

# DREDGING TO CRUISING

A H2 Literature Student's Survival Guide

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# PREFACE

This Google document is by a former student, someone who was very recently in your shoes. It's meant to be a spare map. It is neither a 1 for 1 substitute for listening to your tutor, nor a reason to disregard any of the wisdom your tutors espouse. I think that Lit tutors teach a very sentimental subject, by nature of that sentimentality, they have to put a lot of their heart into each and every student they try to save. There's not enough of them to go around.

There's not a lot of time, either. With the clock ticking down, limited time to consolidate 5 books, learn comparison skills AND somehow spread that with your other subjects, I can safely say that H2 Literature is definitely the most taxing A Level subject to *master*. Thus, I wanted to help any future A Level students teach themselves how to rescue themselves, and provide them a proven efficient method for getting their A. So in terms of communicating the beauty of reading Literature, this guide is sparse on those, leaving the labour of developing passion for reading to the pros, the Lit tutors themselves.

When I was done with A Levels I threw almost everything away. I didn't care anymore, NEA can do what it wants with my chemistry papers. I wanted to retake my room, reclaim my life, but I didn't throw my H2 Literature file away, I couldn't. That is because, even if up until the very end it was an (almost insufferably) difficult subject, I came to love it in spite of all of the pain it put me through. For me, the ultimate learning outcome of creating structured arguments under timed pressure, as well as learning to analyse art, outweighed the pain.

In spite of the pain, something, somewhere in all the hearty speeches Mr Ho gave about *Nick Carraway and his liminal garden outside of frustrating place and time*, there must have been a special sentence or two that saved me. And I can't for the life of me narrow it down to which one. In this google document, I attempt to pen down as many of them as I can recall. I also give you a couple of tips and tricks to grind H2 Literature, from the perspective of a student with limited time and energy.

(P.S, if you don't feel like a Helpless Sotong Out Of The Water, I would strongly recommend skipping to Chapter 4, then maybe read Chapter 3. Chapter 4 is the most useful thing I have to say, which I don't think your tutors would have already told you.)

# CHAPTER 1: GETTING INTO THE RIGHT MINDSET

## Sect 1.1 Who's Afraid Of H2 Literature?

I can talk all I want about the Craft of Close Reading, about content memorisation strategies, about reading model essays, but if we don't talk about this, then it doesn't matter how many pages you go out of your way to highlight, it will not matter how many google documents you make. At the last minute in November, it could turn out to all be for nothing.

Instead, let's talk a bit about human psychology before we jump into the weeds. Let's talk about the idea of *The Lizard Brain*.

Humans have evolved from our ancestors to think in abstract concepts instead of simple  $A = A$  statements. Literature is a **thinking** subject, about **arguing** and about **discerning**, so this part of your brain is integral to your survival.

For example, it is because of this modern brain that you understand imagery makes an idea more visceral to a reader. You know that Fitzgerald includes certain images into his novel on purpose, because describing an abstract concept with physical, beautiful, striking images can move the reader much more than unimaginatively spelling the abstract concept out. This helps him get his message across, and as a student of Literature you are meant to discuss what these messages are and how they are brought across.

Instead of Fitzgerald saying "He was sad that a lot of time had passed", Fitzgerald can employ these images of rotting flowers, the path of broken rinds at the end of Chapter 6, to emphasise the passage of time in a way that is provocative and beautiful. The flowers were alive in the summer, now they're all crumpled up on the floor. The significance is that time destroys all the beautiful things.

Your brain has evolved and is able to interpret the literal flower as a symbol of a deeper meaning. Your modern brain can infer and ponder the significance of the **way** something is said, your modern brain can then talk about the **effect** it has on you, what it probably **means**, then **link** those three ideas together. If it hadn't evolved this way, you would have just stopped talking at the flowers. When these deeper insights are present,

when they are accurate and when they are phrased and structured well: You get your A.

Here's another example: say a writer wants to explore ideas of self-perception, and then they decide to do so using the symbol of a mirror. As students of Literature, we use our brains to think about the **way** something is said and what **effect** it has on you. We don't stop at saying "The writer represent Aston's mind and self inside mirror because he can see himself, ehehe".

Maybe this writer does something deeper with the mirror. Maybe it's an unclean mirror, the dirt contaminating his image being a symbol of the sacrifices to his moral character he has had to make to get to where he is. Maybe it's the perpetuated silence as said character stares into this mirror, an auditory image of oblivion, a stark reminder of his haunting solitude, wherein he only has himself. Maybe the symbol of the mirror has shown up for the second time in this story; first he had appeared sophisticated in front of it, well kept and composed, but now covered in bruises and his workwear ripping at the edges he is unkempt, emphasising the idea that he is half the man both visually, and by implication, figuratively.

