

## Writing on a play



**A thorough analysis of passages from a play will show awareness that the text is a script meant to be acted. Take special note of any stage directions in the passages and explain the significance of at least some of them in your response.**



Go to [www.insightpublications.com.au](http://www.insightpublications.com.au) for sample responses on *Pygmalion*, *Hamlet* and *Hedda Gabler*.

## Sample response on Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*

The following response is based on three passages from William Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*:

- In Act 3 scene 3, from Brutus: 'There's no more to be said, but he is banished', to All: 'The gods preserve our noble tribunes! Come.'
- In Act 5 scene 3, from Volumnia: 'Your knee, sirrah', to Virgilia: 'That brought you forth this boy, to keep your name / Living to time.'
- In Act 5 scene 6, from Coriolanus: 'Hail, lords! I am returned your soldier', to All Conspirators: 'Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill him!'

Although Coriolanus is a dedicated and celebrated soldier and defender of Rome, he lacks the ability or even desire to promote himself or his deeds in such a way as to secure the respect and loyalty of the Roman people (the plebeians). Passage 1 exemplifies Coriolanus' hatred for the people and his refusal to temper his feelings with any political sensitivity. He resorts to brazen insult, ridiculing the plebeians' 'innocence' and calling them 'curs' (low, worthless dogs) who he despises as much as stinking 'rotten fens' (bogs) or 'the dead carcasses of unburied men' who 'corrupt' the air with their foulness. There can be no doubt of his feelings for them, and his words give them no reason to reconsider their rejection of him. Rather he reveals himself to be the impervious patrician-class soldier the plebeians see him as: dismissing their place in Roman society and cruelly withholding sustenance from them as they struggle to support themselves.

This passage also suggests that the plebeians do, in some ways, earn Coriolanus' disdain. Their banishment of him closely follows their reluctant endorsement of his campaign for election as consul (Act 2, scene 3), which in turn follows their 'mutinous' determination against him in the opening scene. In their fickleness is a kind of mob mentality: they are easily roused to one cause or another, following those who make any attempt to lead or compel them (whether their own tribunes or, briefly, Coriolanus). This passage justifies the derision in Coriolanus' indictment – 'let every feeble rumor shake your hearts'. They do act as one, blindly following their leader even when doing so contradicts their previous intentions and declarations, heartily embracing each new 'rumor', as in their unanimous echoing of Brutus' and Sicinius' words 'It shall be so, it shall be so!' and 'let's see him out at gates'. Not only dialogue but also the stage directions support this idea of the people as a powerful unity: 'they all shout, and throw up their caps'. Here the plebeians act not as individuals but as a mass in opposition to the protagonist.

Opens with a broad statement about an aspect of the protagonist's character and how he relates to the play's structure; hints at the tension between action and words, which the discussion later expands on.

Moves straight into a close analysis of the language in Passage 1, using brief quotes to support the argument.

Shows awareness of how this passage relates to the wider play.

Demonstrates understanding of stage directions as crucial to the meaning and impact of the play when performed; discusses how stage directions and dialogue combine to present an idea.

Uses 'however' to connect paragraphs, contributing to cohesion and linking the analysis of the people with that of Coriolanus.

Brings together quotations from two different passages, using them to illustrate the argument and lending cohesion to the analysis.

Develops the interpretation through a close reading of Volumnia's speech, discussing how it contributes to the play's exploration of language and power.

Identifies textual features used by the playwright to construct meaning.

First half of the opening sentence uses repetition (capitulate/capitulating) to link to the previous paragraph and to help draw together the arguments of the previous paragraph (on words/action) and those earlier (on loyalty).

Uses evidence from the passages to support discussion of the text's views and values.

Picks up an idea from previous paragraph in order to return to the idea of persuasion, which will draw together the discussion of all three passages.

Interestingly, however, Coriolanus and the plebeians are not without similarity. He, too, can be accused of shifting his loyalties, in turn calling into question his own integrity – a quality both he and his mother value highly. Though he fights valiantly for Rome, when the people banish him he declares 'I turn my back. / There is a world elsewhere'. He would now rather abandon his loyalty (including to his 'mother, wife, and child') and ally himself to Rome's enemies, the Volscians, and indeed his own sworn enemy, Aufidius, than make any attempt to regain favour with Rome. Such behaviour leads to his loyalties being uncomfortably divided when Volumnia manages to persuade him to 'show a noble grace to both parts'. As a result he later tells Aufidius that he has 'made peace / With no less honor to the Antiates / Than shame to th' Romans', a statement that leads directly to his death.

