

# How to Write a Detailed Essay

Choose a character from a novel you have read recently. Explain how the novelist presents and describes the character and how the character grows and changes during the novel. Discuss any lessons the character learns and how this connects to the main theme of the novel.

In this section we are going to look at how to write a detailed answer to an essay question. When writing an answer to an essay question, it is important to make sure you understand the question and answer it directly and fully. The strongest essays have simple arguments which are well supported with information from the novel – usually either quotations or descriptions of actions and style.

## Analysing the question

- 1 **When you are given an essay question, the first thing to do is analyse the question to find out exactly what it's asking you to do. Look at the essay question above and underline all the key words.**
- 2 **Compare your answer to the one below. Did you underline the same words?**

Choose a character (1) from a novel you have read recently. Explain how the novelist presents (2) and describes (3) the character and how the character grows and changes (4) during the novel. Discuss any lessons (5) the character learns and how this connects to the main theme (6) of the novel.

- 3 **Look again at the words that have been underlined. These tell you exactly what you are expected to write in the essay. Use the expressions in the box to complete the notes.**

and makes his/her first appearance  
it doesn't have to be the main character  
what the character fails to learn

comment on the lack of change  
metaphors, similes, satire and irony

- 1 write about *one* character only. (1) \_\_\_\_\_ .
- 2 look at the first time the character is introduced in the book (2) \_\_\_\_\_ .
- 3 look at how the author uses dialogue, actions and literary devices, for example (3) \_\_\_\_\_ .
- 4 look at any changes in the character. With a minor character there may not be any important changes. This is fine, but you must (4) \_\_\_\_\_ .
- 5 answer this question – does the character learn anything important from his/her experiences? You may also want to discuss (5) \_\_\_\_\_ (eg, Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick* fails to understand that his obsession will end in disaster).

- 4 Look at these essay questions. Underline the key words. What exactly are you being asked to write about? Which essay do you think would be the easiest to write? Why?

1 Consider the significance of money in *Middlemarch*. Comment on the good and bad uses of money in the novel and discuss how it affects people's choices.

2 Discuss the difficulties involved in 'making a good marriage' as described in *Middlemarch*. Think about the difference between what people are looking for in a marriage and the reality of married life. Take two examples from the novel and describe the problems faced by the two couples.

3 Discuss the character of Ahab in *Moby Dick*. He is stubborn, selfish, revengeful and destructive, but there are times when we feel pity for him. Explore both sides of the man, his obsession and his humanity.

4 Discuss how the narrator, Ishmael, gradually introduces us to the world of captain Ahab and the great white whale in *Moby Dick*. How are other people's descriptions and stories used to introduce the characters before they make a direct appearance?

### An example

Read an answer to the question in exercise 1 above based on Dickens' novel *Our Mutual Friend*. Does the answer cover all the points highlighted in the question? Use the checklist below to help.

- Does it talk about **one** character?
- Does it talk about the **first** description of the character?
- Does it give details about **how** the character is described – for example, the literary devices used (dialogue, comparisons, etc)?
- Does it describe how the character **changes**?
- Does it talk about any **lessons** the character learns?
- Does it explain how the character connects to **the main theme** of the novel?

- 1 Bella Wilfer is one of the main characters in Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*. A rich merchant has died and left all his money to his only son, John Harmon. But John can only receive the money on the condition that he marries the 'very beautiful' Bella Wilfer. However, John is not happy to marry Bella without first finding out more about her.
- 2 When we first meet Bella she has recently heard about the supposed drowning of John Harmon, the man who she was going to marry. She is dressed in black 'like a widow who has never been married' and she is disappointed by the news: 'I was going to be rich and now I have nothing. No husband, no money. It was bad enough to be told to marry a stranger. But it's worse, much worse when the man gets himself drowned!' Bella then pulls at her hair like a spoilt child and we get the impression that she is selfish, thinking only of herself and not of the dead man. But at the same time, she shows her good-nature as she jokes with her father about her bad luck.
- 3 Throughout the novel, three characteristics are associated with Bella, her beauty, her love of money and her good nature. In the first half of the novel, Bella's selfishness and greed are the focus, as she

interest in money is highlighted in her repeated conversations with her father, where she shows that she is aware of her obsession and ashamed of it, 'I can think of nothing but money. I'm so greedy for all the things it can buy.'

