



Department  
for Education

# English literature

**GCSE subject content and assessment  
objectives**

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## Introduction

GCSE subject criteria set out the knowledge, understanding, skills and assessment objectives common to all GCSE specifications in a given subject. They provide the framework within which awarding organisations create the detail of their specifications, so ensuring progression from key stage 3 national curriculum requirements and the possibilities for progression to A level.

## Subject aims and learning outcomes

This content sets out the learning outcomes and content coverage required for GCSE specifications in English literature. In subjects such as English literature, where topics are taught in progressively greater depth over the course of key stage 3 and key stage 4, GCSE outcomes may reflect or build upon subject content which is typically taught at key stage 3. There is no expectation that teaching of such content should be repeated during the GCSE course where it has already been covered at an earlier stage.

GCSE specifications in English literature should develop knowledge and skills in reading, writing and critical thinking. Through literature, students have a chance to develop culturally and acquire knowledge of the best that has been thought and written. Studying GCSE English literature should encourage students to read widely for pleasure, and as a preparation for studying literature at a higher level.

GCSE specifications in English literature should enable students to:

- read a wide range of classic literature fluently and with good understanding, and make connections across their reading
- read in depth, critically and evaluatively, so that they are able to discuss and explain their understanding and ideas
- develop the habit of reading widely and often
- appreciate the depth and power of the English literary heritage
- write accurately, effectively and analytically about their reading, using Standard English
- acquire and use a wide vocabulary, including the grammatical terminology<sup>1</sup> and other literary and linguistic terms they need to criticise and analyse what they read.

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<sup>1</sup> See also the [glossary of grammatical terms](#) that supports the national curriculum programmes of study for English.

## Subject content

This document sets out the full range of content for GCSE specifications in English literature. Awarding organisations may, however, use any flexibility to increase depth, breadth or context within the specified topics or to consolidate teaching of the subject content.

Study of high quality English literature should be the principal focus for this GCSE. GCSE specifications in English literature should be designed on the basis that students' reading should include whole texts.

In addition to the content in the 'Detailed study', the examination must include questions on texts that students have not read previously ('unseen' texts).

## Scope of study

GCSE specifications in English literature should require students to study the following content:

### Detailed study

Students should study a range of high quality, intellectually challenging, and substantial whole texts in detail. These must include:

- at least one play by Shakespeare
- at least one 19<sup>th</sup> century novel <sup>2</sup>
- a selection<sup>3</sup> of poetry since 1789, including representative Romantic poetry
- fiction or drama from the British Isles from 1914 onwards.

All works should have been originally written in English.

Within the range of texts above, the emphasis should be on deepening students' understanding. The texts should be chosen with the key aim of providing students with knowledge to support both current and future study.

To broaden their knowledge of literature, and enhance their critical and comparative understanding, students should read widely within the range above to prepare them for 'unseen' texts in the examination. These unseen texts may or may not be by authors whose works students have studied as set texts.

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<sup>2</sup> Short stories should not form part of this category.

<sup>3</sup> Any selection published by awarding organisations should comprise no fewer than 15 poems by at least five different poets, and a minimum of 300 lines of poetry.

## Reading comprehension and reading critically

- *literal and inferential comprehension*: understanding a word, phrase or sentence in context; exploring aspects of plot, characterisation, events and settings; distinguishing between what is stated explicitly and what is implied; explaining motivation, sequence of events, and the relationship between actions or events
- *critical reading*: identifying the theme and distinguishing between themes; supporting a point of view by referring to evidence in the text; recognising the possibility of and evaluating different responses to a text; using understanding of writers' social, historical and cultural contexts to inform evaluation; making an informed personal response that derives from analysis and evaluation of the text
- *evaluation of a writer's choice of vocabulary, grammatical and structural features*: analysing and evaluating how language (including figurative language), structure, form and presentation contribute to quality and impact; using linguistic and literary terminology for such evaluation (such as, but not restricted to, phrase, metaphor, meter, irony and persona, synecdoche, pathetic fallacy)
- *comparing texts*: comparing and contrasting texts studied, referring where relevant to theme, characterisation, context (where known), style and literary quality; comparing two texts critically with respect to the above.<sup>4</sup>

## Writing

- *producing clear and coherent text*: writing effectively about literature for a range of purposes such as: to describe, explain, summarise, argue, analyse and evaluate; discussing and maintaining a point of view; selecting and emphasising key points; using relevant quotation and using detailed textual references
- *accurate Standard English*: accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar.

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<sup>4</sup> In the examination, these texts must be unseen.

## Assessment objectives

<b>AO1</b>	Read, understand and respond to texts  Students should be able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ maintain a critical style and develop an informed personal response.</li><li>▪ use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations.</li></ul>	35-40%
<b>AO2</b>	Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate	40-45%
<b>AO3</b>	Show understanding of the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they were written	15-20%
<b>AO4</b>	Use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation	5%
<i>In each specification as a whole, 20-25% of the marks should require candidates to show the abilities described in AO1, AO2 and AO3 through tasks which require them to make comparisons across texts.</i>		



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