

**ANSWERING QUESTIONS IN LITERARY APPRECIATION: PRINCIPLES,
APPROACHES AND TECHNIQUES¹**

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If you were asked the hypothetical question, “Write everything you know about Thomas Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge*,” how would you go about it? If you decide to write about the novel’s themes, or structure, or setting, you might not be answering the question. This is because the question does not say, “Write about the theme of Thomas Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge*,” or “Write about the structure of Thomas Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge*,” or “Write about the setting of Thomas Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.” What it does say is that you should write everything you know about the novel, whether it is a little or a lot.

Of course, if everything you know about the novel has to do with its themes or structure or setting, then you would in fact be answering the question properly. The point is, however, that students often look at a question, reinterpret it to suit what they know, or have crammed, and then proceed to answer the reinterpreted question. To give another example, the question, “Trace the events that led to the downfall of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*” requires that you isolate the incidents related to the disgrace and death of Okonkwo, and show how one led to another, ultimately ending in the ruin of the central character of the novel. It does not demand that you provide a summary of the novel. Even though some elements of a summary will be applicable to the question, a great deal of it will not be, for the simple reason that you were not asked, “Write a summary of *Things Fall Apart*.” You will therefore score low marks, or no marks at all if the answer is deemed irrelevant.

In trying to determine what kind of response a question requires, it is important to look at the words used in the question. Majorie Boulton has useful advice in this regard:

The basic technique of an answer on literature is almost always to argue a case, agreeing or disagreeing with a statement in the question, or looking at both sides. It is important to notice the exact wording of the question and carry out the instruction: ‘Comment’, ‘Justify this statement’, ‘Discuss’, (which

¹ Be aware that this essay is not a substitute for your own ideas or your own research.

requires at least two possible points of view); ‘Analyse’, ‘Compare’, ‘Explain’, ‘Elucidate’, ‘Illustrate’ (which requires a good stock of examples proving some point), ‘Trace’. If you are asked, ‘Do you agree?’ you may answer either ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ or even something midway, such as ‘In general this assertion is true, but there are exceptions’ It is always worth while to pause and consider exactly what shape of answer corresponds to the wording of the question.²

The easiest way to fail a literary appreciation question, or any question requiring literary analysis, is to fail to meet the demands of the question. You must pay attention to the literal wording of the question and fashion out an answer that meets its requirements unerringly. “Justify” means you must argue in favour of an already-stated notion; “Compare” demands that you evaluate the elements of more than one notion or concept; “Explain” means that you must clarify something, and this includes giving its definition(s), its categories or classifications, and illustrating its use.

Part of the reason why there is such a persistent inability to understand the requirements of a literary appreciation question is the tendency for students to think that they are under obligation to “agree” with the question, or take a position which they feel is similar to that of the course lecturer. This is incorrect. Most literary appreciation questions are free-response questions, that is, they have no set answer because they allow the student to formulate a response shaped by his/her understanding of the literary text(s). In response to the question, “Do you think Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is a bad person?” some responses will say that he is, others will say that he is not, while others will claim that he has elements of both good and bad in him. If they are properly argued, all will be correct. Your answer is shaped by your perception of the text, and must therefore be unique to you. On the other hand, you do not have the freedom to offer just any opinion, since the literary text(s) and the depth of your understanding of it limit what you can say. The text is the basis of all information in literary appreciation. It is the source of your views; it provides the evidence for your arguments; it is the basis of your contentions. An essential skill that you must acquire, therefore, is the ability to identify those aspects of the text(s) that help you to answer the questions put to you in the most comprehensive manner. There is no way in which

² Majorie Boulton, *The Anatomy of Literary Studies: An Introduction to the Study of English Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980) 178.

you can achieve this without a thorough understanding of the text(s), so make every effort to acquire and read them, ideally more than once.

Answering literary appreciation questions becomes easier if you plan your response. The first thing to do is to realise that your essay must have an introduction, a body and a conclusion. The next thing is to draw up an outline in which you will write down the points which you think are relevant to answering the question. The outline is very significant in formulating a viable response to the question. It is the crucial bridge between the information you have in your head, and the way in which that information is shaped into an answer. If you are writing the essay under examination conditions, you will not be able to write an extensive outline and therefore you should simply put down your ideas in short phrases. Take, for instance, the following question:

“Write a crucial analysis of any one poem studied by you in this course, paying special attention to its theme(s) and style.”

