



HSC ENGLISH ADVANCED:

HAMLET

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CHARACTER SUMMARIES

CLAUDIUS

Claudius is the current King of Denmark. He is the late King Hamlet's brother and Hamlet's uncle. At the beginning of the play he has married his sister-in-law, Gertrude, ensuring that he becomes the new king and that she remains the Queen of Denmark. According to the Ghost, Claudius is responsible for the death of King Hamlet, a fact Claudius later admits to in his Act 3 soliloquy.

HAMLET

Hamlet is the Crown Prince of Denmark. He is the son of the late King Hamlet and Queen Gertrude, and King Claudius's nephew. His mother's marriage to Claudius also made Hamlet King Claudius's stepson. Prior to the opening of the play, Hamlet was studying at university in Wittenberg. As a consequence, he was absent from the Danish court at the time of his father's death and Claudius's rise to power.

When we first meet Hamlet, he is grieving the loss of his father and is angered at what he perceives to be a hasty and immoral marriage between his mother and Claudius. For these reasons, he refuses to support Claudius either personally or politically, a move which both ends his relationship with Ophelia and ensures his alienation within the court. To complicate matters further, Hamlet's friends Horatio, Marcellus and Barnardo introduce Hamlet to the Ghost of his father who they have seen several times wandering on a platform outside the castle. The Ghost tells Hamlet that it was Claudius who murdered him and charges Hamlet with the filial responsibility of avenging '*his foul and most unnatural murder*' (Act 1, Scene 5). This sends Hamlet into a crisis which sees him question both the purpose and the value of life. As a consequence, Hamlet spends much time deliberating upon the morality of taking revenge, adopting an '*antic disposition*' (or feigned madness) (Act 1, Scene 5) when in public in order to buy himself the time he needs to prove Claudius's guilt and decide upon his course of action. However, as the drama unfolds, we realise that Hamlet's decisions place him in danger and destabilise Denmark. His assumed madness heightens Claudius's suspicions, while his refusal to constructively participate in the governance of Denmark allows Claudius's expedient, yet morally bankrupt style of leadership to corrupt the state.

It is only once Hamlet realises that Claudius has committed a number of offences against Denmark (in addition to regicide) that he can bring himself to take his revenge. In doing so, Hamlet purges the Danish court, yet also causes its complete destruction. It is perhaps this ambivalent ending that allows successive audiences to consider both the merit and the morality of Hamlet's actions.

GERTRUDE

Gertrude is the current Queen of Denmark. She is Hamlet's mother and the late King Hamlet's wife. Upon her husband's death she married her brother-in-law, Claudius, making him the new King of Denmark.

POLONIUS

Polonius is the Lord Chamberlain (or King's Chamberlain) of Denmark. This means that he provides advice to the sovereign, overseeing proceedings in the court and controlling access to the king. Polonius is also the father of Laertes and Ophelia. He formulates a theory that Hamlet has gone mad as a result of Ophelia's rejection of him. However, he is unsuccessful in persuading Claudius to believe this theory.

LAERTES

Laertes is the son of Polonius and brother of Ophelia. Although well regarded by Hamlet because of his good reputation and expert swordsmanship, Laertes (by virtue of Polonius's allegiance to Claudius) finds himself in a position that demands loyalty to Claudius.

OPHELIA

Ophelia is the daughter of Polonius and sister of Laertes. At the beginning of the play she is involved in a courtship with Hamlet. However, Claudius's ascension to the throne causes both Polonius and Laertes to advise her to end her relationship with Hamlet, fearing that she is setting her sights too high which will only result in rejection and a ruined reputation.

GET REVISING

REVISING FOR YOUR EXAMS

Your HSC in English will introduce you to a wealth of excellent, exciting literature, and will open your eyes to new ways of viewing the world around you. However, preparing for any exam can be stressful, whether you like the subject or find it difficult, especially with so many demands on your time. You need to be sure that you're using your time wisely and being as effective as you can in your revision. Preparation is key, and there are a few things you can do to make sure you feel confident when it's time for the exam, and to help you to achieve your full potential.

One of the first things you should do is to familiarise yourself with the structure of the HSC English examination papers. Knowing what to expect in the exam is the best way to know how to prepare.

ABOUT THE PAPERS

As an Advanced English student, you will complete two exam papers that are organised as follows:

PAPER 1: AREA OF STUDY

This paper is common to both English (Standard) and English (Advanced). Everyone sits the same exam. You will be given 2 hours' writing time, plus 10 minutes' reading time.

This paper is designed to assess your understanding of the Area of Study: Discovery, and how you respond to questions about it. There are three sections:

- Section I—short answers (15 marks). This is the section where you will read a collection of unseen texts and answer a series of short-answer questions.
- Section II—creative writing (15 marks). This is the section where you will compose a piece of creative writing on the topic of discovery in response to a specific stimulus.



