

Cambridge O Level Literature in English 2010

Paper 1 Poetry and Prose – Using candidate responses in the classroom

Stories of Ourselves – Writing a response to a prose general essay question

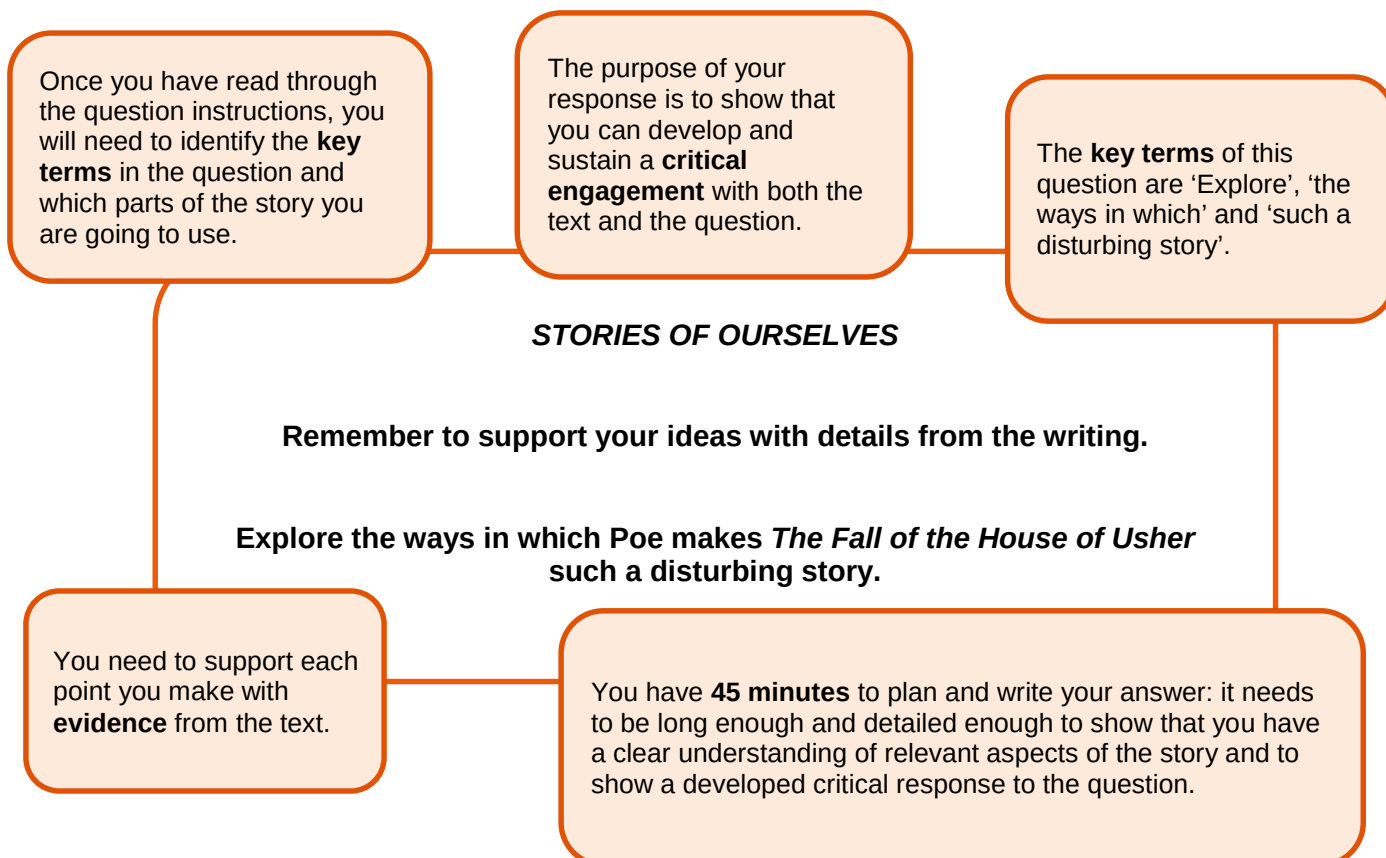
- The purpose of the response is to make an informed, sensitive (AO4) and supported response to the question that shows a detailed knowledge (AO1) and understanding (AO2) of the passage and a critical engagement with the writer's methods (AO3).
- The candidate will use relevant short textual references (AO1) from their study of the text as evidence to support the points they make.
- The candidate will use the references to support an informed personal response to the writer's methods: the ways in which Poe uses language, structure and form (AO3) to create such a disturbing story.

Tips for learners

- Read the question and highlight the **key terms** that you need to focus on.
- Spend up to 5 minutes writing a **plan** for your answer – you could use bullet points or a mind map.
- Remember you cannot write about everything in 45 minutes. **Be selective.**
- Keep **focused on the question**. You are not expected to retell the story.
- You will need to **make references** to the story **to support your points**. You will, therefore, need a detailed knowledge of the story.
- **Comment precisely** and in detail on the ways in which Poe achieves his effects in making this such a disturbing story.
- Aim to make at least **10 points** so that you can develop a convincing response to the question.
- Remember that the assessment objectives are not assessed separately, so try to **address all of them in each point** you make.

Examination question

We have annotated the question below with some **guidance** for learners to help them prepare their answer and encourage them to focus on what the question is asking for. This information is not given to candidates in the examination.



This question is from the Cambridge IGCSE Literature (English) 0486 past paper March 2019 Paper 12 Question 22. For the passage, go to the [School Support Hub](#)

Suggested lesson activities

Assessment objectives

AO1: Show detailed knowledge of the content of literary prose texts, supported by reference to the text.

AO2: Understand the meanings of literary texts and their contexts, and explore texts beyond surface meanings to show deeper awareness of ideas and attitudes.

AO3: Recognise and appreciate ways in which writers use language, structure and form to create and shape meanings and effects.

AO4: Communicate a sensitive and informed personal response to literary texts.

Learning objectives

- To select relevant details from texts to provide material for 45-minute essays
- To plan and structure personal responses to prose fiction
- To develop skills of critical analysis of a writer's use of language, structure and form

Starter:

Give learners three minutes to write down (in order) the key stages of the story.

Use a quiz format to provide formative assessment of how well learners know the text. (The *Just a Minute* format would work well: learners line up in pairs; each tells their partner the plot of the story, talking non-stop for one minute. The pair sits down if the learner telling the story hesitates or stumbles on their words or repeats details.)

Development:

Learners should read the example candidate response and examiner comments one to seven. From this they should make a list of what the candidate has done well.

Ask learners to read the candidate response again, this time focusing on the sections relevant to examiner comments eight to thirteen. What is the candidate missing from these paragraphs? How could the candidate improve the second part of their response. Learners can use the tips for learners section to help them.

Main task:

Learners work individually on selecting relevant language, structure and form details from the story that would support an informed personal response. Emphasise the need for learners to select their own quotations to support their own analysis.

They should use the checklist they wrote in the development to help them.

In focusing on the key words 'such a disturbing story', learners should consider:

- the start and end of the story
- key shifts in content and mood
- events viewed from the perspective of the first-person narrator
- the significance and impact to the overall story of the poem 'The Haunted Place'.

Plenary:

Select a competent example from learners' work of a sustained informed personal response to the question and invite comments about the effectiveness of the response (e.g. use of quotations, directly addressing the question).

Learner responses can be peer marked against the list they wrote in the development. From this their partner should be able to give them a clear sense of what they have done well in their

Suggested lesson activities

response. They could use the section on what the candidate could have done to improve to help them with this.

Extension (optional):

Learners research clips from videos to compare different interpretations of the story. You can advise which clips to use.

Learners listen to a reputable audio recording from the internet, making notes of those aspects of the story that sound particularly disturbing.

