

2021 VCE English external assessment report

General comments

More than 40,000 students sat for the 2021 VCE English examination and the skills and qualities shown by the majority of students were pleasing. The paper was consistent in its presentation of the three sections of the course:

- Section A – Analytical interpretation of a text offered students the choice of two distinct topics for each of the 20 texts and students were required to complete one response.
- Section B – Comparative analysis of texts asked students to meaningfully compare and contrast the ideas and issues in a chosen pair of texts.
- Section C – Argument and persuasive language required students to analyse the ways in which argument and language were used by Ava, the marketing manager of Toppdale cinema, in her online post on the dangers of its impending closure.

It is important to remember that the assessment of English is global and norm-referenced. It is based upon criterion-referenced descriptors that are applied holistically and reflect the assessor's estimate of the **whole** answer. There is no such thing as the 'right' answer – the assessors make judgements about the unique qualities of what is written by each student, understanding that this is first draft writing completed under the time constraints of an examination.

In the 2021 VCE English examination, students worked diligently to complete the demands of the three-hour paper. The majority were able to present three completed pieces of writing. They tended to write at length, but there was a sustained dependence on summary, restatement and quotation at the expense of analysis of ideas. Pleasingly, there were very few incomplete and/or blank answers. Students generally displayed a sound command of essay structure and the majority gave clear indications of appropriate textual knowledge, particularly in Section A.

Some general observations for continued improvement are as follows.

- While improved knowledge of individual texts was clearly shown, shaping this knowledge to the demands of a particular topic question was a challenge for many. Students were very confident about their characters, plot points, key examples and quotations; however, they must learn to judiciously choose textual material that is relevant to the set question and be brave enough to put the rest aside. Too many Section A and Section B essays were lengthy and dense discussions of the text, but not of the set topic.
- Achievement in Section C was limited by student dependence on summary, restatement and paraphrasing, and their failure to analyse. Students could identify contentions, supporting arguments and relevant language use but did not always demonstrate understanding of **how** the argument develops and functions, **how** language is used to persuade and **why** it is intended to impact on the audience in a particular way. This is analysis.
- Basic handwriting legibility is emerging as a significant issue. Students need to be aware that assessors can only mark what they can read. They are not permitted to guess or infer meaning, so students can disadvantage themselves by not expressing their ideas in a clear, legible manner. Students and teachers are encouraged to engage in classroom practice of pen-and-paper responses.

Specific information

Note: Student responses reproduced in this report have not been corrected for grammar, spelling or factual information.

This report provides sample answers or an indication of what answers may have included. Unless otherwise stated, these are not intended to be exemplary or complete responses.

The statistics in this report may be subject to rounding resulting in a total more or less than 100 per cent.

Section A – Analytical interpretation of a text

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	1	1	2	7	13	19	22	18	10	4	2	5.8

Section A required students to ‘write an analytical interpretation of a text in response to the topic’. Overall, the majority of students displayed a competent awareness of their selected text and demonstrated an understanding of how to structure a response appropriately. Many wrote clearly and were able to use evidence from the text to create a coherent discussion of the topic.

The students appeared to be confident in dealing with the three types of questions – propositional, quotation-based and direct. There was a noticeable improvement in students’ recognition of ‘how’ questions – for example, ‘How does *Nine Days* explore the connections that keep people together?’ – as an invitation to focus on the ways in which literary features were used to present ideas and values.

Most students made a genuine attempt to engage with the topic. The best responses were from those who understood the need to present an argument; they discussed a sequence of ideas in response to the question, rather than simply offering a series of examples to illustrate a contention. This sequence of ideas was often identified in the introduction.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response to the *Rear Window* question: “There is no harm in looking.” Is this idea supported by Hitchcock’s film?’.

For past and present audiences, critics and theorists Alfred Hitchcock’s 1954 cinematic masterpiece Rear Window remains relevant as it explores our innate desire to watch, look and observe those around us. Although there are many moments where looking is inappropriate and harmful, there also are countless instances in one’s life where it is justifiable and ultimately harmless. Fundamentally, Hitchcock’s suggests, we are all natural voyeurs, and our being is inherently reliant on what we observe day to day.

