

2019 VCE English (NHT) examination report

General comments

The 2019 VCE English NHT examination consisted of three sections: Section A required students to write an analytical essay in response to one of five texts. Section B required students to write a comparative analysis of one of three pairs of texts. Section C required students to analyse the ways in which argument and language persuade in response to unseen material.

Assessment was holistic, applying the published assessment criteria. Assessors related individual student performance directly to these criteria, and their judgments were assisted by the use of the set of published expected qualities for each specific section of the examination. These assessment criteria and expected qualities are accessible via the VCAA website.

Specific information

Section A – Analytical interpretation of a text

Students were required to develop an analytical interpretation in essay form on one of five set texts. Two topics were offered for each of these texts. The descriptors used for assessment related to the degree of textual knowledge, including the concepts and construction, the consistency of the essay structure utilised, extent of topic focus and relevance, and the control and appropriateness of the writing skills employed.

Three of the available texts were responded to, namely *Medea*, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* and *Rear Window*. All of the topics on these texts afforded opportunities for students to readily draw upon their close textual knowledge so as to demonstrate their essay writing proficiency. In the case of *Medea*, the highest-scoring responses to the second topic were able to meaningfully explore both the ‘dangers of ambition’ as well as Euripides’s intentions as a playwright for his audience. The first topic, in offering an absolute position, ‘Jason is to blame for the events...’, necessitated students reflecting on the extent to which this was a valid textual reading, reflecting the intent of Euripides.

The first topic on *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, in proposing that the text ‘is not just Marji’s story’, required students to reflect the extent to which they agreed with this position. In the case of the second topic, the given proposition juxtaposed converse elements ‘warmth and humour in a grim world’ and students needed to reveal the clear tension between these opposing aspects. Students are reminded to read the wording of the topic closely so as to respond precisely to it.

The second topic on *Rear Window* posed an absolute position, ‘a world in which there is no privacy’, which invited students to challenge the extent to which this was an accurate reading of Hitchcock’s intentions in this film. The first topic required students to analyse the ways in which women and men are presented in the film, and the extent to which Hitchcock implies that women

'are more admirable'. This necessitated not simply a consideration of different female and male characters, but also the prevailing ideas and issues revealed through their actions and words.

Students should very carefully select a topic which they fully understand so as to write meaningfully, showing close textual analysis and coherent argument. The highest-scoring responses demonstrated a thoughtful and consistent approach to the chosen topic, with apt use of relevant textual elements and a sustained focus on the core ideas in the text, all expressed with care and accuracy. They demonstrated a thoughtful reflection on the selected topic, development of a clear contention, supported by logically sequenced topic sentences and substantiated by precise textual analysis. It is essential that students can demonstrate with assurance close and relevant textual knowledge, which is prudently used to support and affirm the line of argument being developed. Students should guard against using textual knowledge that fails to relate directly to the selected topic.

Students must approach each topic to elicit the close consideration of selected aspects of the text. The wording of the entire topic must be examined so that a meaningful and relevant response can be developed. Ultimately, it is essential that the entire topic is fully resolved, supported by precise textual elements and details. This should never be interpreted as an invitation to retell portions of the plot or to simply describe attributes of characters. To deal prudently with a topic, a student must reflect on the intentions of the writer/playwright/filmmaker, recognising that all selected texts are constructed to convey essential ideas and issues through chosen structural means. Students should scrupulously avoid any tendency to memorise a response to a topic on a chosen text, and then try to apply this to an unseen topic in an examination. Students should aim to present freshly and thoughtfully considered essays, which arise logically and carefully out of unseen topics, as opposed to pre-learned or semi-relevant responses.

Expression is the vehicle through which students convey their ideas and knowledge about a text. Essays require a formality, control and capacity to reason, which are expressed with care and precision. Students should carefully consider the calibre of their expression, along with the ideas they are seeking to convey. Textual analysis requires precise explanations facilitated by sharply controlled and considered expression.

Section B – Comparative analysis of texts

Students were required to develop and write a comparative analysis in essay form of one of three possible pairs of set texts. Two topics were offered for each of the paired texts. The descriptors used for assessment related to the degree of textual knowledge of both texts, focusing on the ideas and issues these present, the extent of exploration of connections, similarities and/or differences between the texts, the degree of topic focus and relevance, and the control and appropriateness of the writing skills utilised to aid meaningful textual comparison.

