



# Step Up to English Literature A Level

Congratulations on making the brilliant decision to enrich both your mind and your soul with A Level English Literature. This document will introduce you to the course and provide you with activities for the next **three weeks**. There are **two sessions per week**, with each one (apart from the final session) to be completed using a **Google Form**.

Here's how those three weeks of content look at a glance:

Week	Session	Approximate Time (minimum)
1	<a href="#">1 - Overview</a>	45 minutes
	<a href="#">2 - Drama</a>	3 and a half hours
2	<a href="#">3 - Poetry and Contexts</a>	1 and a half hours
	<a href="#">4 - Prose</a>	2 and a half hours
3	<a href="#">5 - The art of the essay</a>	2 and a half hours
	<a href="#">6 - Gaining intellectual independence (setting up your summer)</a>	45 minutes

There is so much you can be doing independently to prepare yourself to be a brilliant A Level English Literature student (and, therefore, a brilliant human being) right now, so each session will come with a range of additional pointers towards ways of challenging yourself, getting creative, or immersing yourself in a new aspect of culture. Ultimately, this document is just a stepping stone: it is up to you to explore further and find your own path.

## **Session 1: Overview**

(approximately 45 minutes)

This first session will help us get to know a little bit about you and help you to get a really good sense of the types of things covered in the English Literature A Level course. It might also get you thinking about why studying literature is such an enlightening, rewarding, and essential experience...

You should complete this session using our interactive [Google Form](#).



## Session 2: Drama

(at least 3 hours 15 minutes, possibly much more if you get into it)

Set aside a good chunk of time for this one, because we're off to the (virtual) theatre!

Again, you should submit your response for this on our [Google Form](#).

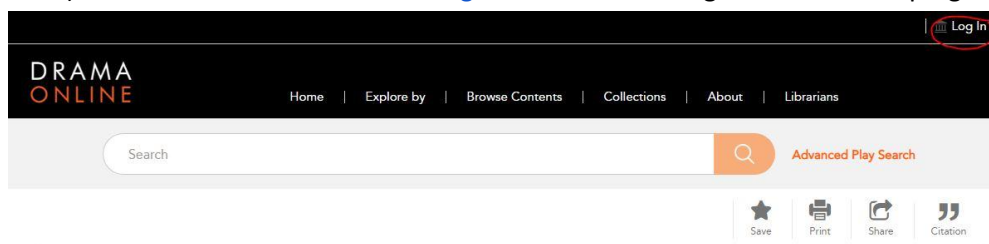
We have access to a range of recordings of National Theatre productions, which you can access here: <https://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/national-theatre-collection>.

Some of these plays come with age-related guidance as they contain nudity, swearing, or adult content.

For the 'Drama' paper on A Level English Literature, you will study the plays *Othello* by William Shakespeare and *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams, so you could definitely do worse things with your time than to watch the available versions of those two plays.

However, you will watch those (or other versions of them) during the course anyway, so it would really be even better preparation to choose some different theatre. We're going to watch *Twelfth Night* starring the inimitable Tamsin Greig as Malvolia (a modern twist: in Shakespeare's original, the character is male and called Malvolio).

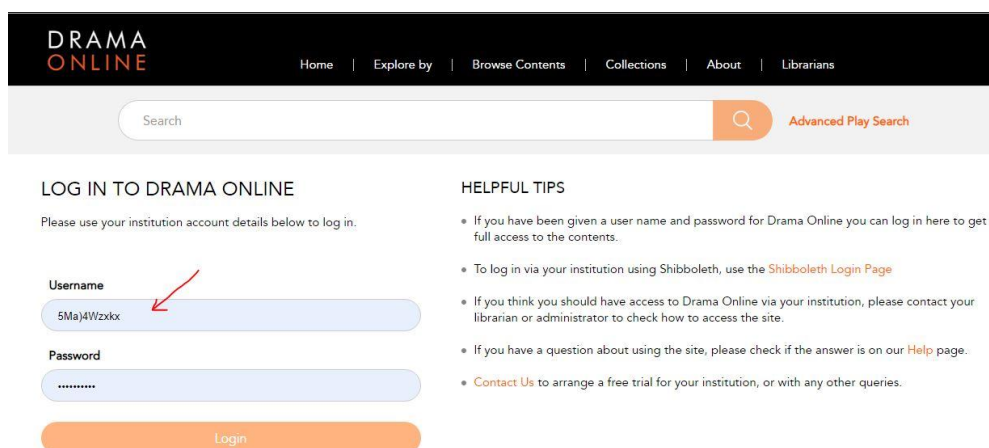
- 1) Click on [this link for Twelfth Night](#) and click the 'Log in' link in the top right-hand corner



Home > Video > Videos > Twelfth Night

**Twelfth Night**  
by William Shakespeare and National Theatre  
DOI: 10.5040/9781350935044  
Subscription Required

- 2) Enter the username **5Ma)4Wzxkx** and the password **0Vbx2Je&u)** under 'Access log in' and click 'Log in for access'. These log-in details are only for use by students and staff (including incoming students) and should not be passed on to other users.





### Three questions to respond to after watching:

1. This play is a 'comedy'. That does not simply mean that it has jokes in it (although there are plenty of moments which, even 400+ years after Shakespeare wrote it, still raise a smile). Do some research. What is the traditional literary definition of a 'comedy' play?
2. What elements of the play seem to undermine the optimistic spirit we might ordinarily associate with 'comedy'?
3. How was the experience of watching this play without studying it different to your previous experience of studying Shakespeare (for exams and 'assessments')?

Challenge 1: Listen to an Oxford University English Literature lecture on a Shakespeare play you know!

[Romeo and Juliet](#)

[Macbeth](#)

[Much Ado About Nothing](#)

Challenge 2: Watch more plays!