This example also demonstrates the way in which some students felt empowered to challenge the proposition presented on the paper, rather than simply demonstrating that the proposition was a contention that they needed to ‘prove’.

It must be stressed that there is a difference between challenging the topic and dismissing the topic. For example, some students challenged the idea that the ‘personal tragedy of the Clutters is overshadowed by the stories of Dick and Perry’ (*In Cold Blood*). While this may be a controversial position to take, if a student supported this interpretation with a well-substantiated discussion of the text, they were rewarded. It was very different when students responded to the question “Human connection is a vital source of hope.” Is this the main message of *The Golden Age*?’ by dismissing a discussion of human connection, and writing an essay on the concept of vocation. Students should be aware of the difference between challenging and dismissing the topic.

Students should remember that they need to address the specifics of the question and not just a general concept. Hence, when answering the *Women of Troy* question, ‘Euripides’ play shows there are no winners in war’, students who simply discussed the suffering of the Trojan women were not considering what it was

'to win' a war, nor were they considering the idea of 'no winners', which required a wider consideration of participants. Higher scoring responses built an answer around a consideration of the women of Troy, the Greek soldiers and the gods. Others considered the purpose of the war when determining the concept of 'winning' and used judgements such as deposing of a state, achieving a moral victory and the likelihood of maintaining political control as measures of success. Students are encouraged to explain their response to the question in a fresh, engaging and well-supported way.

Equally, students needed to consider the wording of the topic in order to understand its exact focus. Those who were able to explicitly address the concept of 'harm' in the *Rear Window* question did better than those who could only write in a more general way about the ethics and dangers associated with voyeurism. Similarly, students who understood that 'the male gaze' constituted 'looking' were able to consider a wider range of ideas than those who simply equated 'looking' with voyeurism. It is vital that students read the question carefully and address it explicitly, rather than writing a general response about a concept.

In their essays, students were required to demonstrate an understanding of the ideas and values the text explores. Those who simply discussed characters or plot points, without explaining how these were connected to the ideas and values of the author, struggled. Better responses made clear how the text was constructed to convey conceptual understanding. It follows if a student understands the concepts, they are better placed to analyse the ways in which the text is constructed purposefully to convey them. The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

In ardently disparaging the act of looking, Hitchcock cautions the audience that it may lead to false and misleading and inferences about others. This is evident in the case of Miss Torso where Jeff's voyeurism leads him to make false and misleading assumptions on the basis of his observations of her. In characterising Miss Torso as 'a queen bee' with her 'pick of the drones', Jeff illustrates his view of Miss Torso [...] as an object of beauty with no practical proclivities and hence Hitchcock may position the audience to similarly delineate Miss Torso as an example of the type of woman that Jeff describes as 'pretty enough' to 'just be.' However, Jeff's speculative conjecture of Miss Torso's disposition is ultimately contradicted as a mid shot at the conclusion of the film highlights her delight in the return of her husband Stanley - a vivid digression from men Miss Torso seems to associate herself with. Hence, in illustrating the unfounded and flawed nature of Jeff's assumptions, Hitchcock may call the audience to consider the ease in which the act of looking may cause harm in the creation of false and misleading inferences about others.

Some students created a clear conclusion by restating the points made through the essay. This response was to *Station Eleven*.

Essentially, Mandel explores how people search for meaning in life through good acts, artistic contributions and the formation of connections.

High-scoring responses were able to resolve the tensions within the topic in their conclusion. While some students tackled this in the introduction and others through the essay, the conclusion was often where students could demonstrate their sophisticated reading of both text and topic. The following response is an example of a student resolving the tensions in the topic. This response was to *Women of Troy*.

Ultimately, Euripides urges his Athenian audience to see that even if they are not sickened by the suffering of war their own side, even if victorious, will suffer loss. Indeed, the destructive cycle of vengeance that war continues destroys all the minor gains the victors might attain. In view of this, Euripides seeks to show Athenians that 'any sensible man must hate war'.

