Creative Arts – Drama
Essay writing transcript

(Duration 33 minutes 56 seconds)

Instructor: Welcome to the HSC hub for Essay writing in Drama. I would like to pay my respect and acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we share our learning, and also pay respects to Elders both past and present.

As part of the HSC, drama students must write about their knowledge and experiences of theatrical styles and traditions. During the HSC exam period, students will be asked to write two essays during a one and a half hour exam. In order to do this effectively, students need to have a good understanding of what it is they should be writing about, but they also need to have confidence in controlling an effective essay structure so that they can communicate their ideas clearly.

In this presentation, I will focus on some strategies that might assist students in building confidence in structuring an essay. I'll use examples that discuss Australian drama and theatre, as this is the core question that all students will respond to. However, the same general advice about essay writing might be useful to consider when writing about other styles and traditions as well. Please note that through this presentation, there'll be samples of writing that discuss a number of different Australian plays. These plays may or may not necessarily be the current prescribed HSC texts. Please make sure that you are referring to the NESA prescriptions document to check that you are studying the current prescribed text as these texts do change.

In thinking ahead to the HSC exams, we need to remember that you are writing essays to showcase your understanding of drama for a marker, and therefore it is really important to know and understand the criteria that they use to assess the quality of your responses. The marking criteria for HSC written questions are published on the NESA website and are as follows. One, demonstrate knowledge and understanding of drama and theatre relevant to the question. Two, express your point of view using appropriate supporting evidence. And three, present a sustained, logical, and cohesive response. I will structure my presentation using this marking criteria, and I will try to help you understand what the criteria means and offer some general advice about how to ensure that your essay meets each criterion.

So let's have a look at criterion one, demonstrate knowledge and understanding of drama and theatre relevant to the question. This criterion refers to your understanding of how drama works. It is all about showing your depth of understanding of the subject as a whole. As a drama student, you know that in drama and theatre we use specific techniques and devices in order to communicate something to an audience. You should be making sure that in your essays you are showcasing your understanding of this. It's also really important that you are using the metalanguage of drama. This refers to the very specific terms and phrases that we use in the study of drama. There is a useful glossary at the end of the drama syllabus that can help with this. The syllabus is published on the NESA website. In discussing drama, you should be referring to the elements of drama. The elements of drama are the building blocks of drama, and these are the things that we use to shape the experience an audience has.

The elements of drama include: atmosphere, audience engagement, focus, contrast, language, moment, movement, place, rhythm, role and character, situation, sound, space, structure, symbol, tension, and time. When you discuss the elements of drama, you really end up discussing them all together and in relation to each other. Here is an example. In Norm and Ahmed, Norm's character can be seen as a symbol for the everyday white Australian man. In order to assert dominance over Ahmed, his movement in the space can be made to be confident and aggressive, decreasing his proxemics to Ahmed in order to build tension. It is really important that you develop confidence in how to use this language to discuss theatre.

The other devices that we use in shaping theatre are the elements of production. Elements of production refers to costumes, sets and props, lighting and sound. Students should work to confidently discuss how these elements are used in theatre. Here's an example discussing the Australian play ‘Stolen’. Notice how the elements of production are not just listed, but the impact of each one is also described. In the scene in Ruby's descent into Madness, elements of production are used to communicate the abuse that Ruby suffers at the hands of the authority figures throughout her life. The stage is in darkness, only Ruby is lit with a small spotlight to accentuate her vulnerability. The sound of the authority voices are heard as a sound effect. They are loud and distorted, creating a threatening and hostile atmosphere. Slowly, the lights build to reveal these threatening figures encircling Ruby getting closer and closer to represent how these figures have preyed on her. Another important aspect of showing your knowledge and understanding of drama and theatre is being able to identify what the intended impact is on the audience. It is really important that you can identify what you want the audience to feel and think. In terms of discussing what the audience feel, this is where you discuss how the elements of drama create a mood or atmosphere for the audience, or even just generally discuss whether the intention of the play is to make the audience laugh or cry.