Everything available on that website is worth a watch, but the following come highly recommended:

Title	Why you should watch it	Time
<i>King Lear</i>	Our set Shakespeare text for the Drama paper and an absolute beast of a tragedy. This production stars the venerable Sir Derek Jacobi and uses a stripped back blank stage to focus our attention on the sheer humanity of the characters - a key concern of Shakespeare's play which strips away all the trappings of power to reveal humanity as 'a bare, forked animal'	2hrs 37mins
<i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i>	Our other set text for the Drama paper. This production features the awesome Gillian Anderson as Blanche DuBois, the fading Southern belle whose world is collapsing in a tailspin, reflected through the ceaselessly revolving stage of this intense production.	2hrs 47mins
<i>Frankenstein</i>	Another of our set texts covered here, although this is a fairly loose adaptation of Mary Shelley's novel. It does, however, stay very true to two fundamental drivers of Shelley's work: 1) the sympathy we feel for the 'monster' 2) the duality of the monster and Victor Frankenstein, the scientist who creates him, as reflected by the incredible fact that the two lead actors in this production (Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller) swapped parts on alternate nights. Both versions are available on the site. The physical theatre and symbolic staging are astounding.	1hr 50-55mins
<i>Cat on a Hot Tin Roof</i>	Were it not for the nudity (from the start, but never in a particularly sexualized way), this would be the play we recommended that everyone watch to prepare for A Level English Literature. It's by Tennessee Williams, and works as a brilliant companion-piece to <i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i> . It explores sexuality, a descent into madness, and the 'mendacity' of the world. You do, however, need to be mature to watch this one!	2hrs 31mins
<i>Jane Eyre</i>	Another adaptation of a classic novel (and one which students often	3hrs 10mins



	<p>choose for coursework). This is a coming of age tale and a meditation on the limitations created by class and gender roles in the early 1800s. This production uses a symbolic set and an ensemble cast to race through the protagonist's life from the moment of her birth. The depth and breadth of the astonishing novel can never be fully translated to the stage, but something of its incendiary intensity is admirably conveyed here.</p>	
<i>Hamlet</i>	<p>Alongside <i>King Lear</i>, this is generally considered Shakespeare's defining tragic achievement. "Oh, what a piece of work is a man" muses the bard's most introspectively eloquent hero as he struggles with the nature of human existence in his discomfort with the violent course set before him: to avenge his father's death. This production, starring Rory Kinnear, turns Denmark into a police state to reflect modern anxieties around surveillance.</p>	3hrs 32mins
<i>One Man, Two Guv'nors</i>	<p>If <i>Hamlet</i> strikes you as a bit heavy, then maybe this is more like it: James Corden in a knock-about farce featuring audience interaction (who brings a hummus sandwich to a play?) and some inspired musical and physical silliness. With its roots in the Italian 'Commedia dell'arte' genre, though, this is 'literature' too. And blimey, it's fun!</p>	2hrs 53mins



## Session 3: Poetry and Context

(1 and a half hours)

Again, the ideal way for us to receive your responses is through our [Google Form](#).

Before we get into the poetry part, we are going to watch the documentary '*The Art of Gothic: Britain's Midnight Hour*', 'Episode 2: The City and the Soul' which is perfect for our contextual understanding of the Romantics, and *Frankenstein* (and even a bit of *King Lear* in terms of the ideas of what England 'used to be'!)

[Four - The Art of Gothic: Britain's Midnight Hour, The City and the Soul](#)

This is Episode 2. Episode 1 is worth watching as well as it defines the traits of the Gothic more specifically, but it is in this one that really nails our set texts. Within the first half hour it covers: *Frankenstein*, Coleridge (whose *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is heavily referenced in *Frankenstein*, and who was the literary partner of Wordsworth), and Blake.

Watch from the start - the first thing it covers in detail is the English Department Head, Mr Knight's favourite painting: 'Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump' by Joseph Wright of Derby; then it segues into *Frankenstein* and keeps going with relevant literary context for the next 20 minutes or so.

The second half is still interesting, and deals with the ideal of a lost, idyllic past which is very important for the Romantic poetry that we study and for *Lear*, but it focuses rather more on architecture, and you will be forgiven for switching off after 35 mins or so.

Three quick questions:

- 1) Where did Mary and Percy Shelley declare their undying love and decide to elope?
- 2) What did Blake say was the "tree of death"?
- 3) What does the narrator say was "undermined as people flocked to the cities in search of jobs"?



Now, here's a poem which you may well be familiar with from your GCSE study (if you did AQA's 'Power and Conflict' cluster). It's on the A Level 'Romantics' selection as well...

### **London**

BY WILLIAM BLAKE

I wander thro' each charter'd street,  
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.  
And mark in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,  
In every Infants cry of fear,  
In every voice: in every ban,  
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear

How the Chimney-sweepers cry  
Every black'ning Church appalls,  
And the hapless Soldiers sigh  
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful Harlots curse  
Blasts the new-born Infants tear  
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

Here's a video of Akala and Mr Gee discussing the poem, for anyone who doesn't know it well:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02m6hrk>

But we don't want you to do that sort of academic analysis right now. **You have a choice of tasks to bring your understanding to life. Choose one of the following:**

- 1) Write a comparison of this poem with a modern rap/song about urban life. Alternatively, adapt Blake's words into a rap of your own and create a voice recording of you performing it!
- 2) Write an imitation called 'Lockdown London' describing what you see and reflect on as you wander through the strange, altered version of the city in which we found ourselves living in 2020. Experience Simon Armitage's poem 'Lockdown' [here](#) first.
- 3) Write a humorous parody of Blake's poem called 'The Countryside' in which you explore anxieties about rural life.

### Challenge tasks:

- Find and read at least three poems by any of the following modern poets: Patience Agbabi; Simon Armitage; Carol Ann Duffy; Daljit Nagra; Sinead Morrissey; Tishani Doshi; Seamus Heaney

## Session 4: Prose

(approximately 2 and a half hours)

You should complete this session using our interactive [Google Form](#).

