

Preparing students for the Critical Reading section of the English Studies Exam

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from the SSABSA English Statement

- ?? Critical reading is a shared activity based on short texts chosen by the teacher to address a range of text types, which may include prose, verse, and texts with graphical or visual elements. Students will analyse a range of short texts and show that they can produce sustained and coherent analysis of and reflection on the relationship between audience, purpose, and form, explaining the connection between these elements and the linguistic structures and stylistic features of the text.
- ?? The study should emphasise students' development of techniques of analysis and their ability to recognise the author's role and intent in constructing the text. They will compare texts to increase their understanding of the craft of the author. Reflection on similarity and difference will increase awareness of the text in its context. An emphasis on the analysis of style will give students an awareness of the power of language structures and features in influencing the reader's interpretation of, interaction with, and response to what is read. It will allow them to extend their own ability to reflect on and communicate intention, craft texts with purpose, and influence the responses of others to the texts they produce.

Criteria for Judging Performance

The student's performance in the examination will be judged by the extent to which he or she demonstrates:

understanding and analysis

- ?? To what extent does the student demonstrate knowledge of texts?
- ?? How clearly does the student recognise and explain an author's use of textual features to communicate ideas and influence the reader's response?
- ?? How effectively does the student describe the connections between texts?
- ?? To what extent does the student recognise the characteristics of different text types?
- ?? How well does the student understand the interrelationship of audience, purpose, and form in texts?

application

- ?? How precise is the student in responding to the meaning and intention of the set questions?
- ?? How well does the student develop an argument in response to the set questions?
- ?? To what extent does the student use evidence from the texts to support his or her argument, analysis, or discussion?
- ?? How effectively does the student integrate quotations into the line of discussion?

communication

- ?? How accurate and fluent is the student's expression?
- ?? How appropriate are the form and register for the audience and purpose?

Issues to address

- ?? Being aware of the linguistic structures and stylistic features of different text types and how this connects with the interrelationship between audience, purpose and form
- ?? Being aware of the socio-cultural contexts of particular texts and using this knowledge in their discussion and analysis
- ?? Showing how the above influence the reader's interpretation, interaction and response
- ?? Having a vocabulary to describe what they see happening or working in the text(s) and their impact on the reader
- ?? Answering the question
- ?? Following instructions in the exam re length of response

?? Writing enough to prove depth of understanding

Extending students' vocabulary of analysis can be achieved by...

- ?? Using Writing Posters for Tone and Style which the students keep and refer to during the year.
- ?? Using my Critical Reading Analysis Sheet which can be applied to any text.
- ?? These are available from the SAETA web site saeta.org.au. Follow the links for the Year 12 Refresher Course.
- ?? Doing some formative class exercises raising awareness of tone and style.

Formative exercise on tone:

Divide up the various tones named on the Tone Poster amongst the class and make each student write a short paragraph on the same topic (e.g. losing a pet) for each of their allocated tones. Then have them read their paragraphs aloud to each other, emphasising the particular tone.

Formative exercise for style

- ?? Hand out copies of a short text to the students and for homework get them to highlight, underline and make marginal notes on the paper of all the stylistic features they can find. (Go to my workshop notes on the SAETA web site for some you may like to use.)
- ?? Then next lesson, go through the article, bit by bit, sharing all their notes. Hopefully there will be lots! As they share, constantly ask them to consider what impact each technique may have on the reader – remind them that just identifying a technique is not enough.
- ?? This is good practice for the exam, where making marginal notes and underlining bits will help them enormously as they come to write their answers, especially to any *how* type question.

Using the Critical Reading Analysis Sheet

- ?? Hand out the sheet and give the students a short text to work on.
- ?? Put the students into small groups and allocate each group a different section of the sheet (such as Form, Narrative Point of View and Implied Audience).
- ?? Then have them report back to the whole class so that by the end they can all fill in each of the sections.
- ?? You could also give them another sheet to fill in individually for another short text as a homework exercise, and share their findings next lesson.