Students who were conveying complex and nuanced ideas about the text were faced with a greater challenge than those who presented simple ideas. Fluency and precision in vocabulary help students to convey complex ideas. Many demonstrated a capacity to use language effectively. However, it is worth noting that using a variety of polysyllabic words is not an end in itself and to do so indiscriminately can sometimes impede communication. Clarity is the key to effective communication. Many students wrote their

responses using clear and precise language and they are to be congratulated for their capacity to successfully communicate their ideas.

Section B – Comparative analysis of texts

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	2	2	4	9	14	20	20	15	9	4	2	5.5

Section B revealed the capacity of the majority of students to meaningfully compare the ways in which two disparate texts present ideas and issues. Analysis of the ways in which both texts conveyed key ideas and issues was crucial. This required explanation of the intentional choices made by the writer/film-maker in determining how to expose, reveal and convey such ideas and issues and override any tendency to merely provide textual examples or to compare characters in the paired texts.

All eight pairings were addressed by students, while three pairings were most popular: *The Queen and Ransom*; *The Crucible and The Dressmaker*; and *The 7 Stages of Grieving and The Longest Memory*. Some students unwisely resorted to using previously learned and memorised elements, especially in their introductions, despite previous advice to avoid this tendency.

The criteria for Section B focused directly on the notion of comparison and ‘comparative analysis’. This was directly reflected in the careful wording of the 16 questions: eight topics stated ‘compare how’; two topics posed ‘compare to what extent’ and six topics asked ‘compare the’. Some topics contained two elements at their heart, for example, ‘loss and change’, ‘comfort and hope’, ‘rebellion ... establishing identity’ and ‘human connection ... generating change’. In each instance, the student needed to examine and ensure that the comparisons made adeptly focused on both elements and the relationship between them. One topic, on the popular pairing of *The 7 Stages of Grieving and The Longest Memory*, proffered an absolute statement ‘hope is always present’, which invited students to qualify to what extent both texts conveyed this notion. Students must recognise that the wording of questions is sharp and precise and must govern and direct what is written in response. Topics should never be viewed as loose prompts, but rather as carefully worded questions that offer clear parameters about what is to be explored, and that need to be fully resolved through careful argument.

There would seem to be some uncertainty about the role of quotations when included in topics. In the five double quotation topics provided in 2021, it was clear that the quotations had been very carefully selected. In each case they offered important insights into the essential ideas and issues at the heart of the text. Students are advised to consider and to reflect upon the nuances these provide. They also need to consult dictionaries during reading time to ensure that they have clarified the precise usage of key terms in each topic (e.g. ‘the fragility of leadership’ or ‘colliding cultures’ or ‘rigid gender roles’).

All topics allowed for students to infuse their own approach to such comparison. In response to topic 1 on *Photograph 51* and *The Penelopiad*, there was the following high-scoring response.

While both men and women lack full autonomy over their own fate, gender roles create a greater disadvantage for women.

This response meaningfully qualified the topic’s core proposition, ‘Both women and men are disadvantaged by rigid gender roles’.

The comparisons and contrasts explored in an essay needed to be selected in such a way that they added complexity to the treatment of the topic. The following is an example of a high-scoring response to topic 1 on the pairing of *The Crucible* and *The Dressmaker*.

Whereas The Dressmaker illustrates the downfall of women after a rise in social class, exposing how women may never obtain true power, The Crucible showcases how groups of women can gain small authority, yet highlights the struggle of maintaining it.

The strongest responses explored differences as well as similarities. The instances to which they referred added 'meaning' to the topic, inviting conceptual thinking. The following is an example of a high-scoring response to topic 1 on the pairing of *Tracks* and *Charlie's Country*.

Davidson presents how Robyn's new revelations allow her to liberate herself from 'infernal instrument[s]' such as 'clocks, maps and clothes' to truly trust in how she is away from society's shackles. Whilst Davidson presents the freedom Robyn is able to experience, de Heer illuminates the battle that Charlie continues to struggle with [...] The two texts illustrate the incredible lengths to which characters go in order to be able to combat society's hold on them [...] The two texts extol the wisdom gained from respective journeys in how they guide the protagonists [...]

