

HITTING THE ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES AT AS AND A2

Bernard O’Keeffe considers the English literature Assessment Objectives and gives advice on how to meet them

At the beginning of a new year, as you start an AS English literature course or move on from AS to A2, there are many questions to ask. You will want to know what texts you are going to study, how you are going to study them, and how you are going to be assessed. But, above all, you will want to know what you have to do to get a good grade.

Your teachers are in the best position to provide the answers to the first three questions, according to the specification and the options you are following, and you can also find useful information on your examination board’s website (see below — 2 Know the specification).

Familiarity with the four English literature Assessment Objectives (AOs) will show you the skills you need to master to get a good grade. Regardless of what texts you are studying or what options you are following, the AOs are the targets you should always bear in mind. They lie at the heart of your study of English literature at AS and A2. Assessment Objectives sound more daunting than they are — all they do is summarise what you are expected to do at this level. They are there to help, and

the more familiar you are with them the more of a help they will be. This article will outline ten key things you can do to meet the demands of the AS/A2 assessment objectives.

1 Know the Assessment Objectives

Make sure you are familiar with the Assessment Objectives. The AOs are there to support, rather than restrict, you and they should certainly not be regarded as encouraging a tick-box approach, a mechanistic reduction of the way we study literature. Remember that using your knowledge and understanding of the texts to answer specific questions is what is at the heart of your studies. Exam questions are devised with the AOs in mind, so if you answer them fully and clearly you should automatically hit the right targets. If you are devising your own questions for coursework, seek the help of your teacher to ensure that your questions are meeting the required objectives.

2 Know the specification

All specifications have certain things in common, but they vary enormously

The Assessment Objectives

Candidates should be able to

AO1: articulate creative, informed and relevant responses to literary texts, using appropriate terminology and concepts, and coherent, accurate written expression

AO2: demonstrate detailed critical understanding in analysing the ways in which structure, form and language shape meanings in literary texts

AO3: explore connections and comparisons between different literary texts, informed by interpretations of other readers

AO4: demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and understood

in the way they meet the requirements. The boards’ websites, listed below, provide useful information, including sections for students, past papers, sample papers and mark schemes.

- AQA: www.aqa.org.uk
- EDEXCEL: www.edexcel.com
- OCR: www.ocr.org.uk
- WJEC: www.wjec.co.uk

3 Know the texts

Despite the changes at AS and A2, knowledge and understanding of the text still lie at the heart of A-level study. What constitutes a *text* may vary according to the specification you are following (it could be a critical work, a review, a single poem), and there may be an emphasis on the different ways texts can be interpreted and on considering the texts in relation to different contexts, but the study of literature always starts with, and comes back to, the text itself.

- The insight and understanding needed for **AO1** are dependent on a firm grasp of textual detail. You will also need to deploy quotation and reference effectively, weaving them into your own argument.
- **AO2** can only be met if you know the text well enough to engage in discussion of form, structure and language. For example, you can only analyse a text's structure if you are familiar with the way it is organised (for example, into chapters, scenes or stanzas) and can only discuss the effects of imagery if you know the text well enough to quote and analyse examples.
- The interpretation needed in **AO3** will only be convincing if it is supported by clear reference to the text, and you will only be able to evaluate other readers' interpretations if you are able to test them against the evidence of the text itself. Similarly, any connections to or comparisons with other texts will only be convincing if a secure textual knowledge is your starting point.
- **AO4**, with its focus on context, seems to be the only objective that might not be so rooted in the text itself, but here you are considering and evaluating the relationship *between* the text and context. **AO4** is not an opportunity to unload knowledge of historical, political, social or literary context.

4 Write clearly (AO1)

AO1 is the objective concerned with literary and critical insight, organisation of material and clarity of written communication. You need to use 'coherent, accurate, written expression'. Examiners expect high standards of spelling and grammar, but above all they expect clarity of thought and expression. Say what you want to say and say it as clearly as you can. You are expected to use 'appropriate

terminology' but don't try to hide behind fancy critical terms or complicated language. Remember to:

- answer the question
- use basic literary terminology
- develop a clear, coherent argument
- organise reference and quotation, blending it into your own argument.

Remember also that this **AO** is about more than just spelling and grammar — the way you organise and structure your response is just as important. Aim for coherence — your ideas should be presented clearly and linked coherently, so that it makes overall sense.

5 Respond (AO1)

You need to 'articulate creative, informed and relevant responses to literary texts'. Studying literature is about *connecting* with the text and responding to it. For that response to be valid it must be based on a secure understanding of the text (see above — 3 Know the texts) and it should be relevant to whatever question you are answering or whatever issue you are discussing. In some specifications you will be asked to develop a critical-creative response (see Nicola Onyett's article 'Creating Texts', *THE ENGLISH REVIEW* Volume 19 Issue 2, November 2008). This is a specific type of response. Bear in mind, though, that all responses are, in a sense, creative. It is *you* connecting with the text and coming up with *your* ideas.