Critical Reading Formative task: exploring a variety of forms of text

Your pair will be allocated one of the following text types:

Opinion article	Email
Advertisement	Textbook explanation
Narrative	Speech
Cartoon	Diary entry
Newspaper report	Photograph
Letter	Play script
Poster	Interview transcript
Web page	

- ?? Your task is to find an example of this particular form of text and explore its many features and their effect on the reader.
- ?? Do this by making a poster with the text in the centre and use arrows and annotations around to draw attention to its various features.
- ?? Your example should not be too long, but long enough to give you sufficient material to analyse and comment upon.
- ?? Things to note about the text (not all will be relevant to your particular text type):
- ?? Author – any known details and their significance
- ?? Context – where and when published; any relevant social or historical details affecting it
- ?? Summary of content in one or two sentences

- ?? Possible purposes of author in creating the text
- ?? Narrative point of view
- ?? Implied audience
- ?? Structure and sequence of whole, paragraphs and sentences. When/where is the central idea of the text communicated?
- ?? Layout – where and what is the eye drawn to?
- ?? Visual images
- ?? Use of colour
- ?? Title’s effectiveness
- ?? Vocabulary
- ?? Tone(s) and what this reveals about the author’s attitude to the subject(s)
- ?? Methods of involving the reader (eg use of pronouns such as inclusive/ exclusive/ 1st or 3rd person, singular or plural; rhetorical questions etc)
- ?? Use of Evidence (eg statistics, authority, personal experience etc)
- ?? Appeals (eg to justice, emotion)
- ?? Use of Figurative language (eg metaphors, similes, personification)
- ?? Use of Humour
- ?? Other notable features (eg use of repetition, contrast, mood, irony, allusion to other texts, dialogue etc)

You will show this poster to the rest of the class and give a 5 -10 minute informal talk going through your analysis of the text. We will then stick these up around the room to help you in your understanding of this area of the course.

Answering the question

- ?? Look at critical reading questions from past exams in class and discuss their key words and implications.
- ?? Notice how some questions ask what or why and others ask how.
- ?? The what or why type questions should be answered as much as possible in the student’s own words, proving their depth of comprehension of the text(s) rather than quoting too much.

from the 2004 Chief Assessor’s report:

Qu a) Explain why the bus driver ‘would never open the door of the bus for people who were late’. ‘The best candidates included the comment that his ideology ‘relied on a love of justice and on simple arithmetic’ and instead of simply explaining the bus driver’s ideology were able to analyse its central premise. The weaker answers tended to quote substantially from the first paragraph of the story or paraphrase it.’

- ?? Answers to the how type questions should specify the various **techniques** being used, supporting each one with an example from the text, (either brief **quotations** or **descriptions** of specific details if a visual text), and a comment on how each of these techniques could **affect the reader**.

from the 2004 Chief Assessor’s Report:

Qu (c) How does the author create sympathy for Eddie despite presenting him as ‘lazy and wasted’?

‘Successful candidates provided close textual references to support their statements. It was these candidates who engaged with the ‘despite’ in the question... Less successful candidates tended to summarise the events of the story and the things Eddie does and suggest we sympathise with Eddie because, ‘we have probably been in a situation like,’ missing a bus or being stood up. These candidates did not appreciate the subtlety, irony, and humour in the story or that his inability to get out of bed on time hardly qualified as a condition and confused empathy and sympathy.’

Qu (d) What techniques does the author use to involve the reader in the text?

‘In this answer, candidates needed to focus on how the reader’s interpretation and understanding of the story are shaped by the way the story is written and constructed. The answers to this question tended to be the discriminator in this section of the paper. The more successful candidates were able to engage with the question while the weaker ones were unable to move beyond what they had said in answer to

(c) and often repeated this material...

Many ... candidates assumed that identifying a technique was in itself sufficient to explain how it involves the reader in the text.'

Note that although this question starts with 'What...' it really is a how type question as it explores techniques.

- ?? Focus on the instructions and recommended length of response. Remind them there is no point writing more than is asked for, or on aspects of the text that are not relevant to the particular question.

from the 2004 Chief Assessor's report:

'As in previous years, many candidates did not take into account the italicised instructions after each question regarding the length of their answers. These instructions are explicit and reflect the importance of the question in demonstrating candidates' understanding of the text and how it is constructed. Many candidates ignored these guidelines and wrote a page on (a) and (b) particularly. Teachers need to continue to work with students so that their answers better reflect the suggested lengths. Candidates need to be reminded that their 'ability to focus on the meaning and intention of the set question,' is being examined in this part of the paper as well.'

