

ENGLISH

TIPS FOR WRITING ANSWERS AND ESSAYS

□ Writing well in English is like perfecting a craft – it takes time, consideration and effort. So think about what you are writing and examine how you could improve it. An A-standard essay is a beautifully structured, well-expressed piece of art, while a C-grade essay is usually sloppily written, vague and clearly not reread.

□ For example, instead of simply saying “I like this image”, consider the following alternatives: “I find this image strikingly visual; “This image is remarkable in the way it portrays Plath’s strained emotional state”; “I believe this theme is universally and timelessly relevant and this is why I find the poetry of [Plath] truly rewarding to read.”

□ You should familiarise yourself with some key phrases like this and integrate them into your own style of writing. For example: “I admire her mastery of symbolism/ expressive language/ startlingly original images/ challenging themes.”

□ A tight, preplanned structure is essential. Every essay should consist of an introduction, conclusion and six to eight paragraphs. Aim to have your essays (in Paper One and Paper Two) between about three and five pages in length.

□ Your paragraphs must lead logically onto each other, so that the essay will not seem like a series of disjointed points. Remember to use linking phrases, especially in the first sentence of each paragraph. For example: “We see this use of powerful imagery once again in the poem . . .”; “This theme [of identity/death] is explored from a slightly different angle in the poem . . .”; “Whereas the witches embody supernatural evil, Lady Macbeth represents the capacity for evil in humans.”

□ Some simple linking phrases include: indeed, undoubtedly, furthermore, on the other hand, nevertheless, further evidence of this, etc.

□ The two most important paragraphs in any essay (in Paper One and Paper Two) are the introduction and conclusion. If you have a weak opening and closing, you will lose marks.

□ Start your essay strong with a definite, confident statement: “Of the 37 plays penned by Shakespeare, *Macbeth* is certainly one of the most memorable.”

As well as including general praise, your introduction should follow the wording of the question you have been asked. You should try to rephrase the question or, if you can’t, simply repeat it in your opening statement. Always refer in some way to the question asked in your opening paragraph as the examiner is looking for engagement with the set task. For example, use words to link back to the essay title such as “indeed”, “without doubt”, etc.

□ Here is an example of how to rephrase a question.

Question: “Bishop’s poetry moves from detailed outer description to intense inner reflection.” Discuss.

First sentence in answer: “I certainly agree that the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop moves from external physical description towards moments of discovery and insight. These moments of epiphany can be joyful or devastating, depending on the emotional state of the poet at the time.”

□ Your conclusion should be strong and convincing. It should begin: “In conclusion, therefore, I firmly agree that . . .” It should refer back to the essay itself and show how you have answered the question (“As my above points have illustrated . . .”). This will show the examiner that your answer is well thought-out from start to finish. Many essays end vaguely or mid-point so ensure your closing statement leaves an impact on the examiner. For example: “Elizabeth Bishop was a master of visual description and is, in my opinion, deservedly remembered as one of the greatest American poets of the 20th century.”

□ Remember to keep referring back to the question the whole way through. You should do this about three to five times. For example, the last sentence of every second paragraph should sound something like this: “This is further evidence that . . . indeed . . . [rephrase essay title/question].”

□ Ensure the quotations you use are 100 per cent accurate and try not to give partial quotes simply because you can’t remember the rest, as this only highlights what you don’t know!

□ Ensure what you are discussing is relevant – don’t discuss Banquo’s distrust of the witches if the question is on the character of Macbeth.

Also, if you drift into autopilot and write a paragraph on imagery when you have been asked to discuss the poet’s themes, you will not get any marks, no matter how brilliant your imagery discussion is!

What ordinary students need

Ordinary-level students should focus on the following three areas of study in preparation for the Leaving Cert:

- Practising written communication skills and improving your personal style of expression;
- Building your range of vocabulary;
- Familiarising yourself fully with the course material and what is required in each section.

So, this is our challenge! Keep these key areas of study in mind as you read the following notes. Make a note of the key points for revision closer to exam time.

PRESCRIBED POETRY: ELIZABETH BISHOP

Poem One: *The Fish*

□ Bishop is struck by the fish’s willingness to surrender its life so peacefully: “he didn’t fight”. Line five.

