

The highs and lows of AS English literature

Students **Charlotte Hobbs** and **Rebecca Menmuir** tell you how they coped with AS English

You've already been studying AS English for a few months now, so you're well on the way with the syllabus. The advice we'll give here should help you to really get to grips with coursework, exams and wider reading.

How to read

First and foremost, don't forget that you like reading. You should read because you want to and you benefit from it, rather than because you have to. You'll be studying texts from different genres, time periods and forms, so don't judge your enthusiasm for reading on purely one type of book. Some questions a thoughtful English student might ask while reading a book include:

- What is the author really trying to get across?
- How would different types of people react to this book (for example, women)?
- Why would *this* word in particular be used instead of *that*?

With regards to the last question, the concept of specific and close reading will become a vital skill. Although you should have a good knowledge of all the text, a precise and detailed understanding of specific parts will be crucial, and particularly helpful in terms of coursework.

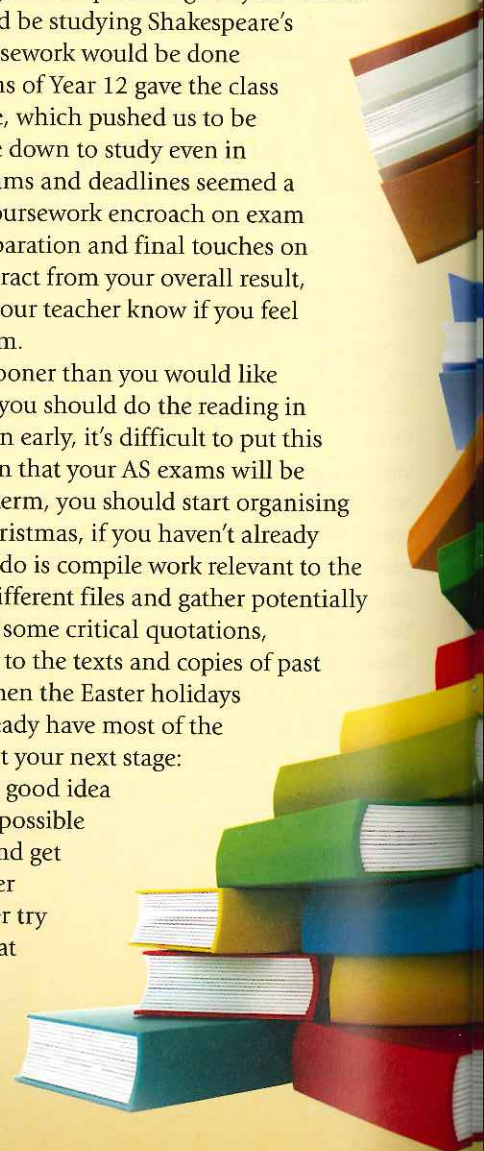
Make sure you don't become a passive sponge when studying. Reading, especially in preparation for any topic at university, isn't solely about quantity — you need to *engage* with the text. Balance literature that's on reading lists you should be aware of (but may not have a huge desire to knuckle down to) with novels and poems that interest you, perhaps more contemporary ones. Keep the process of reading active. For example, you'll remember much more by reading aloud difficult passages, acting out scenes and flagging moments that impress you with page markers. Watching good film adaptations and listening to recordings of longer, more tricky novels isn't cheating. It's more important that when you finish reading any text you have an opinion about it, and perhaps, having found an aspect of it particularly engaging, have done some personal research. When our class needed to have a grasp of particular parts of *Great Expectations*, it was helpful to buy the relatively inexpensive recording from iTunes and listen to these sections, which you could even play when you're on the bus home.

Planning ahead

Perhaps the most important thing to know both before and during the course is what is required of you. Get a reading list from your teachers so you know what the core texts are. Moreover, have a clear sense of where you want to be in six months' or a year's time and set certain short-term targets. For example, you may want to read one or two of the set texts in the holidays.

Coursework will almost certainly be a part of your AS studies, and may be a significant percentage of your overall grade. Knowing that we'd be studying Shakespeare's *Othello* and that the coursework would be done after the first four months of Year 12 gave the class a medium-term deadline, which pushed us to be enthusiastic and knuckle down to study even in September, although exams and deadlines seemed a long way off. Don't let coursework encroach on exam time. Juggling exam preparation and final touches on coursework will only detract from your overall result, so don't be afraid to let your teacher know if you feel there may be this problem.

