

QMGS ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

A-Level

Academic Writing Style Guide



Introduction

A recent survey of academic staff at the University of Essex identified “the interrelated skills of writing and reasoning as the two most important skills for success in higher education”. When asked which skills students most often lacked, writing was again at the top of their list. With this in mind, the advice and examples contained within this guide are intended to support A-Level students in developing an appropriate academic style which they can use in their A-Level studies and beyond.

Although this guide was produced with A-Level students studying either English Literature or English Language & Literature in mind, the advice contained herein may be beneficial to students of all subjects in their preparation for writing academically when they begin their undergraduate degrees.

It should be remembered that this is not a rulebook, but a *style guide* for A-Level students. Therefore, this guide does not contain details on ‘how to use commas’ or ‘how to spell philosophical’. For students looking to improve their written accuracy, there are myriad textbooks and websites available.

Finally, students must understand that the ‘final say’ in matters of style and expectation will always be with teachers and exam boards for each subject. Additionally, over the course of their academic studies, students will find themselves developing their own *written voice*. So long as this voice remains academic in style, it will lead to an authenticity that cannot be taught.

‘However they are worded, all assignment titles contain a central question which has to be answered. Your main task is to apply what you know – however brilliant your piece of writing, if it does not ‘answer the question’ you may get no marks at all.’

S. Cottrell, *the Study Skills Handbook*,
2003: 154

What is Academic Writing?

In short, academic writing is non-fiction writing which is suitable for academic purposes. To meet this aim, academic writing tends to feature **in-depth** considerations on a topic, written in **formal English** which prioritises **clear communication**. Academic writing tends to be written from an **objective** perspective, though this does not mean it should lack passion. In most cases, academic writing will include higher levels of **technical subject terminology** than other forms of non-fiction writing, such as a newspaper article.

Below are some examples of academic writing from previous A-Level English Literature students at QMGS, both comparing Jez Butterworth's play *Jerusalem* with Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth*:

In an ever-changing post-modernist society where the importance of the female voice is repeatedly called into question, both Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* capture the degeneration of female identity in the rural and urban landscapes of Flintock and Cricklewood respectively. Both writers have a distinct way of conceptualising women through the scope of the male gaze, thus reducing the importance of female voice in portraying female characters and going some way to explain their lack of character development.

This idea of social pressure shaping female identity is continued in both texts, though arguably more so in *White Teeth* than *Jerusalem*. Even though her title is 'Ms', Katie Miniver appears nervous to challenge Samad's repeated reference to her as 'Mrs'. This suggests a lack of confidence in challenging a man's preconception and Samad's response of offering his 'condolences' connotes the perceived notion that, in order to live a fulfilled life, females must be married. This is an idea especially prevalent in the Victorian era, with Patmore's *The Angel in the House*, but continues to the present, as Samad's reaction suggests.

In both examples above, the students' passion for their subject is still visible, through their engagement with the topic. However, both students remain objective by rooting their argument in clear analysis of the texts, not personal opinions.

Each paragraph is formed in a similar way. The student opens with a **topic sentence** which clearly defines a point or question to be addressed in the paragraph. The topic sentence is then developed into a more detailed **argument** by referencing specific elements of the text. The argument is supported by the students' wider **academic knowledge**, in this case the concept of the 'male gaze' and Victorian society.

The completed paragraphs are also linked into the wider essay structure. In the first example, taken from the beginning of an essay, the student has created an opening to discuss the portrayal of female characters. The second extract is taken from midway in an essay, suggested by the segue from a previous paragraph on 'social pressure shaping female identity' into this paragraph on one of the female characters.

Elements of Academic Writing

Academic writing is a hard thing to teach in a short guide such as this. It is likely that your teacher will provide you with high-quality examples of academic writing during your course. You will notice that they will be very different from each other. However, there are some core elements which all pieces of academic writing incorporate.

Formality

Academic writing is a formal style of writing. Care should be taken by students to remove colloquial (slang) phrases and to employ a variety of appropriate level vocabulary. Academic writing tends to include more technical terminology than other types of writing.

Objectivity

Academic writing should be written with an objective tone. An objective tone is one which judges the worth of something based on its quality, not rooted in personal opinions or interests. This objectivity is supported through sound analytical process and well-structured argument.

