**VCE Exam Guide 2013 - English**

September 18, 2013, The Age

* (0)

[**Bob Hillman**](http://www.smh.com.au/national/by/Bob-Hillman)

*Bob Hillman is a senior English teacher at Trinity Grammar, Kew, and writes in the Text Talk space for Education online*

The 2013 English examination will give students the chance to demonstrate the skills and knowledge they have gained throughout their study of VCE English – these are English skills that have been developed throughout their entire school career.

The English examination is 15 minutes of reading time and three hours of writing time. Each section of the examination is equally weighted, so it is wise to spend approximately one hour on each section. Within each period of time, students need to study the task and topic meticulously, think carefully and plan methodically, before beginning their pieces of writing. For many students it is also wise to leave enough time at the end of each piece to proofread the work before moving on to the next task.

Students should also bring along an English and/or bilingual printed dictionary. It must not, however, contain any highlighting or annotation and it may not contain a thesaurus. Electronic dictionaries are not permitted. The dictionary can be used for clarification of terms, and for checking spelling, and may be used during reading time.

All writing is done in a single answer book and students should be careful to fill in the requested information, indicating which text and topic they have selected for Section A, as well as the Context they are writing about for Section B and which text most informs that piece of writing. All writing must stay within the guidelines on the page and students should take care that they are writing in the correct section of the answer booklet. It is also requested that students write in blue or black ink.

The examination itself is divided into three sections, each requiring students to produce a different piece of writing. Many of the generic skills of thinking and writing are required for success across the entire examination, but each piece is quite distinct in its requirements, as are the criteria applied to assessing the piece.

**Section A – Text Response**

Students will have a choice of two topics for each text they have studied during the year. They must select ONE text to write on and select ONE topic from the two offered.

The topics give students opportunities to examine and investigate characters, values, themes and ideas from their text. Therefore it is essential to have an excellent working knowledge of the ideas offered within the texts. A revision program that ensures a detailed understanding of the text and the way the text works is very important. Many students will have studied rigorously to develop a mastery of their texts and will be able to demonstrate a detailed knowledge and insightful selection from the text to support their ideas. It is interesting to note that the 2010 English Assessment Report has suggested that "high-scoring responses did not rely entirely on the most obvious scenes from the texts". This emphasises the need to have precise knowledge and insights into the entire text and to be able to select the most appropriate parts when exploring a topic.

The most important advice for Section A is to consider carefully the topic and its implications. Once the student is confident of an understanding of the topic, they must then create an approach that allows for a thoughtful exploration. Assessors reward perceptive insights that are well supported by the text.

A critical analysis of the structures, features and conventions used by the author to construct meaning is also an important part of the current English study. Some topics will direct students specifically in this manner. For example, one topic from last year on *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* challenged students to consider whether Change was "an unreliable narrator" and to consider how this was "gradually revealed". This calls on students to step away from the story itself and consider how the text is operating.

Of course, a fluent, well expressed piece of writing is required for success; one that seamlessly and appropriately incorporates quotations and is stimulating to the reader. Students should confidently present their proposition based on the topic. It is important to practise a range of topics in preparing for the examination, but the most successful responses are often spontaneous and original. A pre-prepared response rarely succeeds.

**Section B – Writing in Context**

The focus of Section B is on the quality of writing. Good writing, however, can only be achieved from good ideas. Throughout the year students have had the opportunity of exploring in detail concepts in relation to one of the four Contexts provided by the VCAA.

Each school (and even each class) has interpreted and developed its ideas on their Context in a particular way. Likewise, each student will find the most appropriate way to express those ideas, thus creating an enormous variety of writing.

The writing must be informed by one of the texts from the VCAA list and the text which most informs the student's writing must be nominated by the student in the appropriate part of the answer book. There are no expectations about the manner and breadth in which a text is used, but the onus lies with the student to demonstrate that the writing has been informed by the student's nominated text. This will vary significantly according to the choices a student makes about the audience, style and purpose of their writing. These elements will be implicit in the writing and there is no provision for a statement of intention or a reflective commentary.

It has been publicly stated (in the English Assessment Report, for example) that the success of a piece of writing for Section B derives from the quality of the ideas that are presented, the quality of the writing and the manner in which the prompt has been dealt with. It is also interesting to note that in last year's English Assessment Report, an insight was made about the success of those pieces that were authentic in their voice and construction.

**Section C – Analysis of Language Use**

The final section of the English examination offers students the opportunity of analysing one or more pieces of written and visual material. The essential focus of this section is to demonstrate insightful analysis in the ways in which language and visual features are used to present a point of view.

The starting point for any successful analysis must be in contextualising the material and providing a strong overview, while exploring explicitly why particular words and images have been employed. Therefore it is important to read carefully any background information that is offered and consider its implications in the way language works in attempting to persuade the audience.

Students must manoeuvre in and out of the material – finding the appropriate balance between close, specific analysis and connecting this with the wider purposes of the writer or speaker.

Students should also be able to incorporate the analysis of any visual material and explore how the visuals add meaning and implication to the material as a whole. This, however, should not be done in isolation. The analysis of any visual must be in relation to how it adds persuasiveness to the piece itself. Successful students find the most appropriate placement and integration of the visual into their analysis.

Students who have worked consistently throughout VCE, who are well prepared for their examination, understand the distinctions among the three pieces of writing, use their time wisely and respond specifically to the topics, prompts and tasks will enjoy success in English.

**Bob Hillman is a senior English teacher at Trinity Grammar School, Kew**