Here is an example of how you could discuss the impact on the audience. Notice the links made between the choices the theatre maker has made, and what the audience should feel. This example uses a moment from the play ‘No Sugar’. In working as a set designer for 'No Sugar', I realised that the play is more powerful when the audience are made to connect closely with the experiences of the characters. For this reason, I used a catwalk that extended into the audience in order to have them close to the character. This is important as it means that the audience cannot sit back passively from what they are watching, but rather, the institutionalised abuse of the characters happens next to them and among them. This forces the audience to address their own complicity in allowing the horrific treatment of Aboriginal people as it is happening all around them. Once you have identified the intended audience reaction, it is then important to ensure you show that you know why the theatre practitioners want to get this reaction. This is where you should showcase your understanding of the message of the play. In an essay, it is helpful to use a message that is very specific. If for example you talk about a play being about Aboriginal experiences, because that that is so general, you will probably find that your discussion of the message and how it is communicated will also be fairly general. However, if you say that the purpose of the play is to expose and critique the institutionalised injustice experienced by Aboriginal people, this will create a much stronger focus to your discussion and analysis of how the play impacts an audience.

Here is the same example discussing 'No Sugar', incorporating both a discussion of the impact on the audience linked with an explanation of why a practitioner would want to elicit this response. In working as a set designer for the play 'No Sugar', I realised that the play is made more powerful when the audience are made to connect closely with the experiences of the characters. For this reason, I used a catwalk that extended out into the audience in order to have them close to the characters for key moments. This is important as it means that the audience cannot sit back passively from what they are watching, but rather, the institutionalised abuse of the characters happens next to them and among them. This forces the audience to address their own complicity in allowing the horrific treatment of Aboriginal people as it is happening all around them. They are made to understand the impact this abuse and misconduct has on individuals as it is happening so closely to them.

So, let's recap how to effectively meet the first marking criterion, demonstrate knowledge and understanding of drama and theatre relevant to the question. In your responses you must: use the metalanguage of drama, discuss the elements of drama, discuss the elements of production, identify how the audience is affected by the theatrical choices made, and clearly articulate the message of the plays studied.

Now we're going to focus on the second marking criterion which assesses your ability to express your point of view using appropriate supporting evidence. It is important to remember that like all essays, a drama essay is a persuasive text. What that means is that you need to present an argument and then support that argument with evidence to prove your point. The argument that shapes your essay is referred to as your thesis. Your thesis sums up what you think about the topic and must be guided by the question. So it's important to know how to unpack an essay question so that you can effectively shape a thesis that responds to that question. This is really important in preparing for the HSC. Students should not have a pre-prepared essay, as that essay may not address the set question. Students are better off looking at a variety of questions and practicing applying their knowledge and understanding to different styles of questions rather than learning an essay off by heart.

 So let's have a look at some sample questions. These are ones that I have developed, but you can find all the past HSC questions on the NESA website. It is a good idea to look at these as part of your preparation for your HSC exam. Here is the first one. How could the characters concerns be presented on the stage to communicate broader concerns of Australian society? In your answer, refer to the performance styles, techniques and conventions that you could use in staging two text set for study. In unpacking this question, there are a few things that you should take notice of. Firstly, the use of the word how should be a reminder to you that this question is asking you to discuss what practitioners are doing to shape the action on the stage. It is a reminder that you must discuss the play happening on a stage using the elements of drama and production, rather than just writing about it as a written play.

The next part of this question to notice is the focus on characters. This type of question is asking you to shape your response around the discussion of the element of drama-character. This is not to say that you won't discuss other elements of drama, but you need to focus a response to this question on the element named. The next aspect of the question to take note of is the use of the word concerns. In this question, students are being asked to think about the issues facing the specific characters, but then also look at how these particular issues are representative of broader concerns in Australia. Often, this type of question is leading you to discuss how often these characters and what they think, care or worry about are a reflection of what concerns are facing the Australian population on a larger scale. Lastly, the statement in your answer refer to the performance styles, techniques and conventions that you could use in staging two text set for study is another reminder that students need to talk about both plays they have studied in a practical way. This is not an English essay where you discuss the literary devices used in the writing of a play, but rather a drama essay, where you make sure that you discuss how the play is written to work on the stage, as well as discussing how you have worked with the play or how you have seen other people create the play on the stage as an audience member.