1. Introduction – ‘Africa’ by David Diop
2. Themes:
 - a. Suffering
 - b. Edurance
 - c. Ultimate triumph
 - d. Ignorance and awareness
3. Style:
 - a. Use of direct address form
 - b. Division of poem into three stages with historical, psychological and logical correspondence
 - c. Use of images drawn from the fauna and flora of Africa
 - d. Symbolism – blood as symbol of suffering and redemption
4. Conclusion

The introduction is particularly important. In it, you are seeking to create a favourable impression for your work, and it is highly unlikely that an excellent body will accompany a poor introduction. As the entry to your essay, your introduction needs to unmistakably show that you understand the requirements of the question, and that your essay represents a coherent response to its demands. You therefore need to carefully consider the type of introduction that is most appropriate to the question that you have chosen. It is not a

particularly difficult skill, but it does require that you practise it often so that it can be done more easily. For the sample question above, an appropriate introduction might go like this:

The poem selected for critical analysis is 'Africa' by David Diop. It was chosen because of the relevance of its theme and the uniqueness of its style.

This essay will critically examine the profundity of the poem's themes and several significant aspects of its style.

This introduction does three vital things. It immediately shows which poem has been chosen, why it was selected, and states what the essay proposes to do. In doing these things, the introduction prepares the reader for the rest of your essay by providing an indication of what will be treated in the body of the essay. This is not the only kind of introduction that can be written, but your creativity is restricted by the fact that it must be relevant to the question asked. Some introductions begin with a definition of relevant terms, general statements (but not too general), by briefly reviewing the literary text(s) to be analysed, and by interpreting the demands of the question.

The body, or main part of the essay, comes after the introduction. It is the most important part of the essay because it is where you will actually answer the question. If you have given a brief outline of how you plan to answer the question in the introduction, all you need to do in the body is to follow that plan. In the sample outline given above, for example, the body will simply consist of the items under numbers 2 and 3. The paragraph on suffering might begin like this:

The theme of suffering is one of the most prominent themes in 'Africa.' Diop shows how Africa was callously exploited by her colonisers by contrasting her proud past with her present degradation. He describes Africa as possessing a "trembling" back full of red scars caused by the whips of the colonial masters.

Usually, one paragraph is assigned to one point, although it is quite possible for an issue to take up more than one paragraph. What must be ensured, however, is that each paragraph is logically seen to deal with one issue, or one aspect of an issue. Thus, if you were examining the theme of suffering, and chose to also look at the ways in which Africa is seen to have psychological scars as well as physical ones, you might want to begin another paragraph after the one above in the following fashion:

Africa's suffering is not only physical in nature. It is psychological as well and it can be seen in her inability to resist oppression. The continent's degradation is deepened by the fact that she has to consent to her own suffering by saying

“yes” even while enduring colonial torture, thereby seeming to accept her own humiliation. This is a sign of the emotional consequences of the long period of slavery and colonialism that she has endured.

If your paragraphs are logically linked to one another like this (and this is why you should first plan the essay in outline form), the essay will have the coherence that is vital to good criticism.

Just as the introduction represents the entrance to your essay, so does the conclusion represent the exit out of it. Many students consider conclusions to be irrelevant, since all the points are in the body of the essay. However, the conclusion performs an important function in that it helps to tie all the loose ends (such as the various points made) of the essay together, and thereby makes it a consistent whole. Like the introduction, the conclusion could be any of a number of different varieties, as long as it does the job of concluding effectively. It might be a reiteration of the question, for example:

This essay has critically examined the poem ‘Africa’ by David Diop and has attempted to show the way in which the poem’s value as a work of art is effectively demonstrated in its themes and in its style.

You might wish to reiterate your own introduction, in this case, the sample introduction given above:

This essay has attempted to look at the themes of ‘Africa’ by David Diop and the way in which those themes convey a profound perception of the travails of the African continent and its people. It has also examined different aspects of the poem’s style and has shown the way in which they enhance its central ideas.

At the very worst, you may simply use the formulaic conclusion, in which you briefly state what you have done

This essay has examined the themes and style of ‘Africa’ by David Diop.

Conclusions are sometimes difficult to write when you are out of time, but the best way of getting around this is to make sure that you have enough time. In most undergraduate examinations conducted by the English Department of this university, students are required to answer three questions in two hours. This translates into about forty minutes per question. You might wish to plan your time by allocating five minutes to the formulation of an outline, thirty-five minutes to writing out your answer, and five minutes to reading over what you have written. Practice writing to time regularly, and you should soon become proficient in it.

