Higher Horizons+

Answering your English Exam Questions

We've written some easy-to-understand advice about answering different types of exam questions and how to structure essays. You can use this guide to help you practice and revise for your GCSE exams or even your A Level exams.

KEY WORDS IN EXAM QUESTIONS

When it comes to answering exam questions in English, the tricky part can be understanding exactly what it is you're being asked. You can gain marks by looking for clues in the questions. However, you can lose them if you miss them.

Compare and Contrast

Compare: when comparing two or more things, you are looking for their similarities.

Contrast: when you contrast two or more things, you are looking for their differences.

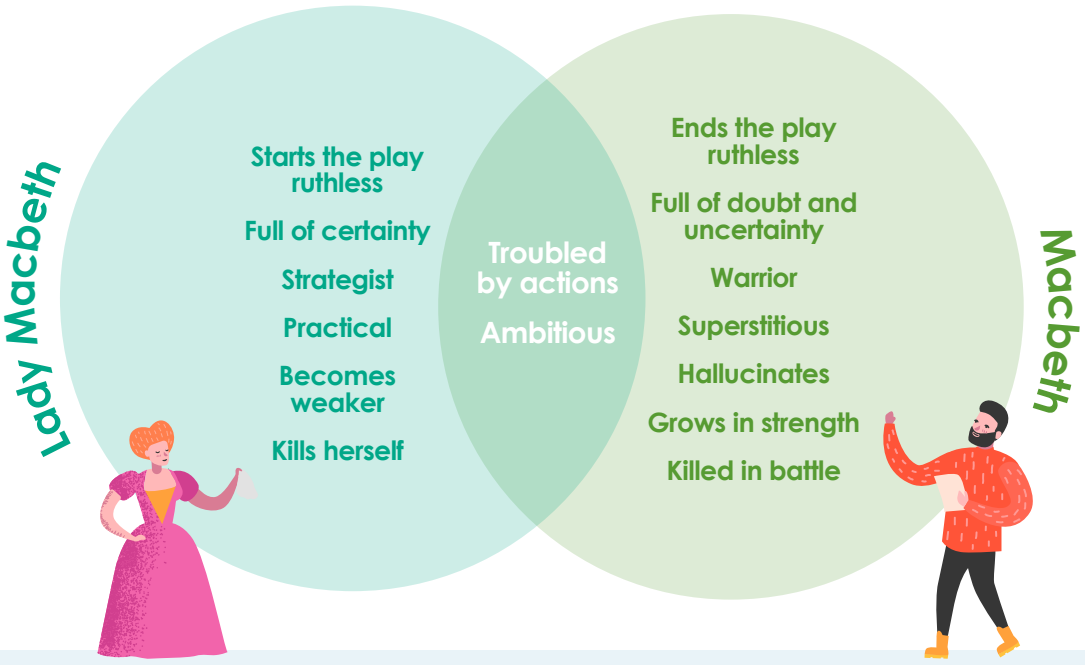
Among the most common keywords that pop up in exam questions are 'compare' and 'contrast'.

That sounds simple enough, right? However, you are being asked to do more than just make lists of similarities and differences. It can't hurt to do that as a start, though. In fact, it can help to write down those similarities and differences on a piece of paper, just to get them clear in your mind.

What teachers are looking for are connections between the ideas contained in the texts. They want you to really think about them. Why is it interesting that they are different or similar? What is the author trying to tell us by placing them in relationship or opposition to one another?

EXAMPLE

If you were to compare and contrast Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, you could create a Venn diagram, as below. Here we can clearly see what the differences are between the two characters, but where the diagram overlaps we see the similarities.



Okay, this is just one example, but hopefully it gives you some idea of what we are talking about.

If we want to get the really good marks, **you need to analyse these differences and similarities and make connections between them**. For instance, at a time of peace, Lady Macbeth is practical enough to identify the next opportunity for her husband, which is to kill the king. That's her strategic mind at work. Macbeth is a warrior, though. He is courageous enough in battle, but when the fighting is over he lacks direction. This might explain one or two other differences between them, such as the way Lady Macbeth becomes more troubled as the play goes on but her husband seems to gain in strength: once blood is shed, the warrior in Macbeth knows his next step, but Lady Macbeth doesn't have the stomach for it. Both are very strong personalities, but adapted to different circumstances. Each are troubled by what they have done, but for different reasons: one was a thinker and not really cut out for bloodshed, while the other was overcome by superstition. When giving your answer, support what you are saying with quotations from the text.

Extract Question

Of course, there are other types of question. You might be presented with an extract in an exam. When this happens, don't forget that you're not just keeping your answer to the extract itself but to how it fits in with the rest of the text. As an example, you might be asked: *How does Shakespeare represent the shift in mental state in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth?*

Read the extract two or three times until you are sure you know it. Now go over it again and underline the keywords or passages that jump out at you as referring to changes in how the characters feel and behave. Think about how the extract provides answers to the question, but also keep in mind what the play as a whole has to say about it.

Again, as in the previous example, you want to do more than just point to examples in the text; you will be looking for connections between them and what they mean. **If you find an example that appears to contradict the others, ask yourself why it does and what its purpose is.**

Thematic Question

You might be asked to look for themes in an extract. As above, underline key words and passages from the extract. Group them into themes. Some might show the characters' guilt, so you group those under 'guilt'. Others might show their lust for power, so you group those under 'power'. Ask yourself how the themes relate to each other.

The extent to which you...question

You may be asked to show the extent to which you agree with an assertion. **For instance: To what extent do you agree that Shakespeare is portraying Lady Macbeth as a strong woman?** In a question like this, you will be expected to show both sides of the argument. This demonstrates that you know the text well, so always provide a counterargument. In the example of Macbeth we've been using, you might say that Lady Macbeth is portrayed as strong in that she is intelligent, ambitious and capable of strategic thinking. She also knows how to manipulate her husband to make him do what she thinks is best. However, she is reluctant to actually kill with her own hands, and when she does, she begins to mentally disintegrate and eventually kills herself. You are proving here that you know the text pretty well and that you understand there are different ways of being strong.

ESSAY STRUCTURE

It is important to structure your essay properly. Introduce your essay by restating the question and explaining how you will answer it and what you will conclude. Begin each paragraph with the point you want to make. Introduce the evidence and your commentary on it. Then, conclude the paragraph with a one-line summary and signpost the next thing you want to say.

So, for example:

Although Lady Macbeth shows herself adept at peacetime planning and strategic thinking, she does not have the stomach for bloodshed . . .

[Quote your evidence and explain why it describes what you say it does.]

While it seems Lady Macbeth is struggling mentally to come to terms with her actions, her husband is similarly troubled by the murder of his friend, Banquo . . .

[Here you will start a new paragraph which talks about Macbeth and the hallucination his experiences at the feast.]

Conclude your essay with a summary of the points you made, but do not include anything new that was not already introduced somewhere in the essay.

Summary

TOP TIPS

Read the question **more than once**.

Look out for keywords, such as 'compare' or 'contrast', which give you clues as to how to answer

If you're given an extract, **read it thoroughly** two or three times until you are familiar with it

Underline key words and passages that relate to the exam question

Think about how what you find in the passage you analysed **relates to the rest of the text.**

Show that you understand the text by giving a **counterargument**

Use evidence in the form of quotations, and give thought to what the words actually mean in historical context

Make connections between the ideas in the text and think about what they represent

What was the author trying to tell us?

Find out more

For more help with exam technique and study skills visit **www.higherhorizons.co.uk/resources**

To chat to one of our friendly team about college or university, or for help with this guide, please visit **www.higherhorizons.co.uk/ask**