So here is a sample section of an essay response addressing this question. In 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll', the audience are made to engage with all Olive's concerns of things changing and losing what she once had. In the New Year's Eve scene that I directed, I asked the person playing Olive to shift in her seat and clearly show her discomfort when Pearl was ridiculing the layoff. We built the tension even more by having her move from her seat and walk to the furthest point away from Pearl in the space to reinforce her desire to avoid facing the changes that were happening in her previously idyllic world. In this way, we were heightening Lawler's reflection on the concern that Australia needed to grow up and out of the shadow of Britain. The ultimate destruction of Olive's relationship mirrors the social concern that Australia shouldn't avoid change, but rather we need to challenge what has gone on before us and define our own new identity as a nation. You will notice in this response that the evidence being used is talking about how to stage the play, as well as making that link between the characters personal concerns and broader social concerns, which is what the questions specifically asked students to focus on.

Let's look at another sample question. "Australian plays keep the audience engaged as well as making them think about issues facing Australian society. Discuss this view with reference to how practitioners use tension to engage the audience. Refer to your study and experience of two of the text set for study." This type of question can be a little tricky for students as it has two parts to it. Let's break it down. Firstly, you have the quote that needs to be broken down. The first part, Australian plays, reminds the students of the focus of the essay. And the next part talks about audience engagement. This refers to how audiences are made to stay interested with what is happening on the stage, and students should address this by discussing what it is that an audience would be looking at on the stage. The question also asks students to discuss how audiences are engaged in order for them to think about issues facing Australian society. And this is where again, you need to be addressing what the play is communicating. It is really important for students to make sure that they have a good understanding about what each of the plays is saying to the audience. What's the play's message? Having a really solid understanding of what you believe audiences are meant to think or feel as they leave the theatre having seen this play will help to address this part of the question. The tricky aspect to this question is that this quote is then also combined with another part which asks students to discuss the quote with reference to how tension is used in engaging the audience. As with the previous sample question, this one is asking you to again, focus your discussion on a specific element of drama. It is really important that you address all parts of a question. So in order to address this one effectively, you need to make sure that you cover the following: discussion of the Australian plays studied, how audiences are kept engaged, how once they are engaged, audiences are also being made to think about specific issues being presented, and finally, you'd need to discuss how the play works on the stage focusing on how tension is being manipulated.

So if I use the content of my last paragraph, but rework it to suit this question, here is what it would read like. In 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll', the audience is engaged with Australia's issues of forging their own identity and accepting a changing society. Tension is created in the play through the introduction of the character of Pearl into the established world of the layoff. In the New Year's Eve scene, Pearl provides a critical voice, and this critical assessment builds anxiety in the other characters. When I was directing this, I wanted to ensure that the tension was built effectively in order to engage the audience. I asked the person playing Oliver to shift in her seat and clearly show her discomfort when Pearl was ridiculing the layoff. This tension was built further by having her move from her seat and walk to the furthest point away from Pearl in the space to reinforce her desire to avoid facing the changes that were happening in her previously idyllic world. This tense atmosphere builds throughout the scene engaging the audience and heightening Lawler's reflection on the concern that Australia needed to grow up and out of the shadow of Britain. The tension throughout the play simmers and finally erupts in the ultimate destruction of Olive's relationship. This control of tension engages the audience in the issue of Australia's need to face change, challenge what they had once been, and define their own new identity as a nation.