Example candidate response and examiner comments

Example Candidate Response – high	Examiner comments
Poe's gothic setting with paranormal activity is what makes 'The Fall of the House of Usher' a disturbing story. 1 Firstly, the plot itself is hauntingly innocent; what happens to be a normal visit turns out to be a nightmare that would scar people for days. 2 What emphasizes the disturbing plot is the setting. Poe chose a Victorian mansion in the middle of a forest as a perfect setting for his story. The 'dreary tracts' and 'lurid tarn' 3 give the feeling of isolation and loneliness, which further adds to the mood of apprehension in the beginning of the story. The 'eye-like' window and the name 'House of Usher', synonymous with both the line and mansion, personifies the eerie-looking house, giving the effect of the house watching the narrator's every single move. 4 While stories like these build up the tension and nervousness in the readers, Poe keeps highlighting the narrator's feelings, which had become disturbing since the very beginning. The 'melancholic' house along with 'oppressive' atmosphere fills the readers with unease, since they know something will certainly go wrong. 5 Secondly, the Usher twins definitely disturb the readers. Born out of incest, a common Gothic theme, they share much more than their last name; they have a physiological bond which Poe shows with the fall of the house at the end. Despite getting to know this disturbing connection in the end, Poe had foreshadowed their connection 6 with the French couplet at the start of the story, which roughly translates to 'His/her heart' is a 'poised lute / as	1 There is an immediate focus on the question. 2 Provides an overview of the story. (AO1) 3 Detail from the story supports the point about the setting and 'feeling of isolation and loneliness'. (AO1, AO2) 4 A personal response is given to the 'mood of apprehension' and the effect of the 'eerie-looking house'. (AO3, AO4) 5 In this paragraph, the candidate comments on the effect of the atmosphere on the reader. A point is made about the narrator's disturbing feelings, but this is not developed. 6 Continued focus on the question with comment on the characterisation of the Usher twins and the foreshadowing of the end of the story found in the couplet at the beginning of the story. (AO3)

Example Candidate Response – high	Examiner comments
soon as it's touched, it resonates!' This 'resonation' proves that every action of one twin has an effect on the other, which is why Roderick becomes insane after Madeline's 'death'. This is further shown by Roderick's behaviour. A twin brother knowingly buries his living sister and mourns for her for a couple of weeks is an extremely disturbing thought. 7 What makes it worse is that the narrator notices the 'mockery of the faint blush' on Madeline, yet dismisses it, well knowing that dead bodies can't blush. Furthermore, the frightening depiction of Madeline as a ghost-like resident who never once greeted the narrator fills the readers with fear, and her surprise re-entry into the story makes it scarier. 8 The frightening thing is the flush on Madeline's body which was a possible pathetic fallacy for the reader to realise what's going on, 9 but seldom latch onto it, making the reader also feel guilty about Madeline's burial as if they also had a hand in this possible murder. 10 Roderick' Usher's first impression was disturbing enough to make the readers apprehensive of him. His 'cadaverous' and 'tall' thin appearance makes him a great horror story character. 11 His acute senses which first mesmerize the reader ultimately becomes his most disturbing trait as readers are left to ponder: If he had acute senses, why couldn't he realise Madeline was alive sooner? 12 This brings up the theme of 'mind' and 'body' in the story. While Madeline had bodily issues (in the form of a disease), Roderick had issues related to his 'mind'. It's obvious that mind and body are equally important and can't function without one another. While readers soon realise Roderick is desolate and depressed, they overlook the fact that his unwillingness to live could have led to the formal burial of Madeline. 13 Symbolically the mind forcing the body into self-destruction or suicide. This afterthought makes the story extremely disturbing, as to why a brother would do so to his own twin.	7 The candidate uses textual evidence to support personal response. The phrase 'What makes it worse...' shows the candidate sustaining their response to the story and question. (AO1, AO4) 8 Further evidence to support the candidate's argument about the 'frightening...ghost-like' depiction of Madeline. (AO1, AO4) 9 This assertion could be further developed and supported. 10 This comment falls short of critical engagement and is, therefore, less convincing than previous informed comments. 11 Well-selected references support the judgements made. 12 Personal response to the details of the characterisation which develops the candidate's comment on 'his most disturbing trait'. (AO4) 13 The points about 'bodily issues', body and mind, and Roderick being 'desolate and depressed' are asserted rather than carefully supported and, as a result, are less convincing.

