

Know the text

Paradise Lost

Exam advice

Effective exam preparation

Bernard O'Keeffe gives some advice on how to prepare for examinations

1 Know the text

At the heart of any good literature essay is reference and quotation. You need to be able to refer to the text in detail and, where appropriate, quote from it. In a closed text examination you don't have the text with you, so you need to make sure you have committed enough to memory to tackle any question.

- Learn quotations. How you learn them is up to you. A long list of quotations might be enough, but some students find it easier if quotations are grouped (for example, by theme or character), or arranged diagrammatically in spider diagrams or mind maps.
- Know what happens in each chapter of a novel, each scene of a play, and be able to recall the key points about each poem. For novels and plays it might help to have a 'timeline' in your head — it is useful to be able to mentally 'fast forward' through the texts (or through a poetry selection) and to 'pause' when you reach something of relevance to the question.
- If your examination is 'open text' do not make the mistake of thinking that you don't need to know the text as well as if it were a 'closed' text.

Many candidates spend too much time leafing through their texts to find references or quotations when they could have simply learned them.

2 Answer the question

It is the oldest piece of advice, but still the one most often ignored. If you are answering the question fully and clearly you don't need to worry about assessment objectives — you will be hitting them automatically.

- Address the question clearly at the beginning, focusing on its key words. Keep these key words in mind throughout the essay, but avoid repeating them too often, or the essay will seem stilted. See if you can guess the essay title from reading just your opening paragraph.
- Don't be frightened of 'taking on' the question — either its wording or its assumption.

3 Plan your essays

There is no foolproof method of planning, but it is important that you do plan in some form and that you get used to doing it under the pressure of time. Essays can be planned either linearly in the form of a paragraph

plan, or diagrammatically in the form of mind maps or spider diagrams. Try to work out which method works best for you and practise it. Ideally, a plan should present you with all the material (including quotations) that seems relevant to the question asked, and should enable you to develop a logical, coherent approach to the essay.

- Remember that **paragraphs** are the building blocks of any essay. Each paragraph should cover a new point or idea. The first sentence of a paragraph should be a **topic sentence**, a sentence that tells the reader what the topic of the paragraph is.
- Read the first sentence of each paragraph of your essay and see if, from this, you can construct the argument of the essay.

4 Introductions and conclusions

- Don't waste too much time writing a general introduction that says very little. Above all, avoid a prefatory statement of what 'this essay will show' or what 'I intend to do'. A better approach is to make your introduction a very concise, focused, *answer* to the question, which the rest of your essay will develop, expand and illustrate.



- In some exams you will be writing 'short answers' in 30 minutes or so. In such exams just get straight to your first point, and don't feel the need to write a formal conclusion.
- If the conclusion just repeats the introduction it serves no function, but it is a good idea to give some sense of an ending, particularly if you clarify issues not made clear in the introduction or points that only became apparent as the essay developed.

5 Quote sensibly

Don't make the mistake of using quotations simply because you have learned them and don't want to waste the knowledge or because you know so few they will have to do, whatever the question. Examiners are quick to spot when irrelevant quotation is being used or when quotation is being used as a substitute for thought or analysis. Avoid peppering the essay with large chunks of quotation, and develop the habit of quoting **briefly** and **frequently** and **embedding** quotation in your sentences. By all means quote four lines of verse if you are going to discuss the way they embody relevant aspects of language, imagery or form, but otherwise apt, brief quotation is better.

6 Keep reading the text

As the exam approaches it is tempting to concentrate on organising your own notes and learning quotations and references. It is important, however, that you keep going back to the text itself and that you keep thinking about it. Another reading of the text can often open up areas you have not so far considered. Never think you have 'finished' a text; it is always possible to find something new to say about it, and the best candidates will show a freshness of personal response.

7 Read criticism

Be familiar with different ways of interpreting your examination texts, and with the most prominent critical responses to them. Reading a short critical essay on a set text is a good way of revising. Bear in mind, though, that you should read critical essays with a critical eye. Test your own ideas and your own understanding against whatever views you come across.

8 Practise writing timed essays

The unnatural and often daunting prospect of having to write on a text in an hour or less can be made less intimidating by practice. Make sure your teachers give you enough opportunities, and that you have a sense of how you will time the *whole* exam, not just individual questions. A common mistake is spending too long on the first question, which can lead to a short, mark-losing final essay.

9 Use the boards' websites

The examination boards' websites contain useful information, past and specimen papers, mark schemes, examiners reports, and helpful advice and tips. (For a list of websites see 'Know the specification' on page 11.)

10 Don't panic

Always remember the first two points. If you know the text and if you answer the question, you can't go far wrong. It's the oldest piece of advice, and regardless of new specifications and Assessment Objectives it's still the best.

Key terms essay planning exams quotations