

***One of the most important challenges when writing your essay is to minimise summary-style writing and maximise your analytical skills.***

***Your paragraphs must be relevant and coherent, drawing upon the most pertinent examples and quotes from your text. They must show a logical progression of thought, starting with a sound foundation.***

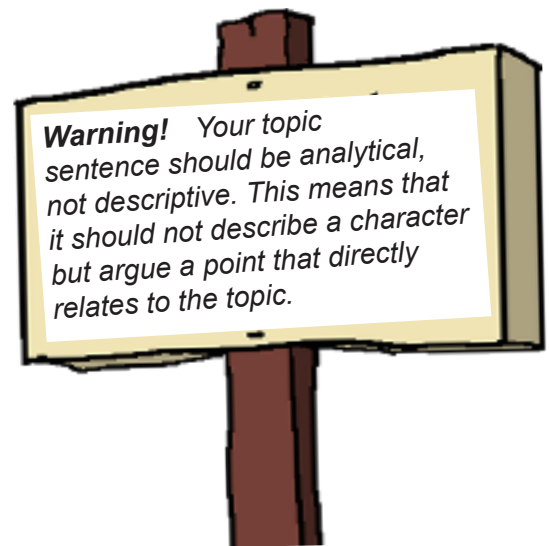
### **10 tips: the features of a text-based essay**

1. *Your topic sentences must show a clear and relevant link to the prompt.*
2. *You must dissect the topic into its components.*
3. *Your topic sentences must connect with the author's key ideas. Develop a checklist.*
4. *Use story-telling devices to explore shades of meaning and the author's intentions.*
5. *Your evidence and examples must connect with the author's themes and story-telling devices.*
6. *Choose quotes with an analytical story.*
7. *Each paragraph should have a coherent thread (from a broad to a narrower focus).*
8. *Aim for depth and complexity; avoid simplistic and generalised statements.*
9. *Your essay must show a logical progression of thought. Ensure that each paragraph has a distinct focus.*
10. *In your final paragraph, include a challenge. (See an essay plan and an annotated model essay.)*

## A direct connection to the topic

If any of your topic sentences do not establish a clear and direct link to the topic, this means that the paragraph will be “off track”. This often occurs if your topic sentence describes a character or explains an aspect of the theme.

Which topic sentences are relevant to the topic? Which of the following statements is “off track” or descriptive?



1. Topic: “In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Jem changes his attitude about Boo Radley.” Do you agree?
  - » In many ways, Jem and Scout copy the prejudice in the town towards Boo Radley. They play a lot of games to try to encourage Boo to come out of his house.
  - » As Jem becomes aware of Boo’s capacity for kindness, he sees past the stigma of his mental disability and recognises Boo as a person.
  - » As Jem changes his attitude towards Boo, he also gains an insight into the prejudice against the African-Americans in Maycomb.
  
2. Topic: *A Christmas Carol*: “Despite his mean and miserable way, we never completely dislike Scrooge.” Discuss. (Charles Dickens)
  - » Readers tend to sympathise with Scrooge because he eventually shows remorse for his heartless ways.
  - » In the beginning of *A Christmas Carol*, the protagonist Ebenezer Scrooge is described as an odious and selfish man who dislikes Christmas.
  - » We sympathise with Scrooge because he makes amends through good works.
  
3. Topic: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*: “I do not tell lies.” Christopher learns that some lies are necessary.” Discuss. (Mark Haddon)
  - » Haddon depicts Christopher as a character who is unpredictable but excels in mathematics.
  - » Christopher comes to realise that his father lied about his mother’s absence to protect him from the pain of rejection.
  - » Like most people diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome, Christopher likes routine, familiar surroundings, smells, tastes and colours.
  
4. Topic: “Let no one think me a weak and feeble woman ... but rather one of the other sort”. What is it that makes Medea different from those who surround her? (*Medea* by Euripides)
  - » One of Medea’s most overlooked personas is that of a murderer. Jason overlooks this, yet is astonished by her murderous rage.
  - » Medea’s refusal to accept the status of a divorced woman makes her different from the typical Corinthian woman in the 5th century BC .
  - » The nurse upholds that Medea had been an ideal wife “ who seeks to please her husband in all he does”. Women are timid for the most part, but they can turn murderous.

### 3. Keep a checklist of key ideas

As you break down the broad concepts and delve into the characters, their conflict and the choices they make, you will gain a deeper insight into the author's themes and their message.

Make a list of the author's key ideas and, as you analyse a range of prompts, keep revising and updating this list.

The checklist will help you write sharper topic sentences.



#### A checklist: 10 points (a work in progress)

The "Checklist" consists of analytical statements addressing themes and a character's traits and behaviour. It covers:

1. a list of the author's themes and specific implications.
2. the author's attitude and message. You must locate the author's concerns and warnings.
3. the protagonists: which character(s) does the author approve of, and why?
4. the antagonists: which character(s) does the author disapprove of and why? Do they change and how? What leads to their triumph or causes their demise?
5. the views of a moral spokesperson: Is one character a (moral) spokesperson? If so, how do their comments shed light upon the main themes?
6. pivotal and defining moments in the plot: what does the author suggest about the characters' actions and responses? What dilemmas do they face and how do they deal with conflict?
7. choices: what choices do the characters make and why? Which decisions seem to be the right ones? Which decisions are frowned upon?
8. a list of key quotes that reflect the characters' thoughts and feelings (their mindset), at significant moments in the text. What do they support? What do they condone?
9. a list of story-telling devices: how do they shed light on the main characters' behaviour and the themes? How do they underpin the author's views?
10. a list of symbols and images: how do key symbols provide a deeper insight into the characters' thoughts and feelings? Trace the re-occurrence of symbols; what is the context and what changes are evident?

**Animal Farm (George Orwell)**

- outlines a dream of economic equality that would benefit the population; however, it is corrupted by the leaders' pursuit of power.
- shows that people in power protect their own interests (often ruthlessly) and are not concerned for the people.
- advises people to be suspicious of those in positions of power who change the facts to suit their own political agenda.
- suggests that one of the best defences against tyranny is an educated populace; conversely, Orwell warns against the rulers' desires to keep the masses illiterate.
- presents Napoleon and Squealer in a ruthless manner;
- presents Boxer as a loyal worker whose goodness is exploited by those in positions of power.

# What to look for in a text: 10 story-telling devices



1. **Narrative perspectives** — Who talks and why? Whose perspective and how does it reflect the author's views and values? Third person (reliable/unreliable narrator; omniscient/limited); first person (interior monologues and stream-of-consciousness techniques); multiple or embedded narrators: authors often include newspaper articles, diary entries, letters and quasi-interview reports to introduce different perspectives.
2. **Setting ("world of the text")** — the physical; historical; social; cultural and political background is critical to the author's themes and message. How do the various settings reflect aspects of character and the problems they face? How does the "world of the text" influence the characters' choices and dilemmas? Particular settings may have symbolic meanings, which enable an author to add depth and complexity to their themes and characters.
3. **Characterisation** — rounded/unrounded; character pairs, triples and foils: protagonists and antagonists. Which characters represent, and which challenge, the status quo? What decisions and choices do they make and why? Analyse the tension between the main characters. How does it drive the plot? How does their confrontation reveal important thematic concerns?
4. **Dialogue** — In analysing characters, their mindset and their attitudes, think about their conversations, tone, body language and mannerisms. How do they talk? How do they interact with others? How do their conversations reveal or conceal their attitudes? How do they enhance or resolve tension?
5. **Foreshadowing techniques** — authors often include events or objects that foreshadow or anticipate subsequent actions. Foreshadowing techniques abound at the beginning of a text setting up comparisons with later events or symbols/objects. Trace the similarities and differences.
6. **Similarities and differences: comparisons, analogies and juxtapositions** — examine the similarities and differences between characters, events and experiences. Authors often include a series of parallel events; characters may become mirror images of each other, or a character may undergo significant changes leading to a "before" and an "after" self.
7. **Writing style and "voice": grammatical patterning devices** — An author's writing "style" refers to their distinctive "voice" which includes sentence styles and grammatical patterning devices. An author may use both standard and non-standard grammar. Tripling is the use of three similar words, phrases, or clauses for dramatic effect. Juxtaposition involves the placing side by side of words, ideas and images while negative constructions and antithesis emphasise contrasts.
8. **Figures of speech and poetic devices** — Authors use a range of figures of speech and numerous poetic devices to add colour and personality to their writing. Similes, metaphors, imagery and personification as well as rhyming devices such as alliteration, assonance and sibilance help to provide an entertaining narrative; such devices are an inherent element of the author's style and their narrative "voice".
9. **Recurring symbols and extended metaphors** — Authors often use an image or (an extended) metaphor as a structuring device. It sets up a significant comparison, usually at the beginning of the text, and this is used as a "framework" or "lens" through which a character's views, behaviour and attitudes are viewed, compared and contrasted. As the layers of meaning multiply, an extended metaphor adds complexity. Also look for recurring symbols, such as clothes, birds, guns, eye-glasses and the weather, which shed light on main themes.
10. **Allusions and intertextual references (background context):** An allusion is a reference to people, places, events, poems, books, art and myths that the audience is supposed to recognise. It is often a kind of appeal to a reader to share some experience with the writer based on a body of common knowledge. An allusion may be woven throughout a text enriching its meanings through association.

# 8. Aim for depth

In your essay, you must show an awareness of plot and character development, honing in on both the direct and indirect consequences of key moments of the text.

Recognising the nuances of the text can improve the depth of your analysis. (A “nuance” is a subtle difference in colour, meaning, tone; a shade or gradation of meaning.)

## Avoid simplistic and generic statements

Avoid generic, simple and sweeping statements that may be only partially true for a character in a particular situation.