And there are so many valid interpretations for what the hypothetical man in the hypothetical mirror could represent. If you, for a moment, decide to travel down that path, if for a moment you let go of the fact that H2 Literature is a subject that has a dangerous bearing on your future, if for a moment you let yourself have fun, let yourself bounce playful ideas with your tutor, the hardest A Level subject quickly turns into the most personally rewarding.

The good news is that you and Cambridge are on the same page here. These deeper observations you make, the fun ones that you can learn to enjoy exploring, these are precisely what model essays are made of. I'm trying to say that in H2 Literature, your grade might actually be linearly correlated with the amount of fun you can have with this subject. I think that's awesome that it can be fun, but I also wish it was easy, because it isn't.

I know that you can't just decide to have fun, not under these conditions. 3 hours, 3 essays, 5 paragraphs each essay, 15 in total, no stopping. Analysis is imperative, fail to read the question, and you die. Planning is an essential tool to not getting stuck, fail to do so and you also die. Both of those take even more time, **time is your enemy**. I can say all

that I want about how beautiful this subject can be, it doesn't make it any less true that you are still playing a dangerous game, where your immediate future is on the line.

The instinct need to escape death terrifies you, clouds your better judgments, your ability to think, or maybe even understand the basic meaning of the sentence you're reading.

This is when the ancient ways of the reptilian brain completely takes over. The one that thinks not in terms of flimsy, higher concepts, but the base ones like running or fighting. The one that says the flower is just a flower. The one that stops at just noticing there is a man in the mirror. And yeah, some of you may be saying that this is completely normal, that you're supposed to continue trying to make meaning out of the flowers and the mirror, that there's no point in me pointing this out. I disagree, I think it's vastly important if only because **there is another way**. There is a way to take control, there is a way to leave little to chance. There is a way to master essay writing and secure your A at A Levels.

### *Sect 1.2 And That Will Be To Love What Hurts You*

Participate in class discussions. Offer interpretations, actually try, be willing to get things wrong in front of all your classmates. It is better to be wrong in the classroom than to be wrong in November. Little by little, your doubt in your abilities subsides.

Listen to the Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf soundtrack. Listen to it again. Maybe, if you're insane like I am, you realise you like it, and begin relating certain songs to certain portions of the text. Edward Albee's play about the American dream gone awry becomes a part of your personal mythos, information that you have under your thumb, easy to play under timed conditions.

On the bus, if you've nothing better to do, wonder about your text, learn to love the characters, the writing, and in doing so, stumble across valuable insights. This gives you an edge over every other candidate, because it is personal, it is an advantage that now belongs solely to you. Maybe, you should jot it down in your notes. It could come in handy in November.

Approach your tutors in consultations, even as you do so be OK with failure. Be OK with revealing gaping holes in your understanding, and feel terrible for misspelling

humorous as humourous, or forgetting to talk about narrative perspective in a prose essay. Your tutors are here to help, and the sooner you're willing to accept that help, the better of a position you will be in later on.

There will be many setbacks on the road to a safe H2 Literature A. At times, you will truly feel like you're the stupidest person in the college (personal experience), you will feel like your tutor hates you specifically (personal experience), that you will fail in the end anyway (Thankfully, not personal experience).

However, as long as you care, as long as you find meaning in what you are analysing, then no matter how badly you get set back, you will always want to get back up, you will always want to **do better**.

This translates to better performances in exams. When you change your motivation from "I don't want to get B for H2 Literature", to "I want to write about what I love, I want to have fun", the reptile brain has little to no reason to kick in. Now, granted, this change in mindset is nigh impossible to completely believe, but as long as on some large enough level you are *trying because you care*, no matter how many times you get kicked down, you will find the motivation to remain calm and persevere.

There is a lot more to H2 Literature than simply enjoying it, if there wasn't I would have stopped here, nevertheless the very first step to getting unstuck is to find the fun in this admittedly unforgiving game. Always try to find the joy in what you read, always be consistent in your practices, and I promise you that at A Levels even if everything goes wrong, against the many other candidates going in unprepared or panicking, fret not: you will have a decent chance of turning out alright in the end.

## CHAPTER 2: NO (WO)MAN IS AN ISLAND

How are we to improve in our essays without knowing what we're doing? To do better for Lit, we're going to need some help from the pros. This very brief chapter will be about how you can get the most out of every tutorial, how a little *active participation* goes a long way to *improving your grade*.

