

2021 VCE English (NHT) examination report

General comments

The 2021 VCE English (NHT) examination consisted of three sections: Section A required students to write an analytical essay in response to one text from the two available. Section B required students to write a comparative analysis on one pair of texts. Section C required students to analyse the ways in which argument and language persuade in response to unseen material.

Assessment was holistic, using the published assessment criteria. Assessors related individual student performance directly to these criteria, and their judgments were assisted by the use of the expected qualities for each section of the examination. The assessment criteria and expected qualities are accessible on the [English study page](#).

Specific information

This report provides sample answers or an indication of what answers may have included. Unless otherwise stated, these are not intended to be exemplary or complete responses.

Section A – Analytical interpretation of a text

Students were required to develop an analytical interpretation in essay form on one of two set texts. Two topics were offered for each of these texts. The descriptors used for assessment related to the degree of textual knowledge, including the concepts and construction, the consistency of the essay structure utilised, the extent of topic focus and relevance, and the control and appropriateness of the writing skills employed.

In the 2021 examination, the students focused solely on the graphic novel *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi. They favoured the first question on ‘the use of the child’s voice’ and how it ‘heightens tensions’ for the reader, a topic that afforded opportunities for students to draw on their close textual knowledge and demonstrate their essay-writing skills. Although students showed good understanding of the text and could write about it with confidence in an appropriately structured essay format, they were challenged by the complexities of the topic question. There was a tendency to reduce it to a simpler task. Instead of considering how the literary convention of using a child’s voice was utilised by Marjane Satrapi for a particular purpose, they focused on the character of Marji and how she responded to the world around her. The author’s purpose of heightening tensions for the reader was universally ignored. This resulted in essays that were strong in textual detail but struggled for complete relevance.

Some students demonstrated their knowledge of the selected text, while others revealed a lack of confidence in structuring their essay. The wording of the topic should be closely considered so that it can be fully addressed. Ultimately, it is essential that their discussion of the topic is fully resolved, using close textual insights and details.

Students must also consider the intentions of the writer, recognising that all selected texts are constructed to convey core ideas and issues through developed structural techniques. As a graphic novel, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, uses the written word, dialogue and visuals to tell its story. All elements must be

considered when responding to the question. The analysis of the text must include the author's intentions, the strategies and impact of the illustrations, the complexities of the written word, as well as knowledge of the storyline and understanding of character development. Some of the essays put too much emphasis on plot and character and missed the opportunities to explore the world of the text. This task should never be misconstrued as an invitation to retell portions of the plot or merely describe the attributes of characters.

It is essential that students avoid any tendency to memorise a response and then try to apply this to an unseen topic. Topics provide students with an opportunity to apply their textual knowledge and insights in a fresh and thoughtful manner, not in a pre-learned, semi-relevant manner.

To achieve at a high level, students must demonstrate a thoughtful and consistent approach to the topic, maintain a clear focus on the critical ideas of the text, use textual elements astutely and write in a careful and precise manner. They must identify a clear contention and structure their response into a considered and consistent essay that presents a sustained line of argument. Students must demonstrate close textual knowledge with assurance.

The highest-scoring responses demonstrated a thoughtful and consistent approach to the chosen topic, with astute use of textual elements and a clear focus on critical ideas in the text, all expressed carefully and precisely. They reliably demonstrated a thoughtful reflection on the concepts in the question, considered development of a clear contention and a capacity to plan appropriately to develop a consistent essay.

Section B – Comparative analysis of texts

Students were required to develop and write a comparative analysis in essay form on the pairing of *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, by Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman, and *The Longest Memory*, by Fred D'Aguiar. Two topics were offered for the paired texts. The descriptors used for assessment related to the degree of textual knowledge of both texts, focusing on the ideas and issues they present, the extent of exploration of connections, similarities and/or differences between the texts, the degree of topic focus and relevance, and the control and appropriateness of the writing skills utilised to aid meaningful textual comparison.

In 2021, the students focused on the straightforward topic 'Compare the ways in which the two texts explore grief'. The question required students to closely examine how the central idea or issue of grief was presented in both texts, and to compare pertinent similarities and differences. The word 'grief' opened up significant possibilities for students to discuss, such as personal anguish, sorrow, regret, widespread harassment, racial torment, individual heartbreak, and students could decide their focus of discussion. They were expected to focus on the entire topic, that is, not just grief, but how the texts explore it, and to ensure that it was fully resolved through the ensuing discussion.