For most people, prose is the main form of literature that they consume, even if they don't know what the word itself means. As <https://literaryterms.net/prose/> tells us,

Prose is just non-verse writing. Pretty much anything other than **poetry** counts as prose: this article, that textbook in your backpack, the U.S. Constitution, *Harry Potter* – it's all prose. The basic defining feature of prose is its lack of line breaks:

In verse, the line ends

when the writer wants it to, but in prose

you just write until you run out of room and then start a new line.

So, when we talk about literary prose, we're basically talking about **novels** (and short stories). We'll look in more detail at the brilliant novels you could be reading this summer in Session 6, but, for now, we're going to focus on an astoundingly prophetic short story...



'The Machine Stops' by [E.M. Forster](#). This longish short story (it's 12,300 words - we generally class a text as a 'novella' when it hits about 17,000 words. For reference, *A Christmas Carol* is about 28,500 words) presents a science-fiction dystopia and was written in 1909.

Let's just think about that: 1909. Eight years after the death of Queen Victoria. Three years before *An Inspector Calls* is set. Eighteen years before the first intercontinental flight. Twenty-seven years before Alan Turing even wrote about the possibility of what we now consider to be a computer. Eighty-one years before Tim Berners-Lee created the World Wide Web. And 110 years before the Covid-19 pandemic turned the world on its head.

You can read the whole story for free online [here](#). If you feel more like being read to, you can have it read to you by a [female voice](#) or a [male one](#).

But, to reflect on where modern life is taking us, you simply must read it. It was prescient before coronavirus. Now, it seems downright uncanny.

As a first response to any narrative text, we can ask ourselves questions such as:

- 1) What are the main abstract ideas explored by the text? (In this case, as it's dystopian, you can make that a little more specific and replace the word 'ideas' with 'anxieties' if you like...)
- 2) How does the characterization of the main (two) characters help to develop these ideas?
- 3) How does the setting contribute to the development of these ideas?
- 4) What factors in the real world might have influenced the writer and might influence readers' responses?



You don't need to write down anything extended in response to those questions now: just have a think about them and maybe make some notes if you think you've found something significant that you want to recall later...

The prose exam we do is comparative: you examine two texts connected to 'Science and Society' and play them off against each other to develop your ideas, so that is precisely what we will practise now.



Your second text might be one you are familiar with: *Wall-E*, written by Andrew Stanton and Jim Reardon, directed by Andrew Stanton.

If you don't know this phenomenally intelligent and emotionally gut-wrenching film yet, you can get a decent idea of the premise by watching the [trailer](#).

For the purposes of our comparison, you should also definitely watch (or remind yourself of) [this key sequence](#), in which Wall-E, newly arrived on the starship Axiom, on which the humans who escaped from the garbage heap they made of Earth have been cruising (and losing bone and muscle-mass) for 700 years, starts to influence the lives of two unsuspecting passengers: John and Mary. It is a succinct introduction to what human existence has become in this imagined future (which again, has some uncomfortably familiar visions of our current, screen-based interactions).

**Your task is simple: write a list (not an essay) of the key similarities and striking differences between the two 'texts'.**

Challenge: immerse yourself in dystopian literature and film using the following list as a starting point...

Novels:

George Orwell - *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Aldous Huxley - *Brave New World*

Margaret Atwood - *The Handmaid's Tale*

Margaret Atwood - *Oryx and Crake* (and the rest of the MaddAdam trilogy)

Film:

Ridley Scott - *Blade Runner*

George Lucas - *THX-1138*

The Wachowski Brothers - *The Matrix*





## Session 5: The Art of the Essay

(approximately 2 and a half hours) Material for this session is taken from the English and Media Centre's [‘Making the Leap: Moving from GCSE to A Level Literature Study’](#).

This one's the last session to involve a shiny Google Form. [Give it a go here.](#)

We know that essays are what you write in English. But, beyond knowing they are the way you show your knowledge in an English exam, what is an essay? And can its meaning outside the classroom help us write better essays inside the classroom (and get more enjoyment from doing it)?

Spend a couple of minutes jotting down what you think an essay is. (Does it have anything in common with a review, for example? Does it have to answer a question? Can you write an essay about anything?)

Now read these short definitions of the essay:

- Essay is derived from the French word *essayer*, which means ‘to attempt’ or ‘to try’.
- A short form of literary composition based on a single subject matter, and often gives the personal opinion of the author.
- A literary device for saying almost everything about almost anything.” (Aldous Huxley, novelist and essay writer)
- A short piece of writing on a particular subject. (Oxford English Dictionary)
- A scholarly work in writing that provides the author’s personal argument.
- A short piece of writing on a particular subject, especially one done by students as part of the work for a course.
- Essays are how we speak to one another in print — caroming thoughts not merely in order to convey a certain packet of information, but with a special edge or bounce of personal character in a kind of public letter. (Edward Hoagland, Introduction, *The Best American Essays*: 1999)

The Black Lives Matter campaign has recently seen a couple of brilliant examples of what that ‘public letter’ means: first, and most effectively, there’s [Marcus Rashford’s famous intervention](#); secondly, and perhaps even more affectingly (notice the different spelling - look up the difference in meaning), there’s [this from the BBC’s New York Correspondent, Nick Bryant](#). Both of these texts are letters, but they are also ‘essays’.

There definitely are certain expectations and guidelines for an ‘academic’ English essay at A Level (which might well be slightly different to those for a History essay or a Sociology essay), but you will learn a lot more about those when you start the course proper in September. For now, we are going to play around with that more open interpretation of what an essay can be. Have a read of this:

### **A Loose Sally of the Mind – Putting Forward Bright Ideas in English Literature Essays**

*Writer, academic and critic Blake Morrison discusses the nature of the English literature essay, going back to the original meaning of the word to discover just how exploratory, tentative and personal it’s meant to be.*



For most students, an essay is something imposed on them rather than something they choose to do. You might hear someone say ‘I’ve been writing a poem’ or ‘I’ve been writing a story’, as if these were pleasurable and freely chosen activities, but if someone tells you they’ve been writing an essay it’ll usually be with a groan – the essay will have been set as homework, to be done as duty, rather than as a means of self-expression. But essays – even literary essays – can be as personal to write, as pleasurable to read and as creative as poems or novels. And they’re no less a matter of expressing yourself and offering your personal take on the world.