- 4 In the second half of the novel, Bella learns about the 'terrible power' of money and stops being so selfish. Mr Boffin, who has received old Harmon's money, gives Bella a home and offers her to spend his money on her. But gradually, it seems, the power of money is changing the kind Mr Boffin, and making him 'hard and cruel'. Bella is shocked by the change and wants no more connection with him or his money. She has learnt her lesson, 'I used to love money, but now I hate it,' she cries as she leaves his house. However, Mr Boffin is only playing a part in a play created by John Harmon. In this play, Mr Boffin holds up a mirror to Bella's selfishness in order to cure her of her love for money. He helps her see that love and kindness are more important than money.
- 5 I believe that Bella is like a fairytale princess who is lifted from poverty to riches and lives happily ever after. And, like all fairytale characters, she is quite two-dimensional. She changes from a spoiled child to a loyal wife thanks to the actions of her future husband, not through her own choice. What's more, when she finally finds out about her husband's actions, she laughs and is grateful. She seems to exist more as an extension of John Harmon, than as an independent character.
- 6 The power of money is the main theme of *Our Mutual Friend*. Bella's role in the novel is to show the danger of money, of how it 'only brings sadness and trouble'. But her story also shows how powerful money is, and how it can control people's lives. John Harmon would not have met Bella if it were not for his father's money. The Boffins, who only know Bella by name, are able to take her away from her family thanks to their money and the position it gives them in society. Bella, herself, uses money to help her father and the happy ending of her fairytale is only complete when John Harmon finally receives his father's money.
- 7 Bella's story teaches us two things: on the one hand the love of money can make people hard and selfish. But on the other hand, money is very important because, in the end, 'everything comes back to money and what it can do.' And in the world of late Victorian London, without money, life becomes a desperate fight just to stay alive.

**5 Read the essay again and complete the table with information from the text.**

<p><b>Paragraph 1</b> Who is the character? What is she like? What is her role in the plot?</p>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p><b>Paragraph 2</b> What is the first impression? How is it created?</p>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p><b>Paragraph 3</b> What are the main characteristics associated with her?</p>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p><b>Paragraph 4</b> How does she change? What lesson does she learn?</p>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p><b>Paragraph 5</b> Is her character believable? Why/why not? What is her role in the novel?</p>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p><b>Paragraph 6</b> What is the main theme of the novel? How does Bella's story connect to the main theme?</p>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p><b>Paragraph 7</b> What is the central message of the novel?</p>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

## Building an argument and using supporting evidence

- 1 Look at one of the paragraphs from the essay. Look at how the argument is built up and supported by quotation and examples from the text.

1 Simple statement of main theme

(1) The power of money is the main theme of *Our Mutual Friend*. (2) Bella's role in the novel is to show the danger of money, of how it 'only brings sadness and trouble'. (3) But her story also shows how powerful money is, and how it can control people's lives. (a) John Harmon would not have met Bella if it were not for his father's money. (b) The Boffins are able to take her away from her family thanks to their money and the position it gives them in society. (c) Bella, herself, uses money to help her father and the happy ending of her fairytale is only complete when John Harmon finally receives his father's money.

2 Explanation of how the character is related to the theme – supported by quoting the character's own words

3 Example of situation in novel which supports the explanation of how the character relates to the theme

- 2 Look at another paragraph. Match the notes to the numbers in the text.

summary of argument \_\_\_\_\_

first statement of argument \_\_\_\_\_

evidence from the plot \_\_\_\_\_

two important situations in the plot \_\_\_\_\_

further exploration of the argument \_\_\_\_\_

(1) I believe that Bella is like a fairytale princess (2) who is lifted from poverty to riches and lives happily ever after. (3) And, like all fairytale characters, she is quite two-dimensional. (4) She changes from a spoilt child to a loyal wife thanks to the actions of her future husband, not through her own choice. (5) What's more, when she finally finds out about her husband's actions, she laughs and is grateful. (6) She seems to be an extension of John Harmon, rather than an independent character.

