

Short answer responses

Short answer questions require you to respond in a clear, concise manner. You should aim to write between 200 and 300 words. Your teacher or exam markers will be looking for responses that demonstrate clarity in the presentation and organisation of ideas, as well as succinct and precise written expression.

A short answer response is not an essay. You should not write introductions or conclusions that merely repeat the same information developed in your analytical paragraphs. A short answer is a different form, and the purpose is to offer a clear, logical explanation in concise and direct language.

Therefore, you should aim to produce succinct analytical paragraphs with tight topic sentences. There is no set number of paragraphs you are expected to write; you should be led by the question in determining how many are appropriate. For example, if a question requires a comparison between two texts, then two tightly linked paragraphs might be the most logical approach. If you are asked to analyse three visual language techniques, you might choose to write three brief paragraphs. However, high-level responses may integrate the analysis within a single extended paragraph, showing how different textual features work together to create meaning.

Here are two guidelines for effective short answer responses.

- **Be precise.** Telling your reader that the writer uses 'descriptive language' is virtually meaningless, unless you follow that up by identifying the precise nature of that language. Similarly, saying that a particular textual feature 'adds impact', 'encourages a response' or 'makes the text interesting' simply uses common phrases that add little value. Identify the precise nature of the impact, the specific response or the ways in which the text is interesting.
- **Be concise.** State your response in succinct language. If you need to add multiple sentences to clarify your original statement, then you probably aren't writing as concisely as you should. Outline the point of analysis you are making, provide an example or two, explain their effects and *move on*.

Two approaches to short answer responses

You can structure your short answers using the technique-led approach or the idea-led approach. The choice will depend largely on the question. (For more information about the sorts of questions that each approach best suits, see page 115.)

TECHNIQUE-LED APPROACH	IDEA-LED APPROACH
1 A concise topic sentence identifying a particular textual feature operating in the text and connecting it to the specific idea or effect it generates.	1 A concise topic sentence identifying an idea or effect arising from the text and connecting it to one or more textual features that contribute to that idea or effect.
2 A clear example, with evidence from the text.	2 A clear example, with evidence from the text.
3 A clear explanation of how that example functions.	3 A clear explanation of how that example functions.
4 Repeat 2 and 3 as necessary.	4 Repeat 2 and 3 as necessary.

The following sample responses (referring to the short story 'Supernova' by Omar Musa) demonstrate each of these approaches. The first uses the technique-led approach, and identifies three key textual features: symbolism, flashback and imagery. It shows how three brief paragraphs are an appropriate structure for this technique-led response.

Explain how Text 1 works to represent the concept of aspiration.

The extract from 'Supernova' employs symbolism, flashbacks and imagery to represent the concept of aspiration as transformative: a sustaining dream of a different or better life that motivates people from humble beginnings.

Each topic sentence identifies one textual feature, as well as one aspect of the representation of the concept of aspiration.

Appropriate metalanguage is used.

Transition markers help to give the explanation cohesion and a logical structure.

The symbolism of the toy rocket is key to representing aspiration as a powerful force. Finding the toy rocket inspires Azlan to become an astronaut. It sparks 'wonder', and as a result Azlan 'vowed to become the first Malaysian astronaut'. The toy is symbolic of his aspirations: just as a rocket blasts away from the Earth's gravitational pull for the freedom of space, aspiration provides the momentum for humans to break the bonds that hold them down and reach for 'the magnificent shawl of stars'. To reach for the stars is typically used as an idiom for our aspirations, and here Azlan's desire to reach them quite literally becomes his dream.

Secondly, the structural feature of a flashback is used to suggest that Azlan is working towards his goal of becoming an astronaut, representing aspiration as sustaining. The passage opens with Azlan as an adult, evident in his recollection that he was once 'young and fit'. The fact that he is returning to his village implies that he has moved on from childhood. By then segueing to his childhood memory of finding the toy rocket and being inspired to become an astronaut, the writer encourages the reader to see a relationship, and to assume that Azlan has followed his dream.

Finally, the imagery of Azlan's simple rural childhood, juxtaposed with his dream of being an astronaut, represents aspiration as transformative. His village is described as 'sleepy', in contrast with a Malaysia that has 'developed at a rate of knots'. His family seem to live a traditional rural lifestyle, fishing the 'broad brown river'. Despite this, the toy rocket and the aspiration it represents are a 'gift' that Azlan embraces, not letting his simple context hold him back.

In contrast, the example on the next page uses the idea-led approach, and demonstrates how a well-structured single paragraph can answer the question successfully.

Exam format

Reading time: ten minutes.

Writing time: three hours.

The English exam has three sections, summarised in the following table.

SECTION	NUMBER OF QUESTIONS	QUESTIONS YOU NEED TO COMPLETE	WEIGHTING %	SUGGESTED WORKING TIME [MINUTES]
One: Comprehending	2	2	30	60
Two: Responding	6	1	40	60
Three: Composing	4 or 5	1	30	60

Section One: Comprehending

- This section is worth 30 per cent of the total exam.
- The Comprehending section requires you to comprehend and analyse previously unseen texts, and to respond in a concise, short answer format. Answers in this section should be between 200 and 300 words in length.
- This section will contain two texts. These will always include one written text, while the other may be written, visual or multimodal – that is, combining written and visual elements. Drama and poetry texts are excluded from this section.
- There are two questions. There may be a question requiring you to compare texts.
- Each question in Section One is equally weighted.

Section Two: Responding

- This section is worth 40 per cent of the total exam.
- The Responding section requires you to respond to your studied texts, demonstrating your analytical and critical thinking skills. You may refer to any text or text type you have studied throughout the year.
- In this section, you will answer one question from a choice of six. Questions may ask you to interpret, analyse, compare, contrast, reflect on and/or evaluate a studied text or texts.
- Although this section is weighted more heavily than the other two, you do not need to write more or spend more time on it. A good rule of thumb is to write an essay with a clear introduction and conclusion, and four or five main body paragraphs. Focus on the *quality* of your main body paragraphs, not the quantity.