### *Trying Something Out*

‘To essay’ something – the verb, that is – means to try something out, to have a go. And the noun ‘essay’ suggests an attempt or endeavour. In his famous Dictionary, Samuel Johnson defines the essay as

*a loose sally of the mind, an irregular indigested piece, not a regular and orderly composition.*

Of course, when teachers come to mark essays, they do look for order of some kind, the sense of an argument being put forward in a clear and logical fashion. Still, I think Dr Johnson is right – the best essays put forward a bright idea or series of bright ideas, not fully formed perhaps, but stimulating and provocative. An essay isn’t the last word. It’s tentative, personal and subjective: ‘Here’s what I think – how about you?’

The most famous exponent of the essay is perhaps the French 16th-century writer Michel de Montaigne, who described his essays as attempts to show ‘some traits of my character’. They also expressed his thoughts on politics, religion, morality, love, sex, parenthood, death and much besides. But they were unashamedly personal and this was what made them radical. We tend to think of essays as impersonal. When I was doing A Levels, and then again at university, the use of the first person pronoun was discouraged. You were meant to be objective, which meant adopting a style that was neutral, beige or passive. But essays can’t help but be subjective. And the original model for them, Montaigne’s, was candid, open, not afraid to say ‘I’.

After all, it’s your engagement with the text that matters. You do need to be aware of what others think of that text – critics, reviewers, your teacher, your fellow students, the way in which that text was received when it came out and has been received since. But it’s what you bring to that text that matters – your own ideas and responses. Talking about its structure, or its themes, or use of metaphor, or characterisation, all this is also a way of saying how it affects you. And if it hasn’t affected you, if it’s left you cold, that too is something to explore.

### *Orwell and Early 20th-century Essays*

The literary essay had its heyday in the early 20th century, with writers like D. H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster. Topping all of them was George Orwell. In the current era of post-truth, newspeak and double-think Orwell is essential reading – a man who can help us see through the lies and sham, a man to guide us through the labyrinth of war, post-colonialism, Brexit and Donald Trump. My favourite essay of his is called ‘[A Hanging](#)’. It recounts an experience he had as a young man while serving in the police force in Burma, at a time when he



was already beginning to question the ethics of colonialism. The essay brilliantly describes the scene of the hanging: the guards, the condemned man (whose offence we are never told), a dog that bounds into the yard where the hanging is due to take place and disrupts the proceedings. For most of the essay, Orwell doesn't comment on the morality of capital punishment. But when he notices the prisoner step aside to avoid getting his feet wet in a puddle, even though he has only minutes left to live, Orwell suddenly realises how immoral it is to take another person's life for any reason, even by way of punishment. Of course, the thought may have occurred to him before. The essay is as carefully shaped, and as artful, as any short story. But there's a sense of discovery in it – as though it's through the act of recalling the event, and writing about it, that Orwell is working out what he really thinks. In creative writing showing always works better than telling. And it's by showing what happened, rather than preaching and pontificating, that Orwell gets his point across.

Of course, Orwell's essay tells a story and it's based in life. Critical essays can't do that. They engage with texts. But when Orwell writes about *Gulliver's Travels*, or boys' comics, or the poetry of the 1930s, or the idiocy of Tolstoy's criticism of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, you still hear that same voice – of somebody not afraid to have his own thoughts, even if they're out of step with current opinion. Above all, there's a sense that he's connecting the books he writes about with his own life, his own experiences, his own ideas about the world. And you don't have to be in your twenties, thirties and forties to do that. If a sentence in a novel resonates with you, or the line of a poem rings true for some reason, or you come across a simile or metaphor that sends shivers down your spine, then that's worth writing about: it's what the poet or novelist hoped when he or she set down those words – not that their text would be studied for exams, but that someone would be emotionally moved or intellectually provoked by it.

### *The Extinction of the Essay?*

In [a recent article for the Guardian](#), the American novelist Jonathan Franzen suggests that what defines the essay – the expression of opinions or the narrating of personal experiences (or some combination of the two) – is now a staple of social media: of blogs, of posts, of tweets. He asks:

*Should we be mourning the essay's extinction? Or should we be celebrating its conquest of the larger culture?*

It's a good question, but I don't think that essays and tweets are comparable. That's not just because the most famous tweeter in the world – the man who's given Twitter a bad name – is Donald Trump or because 140 or even 280 characters are too minimal to be called essayistic. It's because tweets allow little room for nuance. They're assertions not explorations – and exploring is what the essay does best. Blogs are a better comparison: as first-hand testimonies of thoughts, opinions and experiences set down by one person for other people to read, they're the equivalent of essays. And however opinionated, blogs are often vulnerable, tentative and deeply personal – again just like essays.

### *Criticism, Judgement and Celebration*

At one point in Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, the two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, exchange insults – 'vermin', 'moron', 'sewer rat' and 'cretin'. The ultimate, unanswerable



insult they come up with is 'critic'. The word 'criticism' (like the word 'essay') has negative associations. But literary criticism doesn't preclude positivity: passion, enthusiasm and celebration. It's about championing books by showing what makes them tick far more than it's about attacking them or doing them down. Honest judgment is what we look for in criticism – reasoned, nuanced but personal judgement. Critical essays may be parasitic – they exist in relation to the literature they're feeding off – but they can also be an art-form in themselves. What we value in them is wit, passion, intelligence, provocation, enjoyment – the same qualities we look for in a novel or poem.

