WRITING A PASSAGE BASED INTERPRETATION

Having established a focus, your task is to develop a complex and plausible interpretation.

Link the interpretation of the passages’ dominant concern to the text’s overall view of this concern.

Your analysis needs to be a linked discussion. This is often referred to as ‘coherence’.

THE BEGINNING

There are many ways to begin the interpretation.

It is a good idea to ‘dive in’. Start with a direct reference to one of the passages selected for discussion.

You do not have to begin with passage one. The point of view that you want to explore will dictate the way you move from passage to passage and indeed the parts of the passage that you analyse in a specific and detailed way.

Avoid beginning in an obvious way.

There is no need to state the title, writer and form of the text in the opening statement.

Try using a quotation from the passage.

Draw the reader’s attention to a moment in the passage that establishes a concern of the text or highlights a view endorsed by the writer.

Your opening claim could reveal your understanding of how the writer uses language by referring to an image within the passage or the words used to construct a description of a setting or character.

It may be best to make a broad and explicit statement of argument later rather than at the very start of the opening paragraph.

Do not start with a brief biography of the writer of the text. The nature of the writer’s life is not your subject matter. Your task is to interpret the text not the writer’s personal life. You should use the knowledge you have gained about the writer to discuss their commitment to an issue explored in the text, as this reflects the text’s purpose. The writer’s personal contexts may have shaped the contexts that are part of their text and in this respect may help you to explain the meaning of the text. A knowledge of the writer’s views and values will allow you to provide a more certain discussion of the views and values that are endorsed or challenged by the text. It might be pertinent to comment on how the writer’s use of language is drawn from their world of experience.

Do not start with a summary of the narrative of the text.
THE MIDDLE

The body of your response should continue to develop the focus established in the opening paragraph.

You will need to develop statements that will allow you to shift from one passage to the next and also to other related parts of the text.

Think of the body of the response as the means to explore your selected focus in a logical and sequential way.

While you should structure your thoughts via paragraphs, the number of paragraphs is debatable. The passages and your viewpoint will dictate the way you organise your ideas.

Avoid writing three ‘mini’ essays on the three passages.

Select details from the passages that present opportunities for you to show your grasp of the text and give a reading.

The passages are often long. It is better to show a close, detailed analysis of some sections rather than try to cover too much and risk running out of time or becoming incoherent.

The passages will suggest other aspects and parts of the text of relevance to your interpretation.

THE END

Your conclusion should finish with conviction and force.

You could incorporate a specific statement from a passage or make a specific reference to another part of the text.

It is often useful to draw on one of the final moments of the text.

Your concluding statements should acknowledge the text’s message. What is it that the writer wants us to continue to consider? How has the text shaped the reader’s sense of the world in which they live?

The conclusion should of course be linked to the discussion that has gone before. It should bring the ideas expressed in other parts of the response to an end.
**ACHIEVING COMPLEXITY**

Can you see the difference?

These are statements about Gwen Harwood’s *In the Park*.

‘Harwood’s poem explores the lonely plight of a loveless woman.’

‘Harwood’s sonnet, which opens with a series of statements evoking the emotional isolation of a woman sitting in a park with her three children, is one of many such sonnets.’

‘Harwood manipulates the sonnet form to ironic effect in this poem; traditionally a love song, it is here used to explore the lonely plight, the loveless isolation of a woman who ‘sits’ inertly in a park with her children. It is a strategy Harwood employs elsewhere – in *Suburban Sonnet*, for example, the housebound subject of the poem seems more impelled by necessity than love as she cares for her children.’

(Statements taken from ‘Behind tricks of a writer’s trade’, *The Age*, September 15, 2003)

There is nothing wrong with the first statement. It offers a correct judgement of the poem and is clearly expressed. The problem is that it is a simplistic statement. Avoid generalities. Avoid the superficial. Avoid empty statements. The second statement offers more detail but it is the third statement that provides a more precise, more textual and more engaged interpretation.