Let's look at our last example of a drama essay question. Compare how plays use performance styles, techniques and conventions to take an audience on a particular journey. In your answer, refer to your study and experience of at least two texts set for study. So, this question is again a little different to the last two. Firstly, when we unpack this question, we should notice the use of the word how, which, like always, should be an alarm bell for us to remind us that we must write about the elements of drama and production. The next part refers to styles, techniques and conventions, which is another reminder that we should be discussing the aspects of theatre that shape how the play works on the stage. Next, we see the reference to the audience, which is the part of the question that covers the need for a student to write about how the audience is impacted by the decisions on the stage.

Now, the last part of the question is what is a little tricky about this one. It talks about the audience being taken on a particular journey, which is very general. It's really important when you get a question with a fairly general term or idea like this, that you define it based on the plays that you have studied. For example, do your plays take the audience on a journey of realization about themselves? Of learning about something new? A journey of confrontation where the audience is meant to be shocked? Or is it a journey into an imaginary world where they are to engage with the magic they encounter? In defining terms like this for yourself, you can control your essay much more effectively.

Let's go back and look at my example about 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll'. I have reworked my ideas once again to address this particular question. In 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll', the audience are taken on a journey of realisation that Australia needs to accept the changes within society and forge a unique identity to make these changes. The character of Olive is used to engage the audience in this journey, as she is used as a warning about what can happen when we don't accept change. In order to show Olive's idealising of the past, she is contrasted with Pearl who provides a critical view of the layoff. In the New Year's Eve scene that I directed, I worked with the student costume designer to create a design for Olive that seemed a little too tight and a little outdated to show that she was trying to hold on to the past. I used strong direct lighting in the scene to make the scene feel stark as the truth about the layoff was revealed by Pearl. I directed the person playing Olive to shift in her seat and clearly show her discomfort, and by having her move from her seat and walk to the furthest point away from Pearl in the space. This engages the audience in the journey of realisation of the dangers of not accepting change as we see Olive's suffering. The Realist set design aids this journey of realisation, as it feels like a space that is recognisable to the audience, and therefore they connect with the events happening there. This engagement created through the manipulation of styles, techniques and conventions, encourages a journey of reflection on the concern of Australia's need to face change, challenge what they had once been, and define their own identity as a nation.

Now that we have thought about what we need to be including in essays, as well as thinking about how to unpack questions, it's time to think about effective structuring of the essays. This is particularly important to think about in order to effectively address the last marking criteria, which assesses student's ability to present a sustained, logical and cohesive response. In order to address this, you really have to think about how you put your information together. This can be hard when you are in an exam and the clock is ticking. So it's important to think about different ways of doing this before going into the exam room. There is no one right way to structure an essay, as long as you have a clear point that focuses each of your paragraphs. Here I'll show you a few potential ways of organising your ideas, but if you find another that you are more comfortable using, of course you can use that. Also remember that the way you structure your response should also be dictated by the question. So be prepared to be flexible when you undertake exams. I will look at essay structures that use four body paragraphs and an essay structure that uses three body paragraphs. If you're using a four body paragraph structure, I would suggest that you make body paragraphs one and three about text number one, and body paragraphs two and four about the other text. This can be useful in creating an essay that feels unified, rather than one that seems to be two essays on different texts stuck together. It will make it easier for you to draw connections between the two texts you are studying. Before we start looking at sample essay plans, please note that these are examples of basic plans. They are not complete. They would need to have more detail about the specific evidence that a student would use in the essay to be complete plans.

The first structure I will look at uses four body paragraphs. And these paragraphs focus on particular elements of drama. So for example, if I was writing an essay based on the Australian plays 'Life Without Me' and 'Fearless', and I wanted to focus on the use of character and space in these plays, I would structure my essay in the following way. In body paragraph one, I would discuss how character is used in 'Fearless' to engage the audience and challenge them to think about the different experiences of homeless people who are feeling lost and forgotten. I would use examples of how the characters are presented on the stage, utilising the other elements of drama to engage the audience in developing an awareness of the experiences of these often ignored members of their society. In body paragraph two, I would write about how character is utilised in 'Life Without Me' in a different way to engage the audience in an exploration of the feeling of being lost, that can be experienced in a world where people's sense of security has been taken away. I would use examples of how the characters are presented on the stage utilising the other elements of drama, to engage the audience in how the lack of change or development of these absurd characters are symbolic of people in a society that has lost its sense of certainty during uncertain times.