Volumnia's persuasion (in two long monologues, the first of which is in Passage 2) demonstrates the power of speech, when she convinces her son to forsake his commitment to 'tearing / His country's bowels out' in alliance with Aufidius. In Passage 1, we see how incapable Coriolanus is of manipulating words to his benefit. Here, though, Volumnia exhibits what her son lacks; she influences his feelings and his decision-making through her strategic choice of words and arguments. She draws on ideas and values she knows will carry weight with Coriolanus: his love for his son ('my brave boy!'), for his mother ('That brought thee to this world') and for his wife. She reminds him of his family's love for him ('thy sight, which should / Make our eyes flow with joy, hearts dance with comforts'), using figurative language to manipulate him with the emotive power of imagery. She laments the dilemma awaiting Virgilia and her, should he carry out his attack against Rome: 'we must lose / The country, our dear nurse, or else thy person, / Our comfort in the country', appealing to his empathy. The audience sees here that language can be just as powerful as action, since her entreaties do convince him to 'capitulate', despite his initial vow that he would not.

In capitulating, Coriolanus believes he has found a way to appease both his old and his new loyalties, but he quickly learns that Aufidius considers this a traitorous abuse of power, asserting that Coriolanus was 'breaking his oath and resolution like / A twist of rotten silk'. The simile communicates the depth of antipathy Aufidius feels, and portrays Coriolanus as weak, caving easily 'at his nurse's tears'. Once again, in his anger, Coriolanus fails to temper his words. As with the plebeians earlier, he labels Aufidius a 'cur' and his insulting language hardens the resolve against him. Then, the result was banishment; this time it is death. His demise at Aufidius' hands suggests that the play condemns the lack of steady allegiances and constant loyalties. The only possible outcome of attempting to navigate conflicting allegiances is to pay the ultimate price, the loss of one's life.

The notion of shifting loyalty is related to another key idea in *Coriolanus*: the power of persuasion. Passage 1 illustrates the influence that can be exerted when a group acts against an individual. Although the starving plebeians are powerless as individuals, united they have the capacity to banish their enemy and 'give him deserved vexation'. Conversely Coriolanus, whose victory at Corioles was almost singlehanded, is later disempowered

when his stubborn independence loses him the support of the people. In Passage 2, words are shown to have persuasive power over actions, and a key character difference between Coriolanus and his mother is also highlighted: while he achieves his goals by channelling his 'rages and revenges' into physical battle, Volumnia exerts influence by using her 'colder reason' to 'persuade'. Finally, in Passage 3 we see one of the ultimate effects of succumbing to persuasion, combined with shifting loyalties: the loss of power. Here, the celebrated soldier Coriolanus is mocked by Aufidius as a 'boy of tears' immediately before his death. This passage encapsulates Coriolanus' experience of the loss of power, vividly conveying his tragic downfall. (1038 words)

Concludes with a strong summary of the play's journey, highlighting the interpretation's focus on the play's portrayal of power.

## Assessor comments

The analysis begins with a close focus on Coriolanus and his language in Passage 1, and develops a sophisticated interpretation of the text as an exploration of language and power. Textual features including dialogue, stage directions and characterisation are analysed; phrases such as 'he reveals himself' and 'this passage justifies' help to make the connections between textual detail and their meaning and significance.

The particular choices of language by various characters are analysed closely, demonstrating both the links between characters and language and also the wider effects of language, especially when used persuasively. The various elements of Volumnia's speech that are used to sway and manipulate Coriolanus are identified and explained, helping to support the overall interpretation. Views and values are considered through the consequences of actions and decisions – especially those decisions that lead to a change in allegiance.

The focus on language, persuasion and power enables the discussion to make interesting connections between the passages, and between the individuals and groups in the play. This is particularly the case in the concluding paragraph, which draws together the three passages using these connecting ideas. The significance of the selected passages is shown through the analysis of the ideas presented in each and the explanation of how they develop, in different but complementary ways, the play's wider exploration of language and power.

The response is clearly written and well organised. Adjectives such as 'celebrated' and 'impervious' show an understanding of characterisation, and well-chosen, precise verbs such as 'laments', 'appease' and 'encapsulates' add to the expressiveness of the writing. Topic sentences establish a focus for each paragraph and contribute to the smooth flow of ideas through the use of linking words and phrases.