



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
January 2012**

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 fifth entry for the A2 coursework unit and it was very pleasing to see how well prepared were many students for it. The chance to enter students for a module worth 40% of the A2 marks at such an early stage has been seized by many canny schools and colleges; the message that this is an entirely feasible approach because LITA4 offers such fruitful preparation and crossover (in terms of both wider reading texts and core literary skills) for the LITA3 examination is clearly being absorbed.

That said the entry was still relatively small when set against that expected in June and thus many of the key messages about the unit bear repetition in order to provide ongoing guidance relevant for future submissions. It is worth stating that much of the very best work appeared to have been the result of individually negotiated tasks, texts and topics which enabled students 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 school or colleges submission, as the school or colleges work then reflects a range of individual ideas, opinions, interests and analyses. Schools and colleges 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 schools and colleges 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. It is important, though, that all tasks are actually liberating AO2 by incorporating the key verb ‘present’; it was surprising to see in some very reliable and otherwise excellent schools and colleges one or two tasks which did not explicitly invite students to conduct their comparative analysis through the prism of form, structure and language.

The number of weaker students who struggled due to having been set a generic task was, thankfully, very small. It is imperative that tasks are carefully differentiated in this unit, especially when all students write about the same three texts, in order to address individual needs and abilities – otherwise, why bother with coursework at all? The students might as well all sit the same examination paper, if they are not given the opportunity to explore their own agendas. It is always very disappointing to come across a school in which all students seem to be singing from the same hymn sheet, using a very similar framework and quotations to illustrate their heavily scaffolded teacher-led party line. Again, it is heartening to see this approach apparently on the wane, given that it almost always affects the students’ access to the higher mark bands for the second part of AO3.

There were fewer folders which boldly (and, one might say, arrogantly) ran roughshod over the 3000 word limit for this unit printed in the specification, although some schools are still allowing this. The approach is almost inevitably self-penalising, as over-long essays are often weaker than those within the word limit, but even when an exceptionally able student proves capable of sustaining an excellent performance throughout an overlong essay, to reward them for doing so is no less perversely

unfair 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. 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

This section is an edited but substantially unaltered version of the June 2011 Report, as its message is of ongoing relevance.

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 student 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 students 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, students 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 students 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 schools and colleges over-rewarded their students 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, school and colleges 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 they persistently refer to the *readers* of a play, for example, it is a very bad sign.

In terms of AO3, the best students 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 students 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 A04 was stranded with A03ii for instance, and students 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 students argument (AO1) too. When students 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.

POETRY COLLECTIONS: A FURTHER REMINDER

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 [first] 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.

This warning, it seems, has now been taken to heart by the vast majority of schools and colleges as there was little evidence of it this January; the senior moderating team sincerely hopes that this 'poetry problem' will never darken the doors of the specification again! To repeat: poetry collections need to be preferably a published collection, or at least a full listing of the poems studied submitted in advance to the centre's AQA coursework advisor. Any poetry text chosen must be the equivalent of a full-length novel or a Shakespeare play. The school which (in June 2011) allowed one of its students to select a single poem – W.H. Auden's *Funeral Blues* – as his third text had done nothing to help him practise in the essential comparative skills needed for the LITA3 exam. A far better model of best practice was offered last summer by another school which taught Byron's *Don Juan* and enabled its students to compare this text with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and either Stoppard's *Arcadia*, Stoker's *Dracula* or Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* to excellent effect, because the candidates so clearly saw their poetry text as a cohesive body of work rather than a

pretty random patchwork add-on. This is the teaching model with which all schools and colleges wishing to offer a poetry text should follow.

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

Bands	AO1	AO2	AO3	AO4
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

Unfortunately, one or two schools have arbitrarily decided that AO4 is worth as much as the other AOs and have therefore over-rewarded some lengthy and often rather trite Wikipedia-lite downloads under the guise of 'context'. Such a practice almost inevitably leads to folders having their marks reduced, to the distress of students and schools and is definitely a practice to be avoided at all costs.

It is very 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 schools and colleges marks when the summative comment at the end of the essay or on the CRF made vague reference to the band descriptors in the mark scheme but failed to provide evidence of these by highlighting and annotating the relevant sections in the body of the essay itself.

The most accurate marking occurs when teachers identify not only the good features of a student'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 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 the final mark came to be

awarded within the school or college. It was excellent to see teachers making explicit reference to current AQA standardising materials and stating how far they felt their own students' 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 school's marks are always endorsed.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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

Converting marks into UMS marks

Convert raw marks into marks on the Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) by visiting the link below:

www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion.