

▶ ENGLISH

Testing skills to think, plan and write

Rather than looking for a specific response to a topic, assessors will reward thoughtful, perceptive insights, writes **Bob Hillman**.

MORE than 44,000 students will have the opportunity of showcasing the knowledge and skills they have developed throughout the year when they sit the English examination on Thursday, November 1. It is, of course, the examination on the largest scale and lasts three hours plus 15 minutes' reading time.

In the fifth year of the new course, there are no major changes to the format of the examination itself. There is, however, a significant change to the answer book. This year there will be only one book for students to write all three of their responses. It is important for students to follow the simple instructions carefully that request students to nominate the text they are writing on in Section A and the Context they are selecting in Section B. This is done by shading the appropriate box. In addition, it is important to follow all the instructions including those that direct students to write in blue or black ink only.

Each of the three sections of the examination is equally weighted, so it is wise to spend approximately one hour on each section. As well, students will determine for themselves the order in which they complete the tasks, but the task must be written in the correct section of the response book.

Each piece of writing needs to be a completed product, so an awareness of time is essential. Within each period of time, students need to study the task thoroughly, think carefully and plan methodically, before actually beginning their pieces. Many students would also be advised to leave enough time at the end of each task to proofread their work quickly before moving

on to the next task. Students may bring along an English and/or bilingual printed dictionary. It must not, however, contain any highlighting or annotations and it may not contain a thesaurus. Electronic dictionaries are not permitted. The dictionary can be used for clarification of terms, as well as checking spelling, and may be used during reading time.

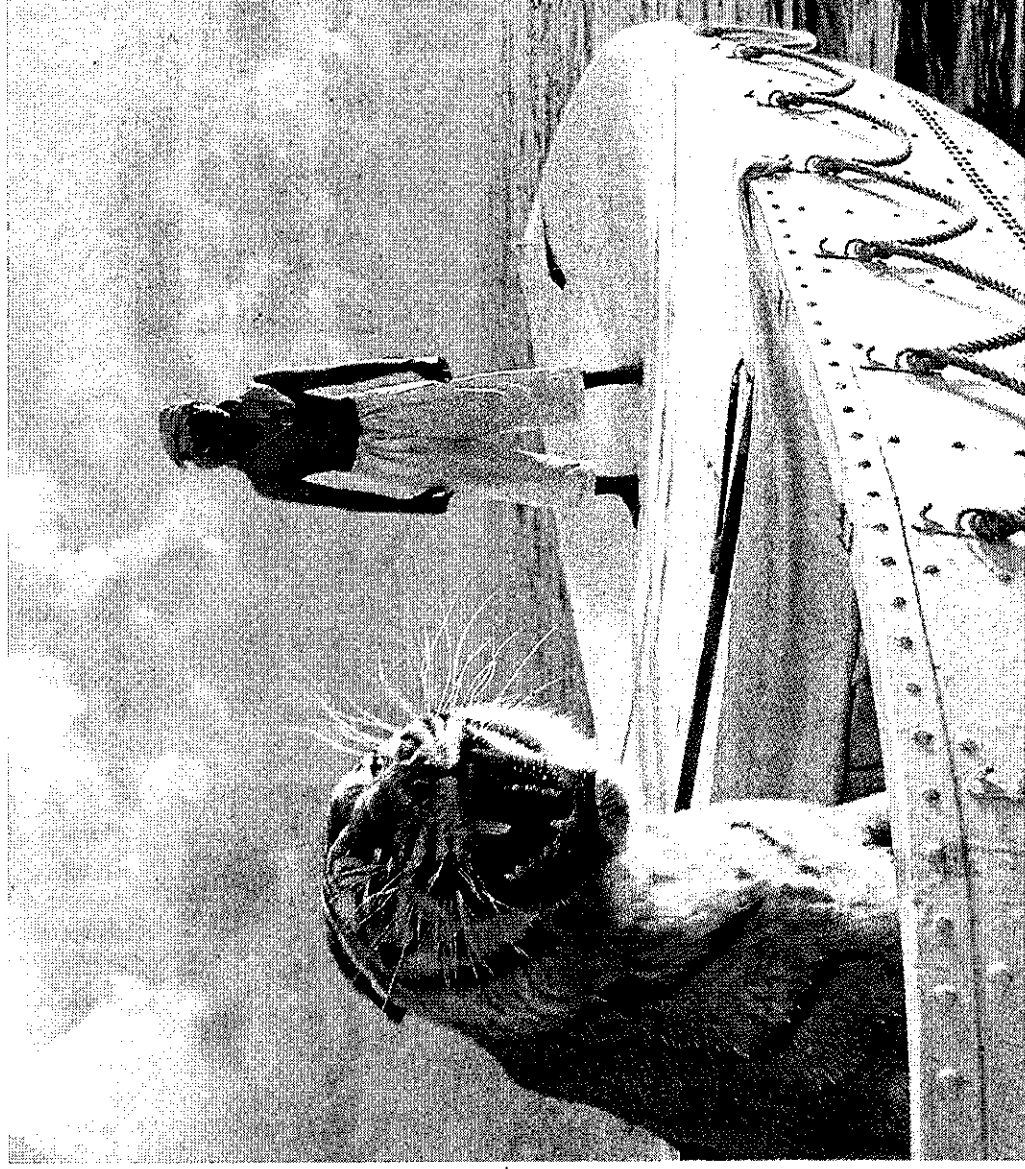
The examination itself is divided into three sections, each requiring students to produce a piece of writing. While the generic skills of thinking, planning and writing are required for all of the writing, each piece is distinct in its requirements and the criteria that are applied to assessing the piece.

SECTION A - Text Response

Students will have a choice of two topics for each text they have studied thoroughly during year 12. Students are to select ONE text to write on and select ONE topic from the two on offer.

As set out in the study design, each topic will offer students the opportunity to develop a sustained discussion from an initial focus on an aspect of key knowledge for Area of Study One - Reading and responding (see pages 23 and 29 from the "English Study Design"). In revising for the examination, it is certainly worthwhile reading and considering the key knowledge and how examiners may construct a topic from these areas.

In last year's examination, one of the topics on *Interpreter of Maladies* offered a discussion on the theme of emotional displacement; while one of the topics on *Life of Pi* challenged students to consider Pi's



A still from *Life of Pi*, which is one of the works studied by VCE students.

PICTURE: COURTESY/20th CENTURY FOX

internal struggle, faith and compromise. One topic was constructed around theme, the other around characters.

Other topics in Section A focused on values, such as the first *Maestro* topic, while others — such as an *On the Waterfront* topic — offered students the opportunity of looking at filmic structures and

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characterisation. And finally there are those topics that focus on reader interpretation such as *A Christmas Carol*, which offered the proposition that "Although the story is entertaining, even enthralling, it is mainly intended to educate."

When revising, students would do well to consider the advice from recent "English Assessment Reports". "There are subtle but discernible differences in the topic types and students would benefit from understanding these variations."

It should be encouraging for students, however, that assessors are not looking for a specific response to a topic; rather, they reward thoughtful, perceptive insights that are well supported by the text itself. There is no "correct" response to Section A topics.

Naturally, a fluent, well-expressed piece of writing is required for success; one that seamlessly and appropriately incorporates quotations and is stimulating to the reader. While it is important to practise a range of topics so that students are well prepared for the examination, the most successful responses are thoughtful and original. Prepared essays rarely succeed.

SECTION B - Writing in Context

There can be much excitement about the opportunity to explore a Context through various forms of writing. Indeed, the focus remains on the quality of writing, but good writing is only achieved with quality ideas. Throughout the year students have had the opportunity of exploring in detail concepts in relation to one of the four Contexts provided by the VCAA.

The interpretation of the Contexts varies significantly from class to class, so students around the state have developed their ideas on Context in many ways. Likewise, each student will find the most appropriate way to express those ideas, thus creating an enormous variety of writing. No particular form is preferable to another.

The writing must be informed by one of the texts from the list provided by the VCAA. The text that most informs the student's writing must be nominated by the student in the response booklet.

The degree and manner in which the text informs a piece of writing will again vary significantly according to the choices a student makes about the audience, style and purpose of his or her writing. Certainly there are no expectations about HOW a text is employed to inform a piece of writing, nor HOW MUCH of the text is used. It is the quality and sophistication of how the text is used to inform the piece of writing that is important.

As well, it is important to remember that elements of

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