Course Companion

International Baccalaureate · IB Diploma · Language A: Literature · SL

Every topic handout in one volume

exercises.lol

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Paper 1 · close reading and guided literary analysis

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Close reading and Paper 1

IB Diploma Programme English A: Literature SL (first assessment 2021). The course is organised in three **areas of exploration**: *readers, writers and texts*, *time and space*, and *intertextuality: connecting texts*. This topic prepares Paper 1, the **guided literary analysis**: you analyse an unseen passage of literature, such as a poem or an extract from a novel or play. HL students get two passages and write about both (2 hours 15 minutes, 40 marks, 35% of HL). SL students choose one (1 hour 15 minutes, 20 marks, 35% of SL). Each passage has a **guiding question**, such as "How does the poet present the power of hope?"

In about 1861 Emily Dickinson, who rarely left her family home in Amherst, Massachusetts, wrote a short poem about hope. It has twelve lines, no title and many dashes, and she never published it. Only about ten of her almost 1,800 poems were printed while she was alive. Today students around the world learn its first line by heart. Why does a short, strange poem stay in the mind? Paper 1 asks you to explain exactly that: *how* a text creates its effect.

Must-know for Paper 1:

Area	Key content
the paper	an unseen literary passage; a guiding question; HL two passages (40 marks), SL one (20 marks)
forms	poetry, prose fiction, drama, literary non-fiction
features	speaker or narrator, imagery, figurative language, sound, structure, tone
method	annotate; a thesis that answers the question; feature, evidence, effect
criteria	A understanding, B analysis, C focus and organisation, D language (5 marks each per passage)

Who is speaking?

The **speaker** of a poem, or the **narrator** of a story, is a voice created by the writer. Do not assume it is the writer. Write "the speaker feels ..." rather than "Dickinson feels ...". Ask three questions first:

Question	What to look for
who speaks, and to whom?	first person (“I”) or third person; a listener or reader
what happens or changes?	a situation, a memory, a decision, a turn in thought
what is the **tone** ?	the speaker’s attitude: calm, angry, ironic, hopeful, uncertain

Literary features

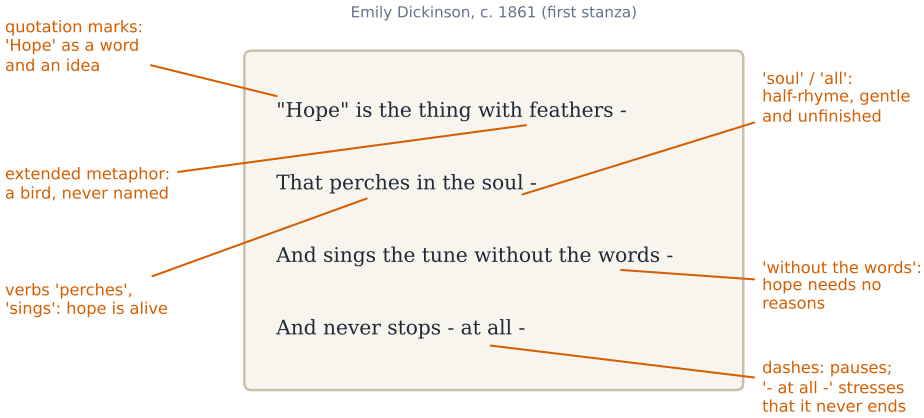
Feature	What it is	Ask
imagery	words that create a picture or a sense (sight, sound, touch)	which senses, and why these?
metaphor	describing one thing as another	what is the idea compared to, and what does that add?
personification	giving human qualities to a non-human thing	what feelings does it create?
diction	word choice	simple or formal? any surprising words?
rhyme and rhythm	repeated sounds; the beat of the lines	where does the pattern break, and why there?
enjambment	a sentence that runs on past the end of a line	what is delayed or stressed?

Feature	What it is	Ask
structure	stanzas, sections, the order of ideas	where is the turn or the climax?
ambiguity	a word or line with more than one meaning	which readings are possible?

A worked close reading

The first stanza of Dickinson’s poem:

> “Hope” is the thing with feathers -
> That perches in the soul -
> And sings the tune without the words -
> And never stops - at all -



Annotate before you write: each label names a feature and hints at its effect

- **Metaphor.** Hope is never called a bird, only ”the thing with feathers”. The reader completes the picture, so the idea feels discovered, not told.
- **Verbs.** “Perches” and “sings” make an abstract feeling act like a living creature inside the body (“in the soul”).
- **“Without the words”.** Hope does not need reasons or language; it continues even when we cannot explain why.
- **Dashes.** The many dashes slow the reader down and create small pauses. The final “- at all -” isolates two short words, so the line ends with stress on how endless hope is.
- **Sound.** “Soul” and “all” share a vowel sound but are not a full rhyme (a **half-rhyme**), which makes the stanza sound gentle and slightly unfinished, like a song that “never stops”.

