2024 VCE English (NHT) external assessment report

General comments

Section A offered students the opportunity to respond to one of two analytical interpretation topics for each of two set texts.

Section B offered students the opportunity to compare and contrast the ideas presented in a selected pair of texts, by writing a comparative analysis on one of the pairs.

Section C invited students to analyse the arguments and language used by a group of young people in an open letter to their local council and community, seeking support for their proposal to repurpose an old library building in a way that would best promote arts in their community.

Assessors used the relevant expected qualities to globally assess student responses. The criterion-based descriptors were applied holistically. Assessors were not looking for specific answers in each section. Rather, they were looking for the ways in which the students could demonstrate their skills and knowledge. Each section required students to craft an essay, but the structure of this essay, the way in which it presented an argument, the focus of the analysis and the evidence to support that argument is a matter for individual students to determine as they respond to the specified task. The VCAA does not mandate a specific format in these responses. Assessors are always mindful of the fact that students are working under timed conditions and with previously unseen material and that they are producing first draft writing.

Most students completed each section of the exam and presented complete answers in each section. These responses were, on the whole, detailed and thoughtful. Most students understood the requirements of each section and responded in an appropriate manner.

Specific information

Section A – Analytical interpretation of a text

Section A required students to complete an analytical response to a specific topic.

More students responded to the questions on Station Eleven than to the questions on Sunset Boulevard. Of the two questions on Station Eleven, part i was more popular.

When considering this question, most students were able to consider Mandel’s ideas in relation to the need for life to have meaning. Higher-scoring responses were able to narrow the focus down to consider how the ‘darkest of circumstances’ may have an impact on an individual’s need to find meaning in life. The highest-scoring responses considered the implication of the word ‘even’ in the question in relation to how Mandel suggested individuals responded to challenging life and world events. The strongest responses considered the way in which Mandel does not wholeheartedly endorse a human desire to imbue life with meaning in dark times, and, indeed, points out the pitfalls that can ensue when that search for meaning is based on corrupted or flawed values. The students’ capacity to read and understand the essay question guided their response and students who read the question in its entirety were able to produce more focused and complex responses than those who wrote in general terms about things that Mandel suggested might offer humans the chance to find meaning in life.

Fewer students by far tackled part ii. This question invited students to consider what the term ‘stories’ might mean in relation to Station Eleven and consider whether these stories could sustain characters and society, and also put them at risk.. Higher-scoring responses considered the relationship between the two terms that the topic implied, challenged the absolute term ‘stories’ and found that qualifying that term led to a more accurate reading.

Many students responded to these questions with a consideration for the way the author used the text’s structure, characters, language and setting to convey ideas. Most students were able to support their reading with appropriate evidence from the text. The strongest responses used close language analysis to explore the way the author had nuanced the readers’ understanding of these ideas.

A number of students responded to the text Sunset Boulevard. Of the two questions, part i was more popular.

This question proved challenging for students. The invitation to consider what Wilder had presented as ‘fantasy’ and what he presented as ‘reality’ was often simplified as ‘a film script’ and ‘unscripted life’. This did not allow students to consider the ways in which Hollywood, according to Wilder, was based on a fantasy, nor how the fantasy that Hollywood ‘sold’ was related to the lives experienced by those who worked in its industries. Few students considered the implications of the word ‘just’, and hence the readings of the text that were presented tended to simplify the relationship between fantasy and reality that was presented in the film.

The less popular part ii was similarly simplified, being interpreted as ‘who lied in the film?’. The absolute term ‘no-one’ and the complex concept of the ‘whole truth’ tended to be overlooked.

As with Station Eleven, students who understood both the question and the text’s complexity produced stronger responses. Higher-scoring responses considered the way the film was shot, edited and structured, as well as using character-based evidence. In this section, thoughtful consideration of the implications of the question guided the best responses. These responses were able to maintain a consistent focus on the contention they established, as well as a carefully considered and supported explanation of the ways in which the text presented and developed its ideas. Many students produced essays that presented a carefully sequenced and supported response in precise and appropriate language.

Section B – Comparative analysis of texts

Section B required students to compare the way in which their selected pair of texts had presented a specific idea.

More students responded to the questions pertaining to The Crucible and The Dressmaker than to The 7 Stages of Grieving and The Longest Memory.

