

Advanced Higher English

Project-Dissertation Topics: Examples with Commentary

Introduction

Candidates should be made aware that the primary purpose of the Advanced Higher English project-dissertation is to write a sustained critical analysis, analysing and evaluating literary technique. The wording of the dissertation topic should reflect this wherever possible. Dissertations which set out to deal with a particular theme or themes should always include supporting analysis of appropriate literary techniques. All dissertations should present and analyse appropriate textual evidence, and should contain a clearly structured and well-supported argument. All elements of the dissertation should be relevant to the task. Therefore, care needs to be taken to ensure that candidates choose specific and manageable topics.

Below you will find examples of topics that have been chosen by candidates along with a commentary on their suitability for the project-dissertation.

Example Topics with Commentary

Topic A

An examination of the complex symbolic significance of trees in 'Beloved' by Toni Morrison.

Commentary

This is a concise statement with a clear focus on a single technical aspect of the chosen text. This should allow the candidate to offer an effective literary analysis of this element of the novel.

Topic B

Explore the dramatic means by which David Harrower forces the audience to face any moral ambiguity they may experience in his controversial play, 'Blackbird'.

Commentary

This topic could be more clearly expressed as:

An exploration of moral ambiguity in 'Blackbird' by David Harrower.

This would allow the candidate greater scope in their analysis of moral ambiguity and not restrict it to audience reaction alone. The words "controversial" and "forces" are perhaps too assertive for the topic statement. Such evaluative comments would be best kept for the dissertation itself, perhaps forming part of the candidate's emerging line of argument and/or conclusion.

Topic C

An analysis of the oppression of women throughout time and society in 'The Help' and 'The Handmaid's Tale'.

Commentary

Whilst a topic looking at the “oppression of women” in these texts is a valid approach, the reference to “throughout time and society” is too broad in scope. Also, the focus is upon a more sociological approach to these texts and it would benefit the candidate if they made more explicit reference to literary technique. For example:

An analysis of the use of characterisation and narrative in dealing with the oppression of women in 'The Help' and 'The Handmaid's Tale'.

Topic D

A critical analysis of the role women play within society as they fight for freedom, self-liberation and challenge the gender roles. A comparison between 'The Miniaturist' and 'A Doll's House' analysing the approaches they use to allow the female characters to break stereotypes with reference to characterisation, symbolism and themes.

Commentary

This title seems overly complicated and it is not immediately clear what the focus of the dissertation actually is. It might be reworded in a number of more helpful ways. For example:

- ◆ *Challenging Gender Roles – a comparison of characterisation and symbolism in 'The Miniaturist' and 'A Doll's House'.*
- ◆ *A comparison of some of the literary means by which themes of freedom and self-liberation are presented in 'The Miniaturist' and 'A Doll's House'.*
- ◆ *Breaking Stereotypes – a comparative analysis of female characters in 'The Miniaturist' and 'A Doll's House'.*

As this is a “mixed genre” dissertation on two disparate literary forms, it is likely that the candidate will have to concentrate on broader elements which are common to both genres, such as theme and characterisation, in their analysis of these two texts.

Topic E

A literary examination of how Tennessee Williams explores the theme of illusion versus reality through the main characters in 'Sweet Bird of Youth' and 'A Streetcar Named Desire'.

Commentary

This is a concise statement with a clear focus on a single theme shared by the two selected plays. This should allow the candidate to offer an effective literary analysis of these two very popular drama texts.

Topic F

A Study of Religion, Morality and Character Motivations in Cormac McCarthy's 'Blood Meridian' and 'The Road'.

Commentary

While the study of themes of religion and morality is a perfectly valid area to focus on in this dissertation, the inclusion of the third element, “Character Motivations” is an unnecessary addition to the task and could weaken the structural balance. Character motivations might well be one of the ways by which the author illustrates the themes present in these texts and as such could still be covered and analysed as a technical element.

Topic G

The Diverse Scottish Female Experience: The Candid Depiction of Scottish Women in Literature.

Commentary

This topic is too broad. While the “candid depiction of Scottish women” is a potentially interesting area for a candidate to consider, the lack of a more precise focus or reference to the actual texts under consideration is unhelpful. The topic could be reworded along the following lines (or similar):

An analysis of the depiction of the Scottish Female experience in ‘Sunset Song’ and ‘The Panopticon’.

Topic H

An analysis of the theme of stoicism in Thomas Hardy’s ‘The Return of the Native’ and Elizabeth Gaskell’s ‘North and South’.

Commentary

This is a concise statement with a clear focus on a single theme appropriate to the selected texts. This should allow the candidate to offer an effective literary analysis of these two large and wide-ranging nineteenth century novels.

Topic I

Proposal: To explore the limitations and themes of Love, Death and Isolation in Robert Frost’s poems.

Commentary

The opening statement of the proposal perhaps lacks clarity (“limitations and themes of . . .”) but the selected themes themselves are appropriate in an analysis of Frost’s poetry. There should be a statement of which poems are to be consider. For example:

An exploration of love, death and isolation in a selection of four poems by Robert Frost – ‘The Sound of Trees’, ‘Out, Out – ’, ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’ and ‘Fire and Ice’.