Of course, hatchet jobs can be fun too, when someone takes on an established name and calls his or her bluff. But it's a different kind of fun I'm thinking of – the fun of finding new things in a classic text or of finding new ways to talk about that text, through the insights of feminism, or environmentalism, or politics, or simply from personal experience. Books might exist physically as objects without even being opened, but they don't truly exist till someone reads them. The author Alberto Manguel has said that

*All writing depends on the generosity of the reader*

– the text gives to us and we bring something to it in return. Your task when writing a literary essay is to interpret, explain, elucidate, make sense – but also to connect the book you're reading to your own life. *Mutato nomine, de te fabula narratur* the Roman poet Horace wrote:

*Change the name and the story is about you.*

Classic texts tell stories that seem to be our stories, as though written just for us. And that's why we, in turn, write about them.

In short, there's nothing weird or elitist or negative about the act of criticism. It's as natural as breathing. It's what we all do when we've seen a film, or heard a new album: 'What did you think of it? I thought this.' And we back up our thoughts by reference to a particular scene or song, and argue our corner against those who disagree with us. That's the basis of the critical essay. And it can be inventive, it can be creative, it can be passionate. Most importantly, whether you use the I-word or not, it has to bear your stamp – it has to have your personality at its heart.

*Article Written By: Blake Morrison. Morrison is a writer of fiction, poetry, non-fiction, journalism and literary criticism. He is Professor of Creative Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London.*

Let's have a play with that.

For our Prose session, comparing 'The Machine Stops' with *Wall-E*, you might well have included the following points of **similarity**:

- machines control human existence
- humans are limited to communicating through screens
- people's lives are very restricted

A really impressive student, in addition to thinking about what is present in both dystopian vision might also have thought about what was **missing**:



- love
- compassion
- nature

And for comparison, we should consider some key differences, such as:

- *Wall-E* is a fundamentally optimistic text; 'The Machine Stops' seems more downbeat

Here is a mediocre essay introduction, involving those ideas.

Both 'The Machine Stops' and *Wall-E* had several things in common. Both showed dystopian worlds where machines controlled human existence. In both narratives, this limited and restricted human interactions to the point where people only really saw each other on screens. They missed out on real human interactions and did not seem to feel love or compassion and had no connection with nature. Whilst both texts were about a quest to rediscover those missing connections, it was only really in *Wall-E* that this quest was presented as truly successful, whereas 'The Machine Stops' presented a much more pessimistic, downbeat account of our future, which I found a bit depressing, so *Wall-E* was better.

All of the observations are accurate (with the possible exception of the last one - why?), so what makes this a fairly bad start to an essay?

This version makes essentially the same points...

In the dystopian worlds of both Forster's 'The Machine Stops' and Stanton's *Wall-E*, mechanization and our obsession with technology have brought about the subjugation and mental somnambulance of humanity. They present us with societies in which digital interactions are the only connections available to human beings who seem to have become devoid of love, compassion, and any concept of themselves as parts of the natural world. Quests to rediscover those missing ingredients form essential components of both narratives, but, by framing Kuno's quest through the eyes of his distant, unerringly conditioned mother, Vashti, Forster paints a bleak and doom-laden vision of a society imploding under the pressure of its own technological advances, whereas Stanton, appealing to child-centred family audience, crafts *Wall-E*'s narrative as one of redemption, resurrection, and the power of the little guy.

What makes this introduction significantly better than the previous one?

Finally, there's this quite different approach...

Just as *Wall-E* is reaching its narrative climax, there is a [tiny moment](#) which is key to unlocking its subtext. The starship Axiom (and all of the self-induced mechanized oppression it represents for humanity) is tilting perilously as Wall-E and Eve attempt, against the will of the sinister 'Auto-Pilot', to place the seedling they discovered on Earth into the ship's navigational computer, thus forcing it to reverse its 700 year trajectory away from our natural home, and this has shaken the human passengers of the ship out of their comfortable hover chairs, forcing them to see each other in the



flesh rather than on holo-screens for the first time and to use muscles which have atrophied over the generations into near-useless blubber. Amid this chaos, the two named human characters, both of whom have been awoken from their technological slumber by very physical interventions from Wall-E within minutes of his arrival on the ship, John and Mary spot a crowd of innocent human babies sliding helplessly across the slanted floor towards the potentially suffocating mass of gibbering adult humans. "John, get ready to have some kids!" yells Mary before swinging her newfound partner into the path of the inclined infants, making herself and John an almost literal safety net for the next generation. It is a moment full of the warmth, humour, discomfort, and self-sacrifice of parenthood which is then followed by a symbolic act of procreation: Wall-E succeeds in planting his seed in the belly of the mothership and the sexual metaphor is complete. It turns out to be a climax in more ways than one.

Whilst the choice of the name "Eve" for the female robot who brings about Wall-E's (and, through John and Mary, humanity's) sexual awakening draws us obviously to Eden and original sin, the narrative overall is more of an optimistic New Testament return to paradise (indeed, Wall-E dies and is resurrected as humanity is redeemed). For a more faithful and profound reconfiguration of Genesis in a locked-down, screen-centric dystopia, we must turn to E.M. Forster's 'The Machine Stops'. Here, too, humanity has made itself subservient to its own technology and is living in a kind of self-willed ignorance (the "most advanced" lecturers issue the warning, "Beware of first-hand ideas"), and a non-compliant individual, Kuno breaks out of the system, much like Wall-E, but his first gasping emergence from the subterranean network of isolated pods which humanity has constructed for itself is a visceral, painful experience, with "[b]lood pour[ing] from [his] nose and ears". This has the feel of Adam and Eve taking their first banished steps outside the garden: chastened, newly vulnerable, but loaded with a knowledge which threatens God himself.

How is this opening unlike the previous, more 'standard' approach to an essay's introduction?

The challenge task here is obvious: write up a full essay comparing *Wall-E* and 'The Machine Stops'. You could pick up where one of the example introductions leaves off, or you could take your own angle entirely. There's no mark scheme, no restriction on style, and nothing to gain except intellectual development - what a great opportunity!



## Session 6: Gaining Intellectual Independence

(45 minutes + 2 months!) There's no Google Form for this one, just a lot of text and links!

If I were an interviewer (whether for university or employment) seeing an applicant from your academic year, my first question would be, "What did you do with the six months you were basically out of the education system in 2020?"

