**Let us look at the three topic type questions:**

**1. Construction Topics**

Topics that focus on Character

* Ask you to explore the ways that protagonists and minor characters interact, and in so doing, present the main concerns of the author.
* It is through the ways the characters behave, interact with others, react to events, are motivated, develop relationships and change and grow, that readers gain a better understanding of what the messages are that the author wants to convey.
* This means that these topics generally centre around one or two characters, and ask for a discussion of one or all of these things.

Topics that focus on Structure and Key Features

* Require you to focus on the way the text is constructed, its narrative, its point of view, its language and style, the characters within it, and the special features that form the specific text type (e.g. film, play, poetry).
* These questions will ask you to explore the way that a key feature of the text contributes to its overall meaning.
* You need to be aware of, for example, how the structure of the text (such as non-linear narrative plot or flashback) or the imagery and symbols enhances the effect that the author aims to create for the reader.

Essentially, "construction topics" ask you to analyse key textual features such as characterisation, structure, imagery, symbolism, etc. and examines the importance of such textual features in conveying key themes and shaping the development of character.

**2. Themes and Values Topics**

* Require you to focus on the themes within the text, the wider world of it and an understanding of the way these factors shape the meaning that the author wishes to create.
* You need to be able to comment upon the way that the society and setting of the text influences the actions of the characters and the author's views and values.
* Themes and values topics require an analytical interpretation that 'pulls together' the different elements of the text to present an explanation of what the text means. It analyses features such as characters, setting, structure and imagery, etc. and shows how they help to convey the overall meaning of the text.

**3. Different Interpretations Topics**

* Simply, this means that you are required to present a detailed and justified response to any given topic that shows your awareness of a range of possible interpretations of the text, and that your own interpretation has been developed as a result of careful analysis and close reading.
* The best place to start is with your own reading of the text. Your ideas and interpretations of the characters, themes, values, (etc.) will be complemented by listening to similar or differing opinions and insights into the text from class discussion; your interpretations will be further challenged and enhanced by reading a range of critical essays that have been written about the text.
* It is important to remember that it is possible to either agree or disagree wholly with the premise of the topic or partly. It is important that whatever position you adopt, that you are able to develop and justify your interpretation fully and support it by the appropriate evidence from the text.

**Advice**• When you begin to deconstruct the topic you are given, it is important that you keep in mind all of the aspects of the text that need to be considered.  
• If you remember the differences between the styles of questions, then this will help you to cover all of the material in your answer.

**How a Text is Constructed**

**Structures**

* chronological: events arranged according to how they occur in time
* retrospective: starting at the end and looking back
* flashbacks: events providing background information as necessary
* flash forwards: presenting a future event first
* traditional linear: beginning, middle and end
* non-linear: where you may enter and leave the narrative of one plot line at any time to read about another set of characters
* double endings: often used when something unexpected occurs and starts the chain of events all over again
* sub-plots: complete separate stories contained in the text, often involving minor characters, and further illustrating the issues and themes

**Narrative point of view**

Authors make conscious decisions about whose perspective the story will be told from. This is called the 'narrative point of view'.

* First person: the narrator is a character in the story and uses: I, my, me, we, our and us to tell the story.
* Third person omniscient: The narrator is outside of the story and is not a character, but can see into the minds of all characters to tell readers the characters' thoughts and feelings. The narrator knows all and sees all (god-like).
* Third person limited: The narrator is outside of the story and sees into the mind of only one character. The narrator still sees other characters, but only knows the thoughts and feelings of one character.

**Language and Style**

Language means the language chosen by the author to tell the story. It is what makes a piece of writing distinctive.

Style is the way language is used; it may be formal, colloquial, ornate, poetic, fast-paced, direct, down-to-earth.

You need to carefully study your texts to consider how aspects of language:

* help to create the tone and style of the writing
* produce an image with special meaning for a setting, character, idea or theme
* have a symbolic meaning

Tone is the mood or 'sound' of the writing and conveys an attitude to the subject matter. The tone can be serious or comic, sarcastic or sincere, angry or affectionate (among many other possibilities)

Be alert to how style and tone are closely related to the narrative point of view and other aspects of the narrative. For example:

* first-person: the style and tone of the narrative will reflect the personality, background and social context of the narrator.
* third-person: the tone of the narrative voice is usually more formal than the language used by the characters. This encourages us to see the narrator's viewpoint as reliable and truthful.The tone and style of a character's speech reflects their social class and educational background. The use of language allows the author to represent aspects of the society and culture to which the characters belong.
* The use of non-English words conveys the cultural context of characters and highlights cultural differences.