What I'm about to say is widely applicable to all of your subjects: We learn the best when we are challenged. Challenges make our brains remember what we were challenged by. Challenges, through their difficulty, also help us find out the gaps in our understanding. When it comes to H2 Literature, I think that the easiest way to challenge yourself is to talk to your tutors when they ask questions.

I know it isn't easy, it can be a bit nerve-wracking to offer a part of yourself and to get it wrong. Think of it this way: when you get things right, your tutors take it a step further and help you make the link back to the larger messages in the text, thus consolidating your understanding; when you get things wrong, tutors will carefully explain why they disagree, so you understand why you were wrong and how to avoid a similar mistake next time. You have everything to gain here, it's a 0 risk game. Furthermore, tutors are a bit like answer keys to a non-existent TYS, and if you choose silence over participation throughout the 2 years...it's a bit like going into A Levels without even doing the TYS, a very dangerous choice. You never discover if you're right or you're wrong until you do the occasional essay, whereas you get many many more opportunities to find out if you just speak up.

Even when you are completely wrong, at the very least you know where exactly you're off. That's one step closer to fixing your mistake, which you'd have no hope of doing without speaking up. This means that if you doubt yourself, you have an even better reason to participate in the discussion.

By choosing to speak and being willing to get shot down, you actually open the floor up for many of your friends to join in. Everyone feels less shame in discovering what they're not sure of, everyone also gets to enrich their understanding by learning from different perspectives they'd have never considered. If you all choose to engage with the tutor at once, you will find that H2 Literature classes become a little more like Writer's Craft Gameshows where Loser Takes All.



## CHAPTER 3: KNOW YOUR PLAYING FIELD

This section is about mugging content, and I'm going to talk about some of the tips I used to master my content. At the height of my power (haha), I knew the exact chapter in which any important line came from, which important line came directly before, which important line came directly after.

I think it is *possible* to begin proper annotation and mugging of your content by the start of CT2, but it is gruelling and will undoubtedly come at the expense of time for your other subjects. After CT2 about 70% of my time was spent covering Literature content...the best time to start making proper notes is as soon as you begin learning your text.

Unfortunately for me, I wasn't really sure of how to go about doing this. I tried a couple of techniques, and only really settled on a working method after CT2. Fortunately for you, I will share some of those nifty tricks.

OK: Here's the deal. There are two ways to make your notes.

The first of these is the **top-down approach**. You start from the larger themes of the text, compile them all somewhere, and then work from the higher-level themes to the lower-level moments, to find the best moments you can use to prove your point.

Alternatively, you can use the **ground-up approach**, a gruelling and difficult journey into your text wherein you map it out moment to moment, page by page, and connect each of those to an overarching understanding of the text.

The benefit of the **top-down approach** is that it is time-efficient. It also has a second very useful advantage: Versatility (Which I'll explain later). The top-down approach gives you the most bang for your buck. If you're running out of time, Prelims is coming and you've yet to highlight your texts, then I recommend you use this.

The **ground-up approach** is not without its merits however. Ground-up is useful for truly mastering your text, for you who creates notes from the ground up will have insight to the intimate moments most others simply wouldn't remember. Examiners are looking for a personal response, so naturally, when you use evidence that lesser people

remember on average, your personal, unique voice shines through and you will be rewarded. If a person uses Ground-Up, there is a much lower chance they will ever need to “smoke” through a tough question, they’ll always have something to play. Ground-up is also good for creating a good mental map of the text, allowing you to navigate it swiftly under timed conditions.

To summarise, **top-down** makes more sense and takes less effort and time, but the extra edge **ground-up** offers still makes it a lucrative option for anyone who wants to minimise the chance of a Smoking Festival in November.

Ultimately, I personally think the best strategy for the best performance is to do **both a ground-up and a top-down approach**. If I had to do it all over again, I would start with a bit of ground-up, ideally finish annotating half the text. Then, move on to top-down and use some of the moments you gathered from the ground-up approach to build a competent summary of the text. Your mileage may vary.

I’m also going to stop highlighting and underlining the words, because I look stupid.

### *Sect 3.1 The Ground-Up Approach*

The Ground-up approach involves doing a page-by-page annotation.

Make it a point, by the end of your journey, to have read every text front to back at least twice. The first time is your initial reading before tutorials, the second time should be after those tutorials. On your second time, you should already be highlighting on your exam copy.

