



THE DRAMA ESSAY

The [drama written] examination is an assessment of the candidate's understanding of the elements of drama and aspects of theatricality that turn a text into a performance.

Drama Examination Report, Board of Studies (1999).

In the new HSC, as in the previous course, students are called upon to make links in their written responses between practice and reflection. In this article we will suggest an approach to essay writing which supports all areas of the HSC that rely on written reflection. In drama you can also assist students by providing a bridge from experiential activities to written responses

Laying the foundation in drama in Years 7-10

As the written component of the examination is worth 40% of the student's total mark, it is crucial that students are prepared adequately in Years 7-10 drama. Students need a grounding in written responses in drama in order to develop skills in this area. You might begin by providing students with a strong grounding in the elements of drama.

Dramawise: an introduction to the elements of drama (Haseman and O'Toole, 1987) provides a strong teaching text for developing understanding in this area. While watching performances, students should be encouraged to respond using the elements of drama. The following proforma may be useful for Years 7-10.

PROFORMA FOR WRITTEN TASK IN YEARS 7-10

Understanding the elements of drama

While watching the performance, explain how the following elements of drama contribute to the performance. You should concentrate on the elements of drama one after the other and make observations on them as you watch the performance.

Dramatic tension

Contrast

Symbol

Time

Space

Focus

Mood

Having established the elements of drama for students, providing tasks that require structured responses will assist in students' development of written skills. Structured responses take the form of questions that relate to specific learning outcomes.

The following example is a scaffold for a question that elicits a structured response for a Year 10 class studying *Juice* by Stephen Davis.

The elements of drama are the building blocks of drama. The following questions relate to the elements of drama in the play we have studied this term.

Respond in ten lines to the following questions about *Juice* by Stephen Davis:

1. What were the sources of dramatic tension in this play?
2. Describe how you decided to set out the stage in Act 1 Scene 1 (please include a diagram).
3. What sort of symbols did you use when you were working with your piece? How did they assist the development of your work?

These sorts of questions will help students build the bridge from experiential learning to a written response.

Essay writing at HSC level

At HSC level students are usually asked to respond to questions that require them to develop their own structures. The work they have done to this point will assist them to create structure in their own responses. The questions at HSC level will ask students to comment on theatrical and socio-cultural aspects of the topic and relate the practitioners, texts or movements to the question asked. The following three-stage approach may assist in the development of student responses in Years 10, 11 and 12.

1. Experiential work

Work with the text exploring its theatrical potential. Students during this stage should be noticing how the elements of drama interact to produce a theatrical statement. At this stage they should be noticing the performance and theatrical elements but also be mindful of the social and cultural context of the play. If you were exploring *Seven Stages of Grieving* by Deborah Mailman and Wesley Enoch, you would work with the text, encouraging students to perform extracts from it, and discuss

the design issues that are central to its performance. While this process is under way it may be useful to get students to reflect in writing on their discoveries.

2. Written reflection

The bridge from experiential to written work must involve reflection on the process and on the social and cultural circumstances that impacted upon and moulded the dramatic work. Students, having worked with the text or topic theatrically, will now be able to use the written reflections as the basis for their written response. These reflections should not only involve "seeing the play". They should include their experience of the play. The following response reflects the standard of response required in this type of reflection in early Year 12.

"We solved the problem of the set in *Gary's House* by putting four red beams together. The building beams suggested Gary's developing house and were symbolic of his growing trouble leading to his downfall".

3. Written response

The written response draws on the detail of the play and practitioner to make points that answer the question. It may be useful during the year to provide students with specific and general questions so they have a chance to respond to both. As the core component, *Australian Drama and Theatre*, now covers a broader area, students may need to respond to less specific or less structured questions than they have in the past. Students may have to draw more heavily on their own writing skill and class experiences to respond in a detailed way to a more general question.

Written responses in drama depend on the development of strong skills in Years 7–11. Building the bridge from experience to written reflection begins in Years 7–10, where students relate their written responses to experiential work in structured tasks. In Years 11 and 12 students must begin to develop skills in responding to broad questions, using their knowledge of the texts and topics derived from their experiential learning. Students will achieve at higher levels when they recognise the relationship between the sociocultural and the performance and theatrical aspects of the plays and use their experiences to mould their responses.

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