## Using quotations

Quotations help us write a stronger essay. They help to support our description of the character, the novel and its main theme.

- 1 Look at the extracts below. Underline the words that are quoted in the essay.

- 1 a lawyer, Mr Mortimer Lightwood, talking about Harmon's will:

'He must marry a certain girl who is now eighteen and very beautiful.'

- 2 Bella's first words in the novel:

'Here I am in this ugly, black dress, Pa,' she said. 'I'm like a widow who has never been married. I was going to be rich but now I have nothing. No husband, no money. It was bad enough to be told to marry a stranger. But it's worse, much worse, when the man gets drowned.'

3 narrator, explaining how Bella adapted to living with Mr and Mrs Boffin:

'She became, perhaps, a little more proud, a little more spoilt. She certainly became very interested in money and in all the pretty things she could buy with it. If she thought about her old home and her family, she never talked about them.'

4 Bella, talking to her father when she goes to visit him:

'Oh, Pa, I can think of nothing but money. I am so greedy for all the things that money can buy. And as I can't beg, borrow or steal money, I have made up my mind to marry someone with money'

5 Bella, talking to her father on a later visit:

'I try hard not to believe it, but I think Mr Boffin's money is changing him. He is always kind to me, of course, but to others he is becoming hard and cruel. How terrible the power of money is, Pa! I know it, because I know its power over me. Money is always in my thoughts. Everything comes back to money and what it can do.'

6 Bella, announcing that she is going to leave the Boffins:

'Don't give me your money, Mr Boffin, I won't have it. Keep it away from me. It only brings sadness and trouble!'

'When I came here, I loved and respected you. But your money has changed you. I used to love money, but now I hate it, and I hate you too.'

2 **Notice how the writer uses the quotes to fit the essay and answer these questions:**

a) **Which extracts are used for more than one quote?**

b) **Which extract is slightly reworded?**

3 **Notice how the writer uses the author's words to support his/her analysis and match the quotations in the essay to their use.**

1 to support the description of Bella and her position at the beginning of the novel

2 to show her selfish attitude to her bad luck

3 to show Bella's changing attitudes to money

4 to describe the change in Mr Boffin

5 to explain one of the central messages of the novel

## Using connectors

The correct use of connectors is very important in a good essay. They help underline the organisation and structure of the essay. They help the reader see how the arguments are linked.

### 1 Look at these extracts from the essay. Complete the gaps with the words and phrases in the box.

also    at the same time    however    I believe that    in order to  
in the first half of the novel    in the second half of the novel    on the one hand  
on the other hand    throughout the novel    what's more

- 1 A rich merchant has died and left all his money to his only son, John Harmon. But John can only receive the money on the condition that he marries the 'very beautiful' Bella Wilfer. \_\_\_\_\_, John is not happy to marry Bella without first finding out more about her.
- 2 \_\_\_\_\_, three characteristics are associated with Bella, her beauty, her love of money and her good nature.
- 3 \_\_\_\_\_, Bella's selfishness and greed are the focus, as she becomes 'very interested in money and in all the pretty things she could buy with it.'
- 4 \_\_\_\_\_, Bella learns about the 'terrible power' of money and stops being so selfish.
- 5 Mr Boffin is only playing a part in a play set up by John Harmon. In this play, Mr Boffin holds up a mirror to Bella's selfishness \_\_\_\_\_ cure Bella of her love for money.
- 6 \_\_\_\_\_ Bella is like a fairytale princess who is lifted from poverty to riches and lives happily ever after.
- 7 She changes from a spoilt child to a loyal wife thanks to the actions of her future husband, not through her own choice. \_\_\_\_\_, when she finally finds out about her husband's actions, she laughs and is grateful.
- 8 Bella's story teaches us two things: \_\_\_\_\_ the love of money can make people hard and selfish. But \_\_\_\_\_, money is very important.