Do not underestimate the importance of re-reading your essay. It enables you to correct those mistakes that you can recognize, and thereby prevents you from losing marks, especially those set aside for grammar and punctuation.

An answer to a literary appreciation question is often a literary essay, and literary essays must follow certain conventions, particularly regarding the reference to the texts of different genres. Novel titles are usually *italicised* in print, and must be underlined in a handwritten essay. The same thing goes for the titles of plays. However, the titles of individual poems should be enclosed in single inverted commas; if the text is a collection of poems and its title comes from a particular collection in the poem, then that title is underlined when it refers to the book rather than the individual poems. Thus: *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (title of novel); *Casualties* (title of collection of poems); ‘Casualties’ (title of individual poem in poetry collection called *Casualties*). It is important that you realise the differences between these modes of reference, because it could be crucially significant that you properly distinguish ‘Casualties’ from *Casualties*, or Julius Caesar from *Julius Caesar*, or ‘Africa’ from Africa. Do not use a combination of reference styles, such as, ‘*Casualties*’ or ‘*CASUALTIES*.’ Quotations from literary texts are usually in double inverted commas [“”], unless they are more than three lines in length, in which case they are set off from the rest of the essay, that is, they are indented. Because of this, there is no longer any need to enclose them in double inverted commas. For example,

Diop shows how Africa was cruelly exploited by its colonisers by contrasting its proud past with its present degradation. He describes Africa as possessing a “trembling” back full of red scars caused by the whips of the colonial masters:

Is this your back that is bent
This back that breaks under the weight of humiliation
This back trembling with red scars
And saying yes to the whip under the midday sun

Be aware that colons [:] are often used to give notice of most quotations, whether indented or not. Also, notice that the left-hand margins of all the lines in the lines of poetry quoted above are more deeply indented than the margins of the material that precedes it. Examples of indented quotations can be found in most good works of literary criticism. When you cannot remember a quotation word for word, you can paraphrase the quotation, that is, restate it in a simpler manner, making sure that the meaning is the same. For example, in

‘Africa,’ if you cannot remember the indented quotation given above, you might wish to substitute it with something like the following:

Africa is seen as a continent with a “back that is bent,” and which trembles
“with red scars.”

As you can see, it is best not to put the entire paraphrased expression in quotation marks since it is not an exact quotation. If you are sure of particular words or clauses (groups of words that make sense), then those should be in quotes.

Closely related to the issue of quotations is the subject of referencing. In literary criticism, there are two acknowledged systems of compiling references (all the materials used by you in preparing the essay), namely the Modern Languages Association (MLA) system and the Chicago Manual of Style (Chicago) system. In the English Department of Redeemer’s University, the former is used for literature essays, term papers and long essays (projects), while the latter is used for essays, term papers and long essays in language. Please Google them to find examples and contexts in which they may be used.

The best critical essay can be ruined by grammatical errors, errors of logic and related mistakes. The following mistakes represent some of the most common examples that I have come across from reviews of hundreds of examination and test scripts.

Common Errors in Student Scripts in Literature

1. The omission of name and/or matriculation number (on test scripts) or matriculation number (on examination scripts). The consequence is that marks cannot be assigned to a particular candidate, no matter how brilliant the script may be.
2. The unnecessary itemisation of points in essay-type answers; the arbitrary division of responses by putting gaps between points; the use of subtitles when they are not required. Most questions in literary appreciation are essay-type questions demanding *one* coherent response; numbering them turns the essay into a series of short notes.
3. Poor grammar and punctuation: these include errors of tense (especially “been” for “being”); errors of concord (Achebe wrote *her* novel); subject-verb agreement (the poem examine the African continent); using commas where full stops would be more appropriate; beginning sentences without an initial capital letter; the insertion of colloquialisms in essays (“not so,” “not only that,” “you know,” “not so?”); the use of “am” for “I am”; collapsing two words into one (“infact” for “in fact,” “inspite” for “in spite”); improper apostrophe use (“the Okonkwo’s family” instead of “the

Okonkwo family”). The medium in which your literary appreciation essay is written cannot be separated from the essay itself. Bad punctuation and grammar can ruin any essay by rendering it unintelligible.

