English · Revision

Essay Writing Tips

A reliable way to plan and write literature essays. Check your exam board's mark scheme for how it splits marks between analysis, context and technical accuracy.

Before you write: 5 minutes

- Underline the key words in the question. Are you asked about a character, a theme, or how a writer presents something?
- Write a one-sentence answer to the question. That is your argument.
- Plan three or four points, each with a piece of evidence.
- Put your points in an order that develops the argument, not just the order of the plot.

Structure

Part	What it does
Introduction	Two or three sentences. Answer the question straight away.
Main paragraphs	One idea each, always linked back to the question.
Conclusion	What the writer's overall message or purpose is. Don't simply repeat your points.

A strong paragraph

Step	Ask yourself
Point	What is my idea, in answer to the question?
Evidence	Which short quotation proves it?
Analysis	What does one specific word or technique suggest? Is there a second meaning?
Effect and context	How does it affect the audience? Why did the writer choose this, at that time?

Example: How does Shakespeare present ambition in Macbeth?

Shakespeare presents ambition as a force that Macbeth knows is dangerous but cannot control. He admits he has only "vaulting ambition", and the word "vaulting" suggests a leap that goes too far, like a rider who jumps too hard and falls on the other side. Because he recognises this before he kills Duncan, the audience sees his crime as a choice rather than an accident. For a Jacobean audience, who were taught that a king was chosen by God, this choice would make his ambition seem not just foolish but sinful.

Notice that it opens with the idea, uses a two-word quotation, zooms in on one word, and ends with context that adds to the argument.

Words that lift your analysis

Instead of	Try
This shows that	This implies, suggests, reinforces, exposes
The writer uses	The writer deliberately, Dickens employs, Shakespeare crafts
This makes the reader feel	This evokes sympathy, unsettles the audience, invites us to judge
Also	Furthermore, by contrast, however, this is developed when

Using quotations well

- Keep them short. One to five words is usually enough.
- Embed them in your own sentence, like the "vaulting ambition" example above.
- Don't explain what a quote means twice. Explain why that word was chosen.

Common mistakes

- Retelling the plot instead of analysing it.
- Naming a technique ("this is a metaphor") without saying what it achieves.
- Adding history that doesn't link to your point.
- Treating characters as real people. Write about what the writer is *doing* with them.

In the last 5 minutes

Check that every paragraph answers the question, that characters' and writers' names are spelled correctly, and that your punctuation and sentences are accurate.