You now have about two months of freedom from the strictures of exam-driven education in which to pursue your own interests. You will not make a very appealing interview candidate if those interests are just PS4 or TikTok videos. You do have the opportunity to expand your own mind and to blow that interviewer's by pushing yourself into creative and intellectual independence. GCSE study has a lot of scaffold and support - schools are very scared by the prospect of students failing so they do everything in their power to avoid it. At A Level, there's still support and intervention, but you will increasingly find yourself on your own. That should be an exciting prospect, not something to dread, but, as with everything in life, it takes practice.

Add to that the fact that the ideal English Literature A Level class involves students with a wide range of different cultural experiences and types of intellectual expertise so that we can have a discussion in which one person 'reads' Frankenstein's monster through their knowledge of Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* whilst another might draw on their expertise in the depiction of the human body in art of the Enlightenment era and then a third constructs an extended analogy likening the monster to 50 Cent and Frankenstein himself to Reaganomics (listen to [this episode of 'Have you heard George's Podcast?'](#) if you want that to make any sense), and you'll see why we want you to really pursue your own intellectual interests.

The first lockdown in 2020 probably showed you how easy it is to drift along unproductively when you don't have a structure and routine in place. Without all the trappings of timetables that come with an establishment, there are definitely advantages and things you can do more of, but there are also a lot of potential pitfalls.

**Name one thing you did during the first lockdown which enabled you to learn something new or greatly improve an existing skill and which you couldn't have done (or wouldn't have easily found time and opportunity to do) if you had still been in school.**

Hold onto that thought. Cherish it. Then use it - what made it worth doing? How did it make you feel? How did it improve you as a person?

We're going to try to multiply that experience by a significant factor.

Over the next few pages are some grids designed to help you to maximize your remaining two months before formally starting Sixth Form. They are what you are spending these 45 minutes perusing and maybe starting to fill in, but the real work here is in the months ahead...

The first grid is our 'Opportunity Knocks' bingo card (adapted from and including one created by the English and Media Centre) - it's a list of English-related skills and knowledge development



opportunities. You could approach it aiming to complete everything on the card or you might choose to focus on a small number and take them further, repeating and sustaining the activity and seeing where further research around it takes you. Each box is hyperlinked to resources or a further explanation.

The second is a one week timetable grid, but with some questions around the outside inviting you to design your own routine. The things we are timetabling here are 'opportunities' to develop yourself: they will inevitably take varying amounts of time - we are free from the restrictions of an hourly lesson timetable here. Fill in as much detail as will fit on your version of this one.

They are grids, because structure genuinely does help us to act more purposefully and productively, but they should also just be a starting point, which you should adapt to suit your interests and needs - the point here is that you have freedom to explore and do things differently. Maybe a 3 day cycle suits you better than a 7 day week because you are focusing things through your three A Level subjects and want to immerse yourself in each for a day at a time. Maybe you have already found a brilliant avenue of intellectual development which isn't named on our 'Opportunity Knocks' bingo card. This is about independence so do your own thing, but do it well!

Remember that the prompts here are for activities related to English literature in one way or another, but that you should add in opportunities from your other 'Step Up' activities, from your own interests, and from non-academic experiences such as helping members of your family or community.

## Opportunity Knocks

Complete at least 3 of the activities from the <a href="#">EMC activity pack</a> and <a href="#">resource book</a> which inspired this grid.	<a href="#">Compare artistic output from the same year across different forms.</a>	Develop your 'Black Lives' Matter' ideas as you <a href="#">time travel with novels spanning four centuries.</a>	<a href="#">Make reading a consistent habit.</a>
<a href="#">Listen to 'Have you heard George's podcast?' and engage with it online.</a>	<a href="#">Become a Shakespeare expert.</a>	<a href="#">Experiment with different media and forms of note-taking.</a>	<a href="#">Use the BBC's 'Culture in Quarantine' as a springboard to help you find new interests.</a>
<a href="#">Become an 'intellectual' film buff.</a>	<a href="#">Investigate music from a different era, culture, or genre.</a>	<a href="#">Write at least one essay 'for fun' on any topic.</a>	<a href="#">Use Google's 'Arts and Culture' as a springboard to help you find new interests.</a>



Should the weekend look different to weekdays?

How much should your routine be influenced by the routines of others?

At what time of day are you at your sharpest?

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Opportunity 1							
Opportunity 2							
Opportunity 3							

Is a seven day cycle which repeats the best structure for your goals?

Is anything in your routine immovable?

Should each day have the same number and length of opportunities?

Create your own grid by hand so that it can fit your intended routine.





### Compare artistic output from the same year across different forms

We'll work this one through with an example. Here is the opening of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, published in 1813:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

"My dear Mr. Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

"But it is," returned she; "for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it."

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

"Do you not want to know who has taken it?" cried his wife impatiently.

"You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it."

This was invitation enough.

"Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it, that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week."

"What is his name?"

"Bingley."

"Is he married or single?"

"Oh! Single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!"

Reading that on its own, we can probably see that the society it depicts is characterized by a desire to improve one's reputation, social standing, and wealth. The characters we focus on are clearly quite well off (they have 'servants') but the narrator speaks of their concerns as being 'universal'. We can also see a certain distance between husband and wife.

A quick explore of ['1813 in music'](#) on wikipedia takes us to Schubert's ['Symphony no. 1 in D Major'](#) in which the ambition hinted at in Austen's social climbers is stirringly rendered: there is a grandiose sense of regal pomp in this music, but there's also clearly something a bit more epic than the fairly trivial world of Mr and Mrs Bennet. Maybe some characters in *Pride and Prejudice* might want more to their lives than just a rich husband.

That's an idea which is developed by the image wikipedia choose to illustrate their ['1813 in art'](#) page:



But looking at some of the other paintings on that Wikipedia page shows us that there is a real value given to the domestic, family of the upper classes. Take '[Piano Practice Interrupted](#)' by Willem Bartel van der Kool, for instance. Perhaps this painting also shows us something about contemporary ideas of gender, especially the expectations of young women, as well.



