Unit 3 Interpretations of prose and poetry

Introduction

The Student Book reflects the structure of Unit 3. It is divided as follows:

Section A Unprepared poetry or prose (pp 6–64) covers the skills and knowledge required for Section A of the exam. It prepares students to write an analysis of one unprepared poem OR one unprepared prose fiction passage. It consists of the following parts:

- Part 1 Analysing unprepared poetry (pp 6–21)
- Part 2 Analysing unprepared prose (pp 21–40)
- Part 3 Unprepared poetry and prose: Independent approaches (pp 41–54)
- Part 4 Tackling Section A of the exam (pp 54–64)

Section B Paired texts (pp 65–125) covers the skills and knowledge required for Section B of the exam. It prepares students to write an essay comparing two or three prescribed texts from the genres of poetry and prose fiction, at least one of which has been published after 1990. It consists of the following parts:

- Part 1 Introduction to Section B (pp 65–66)
- Part 2 Comparing texts by theme, genre and period (pp 67–86)
- Part 3 Comparing texts in their contexts (pp 87–100)
- Part 4 Comparing interpretations of texts (pp 101–12)
- Part 5 Tackling Section B of the exam (pp 113–25)

For Section A, the Student Book supports the unprepared analysis of poems and prose fiction passages drawn from any period. In the exam, students will be asked to show how structure, form and language create meaning in the text. They will also make a personal evaluation of it.

For Section B, the Student Book supports comparison of three prescribed texts drawn from novels and poetry collections within a topic group. In the exam, students will compare the way poets and prose fiction writers use structure, form and language, exploring links between two or more texts and between texts and their contexts. They will also consider how different readers at different times interpret the texts, and give a personal evaluation of them.

The material on pp 9–38 gives guidance on teaching all these skills. It includes detailed commentaries on the poems and prose extracts in the Student Book. A range of handouts is provided on pp 59–123 to further assist your work in the classroom.

More information on this unit can be found in the specification (pp 4–10, 29–33, 80–85), in the Sample Assessment Materials (pp 47–77 and 111–33), and in the support booklet Getting Started (pp 14–16).
Section A – Unprepared poetry or prose

Section A of the Student Book covers the skills students need to analyse unprepared poetry and prose. It prepares them for Section A of the exam, in which they spend about 75 minutes writing an analysis of one poem OR one prose fiction passage. The texts can be drawn from any period.

Part 1 (SB pp 6–21) focuses on unprepared poetry. It provides specific guidance on how to read and respond to a new poem, how to identify its themes, and how to comment on the ways in which structure, form and language shape meaning. These skills were developed during the work for Section A of Unit 1. They need to be consolidated and refined for the more difficult challenge of A2.

You can decide whether to follow the order of activities as printed. They are constructed to provide continuity and progression but they can also be regarded as free-standing. This allows you to reinforce particular aspects of learning covered earlier in the course.


You can make a choice about whether to concentrate the work exclusively on poetry, exclusively on prose, or (as the specification recommends) to combine the two.

Part 3 (SB pp 41–54) provides additional activities for both poetry and prose analysis. It encourages students to take independent, evaluative approaches to the work and so gain confidence in meeting the higher band requirements of AO2. These emphasise personal response and the need to make critical judgements (see the Sample Assessment Materials for Unit 3, pp 113–14).

As in Parts 1 and 2, the activities can be regarded as free-standing.

Part 4 (SB pp 54–65) gives specific guidance on how to meet the requirements of the Section A exam.

1 Analysing unprepared poetry (SB pp 6–21)

Key teaching points. Encourage students to:

• build on the work they did on unprepared texts for Section A of Unit 1: the A2 exam task is comparable, and the same essential skills are assessed
• make their own decisions about what to comment on in an unprepared poem: in the A2 exam, they will not have the support of prompt questions
• develop and justify a personal interpretation of a poem
• evaluate a poem’s effectiveness.

Giving a first response: What meaning can I find here? (SB pp 6–7)

This first sub-section puts the emphasis on personal interpretation, where it should remain throughout the course.

Activity 1 (SB pp 6–7) asks students to explore two poems related in theme. For question 2 they use a role-play device to increase their imaginative involvement with the poems. Questions 3 and 4 encourage a range of responses to illustrate the fact that meaning depends upon interpretation and that different readers will interpret (and evaluate) poems in different ways.

Watch out for... students needing time to find their bearings on a new poem. Stage 2 of many activities asks them to ‘Give a first response...’ in a small group, the intention being to allow them to consider and share their ideas before presenting them to the whole group at a later stage. The small-group work helps them to be questioning and critical in their approach and move towards an evaluation of the text without always being prompted to do so.

Giving a considered response: How do the style and language work? (SB p 8/Handout 3.1)

Activity 2 (SB p 8) asks students to identify the main stylistic features of Siegfried Sassoon’s poem ‘Base Details’ and relate these to his themes. The poem is reproduced on Handout 3.1 for students to annotate when answering questions 2 and 3, and to use for writing a response to question 4. Emphasise that Sassoon’s diction conveys his attitudes in a very direct way: this is a satirical poem that targets a specific First World War readership.

