

The Examination Essay

by John & Jerome Devitt

It is never easy to write well. In the tense circumstances of an examination it can prove very difficult to write even a competent essay on any of the seven options indicated on the paper. The "Leaving Cert English Essay" is a particularly tense occasion because it is fraught with the consequences for the future lives of the candidates. It is examined on the very first morning of the exams, so there's no 'warm-up' time. The stakes couldn't be higher because it's the single most valuable question you'll answer during the fortnight or so of exams, worth a whopping 25% of the exam, or 25 CAO points if you want to calculate it that way. Chances are you didn't sleep too well the night before either. It is also a skill that is (bafflingly) no longer core to the Junior Cycle process.

The exams are conducted impersonally in a laudable attempt at impartiality. But how is a candidate to write a discursive essay (by definition a personal attempt on a subject) when the examiner who reads and pronounces judgement knows the candidate only as a number? Small wonder that in the anxious weeks and months before the exams so many students are haunted by the fear of "drying up" in the exam hall when instructed to "Write a composition on any one of the assignments below." That's a nightmare that persists well after the exam finishes, trust us on that! Too often, the attempt at engaging with the LC English 'Composition' results in the student's decomposition.

Preparation

The English Exam Essay presents a challenge unlike most other subjects. To deal with this challenge, technique is the key. In the "trial-by-ordeal" which characterizes the Leaving Certificate as a whole, much of the material required takes the form of knowledge remembered, proofs to be furnished and vindicated, experiments to be described, problems to be solved, in short, ingested content to be regurgitated. Difficulties abound, but they are not essentially difficulties of expression. With the English Essay this situation is reversed and the difficulty of doing justice to oneself increases. Many students despair of doing anything purposeful about the essay until the inescapable moment arrives. But it is a mistake to trust to the inspiration of the moment without making proper preparation. A student can hardly expect to write an intelligent essay without some simple, serviceable technique for generating

and organising ideas in the un hospitable setting of the examination hall. Mastery of such a technique allows attention to be paid to style and expression. In short, an engaging essay becomes possible.

The only technique a harassed student should trust is one which is simple, memorable, and practical. It should be one which respects the nature of the mind itself. It must also be one that is applicable to all the different modes of "language study" that are examined (viz. information, argument, persuasion, narration, and the aesthetic use of language). The mind is happiest when it is formulating questions and one question invariably begets another. Students are often too preoccupied with plausible answers to relish dynamic questions. But consciousness is a great adventure in questioning. We would urge students to respect the immense penetrating power of their own minds and to enlist those powers in all their intellectual work, and especially in the writing of the essay.

Even the dreariest of subjects can be compelled to yield unsuspected riches when the interrogative method is brought to bear on it. Consider the following general topics, from which more specific titles might flow: Loneliness, The Global Village, Unemployment, Courage, The Death of the Television Set, The Third World War, The Battle of the Sexes. You may find these topics individually uninspiring and collectively intimidating. But let us suppose that they constitute the core concepts behind the options available to you in your English composition and that you must choose between them.

Jotting Down

Take "Loneliness" and question it as comprehensively as you can; jot down the questions that come to mind. What is Loneliness? How does it differ from being alone? Is it curable? Is it only a negative experience? Are people lonelier now than in other periods? What is it like to be lonely? Is it an urban or a rural phenomenon? Do some people feel loneliness more acutely than others? No doubt, you'll be able to think of a dozen more questions. You can even structure this exercise by following Rudyard Kipling's advice by engaging with each of the question below:

*"I Keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are **What** and **Why** and **When**
And **How** and **Where** and **Who**."*

Now review the jumble of questions. Eliminate questions which seem silly on reflection or which overlap with others. Number those that remain in the best order for attack. You have now the spinal column of an essay. Give one paragraph to each question, where your 'Thesis Statement' represents your direct response to that question, that you then explore in detail. If the ordering of your questions is intelligent, the sequence of paragraphs in your essay will result in a coherent structure emerging.

Paragraphing

You will now have avoided the faults that particularly disfigure an essay. Very often, examiners are baffled by essays in which too many ideas compete for attention in a single paragraph. Candidates who trust to the inspiration of the moment and neglect even the minimum of preparation we are recommending here often contradict themselves from paragraph to paragraph. (*Remember: A paragraph is ONE idea fully and exclusively explored → a new idea = a new paragraph.*) They lose their train of thought, primarily because they have no idea of the train's destination. The impact on an individual paragraph can be as destructive as the impact on the essay as a whole. Commoner still is the kind of desperate repetitiveness which makes the reading of an examination essay as tedious a chore as its writing self-evidently was.

The candidate who thinks interrogatively and reviews the questions generated can expect to avoid the most crippling faults we have just mentioned. The essay will have direction; one paragraph will lead to another relatively fluently. But there are other advantages in this method of preparation. It is extremely efficient of valuable time – the most precious, but ephemeral of commodities in the exam economy. Further still, it can be practiced, and if not perfected exactly, can be brought to the point of near universal applicability and mastery. It can be relied upon. Try for yourself. Take the title "Unemployment". What causes it? Is it worse in Ireland than in other 'Western' countries? How does an unemployed person feel? Why does securing employment matter so much to young people? Again,

think up more questions and review them as before. In this instance you might like to sketch the opening or closing paragraph of an essay on the subject. You will soon find yourself able to dextrously prepare an essay in 3-4 minutes and have that process result in almost as much benefit to you as spending 90 minutes on an actual essay.

Variety

One fear can be extinguished. As long as you can ask questions you are in no danger of 'drying up'. On the contrary, you will find that you can afford to pay attention to details of style and expression. The pen will not move in a mad career across the page, but in a more confident and controlled manner. You will see to it that every paragraph contains at least one very short sentence; variety of sentence length is an

antidote to boredom for both the writer and their reader. It really works!

Accuracy of expression remains important. You can identify your own favourite errors quite easily by rereading past essays and your teachers' comments on them. Systematically eliminate errors one at a time. Your incremental progress will startle you when you look back with some objectivity. No one expects you to avoid all errors, but you should not give unnecessary offence to your reader. A senior student should be able to avoid notorious difficulties such as the confusion of "their" and "there", or "its" and "it's", and the like...

Techniques

Writing an essay under examination conditions is certainly difficult but, if you

have a technique you can trust, you need not find it daunting. If nothing else, removing that layer of anxiety, frees up what the psychologists call your "cognitive load", freeing up space in your mind and making creativity at least possible. The technique we are suggesting here is one you can practise for yourself for a few minutes every day. Take the title "The Third World War". How might it happen? How would it differ from previous wars? Who would survive? Would you even want to survive?

But you will have grasped the idea by now and discovered your own ability to generate interesting and useful questions. This approach also has the added bonus that it works no matter what kind of 'marking scheme' is applied to it, and will divert even the most reticent examiner! Your examiners can look forward to reading the results! •

Questions on the Text

A- Short Questions

1. According to the authors, what are the main challenges faced by students attempting to write a coherent essay in an exam setting? Cite specific evidence from the text in support of your answer. (15)
2. Why is it important for students to have an established technique when approaching the Essay Question? (15)
3. Summarize the suggested approach highlighting the different steps in the process. Do you agree with the authors that this technique will prove useful to Leaving Certificate English Students? (20)

OR

B – Short Composition

Using this advice as a template, write a short guide for novices in an area in which you have some expertise that aims to help them make progress. Make sure you consider the problems faced, techniques to overcome those problems, and the potential outcomes for the novice. (50)