So we are able to look back at Austen's work with a few more ideas about the likely tensions in the book between the sense of epic, imaginative liberation and the clearly defined expectations of what it is to be 'respectable' in 1813.

### **Time travel with novels spanning four centuries**

Reading a novel is such an immersive experience, that it can act as a time machine, transporting us to the past. Let's go on a journey together and in keeping with the issue of racism (which is strong enough to wrestle 2020's attention away from Covid-19), let's examine the position of black characters through 400 years of English literature...

*Robinson Crusoe*, by white author Daniel Defoe, published in 1719, is widely regarded as the first novel written in English. You can read the full tale of the sailor's misadventures and life on a seemingly deserted island [on Project Gutenberg](#). One of the most notable things about it is its view of non-European characters.



Once you've examined how 'Friday' and the cannibals are depicted by Defoe, you might hop back in your time machine and head to 1847 where you will find white abolitionist Charlotte Bronte hiding black characters in attics in [Jane Eyre](#).

Now let's hit the twentieth century and 1956 with black Trinidadian writer Sam Selvon to live with the Windrush Caribbean immigrants of London: [The Lonely Londoners](#).

As we return to the present, you might need to start paying for books again, unless you can use your '211' lgfl login on <https://towerhamlets-sls.wheelers.co/account/logon>, and can find *The Hate U Give* by black American writer Angie Thomas, *Pigeon English* by white British author Stephen Kelman, or (and this definitely isn't in the Tower Hamlets Library Service schools collection as it is far too adult) *My Sister, the Serial Killer* by British Nigerian writer, Oyinkan Braithwaite

If you want to take a bit of a short cut, you could watch this episode of BBC documentary, [Novels that Shaped Our World](#), which takes in most of the novels mentioned above!

### **Make reading a consistent habit**

This one's pretty simple but will probably have a bigger impact than any other activity. Reading is like just about everything: the more you do it, the easier it gets. 20 minutes a day should be your minimum. Reading (from a printed page) in bed before going to sleep gives you much more healthy sleep than looking at a screen, so you should aim for 20 minutes then. How about also building in two more sessions of at least 20 minutes earlier in the day as well?

You might keep a record of everything you read.

You might work on [increasing your reading speed](#) (although you should be [conscious of when your comprehension suffers through this](#)). Perhaps one of your three sessions per day could focus on this. But the important thing is just to read every day.

You should be able to access a huge range of e-texts for free here <https://towerhamlets-sls.wheelers.co/> using your '211' lgfl login and password.

You can definitely get an e-text of just about anything significant published before 1924 for free at [Project Gutenberg](#)

### **Listen to 'Have you heard George's podcast?' and engage with it online**

George Mpanga, aka George the Poet, is an articulate and insightful social commentator as well as a lyrical wordsmith and imaginative framer of engaging narratives. He started out as a grime rap artist, but has a project in mind which he felt needed a much more complex medium. That's why he created 'Have you heard George's podcast?' You can get it through [his own site](#) or from [BBC Sounds](#) or from Spotify, iTunes, or wherever you pick up your podcasts...

He says he wants to start conversations, so why not do that? The material he discusses is hard-hitting and very thought provoking, so allow it to elevate your social media interactions by bringing it up with your friends and followers, or get in touch with the man himself on Twitter, where he is [@GeorgeThePoet](#). Here's a thought to discuss (whether with George, your friends, or in your mind if it is anything like the version of his brain that George depicts in [Episode 6-8](#)): is art an escape, as he explores in [Episode 5](#), or a document of the real world, as he sets out in [Episode 1](#)?



### **Become a Shakespeare expert**

There's no doubt that Shakespeare's work presents us with a challenge. But we're A Level English Literature students: we love a challenge. His language is rich and complex, his characters are vivid, and his ideas are compelling. That's why he's still the playwright whose plays are performed more times each year than any other in the world, 404 years after his death.

Thanks to the closure of theatres and consequent opening up of online content, you can currently see Shakespeare's plays on a huge number of sites. Here are some:

9 productions on [BBC iPlayer](#)

Macbeth and a different additional production changing every two weeks on [the Globe's YouTube channel](#). This also has a vast array of 'behind the scenes' and discursive content.

9 productions through our login to the National Theatre collection on [dramaonlinelibrary.com](#) (username 5Ma)4Wzxxkx password 0Vbx2Je&u) - full details in [Pack 1](#))

Once you've watched a play, you could then listen to Oxford University lecturer, Emma Smith discussing it in her podcast lecture series, [Approaching Shakespeare](#).

And whilst we're listening, the BBC has a radio series called [The Shakespeare Sessions](#) where you can listen to audio recordings of full plays, and hear intellectual celebrities like Stephen Fry, Benjamin Zephaniah, and Zoe Wanamaker discussing aspects of the bard that they love (or don't).

Finally, there is hours' worth of detailed content to explore at <https://www.shakespearesglobe.com/>.

### **Experiment with different media and forms of note-taking**

More of the reading at A Level is done independently, so you need to get good at taking notes as you read, and more of class time is given over to extended discussion, again, with note-taking rather than specific writing tasks as standard practice, so noting things down whilst you listen is a vital skill too. Not much class time is given over to the mechanics of how to take good notes, so experiment with different forms whilst you have the time.

Whilst you read a physical book - take some notes in the margin of the page. Is pencil or ballpoint pen better? Landscape or portrait orientation? Is it better using post-it notes? What size?

What about voice notes? Phones generally have a pretty straightforward standard app that lets you record your voice. Then there are dedicated web resources like <https://vocaroo.com/> which can create shareable links to your voice recordings so you could even get a bit of an intellectual discussion going with a friend (or teacher) but with plenty of time in between contributions to do some reading or research, digest ideas, and think carefully about how to articulate your thoughts.