Likewise, the following portion of a student's response to topic 1 on the pairing of *The Queen* and *Ransom*, reveals thoughtful and perceptive textual comparison, which sheds new light on the actual topic focus: 'Compare the relationships between loss and change'.

Through both Malouf and Frears' conceptions of secondary advisors, we gain another dimensional insight into how leaders approach their current loss. Not only do they help the leaders they serve to understand that to effectively manage grief and loss requires a change in perspective, but we too experience a changed perception of leaders through becoming privy to their intricate workings through the lens of their advisors.

Similarly, in the following high-scoring response to topic 1 on the pairing of *Stasiland* and *Never Let Me Go*, the capacity to step back from the events of each text to explore the major concepts is apparent:

[...] exposes how totalitarian systems use deception to manipulate its citizens augmented through conditioning and torture, to suppress heretical thought or to habituate its citizens to consider death as their duty [...] Totalitarian regimes understand the importance of conditioning as a form of deception, rendering people to be submissive to a political dogma or acquiescent to a state-decreed identity [...] perhaps the most pernicious forms of manipulation on the individual's autonomy are the system's attempts to revise history, to ensure that identity is limited to the perpetual present.

Assured and comprehensive textual understanding and knowledge that underpinned effective comparison in response to the topic was sought. The contrasts made between the texts needed to add meaning, as is shown in the following high-scoring response to topic 1 on the pairing of *The 7 Stages of Grieving* and *The Longest Memory*.

Though D'Aguiar intimates that literature could provide a reprieve from despair for African slaves, Enoch and Mailman alternatively depict a world in which the forced education of English was prevalent and, as such, resulted in a severe lack of hope. In verse, Chapel, the intelligent son and namesake of the centenarian slave Whitechapel, describes the 'darkness' or hardship of slavery as an 'anchor in slaves from the cradle to the grave' elegiacally expressing the fate of slaves to suffer from their births to their 'only salvation', their deaths [...] In contrast, The 7 Stages of Grieving also depicts the role of story and its implications of hope, but propounds that when indigenous Australians have been forced to live by the values and language of their English invaders, they have little hope for the future [...] Whilst literature and story is seen as a vehicle for hope in The Longest Memory, It is shown to be another method of subjugation for aboriginal Australians in The 7 Stages of Grieving.

As already noted, an argument must be consciously constructed by the student to fully resolve the topic. Students must recognise the key role played both by the introduction and topic sentences in ensuring that a tight and careful argumentative structure is established and maintained. Consider the following introduction of a high-scoring response to topic 1 on the pairing of *The 7 Stages of Grieving* and *The Longest Memory*.

The repercussions of centuries of injustice, dispossession and subjugation, has left painful wounds, of which the effects continue to reverberate today. Both Fred D'Aguiar's harrowing novella and Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman's confronting play convey the brutal worlds in which hope is sometimes present and afforded to individuals. Each polyphonic narrative explores the crushing brutality which presents worlds seemingly absent of all hope as they have forced individuals to succumb. However, the

few spirited acts of rebellion and defiance shown suggest that hope somehow remains present within each world.

Moreover, it was essential that the evolving argument was sustained and built upon, as shown in the following excerpts from the same essay.

The brutality, which is evident in both texts, is largely the product of a misguided Western mindset, which wished to destroy the hope and will of the individuals it sought to exploit [...]

It is clear, however that in both texts there has been a calculated and conscious effort by Western figures to erase the hope of the individuals it sought to exploit [...]

Both non-linear narratives explore the crushing oppression inflicted on minority groups which fostered worlds where hope was lacking [...]

In spite of the brutality inflicted upon the oppressed, both texts shed glimmers of hope in their respective worlds, through the portrayal of characters willing to overthrow the conventions that constrained them.

It is important that students are encouraged to explore a wide variety of key ideas and issues that are explored in both texts, and to examine how these arise. Students should aim for an ‘insightful grasp’ of ‘meaningful connections, similarities or differences’, revealed through sharp textual analysis, which conceptually address the question.

