



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)  
January 2011**

**English Literature A**

**LITA4**

**(Specification 2740)**

**Unit 4: Extended Essay and Shakespeare Study**

***Report on the Examination***

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## Introduction

This January saw the third entry for the A2 coursework unit and once again it was very pleasing to see how well most centres had prepared their students for it. As before, a good variety and matching of texts was seen here. Much of the very best work appeared to have been the result of individually negotiated tasks. This engaging commitment by students and teachers to the selection of texts and topics enabled candidates at all levels to produce interesting and often original work. It is heartening for moderators to find a variety of tasks and texts across a centre's submission, as the centre's work then reflects a range of individual ideas, opinions, interests and analyses. Centres have chosen to organise this unit in a variety of ways this year, but the best work came from those that taught skills rather than solely content and thus also prepared the students for the demands of the LITA3 examination. Most centres agreed sensibly-framed tasks with their students usually based on a taught Shakespeare text, a second taught text (often a play) and a third text (often a novel) which allowed a freer choice. The "compare and contrast the ways in which..." formulation was understandably by far the most popular task, although some candidates chose to compare all texts in the light of a given critical view, which helpfully foregrounded the second half of A03ii. Both worked well.

By extension, some candidates struggled when the centre set only one generic title for all. There is a manifest need to differentiate tasks in this unit, especially when all students write about the same three texts, in order to address individual students' needs and abilities. Less able candidates can struggle with challenging tasks which may suit their more able peers and last summer it was disheartening to sometimes see almost all students in a centre using a very similar framework and quotations to illustrate the points being made. In this January series, however, there was much less of this overdone teacher scaffolding, which is to the benefit of all; when weaker students follow a heavily signposted 'party line' laid down by the centre, it is hard to give much credit for the second part of AO3.

Tasks need a sharp and manageable focus that will enable candidates to demonstrate detailed, close reading within the 3000 word limit printed in the specification. Although moderators were gratified to report that the vast majority of folders appeared to be the right length or within 5% of the word limit, there were a very few folders which exceeded this by 20% or so and one which was 6778 words long. To allow this is almost inevitably self-penalising, as over-long essays are often weaker than those within the word limit, but even when an exceptionally able candidate proves capable of sustaining an excellent performance throughout an essay which substantially exceeds the word limit, to reward them for doing so is no less unfair to other candidates than it would be to allow them to remain in the examination hall for an extra half an hour after all their peers have handed in their papers. The bottom line is that all students - including those awarded 70/70 – must be within or very close to the word limit and their work should demonstrate those organisational skills which will undoubtedly help them to prepare for the demands of the LITA3 examination, in which being able to compare texts sharply and concisely will be an invaluable asset. In general, it was pleasing to see that students coped well with word limit and the need to move tactfully and economically between texts. Folders that were too long were, almost without exception, weak on AO1 although some more able students were effectively wasting their time because they had already achieved their awarded mark in the first 3000 words. The word limit in this unit should be seen as working in the candidates' favour by excluding a narrative/descriptive approach when there are three texts to cover.

## Addressing the Assessment Objectives

Moderators were pleased to see much imaginative and competent work this summer with students managing to both strand three texts and address the assessment objectives very well. As centres are well aware, this unit covers all the assessment objectives with equal weighting being given to AO1, AO2 and AO3 and a lesser weighting to AO4. In terms of the AOs, many centres recognised that candidates' work may well be placed in different mark bands across the four AOs, and flagged this up accordingly. As one senior moderator pointed out, 'successful centres make good use of the AOs both in their teaching and assessment, and sharing these with students in the planning phase is obviously very good practice.'

With regard to AO1, weaknesses in written expression should not be ignored. Since this is coursework, it is expected that candidates will take the opportunity to check and redraft their work; where this is not the case, it must be reflected in the final mark. One highly experienced moderator noted that some overlong folders should have been more heavily penalised for insufficient control of organisation, which led to verbose and prolix essays, as distinct from the succinctness desired in a very good answer. The opening paragraph often makes or breaks an essay. Plodding dictionary definitions of a theme usually signal a workmanlike and largely narrative approach. Diving straight into analysis of the first text (and continuing for several pages) is unhelpful. Ponderous assertion (often in a misguided attempt to sound academic) is equally redundant; instead students need to define the terms of their essays in their own words, set out with clarity the terms of their debate and use this to shape their argument. These are basic but crucial AO1 skills which will also benefit students in terms of their ability to write well under timed conditions for the LITA3 examination.

At each stage, there needs to be a clear sense that the candidate is aware of the authors at work. The most successful use of quotations is brief but frequent, enlivened by analytical comments that do not merely paraphrase the plot but explore the form, structure and language used by the writers. Some candidates quote to prove their points, relaying the plot and/or narrative of their chosen texts via the use of chunky "hanging" quotation which did not move into analysis or evaluation of writers' techniques; the point-evidence-explanation paragraph structure drilled into most students at GCSE is far from redundant here. Some weaker students quoted dutifully, but then paraphrased or translated the quotation as though the moderator might not understand it without their help. In terms of the ability to frame an argument, some students reached a genuine sense of balanced comparison only in their conclusions. While every essay is, of course, a journey towards a conclusion, these candidates would have done better to turn their essays round and begin with the arguments contained within their final paragraph in order to prevent aimless drift during the essay. More able students, who had absorbed the lessons of balance, overview and close reading which define work at the highest level, produced some magnificent essays which blended a perceptive exploration of all three texts in the light of different readings with consummate grace. Indeed the most able candidates produced outstandingly well written academic essays which used sophisticated terminology but remained clear, cohesive and confident. They were a joy to read.