Extension: Support Ask students to read other First World War poems by Sassoon, such as ‘They’ and ‘The General’, and write an analysis of two of them. Sassoon’s poetry is accessible and his techniques are sufficiently clear for students to comment on them with confidence at this stage of the course.

Identifying themes in a poem: What ideas is the poet exploring? (SB pp 8–9)

This sub-section reminds students how to distinguish between subject matter and themes in a poem. It is a crucial distinction that all students, of whatever ability, need to be clear about. Give as much time to this issue as necessary before moving on to analyse the specifics of diction, imagery, form and structure.
Activity 3 (SB p 9) relates back to ‘Base Details’ because students are in a position to make informed distinctions between what Sassoon describes and the ideas he is conveying to the reader. The table in the Student Book helps them clarify their thinking. Continue discussion until students can give a definition of ‘theme’ in their own words.

Activity 4 (SB p 9) reinforces the learning in Activity 3 by asking students to identify and comment on Carol Ann Duffy’s themes in ‘Mrs Aesop’.

Commentary on question 2
• Aesop is pompous, pedantic, unable to appreciate nature or his wife for their own sake, and sexually inadequate – in Duffy’s feminist poem, these are presented as male characteristics.
• Mrs Aesop differs from her husband in being feisty, quick-witted, articulate, and sexual – Duffy’s poem protests against the traditional view of male/female roles in marriage.
• Aesop has substituted literature for first-hand experience; he is so concerned to find the ‘moral’ in everything that he intellectualises life rather than lives it.

Writing in the exam (SB p 9) The ‘Writing in the exam’ box emphasises that being tentative and exploratory at the start of a response is a necessary part of the process of engaging with the text. Remind students that they will not be penalised for this. What they must avoid is a lengthy paraphrase of the poem's subject matter at the expense of expressing their understanding of its themes.

Vocabulary or diction in poems: Why this word rather than that? (SB pp 10–11/Handout 3.2)
The focus here is on diction. Encourage students to think in terms of the words the poet chooses, not just uses, as a basis for their comments. At A2 level it is still important to consider the process of a poem’s composition and remember that it did not arrive in the poet’s mind fully formed. Poets make choices, make changes, redraft and revise. If students’ analysis of diction is rooted in this understanding, they are more likely to make constructive comments about it.

Activity 5 (SB p 10) asks students to consider Ted Hughes’ choices of diction in ‘The Horses’. Handout 3.2 provides a copy of the poem for them to annotate.

Commentary on questions 6a and 6b
The poem conveys the following themes:
• the sheer immensity of the world of nature compared with the world of man; the poem’s speaker presents himself as an awed intruder into this world (‘Stumbling in the fever of a dream’), yet capable of appreciating its timelessness and elemental beauty
• the contrast between the age-old harmony of the natural world to which the horses are perfectly attuned (‘Not one snorted or stamped’) and the transience and disharmony of the human world (‘In din of the crowded streets, going among the years, the faces’)
• the beauty and dignity of the natural world, which combines huge power (‘Then the sun/ Orange, red, red erupted’) with stillness and the capacity to ‘endure’.

Relating themes to choices of diction:
• ‘Shook the gulf open, showed blue/And the big planets hanging’: ‘Shook the gulf open’ suggests a cosmic force, an impression enhanced by the simple, stark diction and the onomatopoeic verbs ‘tore’ and ‘flung’ in line 20
• ‘Their hung heads patient as the horizons/ High over valleys’: the simile connects the horses with the ‘silent world’ of nature and the elements; this world is unified, all of a piece, an impression enhanced by the strong alliteration of ‘h’ sounds
• ‘May I still meet my memory in so lonely a place/ Between the streams and the red clouds, hearing curlews/ Hearing the horizons endure’: the value the speaker attaches to his experience is suggested by the imperative verb ‘May’ and its placement at the start of line 36, and by the paradoxical-seeming ‘Hearing the horizons endure’, which makes the landscape animate as well as eternal.

Watch out for… students sometimes making quite sophisticated comments on diction without relating these to their understanding of the poet’s themes. Remind them that AO2 requires an analysis of ‘the ways in which structure, form and language shape meaning’ – in other words, they need to relate their detailed comments on language to what they think the poet is doing in the poem.

Extension: Stretch and challenge Ted Hughes’ poems provide excellent material for responding to choices of diction. Ask students to work in a similar way to that in Activity 5 by making an analysis of poems such as ‘Wind’, ‘The Jaguar’ and ‘Tractor’, either in notes or in essay form.

Imagery in poems: How does it work? (SB pp 12–13/Handouts 3.3–3.6)
This sub-section supports students in commenting on poets’ use of imagery and relating it to their way of seeing things. The preamble on p 12 of the Student Book establishes that imagery is not just an embellishment to meaning; poets use imagery to create meaning, and to explore the world as they perceive it.

Activity 6 (SB p 12) uses Raleigh’s poem ‘On the Life of Man’ to demonstrate the use of extended metaphor. In question 2, the small-group work should be exploratory but detailed; the more students look, the more they will find in this highly compressed poem. In question 3, prompt students to judge the effectiveness of Raleigh’s use of a developing pattern of imagery. Use the creative writing task in question 4 to develop students’ understanding that metaphor constructs meaning, rather than simply adds to it.