In a similar vein, we've been experimenting during our remote learning time with an add-on for Google Docs called '[Kaizena](#)'. It's designed as a tool for teachers to give spoken feedback on students' essays and typed work, but you can use it equally well as a way of recording your voice notes on a digital text (provided you can copy and paste that text into Google Docs), pinning them precisely to a particular phrase in the text. Why not download it now and try using it to make notes on one of the texts we've worked with so far (like 'The Machine Stops' or 'A Loose Sally of the Mind...')?



But why stop at just voice notes? You can create full-on video notes, whether just using the video recorder app built into your phone or computer's operating system, or using something like [Loom](#) which lets you record what is on display on your computer screen whilst simultaneously recording audio and a little video of yourself in the bottom left corner of the screen.

The process of writing/recording notes for yourself to revise from is a vital study skill, but with some of these other media, you have to scope to make your notes and ideas a genuine resource for others, and the act of working out how to express them for your peers will really help to consolidate your own understanding.

### **Become an 'intellectual' film buff**

Film and literature have a lot in common. But not if your main experience of cinema involves superhero films. If you've got Netflix, Amazon Prime, Sky, etc..., use the lists below to work out what to watch and still expand your mental capacity.

<https://brightside.me/wonder-films/16-fantastic-movies-that-true-intellectuals-will-relish-255460/>

<https://www.imdb.com/list/ls024156369/>

<https://www.quora.com/What-are-the-10-movies-every-intellectual-person-must-watch>

<https://in.bookmyshow.com/entertainment/movies/6-films-every-literature-student-must-watch/>

Investigate music from a different era, culture, or genre.

Songs (with lyrics) are essentially poetry with music, so really listening to/reading lyrics and concentrating on what they mean to you is great practice for the analysis of poetry which is a key component of English Literature A Level. Try looking at a type of music you are not too familiar with, as novelty is good for unique thoughts. Here's a little [playlist](#) to start you off on your investigations...

[George the Poet - Follow the Leader](#)

[Stormzy - Crown](#)

[Bloc Party - Song for Clay \(Disappear Here\)](#)

[Radiohead - Burn the Witch](#)

[Regina Spektor - Us](#)

[Bob Dylan - Shelter from the Storm](#)

[Laura Marling - Goodbye England \(Covered in Snow\)](#)

[Patti Smith - Gloria](#)

[Bobbie Gentry - Ode to Billie Joe](#)

[Nina Simone - Four Women](#)

[Bobby Womack - Across 110th Street](#)

[Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five - The Message](#)

[OutKast - B.O.B. \(Bombs over Baghdad\)](#)

[The Fugees - Ready or Not](#)

[Leonard Cohen - You Want it Darker](#)

[Tom Waits - Small Change Got Rained On \(With his own .38\)](#)

[Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds feat. Kylie Minogue - Where the Wild Roses Grow](#)

[PJ Harvey - Big Exit](#)

[Kate Bush - The Man with the Child in his Eyes](#)

[The Unthanks - Flowers of the Town](#)

[Joni Mitchell - Both Sides Now](#)

[Ghostpoet - Liiines](#)



But listening thoughtfully to music without any vocals can be equally good for your English skills. Take the incredible [Toccatina and Fugue in D Minor by J.S. Bach](#) which has become synonymous with the Gothic genre. When you listen to it along with a visualization like the one in the link above or [this one](#), you can really start to think about how the Gothic works structurally: it is full of overwhelming intensity which can be created by monumental scale (like the extended blasts of bass notes) and by rioting emotions (like those intricate and frantic patterns of descent in the melody).

**Write at least one essay 'for fun' on any topic.**

Were you inspired by any of the ideas or activities in 'Art of the Essay' session? Why not write up a full comparison of how anxieties about the detrimental effects of the technological revolution are presented in 'The Machine Stops' and *Wall-E*? Or of the allure of the dangerous woman in *Killing Eve* and *Frozen*? Or an evaluation of the extent to which Miley Cyrus, Beyonce, or Billie Eilish is a product of a sexist industry or a reaction against it? Or a commentary on whether Stormzy's lyrics perpetuate negative stereotypes or assert legitimate defiance of an oppressive social system?

When there's no mark scheme and no limitation on topic, length, or style, this kind of experimentation can be a real opportunity to expand your mind...

As ever, the very best thing you can do to prepare for English Literature at A Level is reading.

Have you read any of the novels we recommended in the last pack? Why not spend a little time reading blurbs in an online bookshop (yes, Amazon is impressive because it has just about everything in the world and provides the 'Look Inside' feature so you can read the most pages of most books, but they don't have a great record when it comes to paying their taxes and are killing high street bookshops, so why not browse with Amazon, then buy with: <https://www.hive.co.uk/books>)

Author	Book	Sampled/researched?	Read?
Achebe, Chinua	Things Fall Apart		
Atwood, Margaret	The Handmaid's Tale		
Austen, Jane	Pride and Prejudice		
Banks, Iain	The Wasp Factory		
Barker, Pat	Regeneration		
Brontë, Charlotte	Jane Eyre		
Brontë, Emily	Wuthering Heights		
Burgess, Anthony	A Clockwork Orange		
Carter, Angela	The Bloody Chamber		



Conrad, Joseph	Heart of Darkness		
Dickens, Charles	Bleak House		
Eugenides, Jeffrey	The Virgin Suicides		
Faulks, Sebastian	Birdsong		
Fitzgerald, F. Scott	The Great Gatsby		
Hardy, Thomas	Tess of the D'Urbervilles		
Heller, Joseph	Catch 22		
Ishiguro, Kazuo	The Remains of the Day		
Kesey, Ken	One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest		
McCarthy, Cormac	The Road		
McEwan, Ian	Atonement		
Mitchell, David	Cloud Atlas		
Morrison, Toni	Beloved		
Orwell, George	1984		
Plath, Sylvia	The Bell Jar		
Smith, Zadie	White Teeth		
Stoker, Bram	Dracula		
Tartt, Donna	The Secret History		
Wilde, Oscar	The Picture of Dorian Gray		
Woolf, Virginia	Mrs Dalloway		