In body paragraph three, I would discuss how space is used in 'Fearless' to establish the different physical and emotional spaces of each of the different characters. I'll write about how the space needs to be flexible and changeable as the play explores a variety of experiences of homelessness, and engages the audience with the voices of those who are often overlooked in society. In paragraph four, I would return to discussing 'Life Without Me' and look specifically at the use of space and how it is different to 'Fearless' as it has a fixed setting that is used as a powerful symbol of being stuck. I will write about how the space is defined by the revolving door and the broken elevator, which engage the audience in the experience of people who feel like they are unable to find direction or progress in their lives.

Now I will show you how you can use the message of the play to structure your essay. For this example, I will look at the plays 'The Removalists' and 'Norm and Ahmed'. I will remind you that the following is an example of a basic plan, it is not complete as it does not include the evidence that I will be using to back up my ideas. This structure uses four body paragraphs, which are based around the message of the play. In order for this structure to be effective, you need to break the message of the play into two parts. Sometimes it's possible to find a common message between two plays. However, sometimes the plays will be dealing with totally different messages. This is fine and this structure will work regardless. In looking at 'The Removalists' and 'Norm and Ahmed', there is a common message regarding violence and power. So, using my two texts, I would break that common message up like this. Both plays critique the idea that violence is too often used as a means to reinforce power when it is challenged. And that as a society, we must do more to challenge the accepted use of violence in Australia.

So for paragraph one, I would discuss 'Norm and Ahmed', and the way the play explores that violence is too often used as a means to reinforce power when it is challenged. I would discuss how particular elements of drama and production are used to engage the audience in the idea that Norm sees Ahmed as a threat to his established power as a white Australian male. In paragraph two, I would discuss how this idea that violence is too often used as a means to reinforce power when it is challenged, is also presented in 'The Removalists' through specific use of elements of drama and production. I would discuss specific scenes and elements to show how Simmonds sees Ross and others as a threat to his established power in the police force and uses violence to address this. In paragraph three, I would introduce the other part of the message in 'Norm and Ahmed', that being, that as a society, we must do more to challenge the accepted use of violence in Australia. I would discuss specific scenes and elements to explore how the audience grow complacent and excuse the micro-aggressions of Norm towards Ahmed, and then discuss the tragic outcome of that in order for them to think about their own acceptance of violence in society. In paragraph four, I would look at 'The Removalists' and discuss how this too expresses the idea that we must do more to challenge the accepted use of violence in Australia. I would focus on the scenes and elements that highlight how people often ignore and accept the violence happening around them in order to concentrate on their own motivations. In this way, the audience are made to think about their own complicity in the violence that occurs in society.

The final structure I'll model for you is a three body paragraph structure, and it is often a useful one if you are concerned that you may not be able to manage four body paragraphs in a timed exam situation. For this structure, you can base it on either the elements used or the messages communicated, or any other key points that you would like to make about Australian theatre and how it impacts an audience. The difference in this model is that the first paragraph you would discuss the first text. In the second paragraph, you discuss the second text. And in the third paragraph, you discuss these two texts together. You should spend time experimenting with different ways of structuring your essays and develop confidence in using multiple structures. As I said before, it is vital that you address the question that you are presented with in an exam. So you must be prepared to be flexible with the way you structure your essays.

In summing up this presentation, I will remind you that in order to effectively address the marking criterion, you must do the following: showcase your knowledge of the text you have studied, as well as a clear understanding of how drama can be used to manipulate an audience, answer the specific question given, use evidence that shows that you know how theatre works on a stage as opposed to just focusing on what is written, and finally, effectively control the structure of the argument in your essay.

End of Transcript.