The HL essay

IB DP English A: Literature HL essay: a line of inquiry in 1,500 words

The HL essay

- explain the format, rules and criteria of the HL essay;
- narrow a topic into a line of inquiry through a **concept** and a feature;
- plan the structure of a 1,200–1,500-word essay;
- quote, **cite** and draft in the way the essay requires.

From topic to line of inquiry

- The course has seven **concepts** 概念: **identity** 身份认同, **culture** 文化, **creativity** 创造力, **communication** 交流, **perspective** 视角, **transformation** 转变 and **representation** 再现.
- Linking your topic to one **concept**, and then to a feature of the writer's craft, turns a topic into a question you can answer in 1,500 words.
- For a poet, the "work" is usually a collection or a group of poems studied together.
- *Narrow the topic step by step until the question fits the word limit*

Structure

- **Thesis**: Dickinson's capitals turn ideas into characters and objects, and her dashes make the reader feel time, hesitation and silence, so that hope, death and fear are experienced in the body rather than explained.
- Paragraph 1: hope as a creature. In "'Hope' is the thing with feathers", the dashes at the end of every line keep the stanza open, like the song that "never stops - at all -".

Structure (2)

- Paragraph 2: death as a person. In "Because I could not stop for Death -", the capital D and the line "He kindly stopped for me -" make Death a polite gentleman with a "Carriage"; the dashes slow the ride.
- Paragraph 3: the mind as a place. "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," turns a breakdown into a ceremony inside the head; the capitals give "Funeral" and "Brain" the weight of physical things.

Structure (3)

- Paragraph 4: why she writes this way. "Tell all the truth but tell it slant -" suggests that some truths are too strong to state directly; dashes and capitals are a "slant" way of telling.
- Conclusion: the features that her first editors removed are the ones that make her abstract subjects concrete.

Assessment criteria

- The IB marks the essay on four criteria of 5 marks each.
- Criteria A and B reward what you understand and how well you analyse the writer's choices; C rewards an argument that moves step by step towards its answer; D rewards clear, academic English.
- A narrow line of inquiry helps with all four, because it gives every paragraph the same job.

Writing well

- Quote briefly: a few words in your sentence, not long blocks. For poems, show line breaks with a slash: "Because I could not stop for Death - / He kindly stopped for me -".
- Use the present tense for what happens in the work: "the speaker rides with Death".

Writing well (2)

- **Cite** 引用 every quotation and every idea from another writer, using one referencing style (for example MLA) and a list of **works cited** 引用文献. Say which edition you use: Dickinson's poems appear with different punctuation in different editions.
- Your teacher can comment on one draft only, so make that draft complete.
- The essay must be your own work: using someone else's ideas or writing, including text generated by AI tools, without citing it is **academic misconduct** 学术不端.

Sources for this lesson

- International Baccalaureate, *Language A: Literature guide* (first assessment 2021), HL essay criteria.
- R. W. Franklin (ed.), *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (1981), the hand-sewn fascicles.
- M. L. Todd and T. W. Higginson (eds), *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (1890), the first, "corrected" edition.
- C. Miller, *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar* (1987).

Common errors

- Choosing a topic so wide ("women in *A Doll's House*") that the essay says a little about many things and proves nothing.
- Writing a line of inquiry that is a statement, not a question.
- Using a work you also use in the individual oral or Paper 2.

Common errors (2)

- Summarising the plot instead of analysing the writer's choices.
- Handing in an incomplete draft; the teacher comments on one draft only.
- Quoting without line references or the edition you used.

Key terms

- **HL essay**: a formal essay of 1,200 to 1,500 words on one work studied in the course, worth 20% of the HL grade.
- **Line of inquiry**: the focused question that an HL essay answers.
- **Concept**: one of the course's seven big ideas, such as **identity**, **representation** or **perspective**.

Key terms (2)

- **Fascicle**: one of the small booklets of poems that Dickinson sewed together by hand.
- **Academic honesty**: acknowledging every source you use and submitting only your own work.

Check yourself

- 1.
- What are the word range, marks and weight of the HL essay? 2.
- Which works may you not use for the HL essay? 3.
- Narrow "Dickinson's poems" into a line of inquiry through a **concept** and a feature. 4.