



**WESTMINSTER
SCHOOL**

The Challenge
Specialism Paper

ENGLISH

Syllabus and Guidance

First Examination 2027

A guide to the English Specialism Challenge Paper

In *both* English Challenge papers, we are looking to identify literary flair and the ability to deduce implicit meaning.

There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to tackling the papers, but as a general rule-of-thumb:

- It is better to avoid simply listing literary techniques. Every year, we see *a lot* of analysis that travels in the form of: 'quotation + literary technique'...with no impact given! Devices and techniques are an important part of analysis, but they should be used to illustrate how an author has created a feeling or theme.

Format of the English SPECIALISM Challenge paper

To sit this paper, candidates need to have read the specified text.

The text for the specimen paper is '*The Lie Tree*' by Frances Hardinge (Macmillan, 2016).

The prescribed text for the **2027 paper** will be '*Piranesi*' by Susannah Clarke (Bloomsbury, 2020)

NB: *Piranesi* is a lyrical fantasy novel with beautiful prose, but does deal in more mature themes and ideas best suited to seasoned, highly able year-8 readers, such as:

- Themes of manipulation/gaslighting, kidnapping and mention of death (no gratuitous violence).
- Very occasional, momentary profanity.

Question 1 – Warm-up Question [5 marks]

Candidates will be given a short paragraph from the novel and be asked to focus on **one** example from the text to show how language shapes meaning.

Question 2 – The Essay [20]

Candidates will receive a passage from the novel, and be asked to respond to a particular prompt (how does the author make this *moving*; how does the author make this an *important moment in the novel*, etc)

This question requires close reading of the passage **and** contextualisation of the passage within the wider novel.

It is not a requirement to learn quotations, but candidates should demonstrate knowledge of the wider text by explaining **how** the chosen passage fits within the broader plot and concerns of the novel.

Question 3 – The Creative Piece [10]

Candidates will be given a descriptive writing prompt that relates to one of the themes in the novel.

We are looking for advanced vocabulary as well as an ability to create convincing imagery, resulting in a piece that effectively responds to the prompt.

How-to guide: what we are looking for in long-form written responses:

Relevant for:

- **SAMPLE PAPER - English SPECIALISM Challenge Paper – Q2**

Planning

1. **Read the poem or piece of prose carefully** – and annotate! After two read-throughs, it should become clear what the ‘keynote’ or ‘main idea’ of the piece is.
2. **LOOK AT THE QUESTION** – what is it asking you? Underline the key words of the question. Eg., how does Wordsworth portray the **relationship** between **humanity** and **nature**?
3. **The three ‘whats’** - what are the three things that happen/three important moments/three important concepts in the poem/piece of prose? These three important moments will form the basis of your three paragraphs.
4. Now think about how your three ‘whats’ contribute to the wording of the question. For example, how do they help ‘portray the outsider’/‘portray Nature’/‘portray his anxieties’, etc?

Essay writing:

Introduction

Introductions should address the question directly and provide a **roadmap** of how you are going to prove your argument (explaining/paraphrasing your three ‘whats’!)

Introductions should **NOT** be mysterious. It is a good idea to start with a sentence that answers the question straight away, rather than open with ‘filler’ phrases. A ‘filler’ phrase that is particularly common: ‘[the author] does this in a number of ways’ – leap straight in and tell us what these ways are!

Paragraph structure

Topic sentence – The ‘introduction’ to the paragraph. This should be an assertive, **quote-free** and **device-free** explanation of what the paragraph will cover (one of your **three important moments**).

PEA – This will be your first point of textual evidence + analysis that backs up your topic sentence and the wider essay question. If you struggle with how to get started on an analytical sentence, this is a good ‘formula’ to try:

‘Author X uses imagery/technique Y in [quote] for purpose Z’

Extension PEA – An extension of the analysis above. Having just one ‘point: evidence: explain’ does not a paragraph make for the Challenge! You need to make **two** or **three** points of contact with the text.

Summary – the ‘conclusion’ of the paragraph...a firm link back to the question.

Conclusion

Similar in structure to your introduction, a conclusion is the last moment to sum up how you have **proved** your argument and **answered** the question.

Let’s model it out...

Blanche Taylor Dickinson was a poet of the Harlem Renaissance. We will take her short poem ‘To an icicle’ and use it as the subject of a well-structured essay.

To an icicle

Chilled into a serenity
As rigid as your pose
You linger trustingly,
But a gutter waits for you.
Your elegance does not secure
You favors with the sun.
He is not one to pity fragileness.
He thinks all cheeks should burn
And feel how tears can run.

Question: How does Dickinson make this a **moving** poem?

Planning:

Three things that happen:

- Innocence and beauty of the icicle
- Lack of prospects for the icicle (gutter; melting)
- The evil influence of the sun

How **do** these three factors make this poem moving?

- Innocence and beauty of the icicle → elicits sympathy and awe = moving
- Lack of prospects for the icicle (gutter; melting) → robbing of future = moving
- The evil influence of the sun → domination and abuse of the icicle = moving

Introduction

Dickinson makes her poem 'To an icicle' moving by demonstrating the fragility of the icicle's life. The innocent and naive icicle is portrayed as having very few future prospects, destined only for the gutter beneath it, and attacked from above by the evil influence of the sun.

Paragraph one:

Dickinson creates a moving introduction to the icicle as beautiful in its frozen form and almost human. She personifies the icicle by addressing it directly using the second person personal pronoun – which gives a sense of admiration from afar - praising 'your elegance' and 'serenity'. There is a sense that external influences have already shaped the icicle as it has been 'chilled into a serenity' rather than becoming serene of its own accord. Nevertheless, the icicle is displayed as optimistic and naive, lingering 'trustingly'. This is particularly moving as the icicle is shown to be an innocent and susceptible figure.

Paragraph two:

Dickinson then contrasts the innocence of the icicle to the hopelessness of its future. There is a sense that the icicle figure is doomed as the personified gutter 'waits for you' like an ominous bystander. The gutter is a grim-reaper figure, as the icicle has to melt and lose its solidity to reach the gutter. Despite all the elegance and beauty of the icicle, it does not attract 'favors from the sun' – personified by Dickinson - thereby reemphasising the very moving sense of doom as the icicle is attacked from above and falls into darkness below.

Paragraph three:

The sun is a dominant, almost uncaring figure in this poem who fails to understand the delicacy of the icicle. The verb 'burn' to describe the cheeks of the its subjects suggests that the sun believes only in causing physical harm and pain. Dickinson describes the sun as almost cruel, desiring everyone to 'feel how tears can run' as he cannot understand the alternative perspective of 'fragileness'. The sun and the icicle could be seen to form a very moving metaphor for the oppressor and the oppressed. The oppressed (the icicle) is weighed down by the oppressor (the sun) and is so suppressed that the prospects awaiting it are nil (the gutter).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Dickinson's poem of naivety in the face of evil is highly moving. Oppressed and trapped by external forces, the icicle has no avenue of escape, which creates a feeling of claustrophobia and terror.