Perspective

Generally speaking, an academic essay is written in the third person and the present tense. Students should avoid overly personal responses such as 'I think that' in favour of more objective and considered ideas like, 'It could be said that'.

When writing about parts of the text, students should use the present tense i.e. 'In Act one, Hamlet is grieving his father's death'.

Structure

An academic essay should have a clear structure which includes an introduction/thesis statement, a main body of argument and a clear conclusion.

Thesis

A thesis statement is a type of introduction to your essay. This expository statement is short (often just one or two sentences) and sums up the central point of your essay. Everything that comes after the thesis statement should relate to this key idea. For example:

While most people reading *Hamlet* think he is the tragic hero, Ophelia is the real hero of the play, as demonstrated through her critique of Elsinore's court through the language of flowers.

Structuring an Academic Essay

A typical academic essay can be broken down into four constituent parts:

- Introduction (10%)
- Main body (80%)
- Conclusion (10%)
- Bibliography or reference list

It should be noted that this is **not the same** as having only four paragraphs.

Introduction

It might seem obvious, but the introduction of your essay should introduce your argument and provide direction for the reader. One effective approach is to outline the main issues that you seek to address in your essay and it is often a good idea to address each of the Assessment Objectives you are being marked against.

Main body

The main body of your essay makes up 80% of your writing. Although you have control over how you structure this, it should be clear and systematic, so that it does not confuse the reader. Remember that you are not writing a piece of fiction and accordingly, you should not obfuscate details or try to keep the reader in suspense. Instead, make your statements clear and specific, partnered with strong, logical analysis.

For coursework and NEAs, you could divide your essay into sections and subsections, giving each section a subheading or summary in a few words; you can always remove subheadings afterwards.

Conclusion

It is important to remember that the conclusion of your essay is not a repeat of everything you have already said. However, neither should it contain new material. The conclusion is best suited to an evaluation of your argument, leaving the reader in no doubt as to what you think; you should also explain why your conclusions are important and significant. It may also be a good idea to link your final sentence to the question contained in the title. In size, the conclusion should be no more than 10% of the essay.

Reference list

A reference list contains all the sources you have referred to directly ('works cited') and/or a list of the sources you have consulted but not referred to within the essay ('bibliography'). This is one of the areas in which different departments and exam boards may require different types of lists - find out which is required by your department

N.B. a reference list is not necessary in an exam.

Essay Checklist¹

1. Essay Title
 - Does the essay have the full and correct essay title?
2. Introduction
 - Is there a significant introduction that identifies the topic, purpose and structure of the essay?
 - Are key words or concepts identified in the introduction?
3. Main Body
 - Is there plenty of evidence that you have done the required reading?
 - Have you put each main point in a separate paragraph?
 - Are the paragraphs logically linked?
 - Is each main point/argument supported by evidence, argument or examples?
 - Are the ideas of others clearly referenced?
4. Conclusion
 - Is the conclusion directly related to the question?
 - Is it based on evidence and facts?
 - Does it summarise the main points?
 - Is it substantial (a paragraph or more)?
5. References
 - Have you referenced all your sources?
 - Are all the references accurate?
 - Are all the references in the essay shown in the bibliography and vice versa?
6. Layout
 - Is it neat and legibly presented?

What is an argument?

You may have come across the term 'argument' in an academic context and felt confused, not fully understanding its meaning. Outside of academia, 'argument' usually refers to a disagreement. It tends to be an event; a physical occurrence. This may be the sense of the word that is most familiar to you, but an 'academic argument' describes something quite different: it is essentially a point of view.

A good argument (a 'sound' argument) is a point of view that is presented in a clear and logical way, so that each stage of reasoning is transparent and convincing; it will include evidence and possible counter-arguments. It may help to assume that the reader is in disagreement with you.

When first considering your argument, you should read the essay question, then read it again. What does it ask you to do? Assess? Evaluate? Discuss? Compare? Each of these 'question-words' is different. Make sure that your argument matches the question-word. Once you are certain of your point of view, start thinking about the kind of evidence that would stand up in court.

¹ The essay checklist and 'What is an argument?' are taken from "How to improve your academic writing", University of Essex, 2014

Things to Avoid

This section looks at some of the top 20 mistakes identified by Stanford University and how to avoid them.

