

## How to approach a Literature Essay

### PREPARING TO WRITE AN ESSAY

Having a good overview of the text you are studying ensures more confidence when approaching an essay question.

You can prepare for your exam by making sure you have a good understanding of the Plot, the Character and the Themes. This will help you relate to any themes, relationships or personality traits that are mentioned in the question.



Look at ALL the questions carefully (for both drama and the novel) before you decide to do either the essay or contextual question. Some learners decide ahead of time which type of question they will answer for each section, but until you've looked at the questions you should keep an open mind.

Very often you are given a quote about the text and you will need to respond to a question linking the quote to the text. Underline what you think are key/important words in the quote and question and then brainstorm what comes to mind. By doing this, you are getting your brain 'into gear'. Once you have quite a few comments jotted down you can sift through them to select the ones that you want to include in your essay, commentary or argument.

You may be given a very abstract essay title. For example, you may be given a copy of a picture, painting or image and then asked to discuss whether it reflects a character's state of mind at some point in the story. This is a very open question and you can argue anything as long as you can substantiate it. Again, brainstorm and show how elements of the image relate to the question.

### MORE DETAILED APPROACH

You should spend at least ten minutes thinking about what the question demands and **how you will answer it** before you start writing your answer.



Examiners have noticed that students who rush to answer, and don't take time to plan, never do well because their essays don't stick to the point. It is important to take time to plan!

### HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT ORGANISING AN ESSAY?

Imagine you have decided to do the following essay on *Hamlet*:

'Hamlet caused unnecessary tragedy through his procrastination.'  
Discuss.

Try the following approach:

#### A. Deciding What The Question Demands

First of all you should note that there are certain key words in the question which tell you:

- what the **topic** is about
- what you must do with your knowledge on the topic in order to complete the **task** of answering the question.



Remember, don't EVER retell chunks of the story. Your examiners already know the plot of Hamlet: They want evidence of your understanding of **THEME** and **CHARACTER**.

There are usually three types of **key words** in an essay question:

- 1) **DIRECTION KEYWORDS:** (DW's)  
→ Direct you to what you have to *DO* (i.e. your **TASK**)  
(e.g.: describe, compare, show, explain, etc.)
- 2) **KNOWLEDGE KEYWORDS:** (KW's)  
→ Relate to the area of knowledge required to answer the question – essentially the **SUBJECT MATTER** of the question.
- 3) **RESTRICTION KEYWORDS:** (RW's)  
→ Restrict you to **SPECIFIC DETAILS** or aspects of the subject matter.

Apply this to the essay topic you have chosen:

DW = Discuss

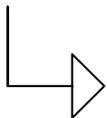
KW = Hamlet; procrastination

RW = unnecessary tragedy (restricts you to those tragic events which would not have happened had Hamlet not delayed in killing Claudius.)

## B. Brainstorming Ideas

Your next step is to jot down everything you can remember about the tragic consequences of Hamlet's procrastination. Try to organise the ideas in groups which will later form the paragraphs of your essay. Your rough page will then look something like this:

1. **DID** †. 'procrastinate' (delay)? **Yes**



Own speeches eg II ii 'dull & muddy-mettled rascal', etc.  
IV iv 'I do not know / Why yet I live to say, 'This thing's to do...''

+ obvious opportunity when Claudius is praying (III iii)

2. **CONSEQUENCES** of that delay?



1. Polonius' death (III iv)



2. Ophelia's madness and suicide (IV v; vi)

3. R & G's execution (V i)

4. Gertrude's and Laertes' deaths (V ii)  
[& possibly Hamlet's own]

3. **WERE THESE DEATHS UNNECESSARY?**

Almost certainly. If Hamlet had not delayed in killing Claudius, the tragic chain of events above would not have been set in motion.

### C. Theme Statement

Now, try and write down in one sentence what the central theme or main argument of your essay will be. This will ensure that your essay has direction.

#### Example

If Hamlet had acted to gain revenge earlier, a number of lives would have been saved which were unnecessarily lost.

### D. Essay Plan

Now you plan your essay, organising all your material from Section B (Brainstorming ideas). Fit in all the main ideas first, and then add in the less important ones, as well as examples to back up the main ideas.

Thus your plan might look something like this:

### INTRODUCTION

Establish whether Hamlet did delay. His own words continually suggest this e.g. his soliloquy '*O what a rogue and peasant slave am I ...*' (II.ii). Certainly he could have killed Claudius when the King was praying (III.iii). (Were his reasons for not doing this sufficient?) So what were the consequences of Hamlet's inaction?



### MIDDLE SECTION

- POLONIUS' DEATH – killed by mistake because Hamlet took him for Claudius (III.iv).
- OPHELIA'S MADNESS AND SUICIDE – up until her father's death, Ophelia may have been upset over Hamlet, but she wasn't insane. Polonius' death and hasty burial caused her to lose her senses (IV.v) and then to drown.
- ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN'S EXECUTION would also probably have been avoided; Hamlet did not realise the full extent of their treachery until they were on their way to England.
- THE FINAL ACT – Laertes and Gertrude would not have become victims of Claudius' plot to kill his nephew (V.ii) and Hamlet's own life too might have been saved if he had managed to escape punishment for Claudius' killing.

### CONCLUSION

Question is whether the deaths were unnecessary; it seems so, for if Hamlet had acted to gain his revenge earlier none of these lives need have been lost – at worst Hamlet would have had to forfeit his own life, but he wouldn't have taken the rest of the cast with him. ('No delay, no play?')

### E. Writing the essay

Finally, your points from the plan are properly developed and explained. Structure your essay into paragraphs in such a way that you devote one paragraph to each main idea. Remember that your essay also needs an opening paragraph which introduces the topic and a concluding one which sums it up. The **Introduction** may state the theme or topic of the essay – your theme statement from section C proves very useful here. The **Conclusion** could refer back to the question, or re-state the main idea or theme, or summarise the main points of your essay. Note that the conclusion *never* contains any new points or examples, nor is it the place to include information which you forgot to mention earlier!

\*\* (With acknowledgement to Rhodes University Academic Support Programme)

It is important to practise your writing skills as essay writing isn't something that just happens. You need to 'school' your brain into looking at the question carefully, deciding what to include and then structuring the essay

Good luck!



If you want to practise your essay writing skills, you can either use one of Macrat's study manuals, or look at our Literature Resource Series which offers essay and contextual questions with memos (selected texts):  
<https://www.digital.macrat.co.za/product-category/pdf-mini-resource-packs/literature/>

OR you can ask your teacher to set a few topics for assessment.