Speaking of which, I don't find working copies useful at all. Nobody I knew referred to their working copies after taking notes. In practice, I found it inefficient and difficult. Later on in Sect 3.2 and 3.4, I will introduce you to two fast and efficient digital alternatives, which I'll be calling **smart notes** for brevity.

#### 1. Highlighting

Anyway, make sure to have a highlighting scheme figured out. Write it down somewhere, paste it on your desk and please do not forget it, lest you'll open your book on a fine August morning and go "Wait a minute, I don't know what any of this means!".

Here is the scheme I used, you may find it useful to replicate or modify it:

yellow	.....	LINGUISTICS: word choice, sounds, diction
orange	.....	IMAGERY DEVICES: images, metaphors, similes, symbols, stage devices
pink	.....	NUANCES: irony, humour, tone
green	.....	THEMES: mind and self ideas, messages in the poem, shifts

(You can get these four colours at the bookstore, if you're wondering why I chose them.)

One of the good things about this scheme is that the devices belonging to the same colour code can often be used in similar ways in essays. For any lines which I found very very important and versatile (usable in multiple essays), I also underlined them on top of the highlights, to make it ultra-fast to find.

## 2. Reading

When doing your second run through the text, follow this cycle:

- I will read one or two pages, while I am doing this I will highlight the devices I notice
- I will ask myself if I have found anything significant to the overarching ideas in the book, or I have found craft that I find personally interesting with respect to the larger ideas in the text
- If I realise that there is little to play here, I will **ignore the page and move on**
- If I realise there are some things to play here, **I will make some short annotations about what this is useful for in my smart notes**
- If I realise this is a very very important moment to play, **I will do a short write up on the passage and what I like about it in my smart notes**

You can include whatever you want in your write-up, it's yours after all. Usually, I talk about the subtle crafts I notice the writers trying to pull off. In my write-up I also briefly mention what these moments are useful to prove in an essay.

For myself, what I tried to do was take an emotion I felt, track down the devices which may have led to me feeling like this, and then I tried to make tangible, the link between **what I felt** and **what the author wrote**. I thought this was good essay-writing practice. After all, Literature is about how we feel and how writers make us feel that way. This is also good because it made me appreciate each moment on a deeper level, I internalised it better, later on during essay practises the process of unpacking evidence was a lot easier.

### Sect 3.2 Telegram (Smart Note type 1)

So here's one of the smart notes I used, and I used this one on the Ground-Up approach. Use the telegram messaging application (or any app of your liking) like this:

Step 1: Create a group with yourself in it

Step 2: Label it after a text and section of the text you want to place your notes of it in.

For example Chapter 3 of The Great Gatsby is titled "Gatsby - 3". Act 2 of The Caretaker would be "Caretaker - 2"

Step 3: Once you have highlighted one or two pages, as per in section 3.1, take a picture of the extract and add your write-up as a caption.

Step 4: Repeat

This method is great for revision, as chunks of each chapter in the text are automatically sorted in chronological order. It is also convenient, capturing the entire page and showing you where your highlights are, a lot quicker than using a google document (which is another smart note).

During revision, you then would only need to tap the right side of the screen to progress through your notes. Remember: This is now a list of all the parts of the text that you found important. This cuts out all the fat, things you've decided aren't exam-smart, thus allowing you to **totally concentrate** on everything you found important, all with a convenient personal write-up to complement it.

I think that this is the much better alternative, to foolscap footnotes or working copy scribbles.

But making these notes alone is not enough, every 2 days, skim through your telegram chat notes. Make it a point to get a sense of “what comes first” and “what comes later”.

Make yourself cite the events of each chapter in order. For example:

Ch 6 begins with Nick talks to the reporter → Nick talks about James Gatz and the birth of Gatsby, Nick's writing takes on a heightened register → Gatsby is left behind by Sloane → Nick, Daisy AND Tom go to the party → Tom asks for a pen and cheats on his wife → Gatsby and Daisy sit outside of Nick's house → Daisy looks up the stairs listening to the 4am waltz → “You can't repeat the past” → The heightened register returns in another flashback, Gatsby kisses Daisy in the Summer of 1917.

Do this over and over, visualising every scene in the text like it's your favourite netflix movie. This way, when you flip through your book during the exam, because you have a good map of how the text is structured, this allows you to “guesstimate” where the part you want to use is. For example, if I'm looking for a moment that I know is in the start of chapter 6 of Gatsby, and I happened to open my book and am around the end of Chapter 4, I know I have to flip far ahead to possibly catch that section. If I then end up

around chapter 7 beginning, I flip back a little less until I eventually find it...and other common sense stuff you'd probably have figured out yourself.