Wrong words

There are a lot of similar sounding, and looking, words in the English language and it is important to ensure that you are using the correct ones.

Some of these errors merely convey a slightly different meaning (such as *compose* instead of *comprise*). Whilst these may not seem to impact the coherence of your essay, they can alter the meaning enough to impair clarity.

Other examples of 'wrong word errors' can drastically change the meaning, such as *illusion* and *allusion* or *allegory* and *allergy*.

The use of a dictionary when proof-reading your work should be enough to help you identify these errors. Be wary of relying on automatic spell-checkers as they do not check for legibility.

Missing commas after introductory elements

Introductory words, phrases or clauses should always include a comma at the end, to distinguish between where the introduction ends and the rest of the sentence begins:

By the time a second edition was deemed worthy, Wilhelm Grimm was still at the mercy of ideological state apparatuses, but different ones.

Here, the introductory clause specifies a temporal quality of Grimm's actions. Without the comma, it may prove difficult for some readers to sufficiently identify the writer's argument.

Vague pronoun reference

Using pronouns is not incorrect in academic writing, however it must be clear which noun a pronoun is replacing. Most often, uncertainty occurs when students write about both character and writer in the same sentence using identical pronouns:

In Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem*, he writes the character of Troy to be aggressive
He does this when he says "You want some too?"

In the second sentence of the example above, it is difficult to know whether the playwright or the character is being referred to as "you". In this instance, it would be clearer to edit the sentence to retain the proper nouns:

Butterworth does this when Troy says "You want some too?"

Missing word

As a matter of quality control, it is a good idea to read your work aloud (or get someone else to read it aloud) before submission. When reading aloud, you are more likely to notice omitted words.

Faulty sentence structure

It is important to maintain the grammatical pattern within each sentence. Each sentence must have a subject and a verb. Subject and predicates must make sense together.

A common mistake of some new (and even some experienced) academic writer's is to make their sentences long-winded and convoluted. Try to maintain coherence and clarity in everything you write.

Missing commas in subordinate clauses

A subordinate clause provides additional information which is not essential to the basic meaning of a sentence. These clauses should be framed by commas:

The English Romantic, **William Wordsworth**, blends this interest in nature with his own childhood in his autobiographical poem *The Prelude*

When proof-reading sentences like this, you should be able to omit the information within the commas without losing the clarity of the sentence.

Shifting tense

Your essay should be written in the same tense throughout. Changing your tense midway through an essay, or worse a sentence, can confuse your readers.

If you are embedding quotations where the tense does not match the tense of your essay, you may amend the tense within the quotation by using square brackets, but the main body of your essay should remain in the present tense:

Although the Dursleys have never been nice to Harry, they now "[act] as though any chair with Harry in it [is] empty."

Possessive apostrophes

You will know that adding an apostrophe and letter 's' (or just an apostrophe in the case of words ending in 's') make a noun possessive:

Babette **Cole's** 1986 picturebook *Princess Smartypants* reimagines the traditional fairy tale princess

However, in the case of the possessive pronouns such as 'ours' 'yours' 'hers' and especially 'its', you should not use an apostrophe.

Quoting and Quotations²

It is essential that your essays frequently refer to the primary texts. They will also benefit from making use of critical material. Whether you are using primary or secondary sources, there are a number of things to remember when using quotes. Any quote that you use should be recorded accurately, and clearly explained.

Many students submit essays with lots of long quotes. Although there are no fixed rules on this, it is generally best to avoid using a lot of long quotes — you only have a limited number of words in which to express your argument. However, if you do use long quotes, you should be prepared to discuss/comment on them in some detail. You should also note that they involve different conventions from short quotes.

Short quotes, which are marked using quotation marks, should be incorporated into the text. You may define short quotes as four lines or fewer of prose, and two lines or fewer of verse. Two examples are given below (note that the separation of lines of verse is indicated with a forward slash):

1. At the start of Dickens's tale the narrator states that "in what I am going to relate I have no intention of setting up, opposing, or supporting, any theory whatever" (33), and for much of the story it is unclear whether or not the spectral visitations are real or imagined.
2. The sensual natural of "Goblin Market" is indicated in the initial description of Lizzie and Laura's encounter with the goblins: "With clasping arms and cautioning lips, / With tingling cheeks and finger tips" (163).