For the first pairing of texts, the most popular question was part i. Most students were able to consider the ways in which the texts addressed ideas of corruption, but higher-scoring responses demonstrated an understanding of the way the modifier ‘effects of’ narrowed the required focus. Understanding the term ‘corruption’ and the different types of ‘corruption’ evident in the texts was also crucial to understanding the invitation of the topic.

The less popular part ii proved challenging for some students, who struggled to interpret the term ‘social status’ accurately and to recognise the way the term ‘impact’ qualified the question.

While students knew their texts well, many were not always able to conceptualise as this section of the course required, and often compared characters’ actions or situations rather than the ideas that the authors were conveying. Students who scored highly were able to consider the complexity of both the questions and the texts, and to structure thoughtful and well-substantiated responses.

With regard to the second pairing, the majority of students seemed to be more familiar with The Longest Memory than The 7 Stages of Grieving. This led some students to produce an uneven discussion of the texts, which included detailed responses to one text and fleeting discussion of the second. Higher-scoring responses considered the relevant ideas presented by both texts and were able to compare the relevant concepts and ideas that they framed for the reader.

A number of students did not recognise that the discussion that was invited about the ‘misuse of authority’ required focus on ‘people in positions of power’, and this led some students to include irrelevant content and miss the implication that existed in the question. No students tackled the question about ‘victimhood’ when considering this pair.

Students were rewarded for a response that considered the whole question, presented a well-balanced consideration of the ideas in both texts and effectively compared the ideas in a relevant, knowledgeable and fluent manner.

Section C – Argument and persuasive language

Section C required students to analyse a previously unseen persuasive text, exploring how argument and language have been used to persuade an intended audience to share the point of view expressed.

This year the text was an open letter to the council and community of Bankswood, presenting a proposal that the community’s old library building be turned into a community arts centre and not, as the council intended, more council offices. It included two images: one a ‘selfie’ of the writers and the other a cartoon depicting the building in two forms, one as an office and one as an arts centre.

The material was accessible, and students comprehended the text.

The majority of students recognised the very straightforward purpose of the text – to garner community support for their proposal, in the hope that this support would influence the council to consider it. Students who scored highly recognised the context in which this proposal was made as being after the council’s decision had been determined and used this as a basis to inform their analysis of the way the writers characterised the council to their audience. Other students explored the ways in which the writers incorporated their response to the new library into their argument to demonstrate their fair-mindedness to their audience. Many responses struggled to acknowledge the disparate audiences of council and community in the writing, with some referencing a ‘reader’, as if both groups would respond to the text’s elements in exactly the same way. This indicated a lack of understanding about the interplay of context, audience and purpose when interpreting and analysing a text. Higher-scoring responses were able to distinguish between the different ‘agendas’ of the two groups of readers, explore the differing responses that may have ensued, and how different parts of the text targeted different elements of the readership.

The ‘background material’ presented to the students to frame their reading of the text offered some insight into context and audience, although students still needed to infer the values and beliefs of each group. Inference was also required to access the material fully.

It was pleasing to see the way in which students tackled the task analytically. There was evidence of careful analytical thought in relation to the text’s line of argument and language. Some students may have needed more practice at expressing their ideas, but the majority demonstrated evidence of the capacity to think analytically in relation to argument and ideas. Students rarely fell back into listing linguistic techniques or simply describing them. Most students demonstrated confidence in their capacity to think analytically about the text.

Students were able to recognise elements of the text, such as the way in which the writers characterised themselves through strategic language choices and the way in which appeals were targeted towards the community’s beliefs and values. Many students were able to explain how the writers used comparison to frame their ideas for the readers.

A strength exhibited by the cohort was their capacity to analyse the visuals. In particular, the cartoon was discussed in detail by students, and they were able to integrate this discussion into a broader discussion of the text’s purpose. In addition, students indicated an understanding of the way in which the strategic placement of the cartoon was designed to amplify the ideas presented in the text.

Assessors in Section C, as in other sections of the exam, looked to reward the students’ capacity and appropriate skills displayed in the responses. There is no single ‘expected response’. In this section, assessors rewarded responses that explained how the argument was purposefully constructed to persuade the specified audience and how language was used to reinforce those ideas. Students were free to select for analysis the parts of the text that they saw as being designed to impact the reader, and there was no expectation that, within the time constraints of the exam, an exhaustive analysis of every part of the text could be completed.