4. Instead of directly answering the question, stories are told. Storytelling in this context refers to the act of summarising the text without answering the question that was asked. A variation of this is the practice of replicating entire poems when judicious quotations would be more appropriate.
5. Failing to answer the compulsory question. This results in the loss of all marks set aside for that question.
6. The titles of novels and books are not underlined, poem titles are not in inverted commas. This may confuse characters with titles, or reduce titles to phrases, particularly if there is not initial letter capitalisation (“things fall apart”).
7. Illegible writing: this refers to handwriting that is so bad that it cannot be easily read. The lecturer therefore has to guess at what the student has written, often with disastrous consequences for the student.
8. The use of unsuitable ink like pink, gold, silver and brown. These colours are often so faint against a white background that the writing is virtually unreadable.
9. Poor expression: this is a situation in which your ideas are not expressed clearly. While this is a function of several factors like grammar, sentence length, depth of understanding of the text and other aspects, poor expression may simply be due to the student’s use of complicated words that are not properly understood.
10. The use of sentences which are far too long. As such sentences go on and on, meanings get lost within one another, eventually leading to complete logical collapse. The best thing to do is to write in a combination of short and medium-length sentences.
11. The consistent misspelling of authors’ and characters’ names. For most lecturers, this habit is conclusive proof that the student did not read the text.
12. Failing to define terms. A common example is omitting the definition of tragedy in an essay on tragedy.
13. The failure to write the essay in the historical present (“in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe *examined* the impact of colonial incursion in Africa”). If your main tense is the past tense, it will seem as if the comments you are making have been overtaken by events and are no longer valid.

14. The refusal to write the numbers of questions where instructed to do so, or declining to write the question numbers at all. This makes it difficult for the lecturer to know which answer responds to which question.
15. Not beginning answers to new questions on a fresh page of the examination answer booklet as instructed. This often leads lecturers to assume that you are still answering the first question.
16. The presence of basic inaccuracies, especially in relation to quotations, numbers and publication dates of texts. Such mistakes betray the student's lack of knowledge of the text.
17. Answering questions with texts that were not prescribed and/or using texts from the inappropriate genre, such as using a poem to answer a question on drama.
18. Writing outlines within answers; this is unnecessary and untidy, particularly when the insides of the front or back covers of the answer booklet can be used.
19. Turning literature to journalism: this is the practice of discussing a work of the imagination as if it is factual. This often goes against the principles of literary appreciation.
20. The failure to discuss issues coherently, particularly when looking at more than one text.
21. The absence of quotations: most essays lack depth if you do not refer closely to literary texts by quoting them.
22. The refusal to plan the essay. The consequence is that the work is not ordered – the most important point is somewhere in the middle of the essay; the title of the text, the author and the main character are not mentioned until the conclusion.
23. The repetition of material previously used in the same paper. Students are not allowed to use the same material more than once.
24. The use of non-fictional works to answer questions. Since the course focuses on imaginative literature, it is often inappropriate to use such texts.
25. Utilising the wrong text/author combination, such as naming Thomas Hardy as the author of *Things Fall Apart*. While this could be a genuine mistake, it can be corrected through re-reading.
26. Mis-numbering questions: question #3 becomes #1 because it was answered first. The lecturer will simply assume that you have incorrectly answered question #3.

27. Answering less or more than the specified number of questions. This results in the loss of all the marks set aside for the unanswered questions, and none for the surplus ones.
28. Providing answers which focus on the elements of character rather than the elements of texts. An example is looking at the activities of the main character when the question requires that you examine the themes of the novel.
29. Using personal abbreviations within the essay. This often makes the essay incomprehensible. It is also offensive because the writer assumes that the lecturer should make himself familiar with these personal abbreviations. It is my personal preference that you do not use abbreviations *at all*.
30. Using distasteful and inappropriate implements to fix loose pages together (nappy pins, used toothpicks, discarded weave-ons, chewing-gum, saliva). This practice simply reveals your own lack of regard for what you have written, and will be echoed by the lecturer. It is better to put your matriculation number on all loose pages.

These are only the more common instances of an incredible variety of mistakes, errors and acts of utter carelessness made by many students while answering questions on literary appreciation. It is hoped that you will make an effort to avoid these blunders, and so escape the harsh repercussions that often accompany them.

**Relevance to Examination: This essay examines the nature of the questions you are likely to face in this course. It offers a means by which you can understand what such questions demand of you, how you can tackle them, and makes you more aware of what distinguishes good literary essays from bad ones.*