Long quotes (five lines or more of prose and three lines or more of verse) are expressed using a separate paragraph which is introduced with a colon (:), indented, single spaced and not given any quotation marks. For example:

In the "Haunted and the Haunters" the narrator articulates Bulwer's belief that paranormal phenomena are open to empirical investigation:

I had witnessed many very extraordinary phenomena in various parts of the world —phenomena that would either be totally disbelieved if I stated them, or ascribed to supernatural agencies. Now, my theory is that the Supernatural is the Impossible, and that what is called the supernatural is only a something in the laws of nature of which we have hitherto been ignorant. (230-231)

² The information on quoting and quotations is taken from "Style Sheet" provided by the University of Roehampton.

Plagiarism

When you write an academic essay, you build upon the ideas of those who have come before; your teachers who have taught you, the writers of critical texts or essays that have been used in lessons and revision. It is important to always acknowledge where these ideas come from, especially when they are not your own. Failing to do this is called **plagiarism**. The Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) defines plagiarism as: “unacknowledged copying from or reproduction of published sources or incomplete referencing.” It is possible for plagiarism to be intentional (i.e. handing in work which is not your own) or accidental (forgetting to use quotation marks, or reference to texts in a reference list).

It is possible for plagiarism to become an issue at any stage in the writing process, from initial research to completion. It is possible to lessen the chance of plagiarism by:

- Keeping a record of sources you have used in your research and revision
- Paraphrasing or quoting from your sources, and then adding your own ideas
- Crediting the original author via in-text citation and in a reference list
- For NEAs, you can use a plagiarism checker tool from the internet before submission

One of the most common reasons for plagiarism is that students forget where they found information and ideas, thus accidentally presenting it as their own thought. Keeping detailed and organised notes can help you to avoid this.

As a general rule, you should ensure that any notes you have made on a subject include the name, author and publishing year included with them. Although you will need more information when arranging your ‘works cited’ list, this basic information is enough to be able to find the information again.

The penalty

The penalties for plagiarism range from mild to severe, but all of them should be avoided.

At the lower end of the scale, plagiarism in a piece of schoolwork is likely to result in you being asked to complete the work again, but could also be sanctioned by a lower termly grade (which may affect the grade you provide to UCAS) and an after-school detention.

At the higher end of the scale, plagiarism in a piece of work submitted to an exam board (either in an exam or as a piece of Non-Examined Assessment) may result in disqualification from the exam and, in extreme cases, any other exams with that exam board.

Plagiarism is serious, but with careful attention to what you are doing, it is easily avoidable.

MLA Referencing

In an exam, the easiest way to avoid plagiarism is to accurately reference authors directly and signifying any quotations using quotation marks:

In keeping with Mikhail Bakhtin's assertion that "degradation has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one" we immediately learn that Hagrid is not as terrifying as first assumed.

However, in a prepared essay (such as your Non-Examined Assessment) you will need to include a list of each text you have referred to. This is known as a '**Works Cited**' list. There are many different methods to constructing a works cited list, each with their own merits. In this guide are the details on how to reference using the **MLA** format.

IMPORTANT

Which referencing system to use is one of the key areas in which students **MUST** confirm with staff or exam boards before submission.

The Works Cited list should include any book that you have quoted from, paraphrased, or referred to in the text. When constructing your list, be sure to set the works in alphabetical order according to the author's surname.

When deciding how to cite your source, start by consulting the list of core elements. These are the general pieces of information that MLA suggests including in each Works Cited entry. In your citation, the elements should be listed in the following order:

1. Author.
2. Title of source.
3. Title of container,
4. Other contributors,
5. Version,
6. Number,
7. Publisher,
8. Publication date,
9. Location.

Nota Bene:

The punctuation at the end of each element in this list is the same as it should be in your Works Cited.

The exact layout of references will depend on what type of text you are referencing, more specific details are covered in the next two pages.

MLA Referencing: Text Type Specifics³

Any book that is listed in your Works Cited list should contain the following information: author's last name, author's first name(s)/initial(s), full title, publisher, date of publication. An example is given below (note the punctuation between details).

Wheeler, M. *Heaven, Hell, & The Victorians*. Cambridge UP, 1994.

