

Every essay on this exam is scored on the same six points: one for a defensible thesis, four for evidence and commentary, one for sophistication. The extracts below are annotated to show which sentence earns which point – because the difference between a 3 and a 5 is almost never the quality of the reading, it is whether the commentary explains how the evidence supports the claim. 三类文章同用一套评分标准, 差距多在“论证”而非“理解”。

The thesis – one point, and it gates the others

I Prompt: analyse how the poet uses imagery to develop the speaker’s attitude towards the passage of time.

Weak: “The poet uses many images to show the speaker’s feelings about time.” Defensible: “By moving from images of ripening fruit to images of stubble and ash, the poet turns the speaker’s early pleasure in abundance into a resigned acceptance that what ripens must also be consumed.”

The weak version restates the prompt and takes a position on nothing, so it earns nothing and, because the commentary points depend on supporting a claim, it makes the rest of the essay harder to score. The defensible version names a specific movement in the imagery and an interpretive claim about what that movement does. It also gives the essay its structure: two body sections, one per stage of the movement. A thesis may be one sentence or two, and it may appear anywhere in the introduction.

I Prompt: analyse how the author uses the contrast between two settings to develop a theme in the novel.

“The novel sets the ordered, inherited house against the improvised rooms the protagonist rents, and by making the second increasingly the place where she speaks honestly, it argues that belonging is something chosen and built rather than inherited.”

Notice what makes this defensible: it names the contrast, states what the author does with it, and arrives at an interpretation that a reader could reasonably dispute. A thesis that could not be argued against – “the two settings are different” – is description, and description is the single most common reason an otherwise capable essay scores 2 or 3 on evidence and commentary.

Evidence and commentary – four points, and the commentary is what is scored

I A body paragraph on the imagery prompt above.

In the first stanza the speaker describes the orchard as “heavy with more than it can hold”, and the branches “bowing” under fruit. The verb “bowing” does double work: it is the literal droop of a laden branch, but it is also the posture of submission, so even at the height of abundance the tree is already yielding to a weight it did not choose. The excess that seems like plenty is presented from the start as a burden, and this prepares the reader for the later images of what remains after harvest, when the same field appears as “stubble” – the syntax of abundance emptied out but the shape of it still visible.

Three things earn the commentary points here. The quotations are SHORT and embedded in the writer’s own sentence, so the paragraph never becomes a block quotation with a sentence after it. The commentary explains the effect of a specific word rather than naming a device: it does not say “the poet uses personification”, it says what “bowing” does. And the last sentence connects this paragraph back to the thesis’s claim about movement. A paragraph that quotes well and then only paraphrases the quotation earns evidence but not commentary, which caps the essay at 2 of the 4.

I A weaker version of the same paragraph, for comparison.

The poet uses imagery in the first stanza. He says the orchard is “heavy with more than it can hold” and that the branches are “bowing”. This is personification because branches cannot really bow. It creates a vivid image for the reader and helps them picture the scene, which shows the speaker’s attitude towards time.

Everything here is true and none of it is analysis. The device is NAMED rather than explained; “creates a vivid image” and “helps the reader picture the scene” are claims that could be made about any image in any poem, so they show nothing about this one; and the final clause asserts the connection to the thesis instead of demonstrating it. This is the standard shape of a 2 on evidence and commentary – and the fix is not to write more, it is to replace every generic sentence with one about the specific word.

Sophistication – the sixth point, earned rarely and deliberately

I What actually earns the sophistication point?

One of a few things, consistently through the essay rather than in a final flourish: placing the argument in a broader context that genuinely illuminates it; recognising and accounting for evidence that complicates the thesis; analysing how tensions within the text are held rather than resolved; or writing with a controlled, persuasive style.

The most reliable route is the second: name the detail that seems to work against your reading and explain why the reading survives it. For the orchard poem – “The final stanza’s tone is nearly cheerful, which might seem to undo the resignation traced here; but the cheerfulness attaches to the emptied field rather than to the harvest, and it is the relief of a burden set down, not a denial of the loss.” A conclusion that merely restates the thesis in larger words does not earn it, and neither does a sentence about the human condition tacked onto the end.

The three question types

I What differs between the poetry, prose and open questions?

Poetry and prose analysis give you the text; the open question does not. In the first two, close reading of specific language is the whole task. In the open question you choose a work you know well, and the risk shifts: plot summary replaces analysis.

For the open question, the discipline is to write no sentence whose only content is what happens. Every reference to an event must be there because it supports the claim, and one clause of context is enough – the reader is assumed to know the book. Choose a work with genuine complexity on the element the prompt names, and if the prompt asks about an element your chosen text handles simply, choose a different text rather than forcing it. Time is equal across the three essays, so plan for roughly forty minutes each and do not let the open question absorb the surplus.