### *Sect 3.3 The Top-Down approach*

In September, during the break before Prelims when time was running short, I found myself asking Mr Teo what method the best Literature students were using that I wasn't. The Top-Down is the method I was given, it is also how I probably snagged an A for Prelims.

It begins with listing 5-6 major themes you personally resonate with in each text. You get bonus points if you spot common themes between the 3 Mind And Self texts, as it turns out, singling those out makes your study of Text Comparison a lot easier.

As you write each theme, force yourself to do a short write-up on what this theme is about in excruciating detail. What is the overarching message the writer wants their reader to come away with? What are the individual steps, the steady progression of that argument throughout the text. What does the writer have to say about this theme at the beginning, what might he turn out to say about it in the end? Mr Ho once told me, a Lit essay with excellent proof and excellent analysis, that stops short of discussing the text's larger message, will fail to reach A.

Consult your tutor on the thematic messages you arrive at. Ask them how they might change your selections to make them more general, more **modifiable**. It would also be good for them to access each write-up, so you know if it's more or less complete.

Once you get the go ahead, write down 3-4 moments in the text which exemplify each theme. Choose them either because you like them, because you find they are easy to write about in a 50 minute essay, or because they easily bring the larger theme across. Or all three of those at the same time, in a perfect world. It goes without saying but if you've already done the Ground-Up approach, it makes your selection of evidence much richer and better informed. This is why I highly recommend doing a bit of Ground-Up before doing Top-Down.

What you end up with is 18-24 distinct moments, that's significance to the writer's ideas is crystal clear to you. In a 3 paragraph essay you might need roughly 6 ([Teo]: 2 for each paragraph as a grossly general rule). You probably won't run out of content.

But it gets better. Creating larger umbrellas to nest these moments under gives you a tactical advantage that can save you in the apocalypse.

What do I mean by apocalypse? I'm glad you asked. Let's say the question is not about any of the 5-6 themes you decided on. Actually, no, let's say the question is about a totally foreign concept, a word you've never even heard your tutor say. This isn't a hypothetical, this is exactly what happened for **both Joan and Gatsby in 2022 A Levels**. It has happened before, and if you're one of the unlucky ones it can happen to you again.

Using this approach, if you modify the message of some of your Umbrella Themes, tweaking them so that they address the question, you can bring in your 3-4 moments, you still have ground to work with.

For example, let's say the foreign question is about "Mystery" in The Great Gatsby, if you prepared the theme of "Beauty", you take that knowledge and change a few of the logical steps in it, then, suddenly, you can use evidence in "Beauty" to discuss, for at least one or two of your points, the "Allure of mystery" in The Great Gatsby. (Your whole essay can't just be about allure because then you wouldn't be ATQing, but that's beside the point).

This is why it is crucial to have a firm grasp on the writer's message, which is the purpose of the detailed write-up. If you understand each theme well, if you are aware of every constituent and which order they come in, then you know how to modify it on the go. It all comes down to using logic as a tool to distort the truth, one of the skills a "High Level Literature student" will have under their belt (I'm not implying I'm one of them). It all comes down to your careful usage of material to support an interpretation. A deadly discussion, where you seed your lies with enough truth to make it a **valid, acceptable argument**.

All in all, the Top-Down approach allows you to consolidate your understanding of the text, it also allows you to connect that understanding to specific moments, hence grounding your understanding. Most crucially, if it comes down to it, the Top-Down approach gives you the knowledge you need to fight your way out of a tough question.

(PS: I briefly mentioned the idea of half-lying while writing. What I mean by this, is that there are times you should exclude evidence that undercuts your claim. Don't say Gatsby

is the novel's pursuer of a moralistic American Dream, and then bring up his exploitation of Young Parke. Not in the same breath, at least.)

### *Sect 3.4 Google Doc (Smart Note type 2)*

The alternative to the Telegram Group Chat would be the Google Document. I would probably use this Smart Note more for the Top-Down approach.

It's messier, I find, but it still has its advantages. I think using it alongside the Telegram Group Chat makes the most sense.

Firstly, this method is better suited for a text like WAOVW, as the exam copy itself has small pages with a relatively low content-to-page ratio. You would only be able to capture entire sections by taking multiple screenshots. Inconvenient.

One of the benefits of the Google Document method is the easier collaboration it affords you, you can work with classmates and have multiple people write comments about the very same section. You can use Google Documents to create shared summaries of your lectures. With a messaging software document, it tends to get messy.