Practise writing essays under timed conditions to get your planning and drafting down to a fine art. You'll find some practice questions later in this book.

- Section III—extended response (or integrated analytical response) (15 marks). This is the section where you will write about the prescribed text you have studied at school, as well as about other related texts of your own choosing.

Total marks: 45

PAPER 2: MODULES

Your questions for this paper are specific to the Advanced English course. This paper allows 2 hours' writing time, but just 5 minutes' reading time. Again, there are three sections:

- Section I—Module A Comparative Study of Texts and Context (20 marks)
- Section II—Module B Critical Study of Text (20 marks)
- Section III—Module C Representation and Text (20 marks).

Total marks: 60

When you look at all the sections across the two HSC papers, you will see that there are three distinct types of response that you will be asked to produce, each assessing a different set of skills and abilities:

- Comprehension and analysis skills—how well you read and interpret texts (Paper 1 Section I)
- Creative writing—your ability to express your conceptual understanding of the Area of Study: Discovery in an imaginative way (Paper 1 Section II)
- Extended response—assessing your skills in analysis and evaluation (Paper 1 Section III, and Paper 2 Sections I, II and III).

Knowing what types of question you're going to be given and how you're expected to respond means there should be no surprises!



Both Paper 1 and Paper 2 are equally weighted as 50% of your HSC examination mark, even though Paper 1 is a total mark out of 45 and Paper 2 is a total mark out of 60. Make sure you give both papers equal attention!

PRACTISE, PRACTISE, PRACTISE

The best way to be prepared for all the question types is to practise, practise, *practise*! Regular practice of your skills in responding to questions under exam-style conditions is the best possible preparation for the HSC examinations. If you commit to a regular routine of practice each week, you will give yourself the very best chance of walking into your English exams feeling confident and thoroughly prepared to achieve your full potential.

WHAT ARE THE FEATURES OF STRONG ESSAYS?

Essays that score well in this module have the following characteristics:

- an introduction that directly addresses the question and establishes a clear thesis (line of argument)
- a series of coherently structured body paragraphs with well-supported discussion of the whole play, demonstrating an informed personal understanding of ideas
- a sustained essay thesis
- treatment of *Hamlet* as a revenge tragedy, with analysis of dramatic form and features, and consideration given to the impact of these on the audience
- confident and articulate use of language.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

WHAT IS AN 'INFORMED PERSONAL UNDERSTANDING' OF *HAMLET*?

An 'informed personal understanding' of *Hamlet* means that you have detailed knowledge of the ideas communicated by the play, its context and how Shakespeare has used dramatic form, conventions and devices to effectively communicate ideas and beliefs. In light of this detailed knowledge, you are able to evaluate the historical and cultural significance of *Hamlet*, demonstrating understanding of its enduring value.

WHAT IS 'TEXTUAL INTEGRITY'?

The Board of Studies Teaching and Educational Standards defines 'textual integrity' as '*the unity of a text; its coherent use of form and language to produce an integrated whole in terms of meaning and value*' (Stage 6 English Syllabus, p. 100).

This means that a text is said to have 'textual integrity' if its parts (content, language and structure) work together to communicate a logical and rational message that is consistent with the composer's purpose and has enduring significance for responders across time.

TOP 10 TIPS FOR EXAM SUCCESS

1. Know the rubric for each and every section of the exam paper inside and out. You should be referring to the wording of the rubrics, as well as synonyms of these words, in your response. This will indicate to the marker that you are engaging properly with the question, demonstrating knowledge of relevant concepts and ideas, and using language appropriate to the audience and purpose. In other words, you will be speaking the language of your examiner!
2. Plan your response. Take a few minutes during the allocated reading time to mentally map out your response. It is also worth taking a few minutes to jot down a plan for each response once the writing time has commenced. A strategic approach may help you to feel more confident and ensure you stay on track to actually answer the question.
3. Allocate an equal amount of time for each section of the exam. Remember that they are all worth an equal amount of marks in the paper and each section contributes equally to your overall HSC exam mark.
4. Work on improving your writing speed and accuracy as often as possible in the lead-up to the exams. This will help you to get as much of what you know down on the page in a legible fashion and get the most out of the allocated writing time. Also, get into the habit of writing in black ink—many of the HSC examinations are now scanned and marked on-screen, and black ink scans with greater clarity. You don't want the examiners missing anything you take the time to write!
5. Use your reading time wisely—be strategic! For Paper 1, start by reading the Section III question and then read the Section II question and stimulus/stimuli. This will give you a sense of the overall 'theme' or 'flavour' of the paper. For the Section I question, read the question for each text first and *then* read the text. Be sure to flick back and forth between the two, so that you always have the question in mind and you are not simply reading the text without the right focus. For Paper 2 you have less time. Use the 5 minutes to read each of the three questions carefully, identifying the keywords and then mentally mapping out your responses in relation to these keywords. A strategy for deconstructing the question is outlined later in this book.
6. Despite the strategy of reading the questions backwards, complete Paper 1 in the order that it appears: Section I, then Section II and then Section III. The paper is designed to help you build up to completing the extended response in Section III. Also, you will have spent the final few minutes of your reading time familiarising yourself with the texts and generating ideas for a response, so it makes sense to get straight into answering this question, otherwise you may waste time later on re-familiarising yourself.
7. Stay hydrated. Your brain functions a lot better when you are hydrated and your body is far better able to turn food into energy. You are permitted to bring water into the exam as long as it is in a clear container and is compliant with the guidelines published by the Board of Studies (known as BOSTES). For further information consult the official BOSTES website and documentation.