As exams will come sooner than you would like and although you know you should do the reading in advance and start revision early, it's difficult to put this into active practice. Given that your AS exams will be before the summer half-term, you should start organising your notes soon after Christmas, if you haven't already done so. All you need to do is compile work relevant to the different exam texts in different files and gather potentially helpful notes — perhaps some critical quotations, background information to the texts and copies of past exam questions. Then when the Easter holidays come round you will already have most of the material you need to start your next stage: essay plans. It might be a good idea to work through a list of possible essay titles and themes and get something down on paper regarding each one. Never try to guess the questions that will or won't crop up, it only ends in panic just before the exam



when you realise you've accidentally skimmed over a whole theme that could reappear in a different format.

Making connections

Actively make links between your other subjects and English. For example, use your historical knowledge to place a novel in context; use your politics lessons to see the struggles and corruption occurring while the text was being written; and your Greek or classical studies to bring a background to the epic poems that you read. While studying T. S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', the psychology students found their knowledge of Freud useful in considering the way images in the poem work. This application of knowledge is particularly important in exam questions, when you need to stand out from the crowd with fresh, interesting and well-developed ideas that will show the examiner your solid, confident grasp of English literature.

As well as reading, analysing and interpreting the set texts, in order to enhance your learning and, more pragmatically, to maximise your potential grade, wider reading is essential. For example, while studying Hardy's poetry for the AS exam it was infinitely helpful to read some of his novels, which usually reinforced what his poetry was trying to get across. 'Reading around' your subject will help you grasp what the author is trying to communicate much more distinctly, and get used to their particular styles and idiosyncrasies to help clarify meaning. This also puts the text you're studying into the wider context of the writing of the author and the time they were writing in — you may find that one of your Assessment Objectives (AOs) is to consider the wider historical, political, social and economic context of your texts. In order to build up this store of extra reading, look for information in a place you may have neglected recently — the library. A source often replaced by the infinite possibilities of the internet, books can offer a wealth of information, often much more focused and relevant to what you are looking for. Balance your use of the internet with the use of books and *THE ENGLISH REVIEW*; your teachers (who have a wealth of knowledge far surpassing what they teach in lessons) will be able to advise you on both good books and good websites.

New ways of learning

You need to be open to reading in different ways and open to new concepts. To help you develop a more balanced way of engaging with a text, your AS teachers will

introduce you to critical views. In your coursework and in preparation for exam essays you will trawl through piles of critics' comments and tease out ideas and quotations that you can challenge and explore in your writing. Having this critical view of the works you are studying helps you look at a text in a different way by looking at why a critic has said something and whether you agree. While these critical readings form part of the AOs, it's important not to get bogged down with them. AOs are there to guide your writing and ensure you create balanced pieces of work, not as hoops for you to jump through, so focus on making sure you're using them to your advantage rather than worrying about them.

Although your teacher will help to guide your own ideas, they won't spoonfeed you as they have done in the lower school. One distinctive change from GCSE to A-level is the relationship between the teacher and the students, and you'll find you can talk to them outside lessons about what you're reading and thinking. The ability to direct your own learning is essential — although there will be pointers in the right direction and suggestions for further reading, to become the independent learner that universities want there must be the drive to learn more than is required to simply pass. Class sizes at A-level are usually smaller, and the importance of class discussion is much more prevalent than before. Teachers will appreciate and value your opinion, and you will find discussions often arise from a controversial point covered during the lesson, allowing you to explore these ideas and bounce your own off your peers. It's a format similar to that of university seminars, and makes the lessons more relaxed and much more fun.

The importance of independent study applies to all subjects, though it is slightly easier in English to carry out further research as this usually involves texts of the same author / period or critical views on the texts. Instilling in yourself this hunger to learn more about something that interests you and taking the initiative to follow up on it will stand you in good stead for A-level, university and whatever lies beyond for you. Any workplace will always look keenly on an applicant who is accustomed to thinking for themselves and who can create ideas from a stimulus.

Finally, to enhance your study and offer much-needed relaxation, extra- and super-curricular activities can be a good way to improve not only social skills, but also your learning. For instance, joining a debating society offers skills such as the ability to create a persuasive argument and present it coherently.

We hope you have a better idea of the best ways to take on AS English — it's such a great course to do and we've loved it, so make sure you enjoy it too. Good luck with the rest of the year.

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Archive articles

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O'Keefe, B. (2009) 'Effective exam preparation', Vol. 20, No. 1

