

## Write your responses

Even though you have only 60 minutes to write each response, it is worth devoting some time at the start to planning, then at the end to checking your work.

### At the start

- The moment you are allowed to do so, highlight and annotate the passages – this means the main material and ideas you will draw on are identified and immediately before you.
- Cluster and organise your ideas so that:
  - you can make links between the passages
  - there is a logical progression of ideas in your writing.
- Write a *brief* plan – this will remind you of where you are going (and what you have already covered) as you write. Don't make the plan too detailed – you receive no marks for it, so your time is better spent on the actual response.

### At the end

- After you have written your response, spend a few minutes reading it through to check spelling, punctuation, grammar, links between paragraphs and that your quotes are correct.
- Use the 'final checklist' at the end of this chapter to make the best possible use of your time.

## SAMPLE EXAM RESPONSES

The sample exam responses in this section cover four main forms of texts: novel, poetry, short story and drama. Pay special attention to the annotation boxes and paragraph commentaries: these show you how the responses are constructed and draw your attention to the essential features of a successful exam response.

### Writing on a novel



**A detailed exam answer on a novel will show the significance of language, images, dialogue, setting and characterisation within passages and an awareness of how these contribute towards meaning in the novel as a whole.**

### Sample response on Austen's *Emma*

The sample response below is based on the three passages from the 2009 VCE Literature examination. These passages (using page numbers in the 2003 Penguin Classics edition of *Emma*) are:

- pp.82–3, from 'I do so wonder, Miss Woodhouse' to 'as sensible and pleasant as anybody else'.
- pp.226–7, from 'Here is something quite new to me' to 'Our little room so honoured'.
- pp.452–3, from 'The intermediate month was the one fixed on' to 'in the perfect happiness of the union'.

Go to [www.insightpublications.com.au](http://www.insightpublications.com.au) for an analysis of three passages from Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* as well as a sample response on them.

I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry. Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing!

An observation about character leads to an awareness of *the ideas embodied in the character* – in this case an authorial comment about the necessity of marriage in Regency society.

Direct quotations from the passage are seamlessly ‘woven’ into the discussion.

Awareness of significant aspects of narrative structure; details of the passage used to make a purposeful link to the wider text.

A link between paragraphs 1 and 2 is made through reference to Emma’s interference – further developed to show a greater understanding of Emma’s character.

Awareness of the ways readers are positioned by Austen’s construction of character.

Reference to the wider text – and a subtle reference to the eventual marriage in Passage 3.

Awareness of Austen’s humorous irony – an important element of her style.

Another link between Passage 1 and Passage 2 – and an awareness of views and values.

Emma’s complete self-assurance is evident in Passage 1 as she declares the impossibility of her ever finding anyone ‘charming’ enough to marry. Emma’s sense of superiority comes partly from her financial independence in a society where women needed to marry in order to ensure financial security and to avoid the ‘contemptible’ state of ‘celibacy’. As she explains to Harriet, ‘I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry ... Fortune I do not want ... [and] few married women are half as much mistress of their husband’s house, as I am of Hartfield’. Yet Emma’s tone of condescension and the enumeration of her social advantages highlight the effect of such advantages on an immature, admired and indulged young woman. Emma’s unkind remarks about Miss Bates: ‘so silly – so satisfied – so prosing – so undistinguishing’, foreshadow her shameful treatment of the ageing spinster at the Box Hill picnic.

Emma’s interference in other people’s lives is motivated by boredom as much as by her sense of social superiority as, within the confines of the peaceful rural setting of Highbury, Emma finds little scope for her lively intelligence. As Mr Knightley observes, Emma was always ‘quick and assured’. Yet Austen paints an unflattering portrait of her heroine, inviting readers to condemn Emma’s snobbery and thoughtlessness as she manipulates both the impressionable Harriet and the ridiculous Mr Elton for her own amusement, or humiliates poor Miss Bates for the amusement of others. What rescues Emma, however, from readers’ deep dislike, is our awareness of her naivety. Even her comment that she does not think she ‘ever shall [fall in love]’ is patently naive; as Mrs Weston presciently observes, it ‘means nothing at all’. Unlike Emma, readers are very aware of Mr Elton’s true feelings, and can appreciate Austen’s humorous irony as she allows her heroine to be completely misled, firstly as a consequence of her own scheming and secondly by the subterfuge of Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax.

Handsome and witty, Frank Churchill is an intellectual match for Emma and, impressed by his wit, she is initially blind to his faults as she enlists him as a co-conspirator in her heartless games. Frank’s verbal duplicity in Passage 2 draws attention to his dubious moral standards – yet it must also be remembered that Frank, unlike Emma, is not financially independent. Thus, his guarded speech and concealed engagement reflect the dependence of poor relations on wealthy ones in Regency society, where social acceptance and eligibility for marriage were largely determined by money. Emma’s belief that Jane is in love with Mr Dixon is strongly supported by Frank – who, having encouraged Emma to form an attachment to him, amuses himself at her expense. His comment that the gift of the piano is ‘so thoroughly from the heart’ and that only ‘true affection ... could have prompted it’ is a cleverly disguised declaration of love for Jane and a continuation of his deliberate deception of Emma. The deception at the heart of the novel embroils the reader as well, as we too are deceived by Frank

The response begins by immediately referring to a detail from Passage 1 and using it as the basis of a comment on character. It also identifies marriage as the major concern of the novel.

Identification of tone adds to understanding of character.

Awareness of the writer’s views and values in the unsympathetic construction of her protagonist.

Awareness of the significance of setting.

Appropriate reference to the wider text.

A comment on the construction of character – an unsympathetic one – as a way of providing the heroine with later opportunities for development and redemption.