Section C – Argument and persuasive language

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	0.5	0.5	0.5	6	15	25	24	16	8	3	1	5.6

Students addressed the Section C material with assurance, and there were many substantial answers written in response to the given material. They handled the single social media post accompanied by two photographs with reasonable confidence. The clarity of the material appealed to the English cohort, and very few students did not make some attempt at this section of the paper.

The main piece for analysis was the social media post on the Toppdale Community Voice page, written by the marketing manager of the local Toppdale cinema, who argued that decreasing numbers at the theatre and an increasing reliance on streaming services would lead to the closure of the cinema. She called on the local population to do everything in their power to support the survival of the local theatre. There were two photographs attached to her post that supported her arguments. The straightforward nature of the material allowed students clear entry into the identification and analysis of argument and language. Nearly everyone could identify the marketing manager’s basic contention, and the connection between the photographs and her arguments.

Most students could identify Ava’s basic concerns about the closure of the cinema; however, higher scoring students could see the broader complexities in her argument. This was not just a simplistic plea to the local people to save their cinema; it was the strategy of a clever marketing manager to succeed at her job; it was also a considered argument for the need to address the broader ramifications of streaming video, made so accessible by advanced technology. Students were expected to approach the post in a holistic manner, asking themselves how it persuaded its Toppdale audience through a deliberately constructed combination of argument and language.

Nearly all students showed sound comprehension of the material and were able to identify their basic understanding of Ava’s arguments. Many middle-range responses provided clear, contextual introductions that reflected this understanding.

While there was confidence in identifying the broader argument, many students needed to focus on the ways in which Ava structured and sequenced her supporting arguments and consciously and deliberately used

language to position her audience in particular ways. **Identification** of argument is only the first step in the analysis process, and many students could not move beyond summarising and restating Ava's supporting arguments. There was a pattern to these summary responses, and teachers might find it useful to look carefully at the language used when 'analysing' arguments, for example, 'Ava's first argument is ...', 'Ava then tells the reader...'; 'Ava's second argument is that...', 'and she speaks about how ...' and 'Ava's third and final argument is ...'. These are clear indicators that the student is simply summarising and restating the argument, not analysing it.

Higher scoring responses could take the next step to analyse **how** this argument functioned and how it supported Ava's position. The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

From the outset, Ava optimistically reflects on the proud history of the cinema, promulgating the communal need to support local and historical businesses. Indeed, through her recollections of past events such as 'Since 1910s' and 'shared experience', Ava aims to cultivate a sense of loyalty in local Toppdale citizens appealing to their inherent desire to safeguard what is closest to them. Such appeals incite a sense of town rapport and camaraderie amongst older residents, as Ava's lexical choices of 'something special' and 'shared experience' encourage them to recall personal moments spent at the cinema which they still value [...] Accordingly, usage of the hypophoric question 'Did you know we had an estimated 250,000 people a year come through our doors just a few years ago?', aims to catalyse a realisation amongst Toppdale citizens that the subsequent decline in visitors is due to townspeople taking the cinema's existence for granted. The utilising of this hypophora seeks to galvanise potential patrons into taking instant action as Ava forebodingly warns that the town is 'at risk [of] losing something really special.

Students were very confident in their identification and quotation of appropriate language. There was considerable listing of words like 'beating heart', 'town's backbone', 'ambience' and 'unique', with students instinctively knowing that they were impacting the argument in some way. Why did the author choose to use these particular words? How did they add weight to the argument? What impact was Ava seeking to have on her audience by using them? A significant number of students identified the terms 'at risk', 'survival' and 'victim' as war-like, and some saw the clear contrast with words and phrases such as 'magic', 'connect' and 'supercharged emotional experience'; however, they struggled to explain why Ava used these contrasts, and how they impacted her audience.