Writing the analysis

1. **Read and annotate** (about 20 minutes per passage): read twice; mark the speaker, the turn, and three or four strong features.
2. **Thesis** : one or two sentences that answer the guiding question.
3. **Body paragraphs** (three or four): each makes one point, quotes a few words as evidence, names the feature, and explains its effect on the reader.
4. **Conclusion**: how the features work together.

Worked thesis. *Guiding question: How does the poet present the power of hope?*

> Dickinson presents hope as a small, quiet but unstoppable force: by turning it into a bird that sings “without the words”, the poem suggests that hope

survives exactly where reason and language fail.

Worked paragraph.

> The poem's punctuation makes hope's persistence felt in the act of reading. Each line of the first stanza ends with a dash, so no line ever fully closes; the reader is carried on, just as the bird "never stops". The final line breaks into fragments, "- at all -", and the extra dashes force the reader to pause on these two short words. The effect is to stress, through form as well as meaning, that hope continues even in moments of silence.

Avoid **feature spotting**: "there is a metaphor in line 1" earns little. Always explain the effect.

Checklist

- Paper 1: an unseen passage and a guiding question; HL two passages (40 marks), SL one (20 marks); 35% at both levels.
- The speaker or narrator is not the writer; tone and the turn.
- The features table: imagery, metaphor, personification, diction, rhyme and rhythm, enjambment, structure, ambiguity.
- The Dickinson **close reading** : metaphor, verbs, dashes, half-rhyme.
- Thesis, feature–evidence–effect paragraphs, no feature spotting.

Paper 2 · comparing literary works

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Comparing literary works (Paper 2)

IB Diploma Programme English A: Literature SL (first assessment 2021). This topic prepares Paper 2, the **comparative essay** , which SL and HL students both sit (1 hour 45 minutes, 30 marks; 35% at SL, 25% at HL). You get four general questions and answer one, comparing two works you have studied. You may not use a work you used in your individual oral or HL essay. The topic also covers the areas of exploration *time and space* (how **context** shapes a work) and *intertextuality* (how works speak to each other across time).

Two kings hear a prophecy. One, in ancient Athens around 429 BC, is told he will kill his father and marry his mother; he runs away to escape it, and runs straight into it. The other, in Shakespeare's Scotland about two thousand years later, is told he will be king; he does not wait, but murders his way to the crown. Both plays ask the same question: are we free, or is our end already written? Comparing the two answers is a Paper 2 essay.

Must-know for Paper 2:

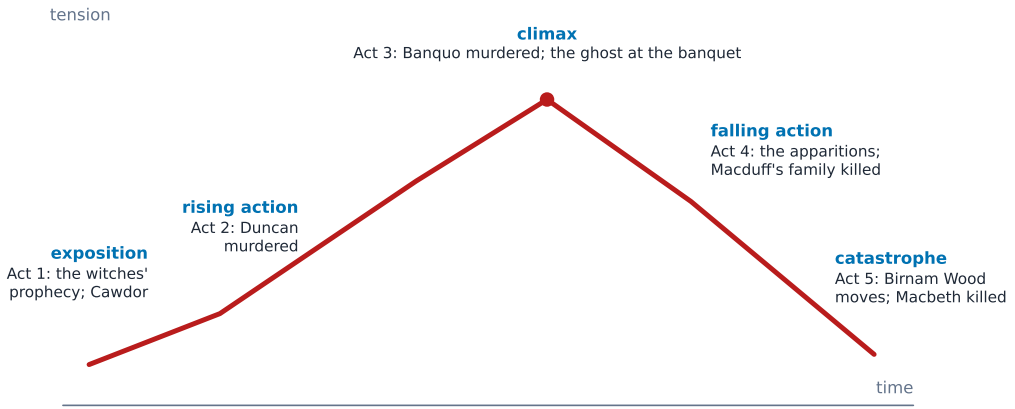
Area	Key content
the paper	1 hour 45 minutes; one of four questions; two works; 30 marks
drama	dramatic irony, soliloquy, stage directions, plot structure, the tragic hero
context	when and where a work was written, and when and where it is read
essay	a comparative thesis; point-by-point paragraphs; short quotations; a judgement
criteria	A and B (10 marks each), C and D (5 marks each)

Tools for analysing drama

Feature	What it is	Example
tragic hero	a great person who falls because of a flaw or error	Oedipus, Macbeth
hamartia	the hero's error or weakness	Oedipus's anger and certainty; Macbeth's ambition
dramatic irony	the audience knows something a character does not	Oedipus curses the killer of Laius, not knowing it is himself
soliloquy	a character alone on stage speaks their thoughts	Macbeth's "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" (Act 5)
foreshadowing	early hints of what will come	the witches' "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (Act 1)
catharsis	the audience's release of pity and fear at the end of a tragedy (Aristotle)	the end of both plays

Structure: the tragic arc

A five-part model (often called Freytag's pyramid) helps you track how a tragedy builds and falls.