Another benefit is that you can go back and edit your notes. This proves to be very useful when you eventually have to dance with Text Comparison, new insights show up in old sections, and being able to append those insights is a luxury you are not afforded with the telegram messaging software.

### *Sect 3.5 Concluding Content*

You will never be able to understand every corner of the text, but that's OK. In November, you can only cram about 6 to 8 moments into each essay without jeopardising the quality of the other two essays.

With these methods for understanding content, your goal should be to know your text, know your text well enough to approximate the moments' location in the book, and know your text well enough that you can modify your understanding of it on the fly.



## CHAPTER 4: LEAVING NOTHING TO CHANCE

This section will be about how to grind answering H2 Literature questions. It gives you a working method for improving your grade, saving as much energy as possible while learning as much as you can from each practice.

### Sect 4.1 The crucial first minutes

Most of the Literature essays' final score has already been decided after the first 10 minutes. Those first 10 minutes are what we are going to focus on in our strategy for studying. To grossly oversimplify, before you even write your intro, getting an A for Lit boils down to 4 questions:

1. Did you read the question right?
2. Are you answering the question?
3. Did you structure your essay well?
4. Does your answer show nuance?

I mean, it seems really simple, I also think it looks very simple. Then 50% of us already fail at checklist point one. I'm not even excluding myself from this. It is a lot easier said than done, and when you fall for pitfall 1 and 2 it can be devastating and humiliating.

So before you even write the essay, you need to force yourself to scrutinise your plan. Hold it up next to the question. Read your plan, and ask yourself: Are the insights I jotted down a natural response to what Cambridge asked me? Am I answering the question, or am I flooding the paper with things that are **only tangentially related** to the question?

Either you've gone off the right path and need to backtrack, or you need to scrap the point entirely. It's like Mr Ho says: If you have 3 points, 2 of them are answering the question perfectly but the last one is only vaguely related to the question, you are literally locked at a **17/25 at best**.

Answering The Question is probably the most important part of getting an A for A Levels. It's so important that, between a student who ATQs but didn't study, and a student who doesn't ATQ but studied like a dog, the lazy but precise student will trump the second one, 100 out of 100 times over.

This process of validating and recomposing is very difficult to do under pressure, yet it makes up 90% of your final grade. So what's the solution? Obviously we need to focus on what matters most to do well for the final exam, while ignoring the parts about essay writing that matter less.

This is why I think the best way to study Literature Essays, at least at first, is to **grind writing essay plans, without writing the essay**. Focus on that first fatal stage, worry about the rest later. It's less overwhelming this way. Borrow questions from the Lit Drive to try out, write an essay plan, rinse and repeat.

Essay plans allow you to practise Answering The Question, without needing to spend the other 50 minutes writing it out. You can grind 6 essay plans in the time it takes to write 1 essay plan and 1 actual essay, so you can expedite the process of mastering ATQ. But, of course, writing an essay plan for 10 minutes and then doing something else doesn't count as actual learning. There's a lot more to it than that, so I'll describe a few best practices, ways in which you can get the most out of each practice.

### *Sect 4.2 Best practices for Grinding Essay Plans*

1. It goes without saying that Grinding Essay Plans is only effective if you know where you went right, and where you went wrong. So when you're starting out, consult your tutors on your essay plans, walk them through your thought process. Process their feedback, ask for what you did well and ask for where you blundered. Keep your strengths in mind, repeat them later on, and find ways to improve on your weaknesses. This is a running theme with studying for H2 Literature. Always ask yourself what you did well, do that again next time. Ask yourself what you didn't do well, think of a way to fix that. I'm just going to refer to this process as the **2 Fundamental Questions** from this point on.
2. Other than learning from your mistakes, it helps to also learn from others' successes. After your 10 minute plan, read a model essay of the question you just attempted in the Lit Drive. Watch the way arguments are created, supported, and flow into one another. Be amazed at how these essays manage to answer the question, in new ways you didn't consider in your own plan. Ask yourself, what makes this a good essay? Whatever answer you arrive at, try to incorporate it into your future essay plans.

3. Ideally, you are training your speed. When you're starting out, time yourself for 15 minutes. As you get better, decrease that period of time until you hit the 10 minute mark, which is close to exam conditions.
4. You are getting into the feel of creating a good essay plan.

