



# VCE English Units 1-4 Second Edition

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First edition published in 2012.  
This edition published in 2017, by  
ExamPro Publishing Pty Ltd  
ABN 23 169 221 845  
PO Box 2194  
Wattletree Road LPO  
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VIC 3145  
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## Preface

I first encountered VCE English as a student in 2008, in the first year of the previous study design. Having provided tuition for the subject ever since, I am well aware of the confusion, lack of direction and consequent frustration that, for many, accompany this subject. Such feelings often stem from a common philosophy (entrenched in both students and educators) that these days there are no rights or wrongs in English. However, this study guide is based upon my belief that there are, in fact, many of both.

What this study guide attempts to achieve is to fill a long-standing void in the resources available to students by providing something far more practical – that is, to present several of these ‘right’ methods in a universally applicable and accessible way. Such methods have predominantly been developed using my own techniques, and pairing them together with the experience and opinion of the teachers, tutors and students whom I have had the pleasure of learning from, and communicating with, over the last few years.

This guide is intended to be universally applicable, and is not meant to spoon-feed you. It would be unfeasible to provide specific coverage of every single text and context on the syllabus. Instead, this guide will describe the methods and tasks that you will need to undertake, and the conceptual framework and critical mindset that you will need. It is through this meticulous process that fine writing is created. And remember, an imitation is never quite as good as the original, so it is imperative that you develop your own ideas and write about them to discover your own unique flair for writing.

The other objective of this guide is to provide something accessible to the majority of students, regardless of their current ability and aspirations in English. While there are obviously significant differences in how different students should approach this subject, I have tried to minimise these discrepancies by employing a formulaic and reductionist approach to writing. This guide simplifies writing into ways which

are easy to employ, but also effective. It is advised that those less comfortable with their writing quite strictly abide by these formulae.

For those utilising this study guide who are in years 10 or 11, I applaud you on your enthusiasm and dedication to your studies. Nevertheless, keep in mind that not all sections in this study guide may be relevant to you at this time. Also, your focus should be on grasping the overall principles of each piece rather than on the specifics of your prescribed texts for this year.

VCE English is vast and varied. Due to this, stronger students should use these formulae as a foundation on which to build, but then begin their own experimentation. This guide aims to help all of you to reach this stage, so that you can appreciate this subject for its beauty. If not, then I hope at the very least that I have offered you a far simpler route through the labyrinth that is VCE English. Best of luck with your studies.

Dr Andrew Ma

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Section A:  
Analytical interpretation of a text

# Introduction

## Overview

- **Analytical interpretation of a text**, better known as the **text response**, forms Section A of the exam. The text response should be a fairly familiar writing style as you would have been employing it throughout high school. The text response can be tedious initially when learning and analysing a particular text, but later on it should come more fluently and easily to you.

## Criteria

- Knowledge and understanding of the text, and the ideas and issues it explores.
- Development of a coherent analysis in response to the topic.
- Use of textual evidence to support the interpretation.
- Control and effectiveness of language use, as appropriate to the task.

- *VCAA English Examination Assessment Criteria 2017–2020*

# Principles of Essay Topics

## Types of Essay Topics

- No matter how well written an essay is, if it is not focused on its chosen topic in a sustained manner, it will not score well. This section will detail some of the techniques involved in interpreting and approaching a question.
  
- In the exam, VCAA has stated that your text response will include the following elements:
  - o The ideas, characters and themes constructed by the author and presented in the selected text.
  - o The way the author/director uses structures, features and conventions to construct meaning.
  - o The ways in which authors express or imply a point of view or values.
  - o The ways in which readers' interpretations of text differ and why.

- These lead to two main varieties of topics:
  - o **Thematic** topics involve discussion of the themes – that is, of the ideas, messages and morals that the text presents. These themes are generally implied within the text rather than provided explicitly. Thus, thematic topics are largely concerned with the author’s intentions within the text. An example of a thematic topic is:

‘Of Love and Shadows shows that no one can be immune to the influence of the political system.’ Discuss.