In order to earn high marks for AO2, candidates need to analyse aspects of all three areas of the triplet – i.e. **form** and **structure** as well as **language**. One moderator noted that while 'most students seemed comfortable with close analysis of language, many found it difficult to write as confidently on form and structure, and it was surprising how few considered genre in sufficient detail.' Whether candidates are writing about texts across one, two or all three genres, they must discuss the specific features of poetry, prose and drama and go well beyond singling out minor lexical items. It is hard to understand why more than one candidate chose to spend a whole paragraph analysing a single word or some arcane

punctuation from a lengthy novel rather than looking at much more relevant, challenging and interesting aspects of narrative form and structure. Indeed some centres over-rewarded their candidates with regard to AO2, placing them in Band 4 for ‘form, structure and language’ when in fact there was virtually nothing on form or structure (i.e. two-thirds of the AO) at all. In order to enhance AO2, centres need to make explicit to students the ways in which different genres of writing present similar themes or subjects, and the key ways in which narratives can be organised. When candidates persistently refer to the *readers* of a play, for example, it is a very bad sign.

In terms of AO3, the best candidates made sustained, interesting and intelligent comparisons and connections across their three texts in terms of narrative structure, genre, critical debate and context. When students merely trot out well-worn critical views and accept them almost without consideration, this does not add up to an exploration of different readings; neither does name-checking a critic and writing ‘I agree’. It is only when candidates show an ambitious and conceptualised alertness to the idea of multiple readings with regard to their chosen texts, evaluate these readings and use them to develop new ideas, that they have fulfilled all the relevant requirements. Responses which cite published critical opinion without engaging with it cannot be as successful as those in which students have considered alternative interpretations of their own and offered credible arguments based on their own informed readings, often based on their understanding of contextual factors. Rather than bolting on some additional commentary, when AO4 was stranded with AO3ii for instance, and candidates considered the different ways in which readers might respond to a given text in the light of the contexts of production and reception, they did very well.

While it is disappointing to see students lace their essays with critical opinions, footnotes and addenda while losing their own voices in the process, another issue to guard against is the tendency of a small minority to import critical views without any proper acknowledgement. As one senior moderator commented, ‘teachers cannot sign a CRF if they are concerned that students have filched actual words from a critic without crediting the source. Some essays had suspicious changes of voice (often from casually colloquial to effortlessly academic). There is nothing wrong with quoting from a critic – in fact it’s good practice! – but taking their words is just plain wrong.’ Overall, however, many students made good use of named critics to structure their own argument, although it is quite possible to look at other ways of reading texts – from a Marxist, feminist, psychological, dominant or oppositional point of view – without always quoting a secondary source. It was rare to find essays entirely lacking bibliographies and when AO3ii was handled well, it undoubtedly enhanced the quality of the candidate’s argument (AO1) too. When candidates entered into a spirit of debate with the opinions of other readers their work was engaged, illuminating and often a pleasure to read, and showed a genuinely conceptualised overview of texts and task.

Contextual factors (AO4) are relatively lightly weighted in this unit, and many candidates chose their contexts carefully and revealed an excellent awareness of the ways in which the contexts of production, reception, culture, society, history, biography, intertextuality and genre can affect texts.

### **Text Choices**

One senior moderator noted that every centre in his consortium had elected to open their Year 13 teaching with the Shakespeare as a class text to set off their coursework task and get students thinking about possible titles and areas of study, and this model had worked very well. The most popular Shakespeare texts were *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Winter’s Tale* this time round, all of which tap into a number of aspects of the overarching ‘Love through the Ages’ theme of the LITA3 Reading for Meaning examination. The other texts chosen were often prose, but it is excellent to see an

increasing awareness of the possibilities afforded by including another play alongside the Shakespeare. *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre* and Austen novels were very popular as were Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and *Enduring Love*. The Jacobean play was often represented, the most popular being *The Duchess of Malfi* and *Tis Pity She's a Whore*. Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and Miller's *View from a Bridge* and *All My Sons* proved popular once again. Centres had taken the opportunity to select texts that were most appropriate for students and teachers and the vast range reflected the enthusiasm of the centres. It was excellent to see that most centres had endeavoured to cover different eras in the selection of their coursework texts.