Imagery sometimes called figurative language refers to language that writers use to help their readers understand and mentally see the subject they are writing about.

* The most common types of imagery include metaphors, similes, personification, symbols, analogies.

Symbols are images that stand for a larger idea or concept (e.g. the crown symbolises royalty; scales symbolise justice)

* Be on the look-out for recurring imagery in your texts for these have a special significance for the meaning of the text as a whole. The repetition of an image indicates that the author is doing more than simply describing a setting or character.

**Characters**

* The characters in all texts are the people around whom the plot is centred. They are fictional constructions of the author, and they drive the action of the story forward.
* Characters often embark on personal journeys or quests which often lead to a personal, emotional or spiritual awakening.
* Often the protagonists are very changed by the end of the text and the main message of the author is embedded in the way the character is viewed in the end. Often this will depend upon the experiences, relationships and reactions that the character has to the events that shape them.
* The way a character is presented at the end of a story, whether they are triumphant or defeated, will depend upon what the author wants the reader to take away with them at the end of their experience of the narrative.

**Themes and Ideas**

* Themes are the messages central to the purpose of any text and relate to the values of the author and their point of view. A text may (and often does) have several themes and explore ideas about particular subject matters (e.g. war, relationships, oppression, justice).
* A theme about war for example, will not be about soldiers just fighting in World War I but may also explore ideas and issues that deal with relationships, conscience, reconstruction (aftermath of war), and so on.
* It is important to remember that a character is constructed by an author to represent particular ideas, themes and values in the text.

**Views and Values**

* The views and values presented in a text are the attitudes, beliefs and ideas of the people and societies depicted. They refer both to the views and values of particular characters and to the views and values endorsed or critiqued by the text as a whole. The author's own views and values are also expressed through their work, just as readers bring underlying attitudes and beliefs to their interpretations of texts.
* In other words, authors may portray positively or negatively a particular set of behaviours, a social convention, a political philosophy. For example, a text such as Charles Dickens' Hard Times may be said to present a damning picture of the ills of industrialised England.

**Cultural, historical, social settings and contexts**

Every decision that an author makes about a story is done for a reason and this is especially important when considering the setting and context of a text.

**Setting**

* The context is which the text is set is very important.
* The specific time period and historical setting of the story will shape the way you understand the concerns of the author.
* Often you will be introduced to a text via a mini-history lesson in order to give you the background required to gain a broader understanding of the issues at hand.

**Context**

* Context refers to the surrounding circumstances in which a text is created. It refers to the influences on the author that shaped their views and values about themes and issues. These include social, political, religious, cultural, family, educational and economic influences, as well as people and life experiences. This, in turn, influences the text created.
* Knowing the context of a text provides you with an insight into an author's views and values. It shows you how they see the world and the factors that influenced the construction of the text.
* The context of a text provides you with a greater understanding of why characters are depicted in a certain way, why a particular setting was chosen and the specific themes an author wants to convey.
* For example, in Hard Times Charles Dickens offers us an interpretation of the social structures and industrialisation of 19th Century England. He clearly attacks the merchant class who exploited the weak and vulnerable; he condemns the divorce laws of the time and the education system, he endorses the feminine ideal and punishes women who do not conform to the ideal.

**Advice**  
• You are advised to research the historical and cultural period of the text you are studying.

**Develop the Metalanguage with which to Discuss Texts**

A. You are expected to be able to identify and actively use the appropriate metalanguage to discuss the texts. The most common are:

* author: authorial voice
* point of view: first, second, third person, omniscient narrator
* characters: protagonist, antagonist, secondary character
* structure: exposition, turning points, climax, dénouement, resolution, flashback, stanza, acts, scenes
* style: narrative, metaphor, simile, motif, imagery, symbolism, tone, mood, soliloquy, monologue, rhyming couplets, mise en scene, dissolve, close-up shot, low-angle shot

Ensure you develop the appropriate terminology relevant to the type of text you are studying (e.g. novels, short stories, plays, films, poetry, autobiography, biography) and actively use them where appropriate, in your written responses. The best way to learn how to use them is through listening to class discussion, reading critical articles on the texts and recording appropriate words and phrases, and through writing practice.

B. It is essential that you use appropriate language and vocabulary throughout your written and oral responses. Over the course of the year, you should aim to have developed a vocabulary list of words and phrases that best describe characters, themes, issues, the author's views and values, etc.