MARK IT!

In this section you'll find model essays answering Paper 1 Section III exam-style questions on *Hamlet*. For each essay, you will:

1. See how to deconstruct the question, and read the tips on getting started with a response.
2. Read the model essay and answer questions based around the marking criteria. Essentially you are being the examiner! Mark the essay by writing in the spaces provided or by highlighting/underlining the essay as required.
3. Read the examiner's comments and compare them with your own marking.

When you've finished you could try your hand at your own response to the questions, or there are more questions for you to try at the end of the book.

The MARK IT! exercise will help you get to grips with what your examiners are looking for, see what makes a strong essay response and, most importantly, understand how to really **make your mark** when it comes to your exam.

MODEL ESSAY 1

DECONSTRUCT THE QUESTION

This quote offers a perspective on the character of Hamlet, suggesting a cause-effect relationship between the changing context Hamlet finds himself in and his feelings of insecurity.

'Hamlet's stifling and consuming insecurities are a result of his struggles to navigate his changing world.' **Evaluate** this statement in the light of **your own informed personal response** to William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Evaluate: this type of question is asking you to judge or determine the degree to which your understanding of the play supports the perspective offered by the quote.

This means your understanding of *Hamlet* as a Shakespearean drama. This includes the function and influence of purpose, context, genre (revenge tragedy), dramatic conventions, language and values.

GETTING STARTED

Once you have deconstructed the question and understand what it is asking of you, you can begin to plan a response. Make sure you read through the section Planning a response on page 13.

For this question, you need to ask yourself:

- What has changed in Hamlet's world to cause him to be insecure? What terms could you use to define these changes?
- Why does Hamlet struggle to navigate the changing sociopolitical landscape of Denmark? What do you think prevents him from being able to reconcile himself to the new world order and successfully find his place within it?
- What are Hamlet's insecurities? What is he uncertain or anxious about? You need to be able to specify these.
- In what ways do Hamlet's insecurities preoccupy him? What examples from the play could you use to prove that Hamlet is both troubled and limited by his feelings of anxiety as he comes to understand his changing world?
- Do you think Hamlet overcomes his insecurities? If so, what is it that enables him to achieve this? What are the consequences for both Hamlet and the state of Denmark? Be sure to consider the ending of the play.

Let's see how the model essay tackles the question. As you read, make notes or highlight/underline elements of the essay that demonstrate strong writing technique or salient points. The questions alongside the essay should get you thinking about how the essay addresses the question and follows the rubric.

MARK IT!

***'Hamlet's stifling and consuming insecurities are a result of his struggles to navigate his changing world.'* Evaluate this statement in the light of your own informed personal response to William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.**

'Be careful when you fight monsters, lest you become one ... For when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.' (Friedrich Nietzsche)

Shakespeare presents Hamlet as a tragic hero consumed by feelings of insecurity about his world and his rightful place in it. Hamlet's changing world leads him into an abyss of doubt and uncertainty, in

1. How has the student demonstrated that they are engaging with the essay question?

GLOSSARY

This glossary provides key language and terminology that you should be familiar with for your HSC in English. Many of the terms feature in the discussions in this book; others you may wish to use in your own writing.

TERMS USED IN MODEL ESSAYS AND MARKER'S COMMENTS

TERM	DEFINITION
antic disposition	This is what Hamlet calls his feigned or performed madness.
chivalric	To exhibit the qualities of a medieval knight; in particular courage, bravery, loyalty, agility
Edenic	Paradise-like
existential crisis	An experience resulting from an individual's questioning of the meaning or purpose of their life
Machiavellian	Scheming, manipulative and unscrupulous (often used in a political context)
medieval	From the period of the Middle Ages or characteristic of the attitudes and values of the Middle Ages
<i>mise-en-abyme</i>	The literal translation from French is 'placed into the abyss'. In literature it refers to the 'story-within-a-story' or 'play-within-a-play' device.
Nietzschean	Relating to the theories and ideas of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche
predilection	A particular liking or preference for something
regicide	The killing of a king