### 2 Look at the extracts again and fill the gaps using the synonyms below.

at all times    at the beginning    but    firstly / equally    in my opinion  
later on    moreover    so as to

### 3 Look at the connectors in exercises 5 and 6 and answer these questions.

Which connectors are used to:

- 1 show contrast?
- 2 refer to sections of the novel?
- 3 express an opinion?
- 4 explain a reason
- 5 introduce additional information

hint

**Note: *however* and *but***

When we use *however*, it is always followed by a comma eg, 'However, John is not happy to marry Bella without first finding out about her.'

*But* is not followed by a comma eg, 'But John is not happy to marry Bella without first finding out more about her.'

## Writing task

Choose a character from a novel you have read recently. Explain how the novelist presents and describes the character and how the character grows and changes during the novel. Discuss any lessons the character learns and how this connects to the main theme of the novel.

Read the essay question again. You are going to prepare an answer to the question based on a novel you have read recently.

### Step 1: Collecting Information

- 1 **Choose a character to write about. It does not need to be a minor character. It may be easier to write about a minor character as there will be less to say. But before you make your final choice, look carefully at the question and make sure you can cover all the points required.**
- 2 **Once your choice has been made, look back over the novel and your notes. Look carefully at the passages where:**
  - the character is first mentioned
  - the character first speaks or does something concrete
  - any significant dialogue

**As you read the passages make a note of any interesting or relevant quotations.**

3 Make notes about your character. Use the table below to help you.

<p><b>Paragraph 1</b></p> <p>Who is the character?</p> <p>What is he/she like?</p> <p>What is his/her role in the plot?</p>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p><b>Paragraph 2</b></p> <p>What is the first impression we get?</p> <p>How is it created?</p>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p><b>Paragraph 3</b></p> <p>What are the main characteristics associated with the character?</p>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p><b>Paragraph 4</b></p> <p>How does he/she change?</p> <p>What lesson/s does he/she learn?</p>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p><b>Paragraph 5</b></p> <p>Is the character believable? Why/why not?</p> <p>What is the character's role in the novel?</p>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p><b>Paragraph 6</b></p> <p>What is the main theme of the novel?</p> <p>How does your character's story relate to the main theme?</p>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p><b>Paragraph 7</b></p> <p>What is the central message of the novel?</p>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

## Step 2: Organising your Arguments

- 1** Decide exactly what you want to say in each paragraph. Now is the time to decide what to exclude as well as what to include. Remember, you cannot say everything you know about the character. You need to decide what is most interesting and important.
- 2** Choose examples and quotations to support each of your arguments.

## Step 3: Choosing the Right Words

- 3** Think carefully about what exactly you want to say and spend time writing one sentence summaries about the following:
  - 1** an introduction to the character
  - 2** a very brief explanation of his/her role in the story
  - 3** a summary of the characters main personality traits
  - 4** how the character changes/grows
  - 5** what lesson/s the character learns
  - 6** the main theme of the novel
  - 7** the central message of the novel

You may not use all of these sentences in our essay, or you may choose to reword them as you write the text, but the process of writing the summaries will help you clarify what exactly it is you want to say.

## Step 4: Writing and Revising

- 1** Write the essay. Remember to keep looking back at your plan as you write to make sure you are including all the points you feel are important. Read back over what you are writing at regular intervals. You may find you want to make changes, add quotations or cut unnecessary examples.
- 2** When you've finished your essay, read it again and answer these questions. If your answer to any of the questions is no, go back and make the necessary changes to your essay.
  - Have I answered all the points in the question?
  - Have I used examples and quotations to support all my arguments?
  - Have I given a clear and faithful picture of the character?
  - Is the relationship between the character and the plot clear?
  - Is the relationship between the character and the main theme clear?
  - Would someone who has not read the novel be able to follow my arguments?