

A: Preliminary Work Before Starting to Write

1. First, read "The Assignment" very carefully, even before examining the texts offered to you.
2. Underline all key words and be sure you understand what the creators of that topic are asking you to do. If you are unsure of the meaning of any of the key words, be sure to check the dictionary for definitions. When checking the dictionary definitions, make sure you are relying upon the definition of the word as it is used in this examination. Words frequently have several different definitions. Not all definitions will fit the topic.
3. Once the assignment for the Personal Response seems clear to you, take a look at the assignment section for the Critical/Analytical Response to Texts. Since the issue has been traditionally the same for both sections of this exam, the wording of the Critical/Analytical assignment may provide some further insight into the assignment for the Personal Response. It is possible, however, that the issues for the two assignments might be different. Do not be thrown if they are different.
4. Once you are comfortable with the assignment, read and examine each text carefully, bearing in mind the issue the assignment has established. Take your time in this early stage of the exam. If you rush this part of the exam, you may make an error of judgement regarding one of the texts or the assignment itself.
5. Once you feel comfortable with the texts, choose ONE or TWO of the texts to focus on. Your choice should be determined by which text(s) provide you with the best opportunity to **provide insight** into the issue of the assignment and which text(s) provide you with the best opportunity to **write well**. One text will suffice, but two might serve as well. Feel no obligation to examine or respond to all the texts in detail.

B: The Simple Safe Approach

1. The simple safe approach simply determines your strategy even before you enter the examination. This approach, however, may not be the simplest or safest approach for all students.
2. In this approach, you will do two things. First, you will choose ONE text to examine in an analytical way. The best types of texts for this approach are poems or excerpts from fiction. Second, you will offer a specific, detailed personal experience that relates clearly to the assignment.

3. The structure of your essay will look as follows:

First paragraph: Introduction

- First, discuss, in a sentence or two, the issue of the assignment in general terms.
- Then, state in one or two sentences the main point of the TEXT you have chosen with respect to the issue.
- Third, in a sentence or two, indicate how a personal experience of your own reveals some truth about the issue. Ideally the point of your personal experience will be different than the point raised by the TEXT.
- Conclude your introduction by re-asserting the importance of the issue being examined through these texts.

Second paragraph: First Body Paragraph - Analysis of a Text

- Indicate in your first sentence the main idea captured in the text you choose to examine.
- Through paraphrase and analysis, work your way sequentially through the poem or passage. Begin at the beginning and work your way to the end. However, feel no need to analyze every line. Simply look for logical sections of discussion that the poem or passage might break into.
- Finish this paragraph with a statement that sums up the main theme (in relation to the assignment) of the text.

Third paragraph: Second Body Paragraph - Detailed Personal Experience

- Indicate in your first sentence the main idea captured in the experience you are about to relate.
- Be sure the experience is focused in time and place, happening at a specific time (ideally within a day) and at a specific location. Take the time to describe the time of day and the setting in detail. What time of day is it? What is the weather like? In what place does the story take place? These concrete details make all the difference.
- Describe fully all characters in your story. Bring them to life, even if you have to invent some details.
- Before you start writing this experience, be very sure you know where you are going to begin, the point of the details you are going to include, and the place where you intend to finish. Be sure that the beginning, middle and ending are manageable within one paragraph, however lengthy. If you are not focused in your approach, your story may get away on you, lose its relevance and waste your valuable time. Ideally, the personal experience should reveal a different insight than your analysis of one of the texts on the examination.

Fourth Paragraph: Your Conclusion

- Begin by restating the importance of the issue raised by the assignment. How does it apply to human life in general or in particular? Note how the text you have examined and your own personal experience have provided different insights into this central issue. Conclude with a strong final sentence of your own devising.

C: The Creative Approach - More Risk? More Gain?

- Choosing a creative approach to one of the texts provides you with an opportunity to demonstrate your skills as a creative writer. You must, therefore, take on the mantle or persona of a writer such as Timothy Findley, Barbara Kingsolver, Henrik Ibsen, William Golding, or even William Shakespeare. You must demonstrate the same concern for vivid detail and strong characterization that they do.
- There is an imaginative and even physical thrill in writing creatively, but do not forget that your thrilling creative response must be on topic and must address thoughtfully and clearly the issue raised in the assignment.
- As well, you must choose your prose form carefully, knowing fully its elements, its advantages, and its limitations.

Creative Prose Forms: Pros and Cons

1. Journal/Diary Entries

- Advantages:*
- seemingly easy to write
 - several (three or four) entries over a period of time can reveal an understanding in the later entries of naiveté or errors in judgment in the early entries
- Disadvantages:*
- only one voice and one mind displayed
 - the speaker is often writing about the events of the day just experienced and therefore has little perspective on or insight into those events.
 - one entry, although tempting, is very limiting in terms of time, place, and thoughtfulness
 - many entries lead to short, superficial accounts of events

2. Script (Film/Dramatic)

- Advantages:*
- involves at least two characters, offering the possibility of exploring different or opposed points of view on the issue
 - provides the opportunity for change of attitude or opinion in at least one of the characters
 - ideal for a student who has a good ear for dialogue and a mastery of the formal requirements
- Disadvantages:*
- restricted primarily to dialogue. Inner thoughts and feelings cannot be expressed. What characters say is not always what they truly feel.
 - stage directions are usually limited to movement on stage. The tone of voice of a character is typically NOT included in stage directions. Thus the dialogue itself must convey

the feelings of the characters, no easy task.
 - the format of scripts is quite precise. A student must be familiar with the capitalization, punctuation, and italicization appropriate to the form.

3. Short Story

Advantages:

- use of multiple characters who can debate issues and reveal change of attitude or opinion
- choice of either first person narrator or omniscient narrator
- use of the typical past tense is relatively easy and provides built in perspective on earlier events (writing stories in the present tense is rare and difficult)
- characters, either first person or third person, can reflect thoughtfully on their choices and actions
- inner thoughts can be expressed, feelings can be explored, setting can be described
- the passage of time can be handled easily
- few format challenges other than dialogue which requires quotation marks and indenting every new speech

Disadvantages:

- few
- confidence in characterization, description, and dialogue is necessary
- easy to wander off topic if the writer gets caught up in the experiences of the characters

4. Inner Monologues (Stream of Consciousness narration)

Advantages:

- seemingly easy to write because so focused
- only one character to worry about

Disadvantages:

- limited to one character whose thoughts and feelings are largely focused on the present moment
- very difficult to pull off
- hard to describe external reality and events without sounding artificial or a little silly ("Oh, two hours have passed. My armpit is itchy. I'm scratching it.")
- little time passes in an inner monologue, thus reducing the opportunity for reflection or change

5. Letter

- Advantages:*
- a straightforward form
 - a specific character writing the letter with a very specific audience (reader) in mind which helps provide focus and purpose
 - provides a snapshot of a moment in time
 - letters are written in very specific circumstances

- Disadvantages:*
- only one voice and mind at work
 - a letter written at a specific moment may or may not provide the character with the chance to reflect on life
 - the events preceding the writing of the letter may be too immediate for thoughtfulness or understanding
 - easy to fall into a tone of excited exuberance and a multitude of exclamation marks (by definition, such exuberance prevents thoughtfulness)

Note: A series of letters over time between two characters might avoid the disadvantages that one letter has.