– *Of Love and Shadows, VCAA 2010 VCE English Exam*

- o **Character** topics involve discussion about the behaviours of the characters, their interactions and relationships with one another, your judgements and perceptions of them, as well as how these change over the course of the text. An example of a character topic is:

‘It is Richard’s skill with words that enables him to manipulate and control those around him.’ Discuss.

– *Richard III, VCAA 2010 VCE English Exam*

## Approaching an Essay Topic

- **Key words:** Begin by identifying the key words in the essay topic. These are the words or phrases which set the direction for your essay. Be mindful of these key words! They will ensure that you remain on topic throughout your essay. It is also important to address each key word within the essay topic, as many students make the mistake of only focusing on part of the topic. Also, as some key words will be subjective, it is important to clarify for yourself how you will interpret any key words. Having ascertained how you plan to interpret these key words, you will later outline your definitions to the assessor of your essay, in order to clarify the position from which you are approaching the essay topic.
- **Type of topic:** It is vital that you understand what aspect of the text the essay topic is addressing in order to remain focused; get this clear at the beginning of your work!
- **Key points:** The essay topics offered in the VCAA English exams often follow a typical pattern:
  - o The idea provided by the topic appears indisputable, as the majority of the evidence in the text does indeed support it. Consequently, the majority of responses will be essays which support the premise of the topic.
  - o However, the VCAA will have set the topic in such a way to allow for other, perhaps less obvious, interpretations. The majority of students do not capitalise upon this opportunity, but students that do so tend to do better.

- **Key points continued:** With this in mind, begin to generate some discussion points which revolve around the key words identified earlier. A text response will typically have an introduction, four body paragraphs, and a conclusion. A general rule of thumb is to have two or three key points agreeing with the essay topic, with another one or two key points challenging the topic or providing another perspective on it. Agreeing with the topic's thesis is rarely difficult as there should be an abundance of evidence available within the text to support it.

However, challenging the topic is what many students find difficult. It does involve some degree of lateral thinking. Be systematic and analyse each key word or idea of the topic to see what can be challenged. However, do not contradict the thesis of the topic just because you think it will sit well with the examiner. Make sure that you have adequate evidence to support your points. Also, changing more than one key word at a time can lead to observations which are off-topic. Ensure that any challenges you develop are actually contradictory to the idea provided in the essay topic. Ideas which are simply related to the essay topic but do not really challenge it may not be considered "on topic". Below are some possible ways to challenge the topic:

- o Negating any absolutes in the essay topic (i.e. words such as 'only' and 'not').  
Substituting different factors instead of the one given in the essay topic.
- o Identifying a different relationship between the key words from the one identified in the essay topic.
- o Clarifying any generalisations or providing exceptions to the essay topic.
- o Providing a different definition for a particular ambiguous key word in the essay topic.

Approaching the essay topic “For the people in *Romulus, My Father*, work is central in building strength of character. Discuss.”

**Identify and define key words:**

- Work: could be interpreted in terms of one’s occupation or social role.
- Central: could be interpreted to mean ‘most important’.
- Strength of character: identify which traits are important when determining one’s ‘strength of character’.

**Type of topic:** Thematic topic

**Key points:**

- Work → Could be analysed in the context of how relationships, personal values and morals affect how work is done.
- Central → A different relationship between “work” and “character” could be argued, such that work is a contributing factor, but not the main factor.
- Strength of character → Draw on the text to illustrate how strength of character is built on the work ethic, but be sure to also show where this task is not so easy, or where it fails.
- For the people → This could be seen as a generalisation, and it could be argued that the statement only applies for certain characters in the book.

# Content

## Purposes of Evidence

- The content in a text response consists largely of arguments and ideas, presented together with the evidence used to support them. Evidence is required for two major purposes – explanation and complexity.
  - o **Explanatory evidence** is required to substantiate the arguments and ideas you are presenting. Most students will not have trouble with gathering this evidence, as it is readily available and includes events, main characters and quotations. These types of evidence are ideal for the purpose of explanation. Their tangible nature allows them to be easier to understand, and hence be used to appropriately explain and support particular ideas. The majority of evidence used in a text response will tend to be explanatory.
  - o **Complex evidence** refers to evidence which is used essentially to ‘show off’ your depth of knowledge of the text and its finer intricacies. Such evidence tends to be more abstract and perhaps not so readily apparent. It is used by fewer students precisely because of its complexity and rarity. Examples include symbols, imagery, minor characters, language style and structure. The list provided in the next section, **Sources of Evidence**, is given in order of increasing complexity.