Link between Passage 1 and Passage 2. The motif of games is one of the novel’s key features.

Author’s views and values revealed here, through an implicit criticism of society’s values.

Churchill, although not as thoroughly as Emma is. Her dealings with Mr Elton reveal that she is very capable of deceiving herself, as she perversely misreads the sentimental declarations of love in his 'charades'.

In a novel about deception, games and conspiracies, Emma's conspiracy with Frank exposes her at her most thoughtless. Although she wishes that Frank would be 'less pointed' in his comments, and has some awareness of Jane's discomfort, Emma 'could not help being amused'. In contrast to Emma, Jane is an 'upright' and truthful character who feels morally compromised by her secret engagement. Her discomfort, revealed by her 'deep blush of consciousness', shows her understanding of Frank's words but also convinces Emma that 'this amiable, upright, perfect Jane Fairfax was apparently cherishing very reprehensible feelings'. This reveals Emma's envy of Jane, whose attributes constantly remind Emma of her own faults of character – faults which she does little to rectify. Although Emma is aware of her jealousy, and is 'half ashamed', her treatment of Jane Fairfax verges on being spiteful. These are serious character flaws in a heroine who must acquire humility and self-awareness in order to affirm the moral standards of which the author approves.

The marriage of Emma and Mr Knightley (Passage 3) occurs after Emma finally achieves the insight and maturity required for a proper heroine and their 'union' is a fitting conclusion for a romantic comedy. This is only possible after the flawed heroine is confronted by Mr Knightley at the Box Hill picnic, where her deep 'mortification' reveals that she is capable of transformation and thus fit for marriage to a character whose virtues make him the novel's moral centre. Interestingly, however, the novel concludes with a focus on Mr Woodhouse and Mrs Elton – two of the characters in whom Austen's capacity for comic irony is given full range. Mr Woodhouse is reconciled to the marriage only because 'his son-in-law's protection' would prevent 'pilfering', while Mrs Elton's opinion of the wedding as 'extremely shabby' reveals her bitterness, shallowness and superficiality.

As always, Austen's comic irony provides an insight into human nature and functions as social commentary. Mr Woodhouse's tyrannical paternal control – disguised as comic eccentricity – is subverted; ironically, it is his demanding nature and unreasonable fears which elicit his 'voluntary, cheerful consent'. Mrs Elton's criticism of the 'pitiful' lack of satin highlights her deep discontent, with its potential to disrupt social harmony. Despite this, Austen suggests that 'perfect happiness' can be attained with support from a 'small band of true friends'. Thus, in creating her highly entertaining comic characters, Austen invites us to condemn their values while affirming the redemptive power of humour to counteract selfishness, snobbery and folly.

(954 words)

Reference to the wider text – and to another game where double meanings play a significant role.

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Awareness of the contrast between Jane and Emma as a way of highlighting Emma's deficiencies.

Awareness of some of the conventions of the genre.

Reference to the wider text as a way of contextualising the passage.

Awareness of the construction of the novel as a kind of 'detective story' in which things are deliberately concealed from the reader – as well as from the protagonist.

Discussion of passage details reveals an awareness of how the passage contributes to an interpretation of the text.

Recognition of the author's views and values.

Awareness of the role of comic characters in the novel.

Awareness of the role of irony in Austen's work.

Discussion of the novel's conclusion as a way of affirming the writer's views and values.

## Assessor comments

(Refer to the exam criteria as published by the VCAA and reproduced in the table on pp.201–2; key phrases from the criteria appear below in italics.)

The interpretation is *relevant and plausible*; the passages are used to comment on aspects of the text in a way that is consistent with an interpretation of details elsewhere in the text (referring briefly to the wider text to support the interpretation). This also demonstrates *understanding of the text*.

Thoughtful *analysis* and *close reading of textual details* are evident in the selection of appropriate material from the passages (direct quotes) and the wider text (specific examples). The discussion goes beyond explaining the meaning (or paraphrasing) of textual details, by showing the writer's awareness of how aspects of character are revealed – for example, through tone or choice of words in a character's dialogue. The writer is also able to show how the novel's key ideas are embodied in characters and how the author's *views and values* are conveyed.

The response is *coherently structured*, using narrative details in each of the passages as a way of tracking the moral development of the protagonist. Using this structure, the writer is able to move comfortably between the passages and from the passages to the wider text. Adding to the coherence of the response, strong links between paragraphs are made through references to recurring motifs (such as games), or key ideas (such as concealment). When using this linear structure, however, there is a real danger of writing a 'plot summary with quotes'. This has been carefully avoided here by a detailed *analysis* of the passage details. There is no inclusion of a narrative detail without an immediate analysis of its purpose or effect.

The writer has also avoided what might be perceived as a 'theme' essay, through a strong focus on the language of the passages – either in the characters' dialogue or in the authorial voice – by commenting on *how* ideas are conveyed through the language, tone and narrative perspective. The writer's ideas are thoughtfully developed, showing an awareness of some of the complex ideas in the novel – for example, the way that tyrannical control can be disguised as comic eccentricity.

The writer uses language *expressively* – communicating ideas clearly, accurately and confidently, and showing evidence of thorough preparation for the task. Sentence structure is varied and a sophisticated vocabulary is used appropriately – particularly in the writer's comments on the author's language, which deploy useful terms such as 'highlights', 'invites', 'reveals', 'suggests', 'elicits' and 'exposes'. Adding to the sophistication of the response is evidence of wider reading of critical articles, seen, for example, in the writer's reference to the redemptive effects of humour – not used gratuitously but rather as the development of an idea about the role of the comic characters. This response would score in the A to A+ range.