The June 2010 report for this unit stated:

*[The] Coursework Guidance document for this unit states that while a collection of poetry is permissible as a second or third text, it must be a cohesive body of work which will bear comparison with a Shakespeare play and another full-length work. However, against all previous advice to the contrary, delivered through teacher support meetings, the official guidance document mentioned above and the Principal Moderator's report on the January 2010 examination series, a tiny minority of centres allowed students to write about a 'lame duck' third text which consisted of only one or two short poems by different authors. If poetry is used, it is far better to choose a collection by one author which enables the students to take an overview at times as opposed to writing about isolated poems as totally separate entities. They need to convey a clear sense of the poetry text as a cohesive body of work as opposed to a seemingly random patchwork add-on. When writing about a collection of Robert Browning's dramatic monologues, for instance, one would expect some discussion of the contexts of production and reception to lead the student into a discussion of the fact that at first these poems met with very little critical or commercial success. On the contrary, Browning's technically innovative but initially inaccessible choice of poetic form, with its unstable narrative perspective, was widely seen as opaque and obscure. Unfortunately, while aptly chosen poetry texts have served students well in comparative coursework since the days of the popular 660 specification, even the most able students are apt to "go through" their chosen poems very thoroughly, framing an often excellent piece of literary appreciation, but not really connecting the poems or seeing them as parts of a whole text.*

In January 2011, it is a pleasure to report that there was little sign of this 'poetry problem' persisting.

## **Tasks**

Task setting was generally very good, although some centres seemed unaware that weaker candidates need a very carefully worded assignment which will help to guide and steer their response and allow them to plan their moves between texts to cover all the assessment objectives. However the majority of titles submitted this time around did enable candidates across the ability range to produce the best work of which they were capable.

## **Marking and Assessment**

AOs 1, 2 and 3 are each worth 21 marks each here, with AO4 being worth 7 out of the maximum possible mark of 70. It was very good to see that centres had made use of the full mark range available and most teachers had paid close attention to each AO when marking in order to trace variations in their students' performances across the range of skills tested.

One centre adopted this following potentially useful model in June 2010 which may be worth bearing in mind when arriving at an accurate mark. It should be remembered, however, that

centres are advised to adopt a holistic best-fit approach to decide the final band and mark rather than taking a harshly numerical approach.

	<b>AOs 1, 2, 3</b>	<b>AO4</b>
Upper band 4	21, 20	7
Lower band 4	19, 18, 17	6
Upper band 3	16, 15, 14	5
Lower band 3	13, 12, 11	4
Upper band 2	10, 9, 8	3
Lower band 2	7, 6, 5,	2
Upper band 1	4, 3, 2	1
Lower band	1, 0	0

Moderators reported that assessments were usually accurate and that the majority of centres had conscientiously cross-marked and moderated their students' work; it is always helpful for the moderator to see the comments of at least two teachers at the end of each essay as evidence that internal moderation has taken place. Moderators sometimes had problems confirming a centre's marks when the summative comment at the end of the essay or on the CRF made general reference to the band descriptors in the mark scheme (or, in one or two cases, simply copied them out) but failed to provide evidence of these by highlighting and annotating the relevant sections in the body of the work itself.

At times centres' marking of folders was rather disappointing even when the final mark awarded was within tolerance. It is worth remembering that even when teachers have marked earlier drafts in considerable detail and do not need to re-mark folders in great detail to reach a final mark, a lack of annotation on the final draft does not help the moderator to understand how the folder has been assessed. Centres should adopt the good practice of ticking or underlining with marginal comments; the summative comment at the end should respond to the assessment objectives – and not merely repeat them. Teachers are advised very strongly against merely listing AOs in the margins of a candidate's work without indicating to what extent they have been met. The most accurate marking occurs when teachers identify not only the good features of a candidate's work but also less successful, contentious or erroneous sections. Teachers who undertake a written commentary within the margins of the essay are demonstrating that close attention has been paid to the candidate's work and that every attempt has been made to be rigorous, fair and accurate. Most importantly, perhaps, this commentary, once done, allows the moderator to see how a mark was awarded in the centre. It was excellent to see teachers making explicit reference to current AQA standardising materials and stating how far they felt their own candidates' work exceeded or failed to match a particular essay. Where moderators see clear, convincing evidence of a robust internal application of the national standards, the centres' marks are always endorsed.

### **Presentation of Work**

The font size and spacing selected by a candidate should not be cramped; a sensible 12 point font such as Times New Roman or Arial with 1.5 or double line spacing is easy to read and allows the teacher marking the folder space in which to conduct the written commentary (mentioned above) in the margins of each candidate's work. As previously stated, the *Coursework Guidance* for this unit gives advice on the presentation of work as well as steerage on task-setting and question construction. Readers of this report who have still not read this document are advised to consult it as a matter of urgency. (See the AQA website: [www.aqa.org.uk](http://www.aqa.org.uk)).

### **Sourcing and Referencing**

Candidates should ensure that secondary sources, including internet sites, are acknowledged in their bibliographies and that the accurate word count is always included at the end of each essay. Centres are advised to encourage candidates not to make uncritical use of anonymous and potentially error-prone contributor-sourced web-sites.

### **Administration**

Good and efficient administration normally suggests a careful centre and where there were major administrative problems, it was frequently noted that there were also issues with the coursework submission itself. It is crucial that centres hit deadlines by sending marks to AQA and the moderator and that they remember to ensure that all the CRF is completed.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.