- The importance of the distinction between explanatory and complex evidence can be seen in the application of two principles:
  - o **Order:** Within any paragraph, explanatory evidence should generally precede any complex evidence. The benefit of this is that the assessor can gain a full understanding of your argument before attempting to comprehend the relevance of your more complex, and therefore more difficult-to-understand evidence. This maximises the impact and salience of your complex evidence.
  - o **Balance:** Essays require both explanatory and complex evidence, but a delicate balance needs to be achieved between the two. Explaining your arguments is an integral part of any essay as all arguments and ideas must be substantiated. Balancing the two types of evidence shows that thought has been given to both in such a way that the more subtle aspects of your response have been brought out.

Remember, though, that not every paragraph requires complex evidence, and for those that do, the amount of evidence with clarity should outweigh those with complexity.

## Sources of Evidence

- **Events in the plot**

- o While events are usually quite simple sources of evidence, they are excellent for illustrating an idea. This is due to their highly tangible nature, and as the saying goes, actions speak louder than words. While you will need to include all the relevant details of an event pertinent to the argument you are putting forward, avoid an excessive chronological recollection of the text.

Retelling details of events in the text does not show an understanding – only guided application and analysis does. Keep in mind that the assessors have read the text and will generally know which event you are referring to without requiring yet another re-telling of the text.

- **Characters**

- o The cause-and-effect relationship between the characters' personalities and their eventual outcomes within the plot can be used as a source of evidence. This allows the author to position a certain personality trait as being inherently positive or negative depending on the outcome to which it is tied. For example, an author may negatively portray a certain trait by associating it with the downfall of one of the characters. Exploring which characters are associated with which ideas and themes is essential to your preparation.

- o Minor characters are often overlooked by students due to their lesser impact on the plot. However, they are often the most salient in illustrating a particular point. The purposes of minor characters include exposing an idea, highlighting qualities within other characters, offering a point of contrast and reinforcing ideas. Higher level students should also note that analysis of a minor character demonstrates a more sophisticated understanding of the text and, as such, can help an essay stand out to examiners.
  
  - o Consider as well the names of the characters. The intention behind certain character names may draw from biblical references, word play or be inspired by some other aspect of the text. Also consider the effect of how characters address one another, such as whether by first or last name and whether a title (“Mr”, “Mrs” etc.) is used.
- **Quotations by characters**
    - o Quotations by characters vary greatly. It is therefore difficult to generalise the criteria for using them in responses. Keep in mind that the opinions of the characters expressed in their quotations may not reflect the views of the author.

- **Quotations by the narrator**

- o Omniscient third-person narrators are external to the world of the text and are able to delve into the minds of the characters. If an omniscient third-person narrator is present, quotations by this narrator may skew our perceptions of certain events. These authorial interventions may well be representative of the author's views, and are important when discussing the themes of the text.

First-person narration comes from a character within the text providing his or her personal perspective of the plot. This includes descriptions of the environment, as well as any thoughts and internal monologues they have in relation to an idea. Keep in mind that these may not necessarily represent the views of the author. Similarly, a first-person narrator may distort events to influence the reader.

- **Imagery and symbolism**

- o Symbolism can be found in things such as repeated motifs or ideas throughout the text, with imagery often being found in the way of descriptions of characters or places. Use of imagery and symbolism shows a more sophisticated understanding of the text. It explores the more subtle features that the author has used to create meaning.

- **Setting and context** can be considered in two ways:
  - o The internal setting refers to the local environment in which the characters reside. This can be commented upon by analysing the language used to describe the physical settings of the characters (for example, places of residence, places of work, weather, schools and so on).
  - o The external setting refers to the state of the world that the author resided in at the time that the text was written. Thus, it is analogous to the social context of the text. A strong understanding of the social context in which the text was written provides the background information which will aid your understanding of the themes that are being presented.

With that said, students should avoid focusing excessively on the author's social context. Generally, such discussion is outside the domain of a VCE standard text response, and the author's social context should be used primarily to complement your analysis, rather than to propel it.