**TRY THIS**

Return to the passage analyses that you have written during the year. Identify statements that are ‘empty’ claims. Revise the statements. ‘Value add’ to achieve claims that offer a close and complex interpretation.
CATCHPHRASES

Look for catchphrases in your texts that seem to define the writer’s and the text’s dominant concerns.

This is an example of a catchphrases approach using the poetry of Peter Porter.

- ‘Words, first and last, have come to stay.’
- ‘After fifty years of writing poetry
  I lust still for what is natural.’
- ‘The age demands that we invent the wheel.’
- ‘We are before the Fall and falling ever’
- ‘Nothingness is lost in history.’
- ‘Chaos is the ideal of every pattern.’
- ‘The Unconscious finds Consciousness irrelevant.’

Catchphrases are more intelligently labelled aphorisms.

An aphorism is a pithy observation that contains a general truth.

TRY THIS

Create a list of catchphrases for your exam texts.

Look for catchphrases in the passages set for analysis. A statement in a passage may provide the overall focus of your interpretation. A statement from each of the passages may help you to build a framework for your interpretation.
CONSIDERING ALTERNATIVE VIEWPOINTS

Different interpretations of a text are possible.

Not every interpretation of a text is possible.

Interpretations must be justified by evidence from the text.

Reviews, critical essays and commentaries may adopt a theoretical perspective.

Theoretical perspectives include:

- Feminist readings.
- Marxist readings.
- Post-modern readings.

FEMINIST READINGS

- Feminist readings explore a text’s portrayal of gender identities and roles.
- Feminist readings are usually preoccupied with the identity and role of women in a text.
- Feminist readings consider the writer’s gender and how the writer’s gender has influenced the construction of a text.

MARXIST READINGS

- Marxist readings of a text are based on the political and social theories of Karl Marx.
- Marx opposed capitalism as a way of organising a society. He believed that the working class were exploited and alienated by capitalism.
- Marxist readings explore how class and materialism are portrayed in a text.

POST-MODERN READINGS

- Post-modernism refers to the nature of Western culture since 1950.
- Modernism refers to the nature of Western culture in the first half of the 20th century.
- Post-modernism argues that there is no absolute standard by which truth and values can be judged.
- Post-modern readings examine conventional ideas about what constitutes the truth or what is best.
TRY THIS

Source reviews, critical essays and commentaries offering alternative viewpoints about your exam texts.

You may have been given articles of this type earlier in the year and found them too challenging. Now that you have your own idea about your exam texts, these articles should be more accessible.

University libraries are often a good place to find resources offering different and challenging readings of a text.

Online sites, particularly those that allow people to post their own comments about a text can provide divergent ideas about a text.

Do you agree with these readings of the texts?

Highlighting a review, critical essay or commentary isn’t really good enough. You will need to take notes and endeavour to make the ideas your own.

Use a PMI (Plus, Minus, Interesting) approach to deconstruct an alternative viewpoint.
REVISION

‘You can’t study for Literature.’

Or can you?

What study strategies will you use to prepare for the examination?
READING

Keep your exam texts close by.

Constant reading is invaluable. Often features that have appeared difficult or obscure may suddenly become clear.

Read randomly and regularly, contemplating the connections and disconnections between different passages in the texts.

Frequent reading will ensure the passages are familiar to you.

Keep in mind that familiarity with the texts as a whole will ensure a close reading of the passages is not only easier but will be detailed and complex.

Read the reviews, critical essays and commentaries that you have been given during the year.

Redecorate your home. Make A3 posters of the poems you are studying for the examination. Make A4 posters of quotations from the texts. Wallpaper the house with excerpts from the novel, the play, the short story collection or other literature that you are studying for the examination. Put the texts in your personal space! Get the whole family involved!
REVIEWING

Tidy up. An organised folder will enable you to revise your texts and prepare for the examination in an efficient and effective way.

Review your class notes. Make sure your notes offer a comprehensive analysis of the significant features of your exam texts.

Organise a discussion group about your exam texts. Swap viewpoints about the texts. Discuss difficult passages.

Compile sets of tasks from past examination papers.