The photographs that accompanied the post were consistently analysed satisfactorily. Generally, they were examined closely and relevant connections were made to the written text. When addressing the first graphic, many students used appropriate language samples to show how the photographs added visual weight to the argument. The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

Immediately personifying the cinema as 'the beating heart' of Toppdale, Ava humanises the building as a kind of charming, idealised environment. Words like 'magic', 'alluring' and 'magnetic ambience' foster a sense of child-like wonder amongst Toppdale residents, and such choices are literally conveyed within Ava's image. The photograph of the cinema full of people from across the demographic, congregating for a film, reassures Toppdale's civilians of the theatre's ability to connect individuals. The composition of the image, with no empty seats, establishes a sense of communal rapport. The lighting on the attendees' faces prompts the reader to also face the light, and so breathe life into the heart of their town. As each individual immerses themselves into the film with large smiles on their faces, it enhances the feeling of a shared experience for the reader, and incites a genuine yearning to participate in this human experience.

There were some differing interpretations of the second photograph – some students saw the image of the dignified, Art Deco building as the 'heart' of the community calling out for restoration and revival; while others linked the words in the last paragraph – 'doors slam shut' – to the image of the deserted, closed-up building that was at risk of being relegated to 'the dustbin of history'. Both analyses of the image were accepted so long as the student gave clear explanations of how it connected to the author's language and argument. The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

Emphatically proclaiming her intention to 'save the Toppdale cinema before its doors slam shut forever', Ava positions the Toppdale community to take action or their united hub for joy and lasting memories will disappear. Closing the post with a still image of the cinema in black and white with closed doors, situates the theatre to look like a barren memory. Lacking any patrons, the building is presented as still, dull and lifeless; what was one a thriving 'backbone of the town' is reduced to 'the dustbin of history'.

There were some weaknesses evident in students' responses.

- Labelling continued to be a problem (e.g. rhetorical questions, statistics, inclusive language) when students failed to explain how these 'language techniques' were being used, and what persuasive effect they were intended to have on the audience.
- An element of evaluation crept in where students believed they had to make judgements about Ava's argument. This has no relevance in examination analysis.
- Misunderstanding of tone, and gratuitous listings of Ava's tone and tone shifts, caused some concerns. Students needed to show evidence of particular tone descriptors, link it to the author's language choices and show how this impacted the argument and the audience.

As in the other two sections of the paper, there were no expected responses in Section C. Students needed to demonstrate their understanding of how the argument develops and functions, and how language is used to persuade. Students could, and did, achieve full marks by selecting different parts of the material to analyse. There is never an expectation that everything in the article has to be identified and analysed.

Text selection and average scores

The table shows the Section A texts selected by students in 2021 and the average Section A scores achieved by those students, shown as a percentage of the possible marks. The table also shows the average scores achieved by the same students for Sections B and C, again shown as a percentage of the possible marks for each of those sections.

Section A text	% of students	% Average Score Section A	% Average Score Section B	% Average Score Section C
<i>After Darkness</i>	4.5	52.8	49.0	52.3
<i>All the Light We Cannot See</i>	2.9	62.0	60.9	61.1
<i>Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity</i>	0.7	56.6	55.5	55.3
<i>Extinction</i>	4.7	48.7	52.8	53.2
<i>In Cold Blood</i>	2.5	56.8	55.0	57.0
<i>Like a House on Fire</i>	3.8	57.4	51.6	53.5
<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>	6.5	63.2	63.3	62.7
<i>Nine Days</i>	5.8	53.3	49.7	51.1
<i>Old/New World: New and Selected Poems</i>	1.7	54.8	50.2	52.2
<i>Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood, Jonathan Cape</i>	1.2	61.7	55.8	58.2
<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>	2.7	65.6	64.2	63.5
<i>Rear Window</i>	25.5	55.8	52.9	55.1

Section A text	% of students	% Average Score Section A	% Average Score Section B	% Average Score Section C
<i>Runaway</i>	0.6	57.6	59.4	58.4
<i>Station Eleven</i>	10.9	60.5	55.1	56.6
<i>Stories We Tell</i>	0.4	55.3	48.3	52.9
<i>The Golden Age</i>	4.9	53.4	50.1	52.0
<i>The Lieutenant</i>	4.7	57.9	55.3	56.8
<i>The Women of Troy</i>	11.2	61.3	56.1	57.1
<i>William Wordsworth: Poems selected by Seamus Heaney</i>	2.2	70.3	66.7	64.6
<i>Things Fall Apart</i>	2	58.5	55	54.6
No text	0.7	0	20.7	36.9