- » Unlimited **generalisations** are general statements made about the whole of a group. While it is possible to accept some generalisations as true, such as “fish swim in water”, we should query those that distort the truth or are inaccurate, or that only capture a certain moment in time. A **stereotype** is a generalisation about a person or group of persons; it is based on an image that is often incorrect about what people in the group are like.
- » Avoid broad-brush statements that rely on stereotypes or generalisations. They often reflect a naive and simplistic understanding of characters and themes. They may fail to grasp developments in the text and changes in characters.
  - » “The boys on the island all gravitate towards acts of savagery.” (*Lord of the Flies*) *This statement is not true of “all” boys.*
  - » The leaders are presented as selfish highlighting the clouded mindset of the citizens in the community.” (*The Dressmaker*) *Not all leaders are selfish, for example Sargeant Farrat shows compassion towards Tilly Dunnage.*
  - » “Harper Lee shows that uneducated people tend to act in racist ways.”
    - » *This statement makes a correlation between racism and people’s level of education which may misrepresent the author’s views and values.*

## ◆ You should qualify your broad-brush statements as they may only be partially true.

- » You need to show an awareness of the complexity of some characters; they may appear fixed at the beginning, but they often change as the plot unravels.
- » You may need to qualify your statements to show that you understand shades of meaning. Use adverbials such as “to some extent”; “in large part”; “for some women”; “in some circumstances”; “initially”, “for the most part”.
  - » “Women are more accused of witchcraft than men.” (*The Crucible*) *You need to qualify this statement as Corey Giles and John Proctor among others are also charged with the crime of witchcraft.*
    - » On the surface, it appears that women are more likely to be associated with witchcraft — more so than the men in Salem.
  - » “Medea is a barbaric savage who shows no regard for her family.” (*Medea*)
    - » To some extent, Medea is presented as barbaric and savage, but she is also a desperate mother and a proud demi-goddess who has been betrayed.

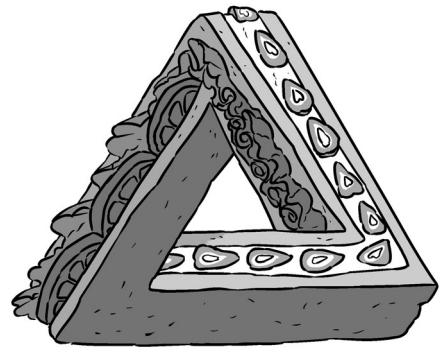




## Aim for depth and complexity

When brainstorming the topic, think about the themes in a holistic way and explore problems, opposites and blind spots.

For example, the characters often stand for one thing, but their actions may be inconsistent and may take a surprising or unpredictable turn. By exploring key symbols and their layers of meaning, you will open up “food-for-thought” ideas.



- ◆ Many topics include concepts that may be **ambiguous**, (*obscure, vague, having double meaning*) or point to moments in a text that contain **ambiguity** (*a double meaning; an expression capable of more than one meaning*). This means that there is more than one possible interpretation of a character’s action or statements. For example, a character such as Medea may be both victim and villain.
  - » Endings often contain a degree of **ambivalence** — two opposing or conflicting meanings. What are their implications?
  
- ◆ Think about recurring **symbols** and **extended metaphors** that can be read on multiple levels. How do these open up extra layers of meaning or point to key insights?
  - » The title of a book or a film often functions as an extended metaphor opening up interpretative possibilities. For example, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger is a reference to Robert Burns’ poem and highlights Holden Caulfield’s obsessive desire to be the “catcher in the rye” and catch people, especially children, falling off the cliff. Likewise, the recurring reference to the mockingbird — “it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird” — echoes Harper Lee’s title and her criticisms relating to prejudice.
  - » Consider hidden, indirect or unintended meanings of a character’s actions or of a recurring image. What do the characters avoid talking about, or what do they leave unsaid? What do they avoid? What do they condone/ overlook? What are their blind spots?
  
- ◆ Protagonists typically undergo transformations; some may act in contradictory or ironic ways.
  - » A **paradox** may arise if a person acts in a contradictory manner or exhibits contrasting and uncharacteristic behaviour. (A **paradox** is “*a statement or proposition seemingly self-contradictory or absurd, and yet explicable as expressing a truth*”.)
  - » If a character exhibits **contradictory** behaviour, this means that they tend to affirm the opposite of what appears to be true or they may be struggling with conflicting qualities. For example, a character may say one thing and do another.
  - » Some characters act in inconsistent or **ironic** ways. “Irony” is the “*use of words whose ordinary meaning is more or less the opposite of what the speaker intends*”. It is ironic that Friar Lawrence in *Romeo and Juliet* seeks to draw the lovers together but his plan leads to their demise. Ironically, Christopher Boone’s father tells a “lie” to protect Christopher but he ends up harming their relationship (*The Curious Incident*).
    - » Authors often use dramatic irony to fuel dramatic tension. Shakespeare often uses asides and disguises to add complexity to his plays. In some contexts, only the audience knows a character’s thoughts or identity, which enables him to explore ironic consequences of their behaviour or to expose blind spots, weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

Actions, conversations, symbols or images may have direct and indirect meanings. They may **imply** (*suggest without actually stating*), **insinuate** (*suggest something unpleasant without actually saying so directly*) or **allude** (*refer indirectly to*) a deeper meaning.