□ The fish is described as a battered, heavy burden covered in bruises and injuries, with its skin hanging off. It is covered in mouldy “lime”, slimy seaweed and is swarming with sea lice. Lines 17-21.

□ Even though the fish is ugly and disgusting looking, it is still sacred and worthy of worship: “venerable . . . a five-haired beard of wisdom”. Lines 61-64.

□ The dangerous aspects of the fish are described: its sharp, bloody gills that can “cut”. Bishop has sympathy for the fish suffering from “terrible oxygen”. Line 23.

□ She compares the fish’s eyes to her own, viewing it in human terms. Lines 34-41.

□ The fish is personified as a brave war-hero with “medals” and a wise old man’s “beard”.

□ Bishop falls into a trance. She realises that she has much in common with the fish: both have struggled through life’s battles and have survived. Lines 74-76.

□ Bishop decides to release the fish because it is brave and honourable and deserves its freedom. Like her, it is a worthy survivor of life’s battles.

□ Fish = a symbol of the poet. The fish represents Bishop’s struggles in life, bravery and survival.

□ The central image of the fish is vivid, detailed, visual (ie we can picture it in our mind’s eye) and powerful. Lines 10-15.

□ Themes: survival, bravery, honour, hardship of life, nature.

□ Language:

(i) Disturbing simile: “flesh . . . like feathers” imagines fish-meat cooked. Lines 27-28.

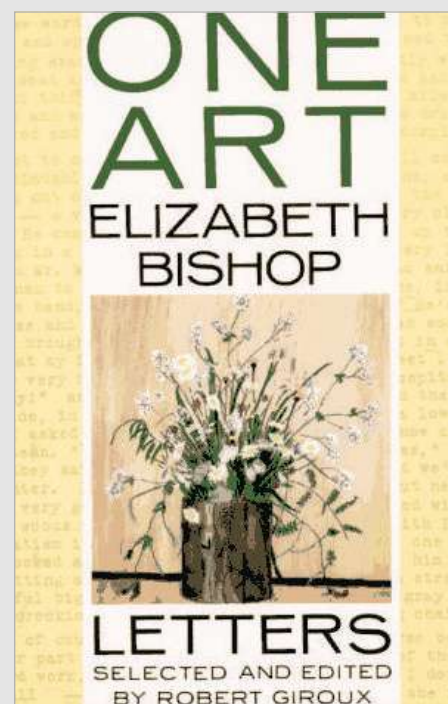
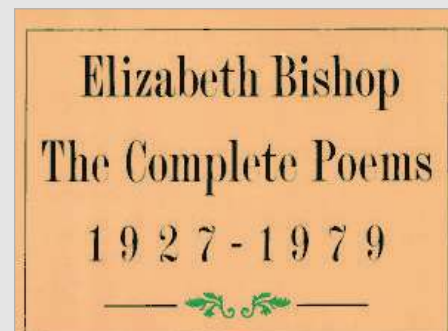
(ii) Impressive simile: “like medals . . . trailing from his aching jaw”; the fish-hooks are like medals, evidence of the fish’s past struggles.

SAMPLE QUESTION:

Do you think the image of the fish is a powerful one?

SAMPLE ANSWER:

I certainly believe that the central image of the fish is an extremely strong one. As an image, it functions on many levels. The image of the fish is very effective because the reader can easily visualise the fish. This is due to the fact that it is described in



clear, visual detail. We are told of its “brown skin . . . hung in strips like ancient wallpaper”.

There are also many vivid factual images of the fish, such as its eyes, mouth and gills. The fact that the fish is personified as a “venerable” wise old man with a “beard” of wavering fish-lines makes it easier to relate to and strengthens it as a poetic image.

The fish also operates on a deeper level, as it represents much more than just a fish. It symbolises bravery and survival and, on a wider scale, the relationship between mankind and nature.

Poem Two: *Filling Station*

*Oh, but it is dirty!
this little filling station,
oil-soaked, oil-permeated
to a disturbing, over-all
black translucency.*

Be careful with that match!