Select a passage from the text. Use the following questions to initiate a close reading of the passage.

- What does the passage tell the reader about the life of an individual?
- What does the passage tell the reader about relationships?
- What does the passage tell the reader about human nature?

Select three passages from the text that are about a main character, one from the start of the text, one from the middle of the text and one from the end of the text.

- What do these passages have in common?
- How do these passages differ?

Compare and contrast three poems.

Compare and contrast a passage from the opening scene of the play, a scene that occurs in the middle of the play and a passage from the closing scene of the play.

Review the passage based interpretations that you have written during the year. What went right? What went wrong?
RESPONDING

Make up your own examinations. Don't agonise about the combinations. Devise examinations that put together passages that you like. Devise examinations that combine passages that you do not like or what seem to be odd combinations.

Your teacher should have copies of practice papers made by VATE and other organisations.

Write one passage based interpretation for each of your exam texts until you get it right.

You don’t always have to write a complete response to a task. Writing detailed plans is also an effective way to revise the texts and prepare for the examination.

Work on practice tasks with your classmates.

Tackle the difficult tasks – the ones that stare at you and all you can do is stare back. Don’t avoid the passages that you don’t like or ‘don’t get’. Face your fears and the examination will not be so daunting.

While you should practise passage based interpretations free of time constraints, you will need to develop effective strategies for coping with the conditions imposed by the examination.

Practise under examination conditions. Start by writing one passage based interpretation in one hour with seven and a half minutes reading time. When you are ready try writing two passage based interpretations in two hours with fifteen minutes reading time.

Getting your timing right is important.

- Spend seven minutes reading the passages and thinking about possible interpretations.

- Use the first five minutes of writing time to plan your interpretation.

- Complete a response in 55 minutes.

You need to develop your own writing skills. Aim for a more sophisticated vocabulary. Look critically at the expressiveness of your own writing.

What's your dream?

What's your nightmare?
WHAT THE ASSESSORS WANT

Assessment reports can be found on the VCAA website.

The following comments have been taken from the Literature Assessment Report for 2010.

‘The two major concerns this year were some students’ inability to analyse and respond to the language of the passages, and that too many students did not base their response on one or more of the set passages as the question required. Some essays were based around the students’ interpretation of the text and included only one or two, often quite minor, references to the passages to support their ideas. In this case the passages were used as a stimulus to recount the narrative or for a general commentary on the text. Ideally, the task should be approached the other way around – the interpretation should be drawn from a close analysis of the passages. The passage(s) must be the focus of the essay.’

‘In high-scoring responses it was clear at the start of the essay how the student would develop the essay, using the passages as a starting point and indicating the interpretation.’

‘This study requires students to work closely with the text and to offer a detailed analysis. Students should be able to show a genuine and substantiated interaction with the text and evidence of close reading. They need to be concerned with the language and construction of the text, as well as with what the text is about.’

‘Generally, most students were able to integrate their discussion of the views and values of the text into their response. The following example shows this well.

_The overly emotional and judgemental women of the Club in Chandrapore are subjected to ridicule by Forster with their outrageous personalities and their adoption of a herd mentality. The ease with which the British reject the educated Indians presents a pessimistic outlook for the achievement of any unity and sense of ‘oneness’ between the two peoples._’

‘Other concerns were the limited vocabulary of many students, their inability to use quotations correctly and problems with the use and reading of punctuation. While some words were clearly incorrect, some students used pretentious, convoluted language which at times failed to make any sense. Sometimes students hoped to make their writing more complex by using such language but often this had the opposite effect. Teachers should help students to compile a vocabulary suited to the task and the text. Similarly, students used quotations which were not illustrative in any way. Students have been taught to integrate quotations seamlessly into their writing but in so doing they must ensure that a particular point is being illuminated and supported.’

‘Posing a question at the start of the essay is to be avoided as the essay usually ends up reading like an English essay and tends to ignore the passages. There were fewer students this year who wrote about the lives of the authors at length, although the love life of Keats and his battle with consumption were favourite topics.’