Macbeth's rise and fall act by act: the climax comes in the middle, not at the end

In *Oedipus Rex* the structure is different: the main events (the killing of Laius, the marriage to Jocasta) happened years before the play starts. The play is an **investigation** : Oedipus searches for the truth, and every step towards it is a step towards his own ruin.

Context: time and space

Sophocles wrote for a festival audience in Athens who already knew the story of Oedipus. They watched not to learn *what* happens, but *how*; this makes every line full of dramatic irony. Greek audiences also believed that the gods' oracles must come true.

Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* around 1606, soon after James VI of Scotland became King James I of England. James was interested in witchcraft and believed that kings ruled by God's will. A play in which killing a king brings chaos to the whole country spoke directly to its first audience. A modern reader may read the witches instead as a picture of Macbeth's own desires.

Two works, one question

Question: *"Discuss how two works you have studied present the conflict between fate and free will."*

	Oedipus Rex **(Sophocles, c. 429 BC; in translation)**	***Macbeth*** **(Shakespeare, c. 1606)**
the prophecy	he will kill his father and marry his mother	he will be Thane of Cawdor and then king
the hero's choice	he leaves Corinth to escape it	he and Lady Macbeth murder King Duncan
does the choice matter?	his escape fulfils the prophecy	the prophecy only names the end; he chooses the means
key technique	dramatic irony: the audience knows from the start	soliloquy: we hear him choose ("I have no spur ... but only / Vaulting ambition", Act 1)
the end	he discovers the truth and blinds himself	he trusts the witches' riddles and is killed by Macduff

Thesis: Both plays use a prophecy to test human freedom, but Sophocles shows a man whose free choices lead him into a fate he cannot escape, while Shakespeare shows a man whose fate is only a suggestion, so that his ruin is his own responsibility.

Structuring the essay

Write **point by point**: each body paragraph compares both works on one idea (the prophecy; the hero's choices; the ending). Use linking words: *similarly*, *whereas*, *in contrast*, *both*.

Worked paragraph.

> Both playwrights let the audience see more than the hero, but they use this knowledge in opposite ways. Sophocles relies on dramatic irony: when Oedipus promises to find and punish the killer of Laius, the audience already knows that he is cursing himself, so every confident step he takes increases our pity and fear. Shakespeare, in contrast, gives Macbeth soliloquies in which we watch him decide. When he admits that he has "no spur" except "vaulting ambition", the audience sees that no god or witch forces his hand. The difference in technique reflects a difference in belief: for Sophocles' audience the oracle had to come true, while Shakespeare's play places the cause of tragedy inside the human mind.

The criteria

Criterion	Marks	It asks
A: knowledge, understanding and interpretation	10	Do you know both works well and interpret them in answer to the question?
B: analysis and evaluation	10	Do you analyse the writers' choices and compare their effects?
C: focus and organisation	5	Is the comparison clear, balanced and well structured?
D: language	5	Is your English clear, accurate and suitably formal?

Preparing: for each work, learn 10 to 15 short quotations or precise moments, grouped by idea (power, fate, guilt, family, gender). For a work in translation, refer to moments and techniques rather than exact wording, and name the translation you studied.

Checklist

- Paper 2: 1 hour 45 minutes, one of four questions, two works, 30 marks; not the works used in the IO or HL essay.
- Drama tools: tragic hero, hamartia, dramatic irony, soliloquy, foreshadowing, catharsis.
- The tragic arc of *Macbeth*; *Oedipus Rex* as an investigation.
- Context: Athenian festival audiences and oracles; James I and the divine right of kings.
- The fate-and-free-will comparison: thesis, table and worked paragraph.
- Point-by-point structure and the four criteria.

Individual oral · a global issue across a work in English and a work in translation

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The individual oral

IB Diploma Programme English A: Literature SL (first assessment 2021). The **individual oral** (IO) is the internal assessment that SL and HL students both do. You speak for 10 minutes about a **global issue**, using an extract from one work originally written in English and an extract from one **work in translation**, and then answer your teacher's questions for 5 minutes. It is marked out of 40 and is worth 30% at SL and 20% at HL. The IO also covers the area of exploration *intertextuality: connecting texts*.

In 1892 an American magazine printed a story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. A young mother, told by her doctor husband to rest and not to write, secretly keeps a diary in a room with yellow wallpaper, and slowly loses her mind. In 1918, on the other side of the world, Lu Xun published ***A Madman's Diary***, the first major story in modern written Chinese. Its narrator believes the people around him want to eat him. Two diaries, two languages, one question: what happens to a person whose society decides they are mad? An IO puts works like these side by side.

