

The expert



Anne Gormley holds an MA Modern English Literature (Hons) H Dip Ed (Hons) and studied English and Irish in Trinity College Dublin. She has been teaching English for more than 20 years. She is currently teaching in Laurel Hill Coláiste in Limerick. Gormley has been the assistant examiner for the Department of Education, and she is the author of several key texts and study guides, including *Explorations II, Less Stress More Success Higher and Ordinary Level*, and co-author of *New Awakenings*. She is also a regular adviser on writing skills, exam technique, and revision planning on local and national radio.

Top tips for studying English

The English course and exam is very large and extensive, so it is easy to fall into the trap of spending a lot of time on paper two. It is easy to spend your time studying the set texts, such as the poetry, the Shakespeare play, and the three comparative texts, and then neglect Paper I.

Remember that Paper I is 50 per cent of the total exam and that spending time preparing for this section is very valuable, and in fact can be a lot easier than learning off reams of notes on the texts.

This is not to say that the texts should be neglected, but be careful about balancing your time and dedicating an equal amount of your study time to both papers.

It may seem easier to sit down and learn off reams of notes on your texts on Paper II, but remember that spending time on the techniques of essay and comprehension will be invaluable at exam time. So here are some tips for studying Paper I and Paper II

TIPS FOR STUDYING PAPER I

- ◆ Know what essay style suits you, whether a short story or a persuasive/argument-style essay. Remember you write best in the style you are comfortable with.
- ◆ Take past exam papers and read through the comprehension passages. There are three printed out each year, even though you only answer on one. Try answering the questions asked. Make sure you support each point you make with a reference from the passage.
- ◆ Remember that every time you write anything, be it three or four sentences or a few paragraphs on any topic, you are improving the quality of your written English.
- ◆ Copy down interesting and original phrases and ideas from newspaper articles and keep them in a notebook for your essays and your Question B.
- ◆ Prepare some material on topics you are interested in, maybe fashion, sport, travel or music. Keep these in a journal and maybe weave them into the essay or writing exercises that come up on Paper I.

TIPS FOR STUDYING PAPER II

The single text

- ◆ Write out a list of quotations from your Shakespeare play if you are doing this as a single text, and maybe group these under various headings, such as characters or themes.
- ◆ Know the text well, especially the main themes and characters.

The Comparative Section

- ◆ Write out a list of linking devices that you can use to tie your three texts together in an answer. Some examples of these linking devices are phrases such as “in contrast to the novel, the play”, or “similarly in the film the director manages to” or “unlike the play the novel deals with real issues”.
- ◆ Write out a list of key sections from each of the three texts you are studying in this section and know how you can apply them to the three headings, Genre, Cultural Context and Themes/Issues.
- ◆ Understand fully what these three headings mean:
Themes/Issues: these are the main ideas in the texts;
Genre: this is how the story is told – through dialogue, or images or a narrator;
Cultural Context: this is the type of society and social framework that is at the core of the text.

Prescribed Poetry

- ◆ You need to know at least five of the eight poets prescribed for the 2008 Leaving Cert.
- ◆ Write your own personal biography of the poets you are studying, and try to relate the poems to the poet’s life.
- ◆ Learn off some lines from the poems and use them in your answers.
- ◆ Prepare some sample answers that you have written during the year and use them for your exam.
- ◆ In each paragraph of a poetry answer always mention the question asked, and quote from a poem or two to support your points.

Unseen Poetry

- ◆ Practise doing unseen poems from past exam papers.
- ◆ Try to grasp the general gist of the poem – often, the actual title can help here.
- ◆ Know how to recognise poetic techniques, such as metaphors and symbols, and see what function they have in the poem.
- ◆ Give yourself the same amount of time that you will have in the actual exam, which is about 20 minutes.

Overall, remember your timing and the marks awarded for each section and try to get to the stage where you can write your answers in that time. Also, when studying in these coming months for English, spend half of your time learning and the other half applying it on paper and practising your writing skills.

Making your

Robert Frost’s poetry reflects his great esteem and love for nature and its extraordinary powers

Question: Write a short talk on the topic “What Robert Frost’s poetry means to me”.

Answer: Robert Frost was an American poet born in San Francisco in 1874 whose poetry has always held a great meaning for me. I find that I can identify with a lot of his poetry in different ways.

One of his most memorable and certainly original poems, called *Out Out*, was written in 1916 when Frost was living in Vermont. The poem is based on an actual incident that occurred to a young boy who was killed when one of his hands was cut off in a sawing machine. The title is taken from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and signifies how short our lives really are – life is like a brief candle, which will just flicker and die out. The poem is written as a simple narrative exposition about how a young boy died while he was cutting some wood. I found the whole effect very striking and what struck me forcibly was how Frost manages to involve the reader so much in the poem. He does not make any commentary, but leaves it very much up to the reader to judge the whole situation.

The conclusion of this poem is very dramatic. It is speaking about the reaction of neighbours to the boy’s death: “And they, since they were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.” I found these lines to be quite chilling as in many ways Frost is outlining the total indifference of people, how they simply get on with their own lives quickly and pragmatically. The whole fragility and brevity of life really became apparent to me from that short poem.

Frost himself said once that “a poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom”. I think that this statement is true for a lot of his work and it has contributed to enriching my experiences on reading much of his poems. In the beautiful lyric *Spring Pools*, Frost has crafted a truly beautiful poem. Frost was a great lover of nature and the natural world, and here he gives us an extraordinary insight into the cyclical process of nature and its capacity for creation and destruction. In two clever stanzas, Frost manages to draw an analogy between the way in which the pools of water become absorbed into the soil and the roots of trees. In turn, these trees will themselves be destroyed by time and the elements. Frost is showing how the process of artistic creation is similar, as it presupposes that the artist must suffer in order to create. Ideas and imaginative inspiration come by means of destruction and creation. In fact, Frost used nature as a backdrop to articulate a lot of his thoughts and he used to say many times how “Man has need of nature, but nature has no need of man.” A lot of his poetry certainly reflects this great esteem and love for nature and its extraordinary powers.

The poem *Acquainted with the Night* is certainly one which was written against that backdrop of darkness and depression. Frost himself described this poem as “a descent into darkness”. Frost’s life was troubled, anxious, and sorrowful. He experienced loneliness, despair and disappointment in life. This poem certainly dramatises these emotions in very profound and dramatic way.

Frost gives an urban night setting to the poem. This type of setting acts as a backdrop for the predominant mood, which is one of depression and darkness. The speaker in the poem has walked in the darkness beyond the furthest city light: “I have outwalked the furthest city light.” The dark and oppressive images seem to dominate – any glimpse of light lies far away “and further still at an unearthly height / One luminary clock against the sky.” The moon is out of reach and alien to him. The poem concludes by reiterating the title “I have been one acquainted with the night”. Indeed, this poem certainly makes me identify with Frost,



Robert Frost explores themes of nature and the natural world and some of his work gives an extraordinary insight into the cyclical process of nature and its capacity for creation and destruction.

Photograph: Reuters/Ian Hodgson