### Sect 4.3 Pointers for Writing an Essay Plans

We're going to spend some time on that last one. The "feeling" of a good essay plan. If you don't even have a feel for what a good essay outline is like, then in a way you're just thrashing around in the dark. At that point, you have no idea what you're doing while you're pumping out essay plans. That is completely natural, do not beat yourself up for it my friend. It still needs to change eventually. If ATQing is the most important ingredient to getting an A, then having a feel for what a good essay is a close second.

First, spend 1-3 minutes reading the question very, **very** carefully. If there's anything I've learnt in H2 Literature, it's that you can never be too careful in interpreting a question. If you think you've got it figured out after glancing at it once, at least in my experience, you're about to write hot garbage. (Especially true in internals, it only makes sense the tutors would intentionally set traps in their essay questions...so...now you know how you'll probably flunk your next internal exam?)

Understand the question like the back of your hand, then identify assumptions you might accidentally make. This will help you to avoid major pitfalls.

Then, spend the next 15 minutes drafting 3 points. Speedrun this until you're able to do it under 10 minutes (as per exam conditions).

In an essay plan, it's helpful to note the  $2 \pm 1$  moments you will use in each of your 3 points, and how bringing each of them in in a certain order can be used to **develop your argument**. Developing an argument involves introducing increasingly deep insights that build off of the previous one. As you're sketching out the moments you plan to use, make a short quick note about **what you plan to say about each of these moments**, track how each idea you bring in **builds off** of the one that came before.

In the actual writing of your essay, as you switch gears from one moment to the next, attention should be given to your own argumentative shifts. Something that sounds like:

“While this impulse to defend one’s masculinity may be seen in George, it seems to extend to the other male in the play, Nick who is portrayed in a more deplorable light.”

Notice how I spent an entire sentence pivoting the focus towards Nick, this is because I don’t want to disorientate the marker, this is also an opportunity to mention **insight** (brownie points).

In essays, each of your larger points should build off of the last one. They should develop your overall perspective, bit by bit. You know that you have created 3 strong points, when you realise that arranging your points out of order completely destroys the essay. This is how you know that you’re not just writing five Smoking Festival Paragraphs, but instead engaging directly with the question. Doing this will help you to answer the 3rd question on the 4 question checklist (was my essay organised well?).

A very popular and easy approach is something akin to...

Para 1: Because of her **steadfastness**, Joan is a figure of solitude.

Para 2: **But at other times**, Shaw also shows Joan as depressingly alone.

Your two paragraphs talk about two contrasting facets of the same idea. Those two facets seem like opposites, Joan is happily strong but she is also sadly alone. If you structure your essay this way, you reveal a sensitivity to **nuance**, the 4th question out of the 4 question checklist, where two things that don’t sound alike can be true at the same time.

It’s also easier to generate points this way, because if you think of a vaguely positive Para 1, then you can think of a vaguely negative Para 2 as a contrast to it. Just make sure you’re not outright contradicting yourself, like in:

Para 1: Joan is always happy.

Para 2: Joan is always sad.

In the first example I gave, Para 1 (her steadfastness and different ways of seeing the world) makes her a figure of startling solitude. It is because she is so ahead of everyone else, a virtue of her strength, that at times she ends up alone.

Point 1 and Point 2 are both true, but they show nuance **and** they don't contradict each other because **Point 1 is the logic of Point 2**. In this case, nuance and developing structure, Question 3 and Question 4 of the 4 question checklist, **is shown together**.

There is much more to be said about Answering The Question. You will discover these through your own practice, the reading of model essays, and your consultations.

Eventually, you will develop a unique style, a working method. At a certain point, the questions stop restricting your answers. They become less like pitfalls, more like helpful prompts that guide your argument and help you brainstorm insights.

When you reach this point, you are no longer just writing a paper, you are now playing a game. With this increased confidence, maybe it's time to shift focus from ATQing...to actual writing.

### *Sect 4.4 Grinding Essay Plans V2*

Before, you would focus on answering the question and do 0% of the actual essay writing. Now, you will take it a step further to train your speed and your confidence. You will focus on answering the question in your essay plan as per usual. Directly after, write **the intro to your essay + a point of your choosing** from the plan.

The rationale for this is similar as in the first version, here we are trying to save energy while practising the tiring routine of writing. Instead of forcing yourself to write 3 quality body paragraphs back to back, focus on writing 1. If you can do it one time over and over, you can do it again.

Writing the intro helps you learn to open a discussion, launching yourself into the flow of writing. It is also a written summary of your essay plan, so it's a good way of very briefly verbalising all the ideas you jotted down.

The intro should take 5-7 minutes, the body paragraph should take 10-15 minutes.