- ?? Get students in small groups to write answers for different questions and present them to the class for further discussion.
- ?? Have students practice writing answers for lots of different critical readings from past papers, available on SSABSA's website www.ssabsa.sa.edu.au, so that they feel flexible about the possible types of texts they might encounter in the exam.
- ?? Also give them the feedback from the Chief Assessor's Report for each particular Critical Reading, which will tease out in detail what the examiners noticed in the students' responses, what the best students were able to achieve, and what some students had problems with when answering the questions.
- ?? Probably the most important way I reinforce answering the question to my class is when I discuss how they should construct their paragraphs i.e. a **topic sentence** making a clear point in relation to the set question and using its key words, followed by **relevant details** from the text(s) including integrated quotations and specific examples which prove the point. If they do this in every paragraph they really can't go too wrong and they will not slip into simply retelling the story.
- ?? This concept of putting your point at the beginning rather than at the end can be applied not just to paragraphs but to individual sentences. It was especially made clear to me at a workshop I attended run by Jay Marshall who explained the concept of 'theme position' i.e. the beginning of your essay via an introduction, or paragraph via a topic sentence, or sentence via your opening words, all referring to your theme or subject.

This is the advice I give my students about working with theme position:

- ?? When you write your answer make your specific point at the **beginning** of each paragraph. It shouldn't emerge finally at the end of the paragraph after you have given a whole lot of details about the text. Otherwise your readers are simply saying to themselves 'So what?' until the end. Your details should be *supporting* your already established point.
- ?? Consider the way you structure your sentences. You should '*thematise*' them, that is, put the *theme* or topic of your sentence at the beginning of the sentence. This makes your writing more formal and concise and ensures that you are focusing on making your point in response to the question, rather than just retelling the story.

Writing in sufficient length

- ?? Students often run out of time when doing the Critical Reading. Just as they need to allocate their time evenly between the three parts of the exam as a whole, they really need to keep an eye on the time when doing the Critical Reading.
- ?? One good method is to look at the questions and how much is expected for each. Once they have finished reading the text(s) they should then divide their remaining time up according to

each question's relative worth and jot down the time they should ideally start the next question on the paper.

- ?? Say at 11.30 they have finished reading and annotating the text and have 40 minutes left. It could be allocated as
 - a) 1 paragraph - 5 mins (start 11.30)
 - b) 1 paragraph - 5 mins (start 11.35)
 - c) 2 or more paragraphs - 15 mins (start 11.40)
 - d) 2 or more paragraphs - 15 mins (start 11.55. Finish at 12.10)
- ?? If they finish a question early, well and good, as long as they have answered it in sufficient detail according to the recommended length, but if they are going over time it is a warning that they may run out of time for later, often more important questions.

Practice, practice, practice

- ?? Of course the best way for students to get better at their timing is to give them lots of opportunities to do Critical Readings in timed test conditions.
- ?? I usually start by giving the first one in advance so they can scrawl on it for homework, but they must write the answers in class in 1 hour. The next one might be again in advance but with only 50 minutes writing time. The next might be unseen in class but with 5 extra minutes. From then on, they are doing them in an hour, unseen, under test conditions.
- ?? Although we do quite a few Critical Readings during the year, I reassure them that I only count their best 2 in their School Assessment component, as this is a skill that takes many students quite some time to develop.

and finally...

- ?? Before the Term 3 holidays I give them lots of past exam papers with their accompanying Assessor's reports to have a go at doing over the holidays and during swat vac. I then encourage them to mark their own work critically a day later, using the Assessor's report to guide their marking.
- ?? This act of being self critical is enormously empowering. As I say to them, I can't be with them in the exam telling them to answer the question or prove what they say or stop rabbiting on and get to the point, so they need to be aware in themselves of what makes their work good or bad. Once they can do that, then really my work is done. 