However, there are many different types of books and articles that you might wish to incorporate, and each type has its own conventions. Some examples are given below to show you how to deal with most of the items that you will come across.

If the book has two or more authors, these should all be listed. However, as you can see from the following example, the surname only comes first at the start of an entry (so it can be listed alphabetically):

Walhout, C. and L. Ryken, editors. *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal*. Eerdmans, 1991.

If you are referring to a particular edition of a work that is in general circulation and has a variety of editions, then the editor of the edition that you are using should be noted. This is often the case with pre-1900 works, where you are also expected to cite the publication details of the edition that you are using rather than the first edition. For example:

Corelli, M. *The Sorrows of Satan*. Edited by Peter Keating, Oxford University Press, 1998.

On some occasions you may wish to refer to a particular essay in a collection of essays. If so, then this should be indicated as follows:

Howells, C. A. "Fictional Technique in Radcliffe's Udolpho." *The Gothick Novel: A Casebook*. Edited by Victor Sage, Macmillan, 1990.

Students are making increasing use of sources that they find on the Internet. While this is fine, you should be careful to evaluate information critically before you use it. When referencing material from the internet you should include the above details **as well as** the date that you accessed the website and the full electronic address. For example:

Bernstein, Mark. "10 Tips on Writing the Living Web." *A List Apart: For People Who Make Websites*, 16 Aug. 2002, alistapart.com/article/writeliving. Accessed 4 May 2009.

³ The information on text-specific MLA referencing is taken from the "Style Sheet" provided by the University of Roehampton

References in the text

When you quote, the quotation should be marked using double quotation marks (“ ”). At the end of the quotation, the page number(s) of the quotation should be included in brackets. This page number should be the page number of the edition of the text you have used. This text should be included in your works cited list at the end of your essay. When quoting from plays or poems, you should use divisions (act, scene, part etc) and line numbers rather than page numbers. Two examples are given below:

1. The Chambers dictionary defines environmentalism as “concern about the environment and its preservation from the effects of pollution etc.” (541).
2. Though primarily a comedic device, the Fool in *King Lear* also provides wisdom, such as when he asserts: “Then ‘tis like the breath of an unfee’d lawyer: you gave othing for’t” (1.4.128-130).

You must ensure that you provide enough information about your reference in the body of your essay to enable your reader to identify the right book in your Works Cited list. In the first of the two examples given above, the reader would know to look in the Works Cited for an item by the *Chambers Dictionary*, and in the second example, the reader would look for a work entitled *King Lear*. For this system of referencing to work effectively, it is important that you think about the information you are going to give your reader. You should be aware of any possible confusion and add information accordingly. For example, consider the following:

Rural ways of life are likely to be linked to the Romantic notion of nature, what Adrian Day calls a “sense of the health of the life of nature, in contrast with the depredations wrought by humanity” (39).

If there was only one text by Day in the Works Cited list, then the information given would be clear. However, if the Works Cited list contained two books by Day, then more information would need to be recorded. In this case, you might get round the problem by rephrasing the body of the essay as follows:

Rural ways of life are likely to be linked to the Romantic notion of nature, what Adrian Day, in *Romanticism*, calls a “sense of the health of the life of nature, in contrast with the depredations wrought by humanity” (39).

However, if you found it impossible to rephrase your sentence, you could add the title of the text to the bracket which followed the quotation:

Rural ways of life are likely to be linked to the Romantic notion of nature, what Adrian Day calls a “sense of the health of the life of nature, in contrast with the depredations wrought by humanity” (*Romanticism*, 39)

However, your priority should be on rephrasing your work where possible.

Stylistic Guide for Word Processed Essays

General presentation

Word-processed essays should be 'double spaced' and 'justified'. This allows makes the essay easier to read and allows space for the marker to annotate.

At the top of your first page you should include your name, student number and the title of the essay. Some students choose to include this information as a title page which is acceptable, but not necessary. Each page should be numbered and use a standard font (Times New Roman, Arial or Calibri) and a standard font size (11 or 12pt) throughout. Do not be tempted to change these to fit essays to a certain number of pages.