Topic J

Coming of Age in . . . ‘The Perks of Being a Wallflower’ by Steven Chbosky and ‘The Catcher in the Rye’ by J.D. Salinger.

Commentary

This topic identifies an appropriate theme in two very popular texts. A little more detail might be helpful for some candidates in establishing their approach to the novels. For example:

A comparative study of some of the literary techniques employed by Chbosky and Salinger in their presentation of the theme of “coming of age” in ‘The Perks of Being a Wallflower’ and ‘The Catcher in the Rye’.

Topic K

The Fear of the Other in Victorian Gothic Horror.

Commentary

This is another example of a topic which is too broad in its scope. A more precise focus and reference to the texts being studied is required. For example:

The Fear of the Other – a comparison of two examples of Victorian Gothic Horror: ‘Dracula’ by Bram Stoker and ‘The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde’ by Robert Louis Stevenson.

Topic L

A comparative study analysing the impact of displacement caused by the war and how this changes the dynamic of relationships.

Commentary

This task offers no specific texts and no specific focus on any literary aspects of the texts being dealt with, albeit it states that the study will be “comparative”. The general statement within the task points to ideas of “displacement caused by the war” and how this impacts “the dynamic of relationships”. To bring some focus to the task, it could be written as:

A comparative analysis of characterisation in highlighting displacement and disconnection in Virginia Baily’s ‘Early One Morning’ and Bernard Schlink’s ‘The Reader’.

This reworded task brings some focus to the literary nature of the task, and the thematic focus which will be dealt with in the two named texts.

Topic M

The American Dream’s failure displayed through classic American novella.

Commentary

This task points towards a topic which is possibly too broad in scope, and to texts which are not named, with no particular literary focus. The use of word “displayed” as a possible means by which the texts will be interrogated does not immediately suggest a literary analysis. A more focussed task could be:

An analysis of symbolism, setting and characterisation in exploring the failure of the American Dream in John Steinbeck’s ‘Of Mice and Men’ and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s ‘The Great Gatsby’.

This would bring focus, clarity and an acknowledgement that a literary analysis will be at the heart of the dissertation.

Topic N

A comparative analysis of the devices used to explore the theme of masculinity in 'Macbeth' and 'Julius Caesar' by William Shakespeare.

Commentary

The task is clear and precise in its focus. It states the specific texts being dealt with and the focus on “comparative analysis” and “devices” points towards a technical analysis of the texts, and a thematic focus.

Topic O

A comparison of the similarities in 'To Kill a Mockingbird' and 'Snow Falling on Cedars', as depicted through narrative, symbolism and setting.

Commentary

This task has a specific literary focus on two texts. However, “comparison of the similarities” is not as precise and could limit the scope of the response. Although the task is looking at literary techniques, it does not define to what end. A slight adjustment could be made to the task. For example:

A comparative analysis of how narrative, symbolism and setting highlight the theme of prejudice in Harper Lee's 'To Kill a Mockingbird' and David Guterson's 'Snow Falling on Cedars'.

This would bring some more focus to the task yet still allow the candidate scope to offer a literary analysis of how the theme is explored by these authors.

Topic P

The prevalence and subsequent significance of gender stereotypes in the work of Daphne du Maurier.

Commentary

This task has a valid and specific idea of “prevalence and [...] significance of gender stereotypes” at the heart of it, which is positive. However, looking at “the work of Daphne du Maurier” suggests a large range of texts and there is no specific focus on literary analysis and/or techniques. A more focussed and concise task would be:

A literary exploration of the prevalence and significance of gender stereotypes in Daphne du Maurier's 'Rebecca' and 'My Cousin Rachel'.

Topic Q

A Wasp in the Bell Jar: The consequences of misogyny in 'The Bell Jar' and 'The Wasp Factory'.

Commentary

This task is a very broad statement which has a focus on the texts and thematic concern. It is a sophisticated task which could work well, however, some more clarity and precision may be helpful for candidates. For example:

A comparative literary analysis of misogyny in Sylvia Plath's 'The Bell Jar' and Iain Banks' 'The Wasp Factory'.

Topic R

A study of the visibility of personal experience in the poetry of Seamus Heaney with reference to the poems 'September 1969', 'Casualty' and 'The Strand at Lough Beg'.

Commentary

This task is a concise summation of what the candidate has chosen to look at in their dissertation. Three poems are specified and the focal point of the dissertation is outlined well in the "visibility of personal experience".

Topic S

Exploring the role of an unreliable narrator in contributing to the reveal of psychotic or impulsive behavior.

Commentary

This task has the technical focus of the "unreliable narrator" which supports an approach to the task which is literary, but it would be beneficial to include the specific texts being dealt with. Also, "the reveal of the psychotic or impulsive behaviour" is less helpful in defining its focus. The task could be adjusted to, for example:

An exploration of the function of the unreliable narrator in Brett Easton Ellis's 'American Psycho' and Patrick McGrath's 'Asylum'.