Must-know for the IO:

Area	Key content
format	10 minutes of speaking, then 5 minutes of questions; 40 marks
texts	an extract (up to 40 lines) from a work originally in English and one from a work in **translation**
global issue	significant, transnational, felt in everyday life; one of five fields of inquiry
structure	introduction, extract 1, extract 2, comparison and conclusion
criteria	four criteria of 10 marks each

Choosing a global issue

A global issue is **significant** (it matters to many people), **transnational** (it exists in more than one country) and felt in everyday life. It belongs to one of five **fields of inquiry**:

Field of inquiry	Example of a global issue
culture, identity and community	how societies treat people who question their traditions
beliefs, values and education	how education passes on, or challenges, old values
politics, power and justice	who has the power to decide what is "normal"
art, creativity and the imagination	how writing can be a form of resistance
science, technology and the environment	how medicine has been used to control behaviour

A topic ("madness") is not yet an issue. An issue is a tension or problem: "how a society silences people who question its norms by calling them mad".

The two works

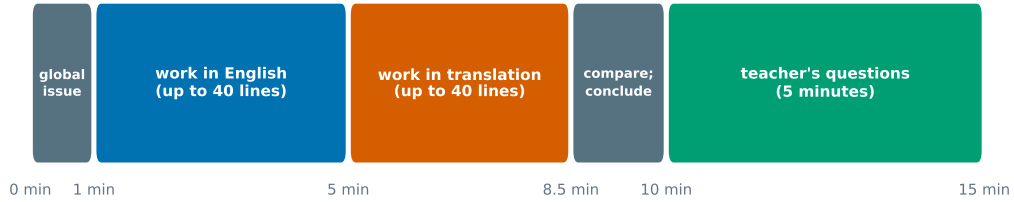
	Original language	In translation
work	Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892)	Lu Xun, *A Madman's Diary* (1918)
form	first-person secret diary	first-person diary, with a short preface by another narrator
who controls the speaker?	her husband John, a physician, who forbids work and writing	his brother, the doctor and the village, who watch him
key moments	she writes on "dead paper" in secret; she sees a woman trapped behind the wallpaper; at the end, "I've got out at last"	reading history, he finds between the lines about "benevolence and virtue" the words "eat people"; the last line, "Save the children ..."
the irony	her "cure" makes her ill	the preface says he recovered and went away to wait for an official post

Gilman wrote from experience: she had been prescribed a "rest cure" for depression. Lu Xun wrote during the New Culture Movement, when young writers attacked old Confucian traditions; the madman's fear of "eating people" is a metaphor for a society

that destroys individuals in the name of morality.

When you discuss a work in translation, analyse features that survive translation (structure, narrative voice, imagery, symbols) and be careful with single words: they belong partly to the translator. Students who read Chinese can, of course, refer to the original.

Structuring the 10 minutes



Plan the 10 minutes, then expect 5 minutes of questions

1. **Introduction** (about 1 minute): the global issue, the two works, and your main argument.
2. **First extract** (about 4 minutes): three or four features, each with brief evidence, each linked to the issue; then link the extract to the work as a whole.
3. **Second extract** (about 3½ minutes): the same.
4. **Comparison and conclusion** (about 1½ minutes): how the two works present the issue differently, and why, given their contexts.

You may bring the two extracts (clean copies) and up to 10 bullet points of notes. You must not read a script.

Worked opening.

> Today I will discuss how societies silence people who question their norms by calling them mad, an issue from the field of culture, identity and community. I will look at an extract from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and an extract from Lu Xun's *A Madman's Diary*, which I studied in translation. My argument is that both writers use the private diary to give a voice to someone their society refuses to hear, but while Gilman's narrator escapes only into madness, Lu Xun's narrator is "cured" back into silence, which makes his story an even darker warning.

The criteria

Criterion	Marks	It asks
A: knowledge, understanding and interpretation	10	Do you understand both extracts and works and connect them to the global issue?
B: analysis and evaluation	10	Do you analyse how the authors' choices present the issue?
C: focus and organisation	10	Is the oral balanced between the two works and well structured?
D: language	10	Is your spoken English clear, accurate and suitably formal?

Common mistakes: spending eight minutes on one work; talking about the issue in general without analysing the extracts; forgetting the works as a whole (examiners expect you to connect each extract to the complete work).

Checklist

- The IO format: 10 + 5 minutes, 40 marks, 30% SL and 20% HL; one work in English and one in translation.
- A global issue: significant, transnational, everyday; the five fields of inquiry; topic versus issue.
- The Gilman–Lu Xun pairing: the table, the contexts, and analysing a work in translation.
- The four-part structure and a worked opening; notes, not a script.
- The four criteria and the common mistakes.