- **Text type specific features**
  - o Text type specific features refer to elements which are unique to the particular text type, and are employed by the author to create meaning. Examples include cinematic features such as camera angles, music, sounds and lighting in films, as well as stage craft and stage directions in plays. Make sure to use the correct metalanguage when doing so. Some examples are provided in the **Expression** section.

- **Structure** can be considered in terms of the narrative and chronological structure of the text. While the two are quite heavily related, they can be distinguished as follows:
  - o The narrative structure refers to the division of the text into discrete sections such as chapters, scenes, acts and so forth. These sections may have names, and such labels may be valuable sources of analysis.
  - o The chronological structure refers to the timeline through which the narrative is told. Texts may feature a simple linear timeline, but non-linear chronologies (such as those with flashbacks interspersed throughout the text) are common. Consider the importance of chronology, particularly when given retrospectively where the narrator has the benefit of hindsight while narrating the story.
- **Language style**
  - o This involves performing a process, akin to language analysis, by analysing passages of your text and explaining the purpose of certain stylistic decisions made by the author. The language present within any of the above sources of evidence can be analysed, with connotative language being particularly important. Examples of language analysis include the rhythm of speech and narration, the finer details of imagery and symbolism, and word choice.

# Structure

## Introduction

- The introduction might well be considered the most important paragraph in your essay. It outlines your key points and contention in response to the essay topic. Another important, yet often overlooked, role of the introduction is to emphasise and define any key words within the essay topic. Often, essay topics will have key words which are subject to interpretation. Thus, in order to provide some sense of direction to your discussion, such key words need to be defined in your introduction to maintain clarity when you use these key words. Subsequently, the main elements needed in your introduction can be gleaned from VCAA's expectations of a text response:
  - Demonstrate an understanding of the complexities of the topic.
  - Demonstrate an understanding of the implications of the topic.
  - Show an appropriate essay strategy for dealing with the topic.
  - Use precise and expressive language.

- Hence, the main features required in an introduction are:
  - o **Context:** Introduce the essay topic in your first sentence by contextualising it with the text, particularly with regard to its setting and plot. Try to start with some flair in your writing, particularly by using expressive vocabulary and phrasing. Be sure to include the name, type and author of the text.
  
  - o **Key points:** Outline the breadth of your key points immediately to show a sense of complexity and an appropriate essay strategy. Be precise when outlining your key points, preferably spending about half a sentence to a sentence on each point. Showing an intention to challenge the topic here is imperative if you are planning to do so.
  
  - o **Definitions:** Practically every key word in the topic should be stated somewhere within the introduction, and those which are ambiguous and subjective to interpretation should be defined the first time that they are mentioned.
  
  - o **Thesis statement:** Synthesise your above key points into a precise statement which makes your position or contention on the topic obvious. This will generally involve weighing your arguments and deciding upon which is the strongest relative to the other points you have made.
  
- An annotated introduction is provided as a suggested structure overleaf.

Annotated introduction for the topic “*Hard Times* shows that the rich and poor live in different worlds”. Discuss.

Silhouetted against the backdrop of Coketown, a bleak microcosm of Industrial England, Charles Dickens’ novel *Hard Times*<sup>1</sup> juxtaposes the misfortune pervading the lives of the poor working class against the luxury of which the wealthy upper class avails itself<sup>2</sup>. Throughout the novel, in illustrating the imperative need for social reform during the Industrial Revolution, this distinction between the abhorred world of the poor – that is, their living conditions and environment<sup>3</sup>– and that of the upper class is exemplified<sup>4</sup>. However, Dickens also presents the notion that the rich and poor inhabit the same physical environment, and it is as such that the wealthy should address the issue of rampant industrialisation before they too are disadvantaged by its harmful effects<sup>4</sup>. Despite such intentions, it can be seen that Dickens collates a critical response in regard to the chasm that divides the worlds of the rich and poor, with his sympathies resting with the less fortunate<sup>5</sup>.

1. Identify author/director, text type and text name.
2. Contextualising sentence.
3. Define key words in the essay topic.
4. Key points.
5. Thesis statement.