Two of the available paired texts were addressed by students, namely Pair 1, *Black Diggers* and *The Longest Memory*, and Pair 3, *Tracks* and *Into the Wild*. All four of the available topics required students to closely examine the ways in which a core idea or issue was presented in both texts, and to compare relevant and appropriate similarities and differences. In Pair 1, students were asked to compare 'the concepts of slavery and service' or to reflect upon a quotation from *The Longest Memory*, and then compare the exploration of 'dreams and realities' in both texts. In Pair 3, the first topic required students to examine the impact of 'isolation' on 'the protagonists of these two texts', while the second asked them to 'examine the quest to conquer extreme physical and emotional challenges'. Students were expected to focus directly on the entire topic and to ensure that the comparative exploration adeptly resolved it. Two of the topics referred to contrasting elements – 'slavery and service' and 'dreams and realities' – and the implicit tension between these concepts needed to be fully explored through the textual comparison. Another topic sought

to focus on 'physical and emotional challenges', which again necessitated an overt focus on these two elements. Students must ensure that such essays juxtapose issues and ideas.

Students are expected to closely analyse the ways in which the relevant writers/filmmakers sought to reveal and expose the ideas and issues in their chosen topic. Through this close comparison of the paired texts, a clearer appreciation of the nominated ideas and issues should be apparent. This ought to be facilitated through considered metalanguage, which underpins meaningful comparison, alongside prudent textual analysis. Students should consider the ways in which each text has been intentionally constructed to expose the ideas and issues identified in the chosen topic. This may include, for instance, the shifting narrative voices that are so powerful in the vignettes that permeate *Black Diggers*, as opposed to the continual juxtaposing of the thoughts and voices of slaves and slave controller in *The Longest Memory*. Alternatively, the ways in which *Tracks* as a memoir presents a personal reflection on a journey compared to the reflective consideration of the meaning and impact journey presented in *Into the Wild*, may be worthy of consideration.

However, some students listed textual examples, or cited aspects of characters, rather than focusing on the ideas and issues that were central to the topic. Students need to recognise that ideas and issues are conveyed in any text through the actions of the characters and the events that occur. It is essential that students recognise the need to continually compare the paired texts that they have studied through the lens of the selected topic, so that there is an analytical focus on the nominated ideas or issues.

Section C – Argument and persuasive language

The unseen task material consisted of a single electronically published opinion piece, written by the director of a national transport company, advocating the widespread implementation of bike lanes. It included a photo of cyclists riding in a designated bike lane alongside busy traffic, serving to reinforce the line of argument being advocated. Its intended audience was fellow 'leaders of the Australian road transport industry' and the author sought to pressure them to influence key decision-makers, concluding with her generalisation, 'everyone benefits from bike lanes'. The issue, argument, language, length and style of the piece readily offered opportunities for all students to demonstrate the skills required. The descriptors used for assessment related to the extent to which the arguments presented were understood, the insight into the ways in which written and visual language persuade and a capacity to use language in a fluent and controlled manner.

This task required students to closely read and analyse the unseen given material, including the visual, and to examine the ways in which argument and language complement each other so as to potentially persuade the target audience of the efficacy of bike lanes. Students are reminded that even in cases where more than one piece is included, there is no specific requirement to compare such texts. Nor is there a requirement to evaluate the effectiveness of any text(s). The expectation is that students approach any such unseen piece in a holistic manner, exploring how it operates to persuade its target audience through a combination of argument and supportive language.

Students needed to directly and clearly focus on the way in which the feature article author opened, structured and sequenced her argument, and complemented this through her controlled use of language to persuade her fellow road industry leaders. The highest-scoring student responses demonstrated a capacity to explain how and why the argument developed and changed, with assured succinct evidence integrated from the piece, through the persuasive language used. They could also clearly explain how the visual operated to reinforce the core arguments and why it was inserted in this precise place.

Some students labelled and identified both argumentative devices and types of persuasive language. This does not represent true analysis, with its propensity to describe and summarise. Students should not simply describe what is presented in a supporting visual image. Rather, this

task requires students to explain how and why such structures and forms of argument, supported by complementary language, are used by the writer(s) to achieve the persuasive intent of the piece. Therefore, the expression used should be non-judgmental in tone, written in third-person and utilise appropriate metalanguage that facilitates succinct and precise explanations.