To mark the start of a new paragraph, indent the opening line. You do not need to do this for the first paragraph in your essay. Nor should you indent the first line of the text that follows an indented quotation unless you wish to begin a new paragraph. (Please note that there is no need to leave a blank line between paragraphs when writing your essays.) Longer quotes (more than 4 lines) should be avoided where possible. If it is not possible, the quote should be 'block formatted'.

Titles

Book-length titles should be italicised. Titles of anything shorter than a book-length work should not be italicised. Instead, they should be marked as titles by using double quotation marks. For example:

Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (a novel)

Shakespeare's *King Lear* (a play)

Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (a book-length piece of verse)

Armitage's "My Party Piece" (a short poem)

Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" (a short story)

If it is unclear whether a title is book-length, then you must use your own judgement. For instance, Pope's famous poem can either be described as "The Rape of the Lock" or *The Rape of the Lock*.

If you are referring to an article in a journal, then the article is placed in quotation marks and the journal is italicised. For example:

Heald, R. "Harry potter and Proust's Magic Key." *Roundtable*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2022, pp. 17-31.

If you are referring to a particular essay in a book that contains a collection of essays by different authors, then the essay is placed in quotation marks and the title of the collection is italicised.

Exemplar Writing

In this final section of the guide are extracts from three high-scoring academic essays. Whilst the material of these essays may, or may not, be interesting to you they serve as good examples of everything that has been covered. An 'examiner's remark' has been added to the end of each example; this is for the purpose of this guide, not a part of the original essay.

Example 1 – Critical Annotation of “from *Sex and Violence: The Hard Core of Fairy Tales.*” By Maria Tatar

What Tatar does, in this edited version of her 2003 essay (Hard Facts 3), is presuppose the reader's acceptance of the ideological reasoning behind the Grimms' widespread changes between the first and second editions of their *Nursery and Household Tales*, namely an increased desire to write for children and a financial situation in need of money. Whilst the original essay makes the same claims, it is supported by wider reference and a more complete argument. Thus, this much shortened essay reads more like Tatar's own musings than a researched piece of criticism, despite its author's pedigree (Enchanted Hunters, reverse bookflap).

Tatar treads carefully, refusing to openly condemn or condone the actions of the Grimms and manages to achieve an unbiased assessment of their actions, and the struggles which may have led to them. Only occasional lapses in language suggest to a reader that Tatar may have preferred for the texts to remain unchanged. She claims that, through his revisions, Wilhelm Grimm “*deprived* the frog king of his soft landing spot” (Sex and Violence 450) and “*systematically purged* the collection of references to sexuality” (Sex and Violence 452) (all italics mine for emphasis).

The purpose of the first edition, Tatar suggests, was “to capture German folk traditions in print before they died out” (Sex and Violence 452) something which is corroborated by Jack

Zipes (Zipes 2) and the brothers themselves in their introduction to the first edition. Thus, the Brothers Grimm began their project in order to fulfil the demands of what Louis Althusser might consider the Ideological State Apparatus of academia. Tatar does not feel obliged to explore this further, highlighting the weakness in her essay as she *merely* considers their actions “a scholarly venture and a patriotic project” (Sex and Violence 452).

Works Cited:

Tatar, M. *The Hard Facts of Grimms' Fairy Tales*. Princeton UP, 1987.

Tatar, M. *Enchanted Hunters: The Power of Storytelling in Childhood*. Norton, 2009.

Tatar, M. “from Sex and Violence: The Hard Core of Fairy Tales.” *The Classic Fairy Tales*.

Edited by Maria Tatar, 2nd Ed., Norton, 2017, pp446-456.

Zipes, J. *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of the Grimms' Folk and Fairy Tales*. Princeton UP, 2015.

Examiner's Remark: A critical annotation is similar to a review of a piece of critical writing. The author of this piece has kept their argument objective by commenting critically on the objective failings of Maria Tatar. Their use of quotations is accurate and specific as well as being properly referenced with a clear 'works cited' list. Being word processed, the essay has been double-spaced and justified.