* words to describe a character may include: morally corrupt, self-centred, arrogant
* words to describe a theme may include: oppressive, dystopian, bleak

Use effective verbs and adjectives that force you to discuss and comment and which prevent storytelling

* The author's irony is used to depict ...
* The author's imagery of ... illustrates …
* The author uses ... to symbolise …
* The author's narrative structure helps to position the way we perceive the values of ...
* A device favoured by author to express his view is ...
* "The text validates its protagonist's violent rebellion through its depiction of a bloody and oppressive regime . . ."
* "The author affirms the need for a balance between reason and emotion by showing the unhappy consequences of . . ."
* "It is through the author's affectionate portraits of eccentric individuals that the novel undermines social pressure to . . ."
* "The narrative critiques the notion that the society offers equal opportunity for all by showing how jobs and justice are far more readily obtained by the rich . . ."
* Use verbs to identify what the text / author, playwright, poet, fim director, is doing (e.g. explores, challenges, illustrates, etc.)
* Text X explores the consequences when . . . through the patterns of imagery that . . .
* The author evokes . . . our sympathy for character A by having him unjustly accused of . . .
* The juxtaposition of images . . . suggest the impermanence of . . .
* The conflict between character A and character B reflects the fundamental dichotomy between . . .
* In this passage our first impressions of character C are challenged because C's private reflections on the issue illustrate . . .
* The binary opposition between light and dark through the novel's patterns of imagery are moral concerns that are examined in . . .
* Author shows how the conflict between culture and vulgarity provides is made clear from the opening of the play . . .
* Author depicts the prostration of the cultured elite before the forces of darkness . . .
* Author illustrates this process through a careful manipulation of the setting . . .
* The link between . . . is crystallised in the image of . . .

**Different Meanings from Different Readings**

Different readers and viewers can focus on specific readings of the text according to the ideas and values they perceive it presents. Many readers respond to texts from a "dominant reading" and while this is quite acceptable, others view texts from "alternative" and "resistant" readings. These include: Feminist, Marxist, Psychoanalytic, Post-colonial, Political, amongst others.

**Dominant readings**are interpretations of texts that are produced by a majority of readers in a particular culture at a particular time. They represent the assumptions and beliefs that are most dominant and powerful in the culture at the time. For example, Hard Times is about the evils caused by industrialisation.

**Alternative readings**are other interpretations of texts which may be different, but are nevertheless acceptable in cultural terms. For example, readers could interpret Hard Times from a Marxist perspective.

**Resistant readings** are interpretations of texts which challenge the accepted views within society, or oppose the dominant cultural beliefs.

For example, the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* is "dominantly" read as a satire on Victorian society and morality and the appropriate ways for men and women to behave, a "Resistant Reading" would argue that the play is a satiric subversion of the rigidity of conventional Victorian attitudes to gender and sexuality. Or, the homoerotic sub-text in the novel, *A Passage to India*.

Readers and viewers can focus on specific readings of the text according to the ideas and values they perceive it presents. Here are just some examples of different readings:

A **Marxist** reading focuses on what the text says about class differences and issues to do with social justice. Some key characteristics are:

* adopts a conflict model of society, headed by the ruling class, which the literature usually supports;
* class is the dominant structure;
* class is the feature that denies or supports the achievement of potential, desires, wealth, love, etc.;
* privileges history as an essential element.

A **gender or feminist** reading focuses on the portrait of men and women contained in the text, identifies stereotypes and highlights examples of inequality. Some key characteristics are:

* examines ideas of masculinity and femininity in texts, as well as what those concepts may mean at any given time and how they may influence and even direct how texts are both constructed and read

Most often seen in feminist readings:

* texts viewed from a female point of view and an awareness that females are often ascribed different roles, responsibilities and ways of acting from men;
* focus on position of women in society and challenging the common assumptions;
* concerned with oppression of women and power relationships that contribute to it.

A **psychoanalytical reading** focuses on the psychological aspects of a text, such as characters' motivations or the author's intentions. Some key characteristics are:

* broad reading that deals with the underlying psychology of the creator and/or the unconscious motivations of characters;
* examines the ideas that underpin and support the social fabric and cultural and, or, social identity on which is built a personal identity;
* includes the narrower psychoanalytic readings that, while based on the same material, use and interpret writers, characters and texts in terms of specific symbols (e.g. Freudian, Jungian).

A **post-colonial** reading might focus on issues to do with the effects of colonisation, the exploitation of indigenous cultures by colonial powers and the movement towards independence and self-determination. Some key characteristics are:

* deals with or arises from the process of colonisation in previous centuries and national independence in (largely) the twentieth century;
* relates to the literature that arose from colonisation, both supporting and challenging the effects of that process;
* very often relates to issues of identity, suppressed or supplanted by colonial rule.