6 Look at how texts are structured, how texts work, and read them closely (AO2)

- In studying a text you should consider its overall **form** (for example, novel or sonnet), its **structure** (how it is organised, how its constituent parts connect with each other) and its **language**.
- Your focus will be determined by the nature of the text and the nature of the task. In studying a long novel, it might be better to begin with the larger elements of form and structure before considering language. In studying a poem, analysis of language (imagery, for example) might be a more appropriate starting point.
- In discussing language, you will need to *quote* from the text. Remember that the mere act of quoting is not enough in itself to meet the objective. What is important is what you do with the

quotation — what you say about it, and how it *illuminates* your argument. The best quotation is brief and frequent. Try to embed quotations into your own sentences.

- Remember, though, that **AO2** is about more than language. *Reference* is just as important as *quotation*. Each shows that you have a detailed grasp of how the text is organised and how the text works.

7 Make comparisons and connections between texts (AO3)

You will find it easier to make comparisons and connections between texts (of any kind) if you try to keep both texts in mind throughout your essay. If you have both texts in focus and if you make comparisons as you go, you will find you get to the heart of the issue much more quickly. Avoid writing *separately* about the texts before making comparisons. Remember also that connections and comparisons are not only about finding similarities — *differences* are just as illuminating. Above all, consider *how* the comparison illuminates each text. It's not just a matter of finding the relationships and comparisons, it's a matter of discussing what they show.

In writing a comparative essay, consider the usefulness of words and constructions that will help keep your focus on comparison — examples include *whereas, on the other hand, while, in contrast, by comparison, in contrast, as in, different, similar, comparable*.

8 Remember that texts do not have a single meaning (AO3)

AO3 demands that you 'explore connections and comparisons' between texts and that such connections should be 'informed by interpretations of other readers'. To do this effectively you should always be testing your reading of a text against the readings of others — teachers, critics and other students. You will get much more out of the course and make better progress if you see your reading as part of that process. By all means refer to critics and quote from them if it seems appropriate, but the examiners are above all looking for *your* engagement with the texts. A top-grade candidate will show a freshness of personal response as opposed to regurgitation of someone else's critical opinions, however good these may be. Such a candidate will also

go beyond mere *citation* of a critical view to an *evaluation* of it.

Such critical opinions include those of your teacher. Even if your teacher has presented a particular line on a text, be prepared to challenge and question it. There is nothing more dispiriting for an examiner than to read a set of scripts from one centre that all say exactly the same thing about the same text.

If you follow this approach you will develop an awareness that texts can be interpreted, and that readers can read, in a variety of different ways, and that such interpretations are influenced by the reader's position or beliefs. The key word here is *plurality*. There is no single meaning, no right answer, and you need to take account of other interpretations in reaching your own. In doing this you may be exposed to different critical approaches or theoretical positions — such as feminist, Marxist, new historicist, post-structuralist, psychoanalytic. These are simply different ways of reading, approaches that offer different interpretations of the text. In interpreting texts bear in mind the following:

- There is no such thing as an obvious or 'common sense' reading.
- There is no 'right' reading.
- All interpretations must be based on evidence from the text.

9 Understand contexts (AO4)

When approaching AO4 with its emphasis on the 'significance and influence' of the 'contexts in which literary texts are written and received' keep in mind the following:

- 'Context' is a broad definition. Consider, for example, literary, political, cultural, social, biographical and geographical contexts.
- Your understanding and evaluation of contexts should be clearly related to the text. Don't unload free-standing material on context — any contextual comment needs to emerge from the text and should illuminate your understanding of it.
- Note the word 'received'. This refers to the context of the *reader*, and therefore refers to the way interpretation can be

influenced by whatever context the reader is in. There is an inevitable overlap between a focus on interpretation (AO3) and a focus on context.

10 Read and connect

Central to your study, and regardless of which board's specification you follow, is the process of *reading*. During the course you will need to develop your reading skills in many areas. You will need to learn to read critically, to read closely, to read widely, and to read independently.

And at the core of the whole process of reading is the idea of *connection*. Reading makes us connect — with the text, with the world that produced the text, and with other readers. You, the reader, are at the centre of this fascinating network of connections. If you reach out to make as many as you can you will inevitably hit all those Assessment Objectives and make the connection you want most of all — with a good grade.

Key terms Assessment Objectives coursework exams specifications



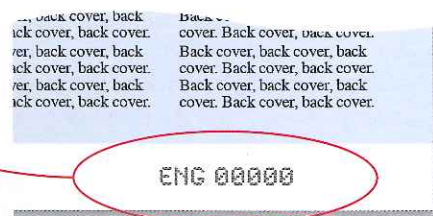
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