Example 2 – Opening paragraph from ‘Rites of Passage and Carnival in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*’

One of the dominant purposes of children’s literature is to recreate ideas of childhood for its intended readers and to facilitate the transition of those readers into new stages of life. As such, it is no wonder that children’s literature is full of both literal and figurative transitions of place and self. In *‘The Rites of Passage’* (1909), folklorist and anthropologist Arnold van Gennep sets out to classify the different ‘stages’ inherent in all elements of transition, particularly in relation to “the ceremonial patterns which accompany a passage from...one cosmic or social world to another” (10). He asserts that these stages, “may be subdivided into *rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation*” (10). Passing through each of these ‘rites of passage’ creates a liminal space between what *was* and what *is*. At such times, and in such spaces, there is an element of the unknown which allows rules to become mutable, creating what Mikhail Bakhtin coined ‘*carnival*’. In *Rabelais and his World* (1940), Bakhtin compared the “sanctioned...pattern of things” (*Rabelais* 45) which religious festivals of the Middle Ages reinforced, with the “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth from the established order” (*Rabelais* 45) and, if there is one literary creation for whom passage from sanctioned world to carnival world provides liberation, it is Harry Potter.

Examiner’s Remark: This opening paragraph is a good example of how to construct a thesis statement and set out the argument for a wider essay. The student begins “One of the dominant purposes of children’s literature is...” which establishes an authoritative tone from the very beginning and their immediate reference to Arnold van Gennep and Mikhail Bakhtin establishes the focus for the rest of the essay. When it comes to introducing the primary text of the essay, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, the student does so in a way which links to the critical ideas already established.

Example 3 – Paragraphs from ‘Compare Butterworth and Smith’s presentation of female identity in Jerusalem and White Teeth’

J.K Gardiner argues that ‘The word identity is paradoxical in itself ’and ‘its contradictions proliferate when it is applied to women’⁴ and this lack of certainty in identity is depicted by both Smith and Butterworth. Women in both texts appear to have an ingrained sense of identity, which they attempt to mask to conform to society’s beauty standards, but which only serves to lead them to question their own purpose even more.

Smith introduces the character of Irie who is ‘subdued’ by what she perceives as her ‘ugliness’. The use of the adjective ‘subdued’ to describe a fifteen-year-old girl is particularly disheartening because it suggests a lack of confidence at such a young stage of life. It also reflects that she tones down everything about her life since she is so fixated by being ‘big’ and hating her appearance: her identity is consumed by what she looks like to others. This point is particularly prevalent in the twenty-first century as the boom of social media has exposed teenagers to a larger quantity of unrealistic beauty standards which have a detrimental effect on how these girls value themselves if they don’t look a certain way. Female identity is shaped around how they are seen by others from an early age, with nothing else seeming to matter aside from being viewed within society’s beauty standards.

This idea is also reflected in Butterworth’s ‘Jerusalem’ through Fawcett, who works as a Community Liaison Officer. Even when serving Rooster with an official notice, ‘she touches up her lipstick’. Evidently, she is always aware of her looks and the verb ‘touches’ implies that this is something she does frequently in order to maintain her outward appearance. It

⁴ Gardiner, J. K. (1981). On Female Identity and Writing by Women. *Critical Inquiry*, 8(2), 347–361. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343167>

suggests a casual action, insinuating this is something she has been conditioned to do without even realising because it is the societal norm. Even though she is older than Irie and in a position of authority, where she is only faced by Rooster and a colleague, she still regards it as her priority to preserve a good appearance. David Ian Rabey argues Butterworth includes the 'melancholy poignancy of specific moments'⁵ and this is shown through the simple action of Fawcett reapplying her lipstick because it depicts how much pressure women are under in order to look presentable. This reinforces the idea of female identity being centred around how others view them, which is especially significant in modern society, where nearly everything is captured online: it is even captured in this scene through a 'digital video camera', which is arguably what Fawcett applies her make-up for. Overall, it is apparent that both Smith and Butterworth convey female identity as being linked, for the women, to how they feel they fit into society's beauty standards in a world where everything is captured by a camera.

Examiner's remark: This example of a comparative essay is a strong example of an 'interwoven' essay which seamlessly blends understanding, analysis and wider reading together. Whilst the tone is somewhat less authoritative than in example 2, it is nonetheless convincing and objective throughout. Of particular note is the student's use of solid analytical practice at word, sentence and text level.

Whilst this student has used the Harvard method of referencing instead of the MLA format listed in this guide, their referencing is clear and consistent throughout.

⁵ Rabey, D.I., 2015. *The Theatres and Films of Jez Butterworth*, Bloomsbury [Accessed 8th December 2021]