The highest-scoring responses were, by comparing the paired texts, able to examine the core ideas and issues with confidence and conceptualise about them meaningfully. However, students need to guard against making loose references to broad themes in a very imprecise and vague manner. The focus of the comparison must always be the idea that is at the heart of the topic, in this case the issue of grief, and never resort to comparison of major characters or divergent plotlines of the texts in the pairing. Given that two texts are to be examined comparatively, it is essential that students carefully regulate the textual detail to which they refer.

Students are expected to closely analyse how the relevant writers sought to reveal and expose the ideas in their respective texts. This ought to be facilitated through considered metalanguage, which underpins meaningful comparison, alongside prudent textual analysis. Students should consider how each text has been intentionally constructed to expose the issues identified in the topic. This may include, for example, the shifting narrative voices that are so powerful in the vignettes that permeate *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, as opposed to the continual juxtaposing of the thoughts and voices of the slaves and slave controller in *The Longest Memory*.

Some students listed textual examples, or cited aspects of characters, rather than focusing on the ideas and issues that were central to the topic. They need to recognise that ideas and issues are conveyed in any text through the actions of the characters and the events that occur. It is essential that students recognise the need to continually compare the texts that they have studied through the lens of the selected topic, so that there is an analytical focus on the nominated ideas or issues.

Section C – Argument and persuasive language

The unseen task material presented for analysis was an article, written by lifestyle coach Arlo Manne, voicing concern about the imbalance between work and personal life demands that exist in modern life. The article included two embedded images – the first symbolising the precarious nature of the work-life balance, and the second of a working woman at the crossroads of personal choice, and these images sought to exemplify and strengthen the line of argument being presented by Manne. The topic, language, length and style of the piece readily offered opportunities for students to demonstrate the analytical skills required. They were expected to show understanding of the arguments presented, to identify and explain how written and visual language worked together to persuade an audience and to use the language of analysis fluently and adeptly.

The straightforward nature of the material allowed students clear entry into the identification of argument and language. All students could identify Manne’s basic contention, and the connection between the visuals and the written text. It became more challenging for them to track the development of the argument over the course of the article. There was a constant pattern of ‘Manne states’, ‘He further states’, ‘He backs this up by stating’, ‘Manne says’ and ‘He continues by saying’. This language is clear evidence of students using summary and restatement of the writer’s ideas. The students struggled to move from paraphrasing to analysing what was said, how it was said and why it was said in this way.

This task required students to closely consider the written material, including the visuals, and examine how argument and language operate together to persuade a target audience to share a specific point of view. There was limited focus on the language employed by Manne, and when some students did identify relevant language choices, they could not move past quotation. For example, they cited ‘feel trapped’, ‘a cycle of increasing workload’, ‘long hours’ and ‘strong sense of failure’ but were not able to analyse the negative nature of these language choices, and how they accumulated to create a sense of overwhelming burden on the reader.

Students struggled significantly with tone. Again, there was the pattern of identification – ‘Manne used a warm, friendly tone’ and ‘his tone became more questioning with the use of four rhetorical questions’. They could not move past the generic descriptors of ‘argumentative tone’ or ‘persuasive tone’, nor could they go on to explain how the tone and/or tone shift impacted the argument and the audience.

For the most part, the two visuals were described rather than analysed, for example ‘In the picture, a wooden stick, on top of a wooden cylinder, is depicted with blocks of wooden letters written on them respectively “work” and “life” ...’. Instead, the students should be explaining the meaning of the graphic and how it adds visual weight to the written argument. There needed to be a strong connection made between the graphics and Manne’s text. The title of the article was ‘Where is the balance?’ and the first visual appeared immediately underneath. It should have been obvious to students that the photograph of the wooden balance was reinforcing the author’s concerns about the unsteady equilibrium between life and work. They also needed to consider and explain why the second image was placed within the body of the article, and to comment on how this directly supported the argument of the writer and thus was an integral part of the persuasion.

It is important that students avoid merely labelling and identifying argumentative devices and forms of persuasive language. It is not enough to identify inclusive language, four rhetorical questions, an appeal to logic and reason and the use of tricolon. Students should explain why such forms of argument and language are used by the writer to fulfil the persuasive intent of the piece. Each device is used for a specific purpose, and the student must be able to analyse how its use adds to the persuasive intent of the writer.

Like the other sections of the paper, there were no expected responses in Section C. Assessors were looking for the skills that demonstrate the student's ability to understand how the argument develops and functions, how language is used effectively to present the argument and the intended persuasive impact on the reader.