Example Candidate Response – high	Examiner comments
Lastly the re-entry of Madeline and ultimate fall of the house is extremely disturbing. Poe hauntingly associates the 'creaking' and opening of the tomb with the poem 'Mad Trist' by Sir Launcelot Canning that he reads to Roderick. The clang of the 'sword' is synonymous to the opening of the metal gates. As the poem proceeds to its climax, the story becomes more intense while Roderick becomes more hysterical. 14 His screams of 'madman' and 'I knew I had buried her alive' disgust the reader as they are fearing what would happen next. The previously slow story turns intense and reaches a horrifying climax, where Madeline returns with 'blood over her robes' and with a 'deep guttural moan' collapses onto Roderick, and they both simultaneously die as the narrator flees and the house falls down. 15 The extremely disturbing ending is a beautiful example of Poe's 'unity of effect', in which every word adds onto the story. Even if the reader doesn't want to read on, their mind forces them to do so, which makes it a scary experience for the reader to read as well. 16 Despite the cliché thunder and storm setting during the end, readers are terrified with the fissure cracking to destroy the house in the presence of a 'blood moon', a scary symbolism for the end, making it a perfect ending for a disturbing story. Overall Poe's choice of a gloomy and haunting atmosphere for the story along with a house in ruins which houses two eerie and mysterious characters is what makes this story disturbing.	14 Comment on the use of structure and form with reference to the 're-entry of Madeline' and the significance of the poem. (AO3) 15 Clear critical understanding of the way the story builds to a climax. (AO3) 16 This paragraph clarifies the preceding general comment. The candidate finds the thunder and storm clichéd but finds terrifying the 'fissure cracking' and the 'scary symbolism' of the red moon. (AO3, AO4)

How the candidate could improve the answer

The candidate shows a clear critical understanding of the story and a sustained critical engagement with the question. There is a wide range of well-selected references (including short/direct quotations) to support the response.

The candidate recognises that in 45 minutes it is important to select relevant material and address the question rather than including too many details that weaken a careful argument. However, there are moments where the candidate makes points but does not go on to develop the points in sufficient detail, for example, Madeline's re-entry into the story and the reference to pathetic fallacy, which is generalised ('a possible pathetic fallacy for the reader to realise what's going on').

Similarly, the candidate could further develop and support the points made about Madeline's 'body issues', the theme of 'mind and body' and the reference to Roderick being 'desolate and depressed' to make an even fuller response that addresses the key words 'such a disturbing story'.

Common mistakes

The most common mistakes in answering this question are:

- writing general introductions instead of addressing the key words of the question 'Explore', 'the ways in which' and 'such a disturbing story' from the start
- retelling the story rather than directly addressing the question
- providing character sketches as if the characters are real-life people rather than fictional characters
- making unsupported assertions (perhaps because relevant details from the text could not be recalled during the examination)
- dealing superficially or not at all with language, structure and form (i.e. the ways in which Poe makes this such a disturbing story)
- repeating points made in study guides without tailoring the material in a way that provides an informed personal response to the question
- including background material about Poe's life without making the comments relevant to the detail of the poem.

Examination preparation (advice for learners)

Learners have found some or all of the following advice useful in preparing for prose general essay questions:

- Re-read the text so that you have a detailed knowledge of it.
- Listen to/watch, adaptations of the text **but** be careful when the adaptation differs from the original text.
- Make and learn the following notes on the text: plot summary; timeline; characters; themes; settings.
- Produce lists of quotations for each key character, theme or setting and learn the quotations – these will help you to support the points you make in the examination.
- Devise a list of examination-style questions – use past papers to help you with the wording.
- Practise writing plans (bullet points or mind maps) for these general essay questions.
- Practise combining short quotations and analytical comment in responses to prose essay questions.
- Mark your own draft answers, identifying and editing out:
 - unsupported assertions
 - lengthy quotations
 - irrelevant points that do not address the question
 - irrelevant background material.

Useful resources

- You can find the **syllabus** and the most recent **past papers** at the Cambridge International public website
- A list of **endorsed textbooks** and digital resources can be found in the Published resources section
- The [School Support Hub](#) provides teachers with a wide range of practical resources, detailed guidance and innovative training and professional development so that you can give your learners the best possible preparation for Cambridge O Level.
- Look out for the [Introduction to Learner Guides](#) and [Learner Revision Guide](#) videos.