During your practices, you will naturally get better at expressing your ideas. This is the goal. However, on a meta level, I also think you should focus on two additional things.

One: Face your fear of writing. Make yourself OK with the writing process, which I know, at least at first, will be full of confusion, self-doubt and fear. Writing in sprints should be like training a weak muscle. Do it until it's no longer difficult to exert. In version one you focused on creating good ideas that answered the question, in version two, you now focus on getting used to wording out those difficult ideas. You will eventually reach a point where you are going through a motion.

Two: Focus on **getting your point across**, not on getting across the page. Some of us tend to overwrite, making the fatal assumption that more words = higher marks. A Lit paragraph really needs only 350 words, but a lot of us stretch it out to 600+ because we just do not know when to stop (This can also be applied to General Paper). You need to get a sense for when enough is enough, when you have said everything you've needed to, and discipline yourself to wrap up and move on. Doing this under timed conditions allows you to familiarise yourself with the right pace, how fast you should be going, and how many times you can afford to "get stuck". (As I previously mentioned, enough usually involves Close Reading 2 moments per point. There are exceptions, for example you might have an entire point on a single moment in The Exorcism, you might also bring in three to four small moments that build off of each other. I'm digressing.)

If you write too much, you're just setting yourself up for failure in your third essay, which inevitably runs out of time.

Later, I will show you an example of a self-imposed schedule I made. I allocated a specific number of minutes to the individual stages of all three essays. You can do this for yourself too, allowing you to create a writing routine which you can complete in under 3 hours.

When you're done writing, read your paragraph to yourself, ask yourself if you are convinced of your own writing. If you're not convinced, the marker from Cambridge won't be either. Then ask yourself those 2 fundamental questions. Plan. Write. Ask. Break. Plan. Write. Ask. Break. Plan. Write. Ask. Break.

Over and over, until you actually trivialise the difficulties of H2 Literature, now knowing exactly what you are doing.

I find that repeating this routine during the end days is very helpful. It was only then that I discovered this insanely effective strategy. Before discovering this routine, I would always have an incomplete (or slipshod) final essay. By the end, during A Levels itself, I managed to finish my Paper 3 with 10 minutes to spare. Twirl the pen and think about what I'm going to eat with my friend later. That was the culmination of a weekend of me planning, writing and then asking, for 17 different questions, with a friend. That's like, 51 points in 3 days. We critique each other's points. Was fun. By the way, that friend is the "High Level Literature" student I was thinking of. Scary. This is my competition in 2023.

I think I managed to finish my essay much earlier, because I finally learnt how to get my points across without dragging on. Speaking of which...

# Final Thoughts

Here is the picture of my time allocation in Paper 1:

Paper 1

	P	I	1	2	3	C
Joan → 53	10	5	11	11	11	5
Gatsby → 53	10	5	11	11	11	5

→ 2h 45 (14 minutes left over)

Poetry Comparison → 1 hour

R	CR	P	I	1	2	3	C
5	10	5	12	12	12	2	

P - Plan & Read, I - Intro, C - conclusion, R - read

Here is the picture of my time allocation in Paper 3:

	A	CB	P	I	1	2	3	C
PLMs	7	5	<del>1</del> 5	5	8	12	10	2 <del>(53)</del> (54)

  

	P	I	1	2	3	C
Single Text	10	5	<del>1</del> 12	<del>1</del> 12	<del>1</del> 12	5 <del>(53)</del> (56)

  

	QA + Ex + PI	I	1	2	3	C	
Text comparison	1	5	5 3	14	14	14	5 (61)

↓ thinking of examples from within the ATA.

↓ thinking of some of the key points of comparison. Nuances

thi 2h and 51 minutes

Tracking down  
//s

P - Plan & Read, I - Intro, C - conclusion, R - read, Ex - examples

You will notice that each essay has a varying amount of time for each para, because I knew some would be more troublesome than others. You will also notice that in PC Mind And Self I planned to take 4 more minutes on point 2 than point 1, this is because my plan was to write a very simple point for Point 1, and only really bring in my depth and nuance for Point 2. I think it's easier to discuss your deeper points once you've gotten the basic observations out of the way.



I've also decided to append my Literature documents for future batches.

[Virginia Woolf \(with some text comparison with Jennings\)](#)

[Diego Helmy text comparisons](#)

[Proof, Analysis, Significance. The formula to Paper 1 Body Paragraphs.](#)

[21S43's Saint Joan Mega Document](#)

[21S43's The Caretaker](#)

[21S43's The Great Gatsby](#)

[21S43's Jennings's Selected Poetry](#)