

The Higher Level Essay

External Assessment = 20% of your overall course grade

The Nature of the Task

At HL, students are required to write a 1,200 –1,500-word formal essay that develops a particular line of inquiry of their own choice in connection with a non-literary text, a collection of non-literary texts by one, same author, or a literary text or work studied during the course.⁴²
Language A: language and literature guide

External Assessment

The HL essay offers students an opportunity to develop as independent, critical, and creative readers, thinkers, and writers by exploring a literary or language topic over an extended period of time, refining their ideas by means of a process of planning, drafting, and re-drafting. The essay requires students to construct a focused, analytical argument examining the work from a broad literary or linguistic perspective. It also requires them to adhere to the formal framework of an academic essay, using citations and references.

Explanation of the Task

The HL essay is based on the exploration the student has carried out in the learner portfolio. During this exploration process, the student will have investigated a number of works and texts from a variety of different perspectives.

In the lead-up to the drafting of the essay, the student must decide which text, texts or work to focus on for further investigation, and which topic to write about in connection with them. In choosing the topic, the student can consult the course's seven central concepts. Any text, texts, or work previously studied in class may be selected, with the exception of the texts used for the internal assessment and the works the student plans to use in paper 2.

Selection of Text, Texts, or Work

Candidates must select the texts and topics for their essays independently; however, consultation with the teacher is essential in this process. Care must be taken to make sure that the chosen non-literary text or texts or literary texts or works are rich enough to support a developed, focused, and analytical argument.

In the case of a collection of short stories, poems, song lyrics, or any short literary text, candidates may choose to use just one literary text from the work as their focus. However, students and teachers should remember that the assignment is a broad literary investigation rather than a more narrowly focused stylistic commentary task. It may be necessary to use more than one literary text from the work chosen in order to achieve this.

In the case of short non-literary texts, it may be necessary for the candidate to use more than one from the same text type by the same authorship, for example, the same creative advertising agency, cartoonist, photographer, or social media user. In this instance, at least one of the texts should be studied in class. If using language texts in translation, these must be professional and published translations of the text.

Determining the Topic

The chosen topic should enable a broad literary or linguistic focus for the essay. In achieving this, the course's seven central concepts may be a helpful starting point for students in generating or determining a topic for the essay. While students do not have to trace their essay back to one of the seven concepts and the assessment criteria do not require it, working with one of the seven concepts will allow students to begin thinking about their topic as they refine their ideas and arguments. The seven concepts are briefly discussed here in relation to the assignment:

Identity

The student might be interested in an aspect of the representation of the identity of a particular character or group of characters in the text, or on the way in which the text relates to the identity of the writer.

Culture

The student might be interested in an aspect of the representation of the culture of a particular place, institution, or group of people, or on the way in which the text itself relates to a particular culture.

Creativity

The student might be interested in an aspect of the representation of individual or collective creativity, or lack of creativity, within the text, or on the way in which the text represents the creativity of the writer.

Communication

The student might be interested in an aspect of the representation of acts of communication, or failures in communication, in the text, or on the way in which the text itself represents an act of communication.

Transformation

The student might be interested in an aspect of the representation of transformation or transformative acts in the text, or on the way in which the text itself is a transformative act either of other texts through intertextual reference to them or of reality by means of a transformative effect on the reader's identity, relationships, goals, values, and beliefs.

Perspective

The student might be interested in an aspect of the representation of a particular perspective or perspectives within the text, or on the way in which the text represents the writer's perspective.

Representation

The student might be interested in an aspect of the way in which the text represents different themes, attitudes, and concepts, or in the extent to which language and literature can actually represent reality.

Here is how a suitable line of inquiry might arise using concepts as starting points. The following are some examples of how this could be done:

- **Identity**—how does Ralph Ellison, in his novel *Invisible Man*, succeed in making his narrator a convincing spokesperson for the concerns of African-Americans in the 20th century?
- **Culture**—how does Robert Capa represent post-Second World War France to qualify/exemplify the brutalities of the French population on former Nazi collaborators in *La Femme Tondue*? (Language A: language and literature only)
- **Creativity**—how do Mario Testino's portraits manage to convey the personalities of those portrayed in original ways? (Language A: language and literature only)

- **Communication**--which view of love does Matt Groening convey in *Love is Hell*?
(Language A: language and literature only)
- **Transformation**--in what ways does The Alan Parsons Project's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* offer a transformative re-reading of Edgar Allan Poe's tales?
- **Perspective**--how does Mary Shelley's protagonist in *Frankenstein* use the motif of dangerous knowledge to show the perspective of fear and anxiety of excesses in scientific enterprise in early 19th century Europe?
- **Representation**--through what means does Juan Rulfo successfully convey the representation of realistic and non-realistic characters and situations in *Pedro Páramo*?

However, using the seven concepts is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive. Other literary focuses, theoretical approaches, or areas of exploration could lead to lines of inquiry such as:

- How does F. Scott Fitzgerald foreshadow how Gatsby's unnatural attachment to the past causes his downfall in *The Great Gatsby*?
- In what ways would Marxist theory about the stratification of wealth and power explain the violence that runs through the action of the novel *A Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez?
- To what extent was the characterization of the protagonist in Patrick Süskind's *Perfume* influenced by Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*?

Assigned: in December 2024

First Draft Due: January 26th, 2025

Final Draft Due: February 26th, 2025 - absolutely NO EXTENSIONS

The Learner Portfolio and the Higher Level Essay

The learner portfolio is **not** specifically assessed, but it is an important tool in helping students prepare for formal assessment. It provides a platform for students to develop independent thinking when studying texts, reflecting on the ways their texts and responses explore cultural values, identities, relationships, and issues across a variety of topics.

In relation to the preparation of the HL essay, the learner portfolio provides an opportunity for students to:

- Reflect on the ways in which each text they read relates to the seven central concepts of the course.
- Keep an ongoing record of themes and issues they find interesting in relation to each of the texts they read.
- Explore how key passages in the texts they have studied are significant in relation to those themes and issues.
- Trace the evolution of their thinking and planning in connection with their chosen topic.
- Record references for, and ideas and quotations from, secondary sources they might want to mention in their essay.
- Reflect on the challenges that the HL essay poses for them as individual learners.