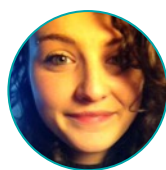
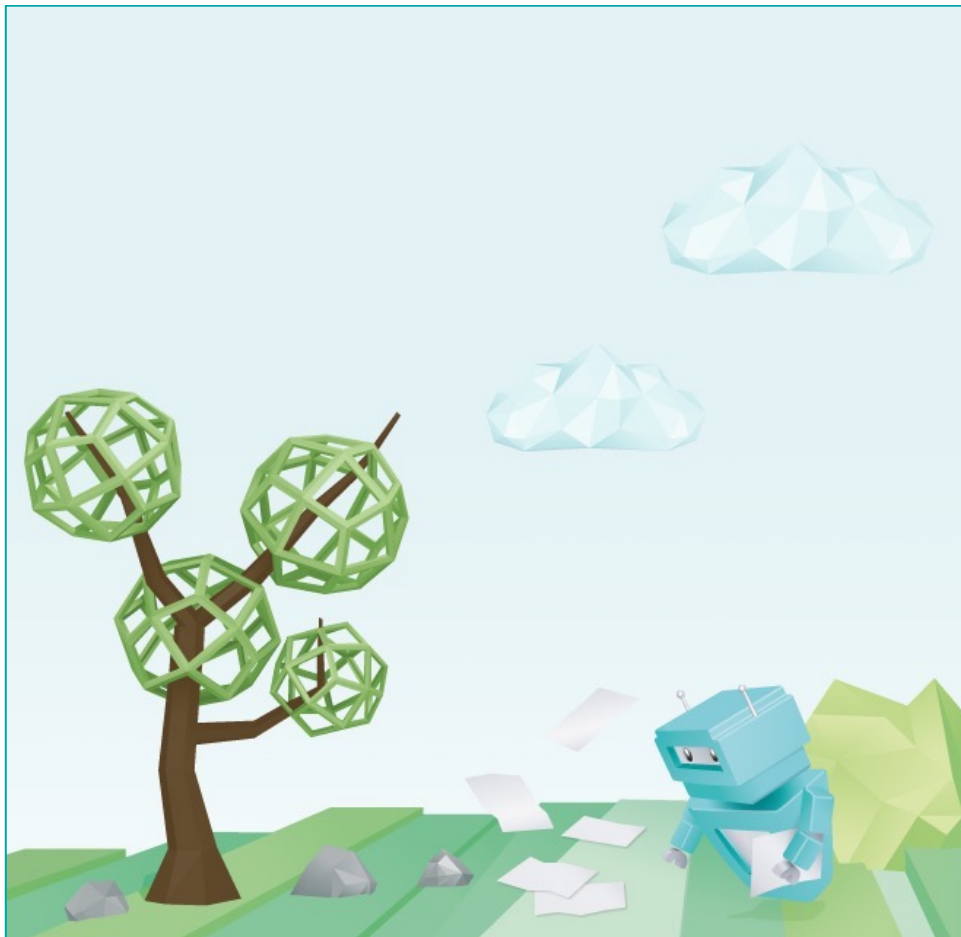


studyclix.ie

presents

English

How to get an A1 in the Leaving Cert
English Exam



by Eimear D.

Eimear D. got an A1 in last year's higher English paper and is now doing Applied Languages at University of Limerick. Here she shares what she learned.

Many would have you believe that being good at English is a talent that you either have or you don't. I personally don't believe this one bit. I used to despise English and thought that I was rubbish at it, but with the help of a good teacher and my own personal effort and perseverance, I really saw an improvement in my work. Slowly but surely, I brought myself up to an A grade. If I can, so can you!

Paper One	3
Paper Two	6



Paper One

Paper 1 has three sections to complete, Composing (100 marks), Question A of the Comprehension (50 marks) and Question B of the Comprehension (50 marks).

Timing

I won't lie, unless you're magic, you will be under time pressure for English, in both Paper 1 and Paper 2. Writing an average of 10/11 pages in 2 hours and 50 minutes is hard, and it does take practise.

- ▶ You needn't write out a 5 page essay every night within the time limit to practise this though, even if you just wrote out one page of an essay within 10/15 minutes, to ensure you can do it in the exam.
- ▶ I think it's a good idea to learn off by heart or write on your hand the times which you should be finished each section at before the exam. Your exam will start at 9:30 a.m. You'll need time to read through the paper first, as well as plan questions, so ideally, you should be done your composition at 11:00. I recommend doing the composition first, as it's worth the most marks. Then, you should hope to be done Question A (or B) by 11:40 and Question B (or A) by 12:30.
- ▶ Obviously, it won't work out this way for everyone, and you might need more or less time for a particular section, which is fine, as long as you finish in time! Time at the end to read over your work can be very helpful as well to notice mistakes you may have made.

Planning

As I've said, you'll be short on time, so although planning is essential, you'll have to be quick. What I did was, for each piece I had to write, I jotted down key words for what I would include in each paragraph. It just helps you keep on track when you're writing, instead of forgetting your train of thought in the middle of your essay.



Composing

There are 7 options for you to choose from, usually comprised of articles, speeches, personal/descriptive essays or short stories. This section is worth 25% of your overall mark.

- ▶ If you're imaginative and creative, I would recommend you do the short story. The handy thing about them is you can go into the exam with an idea (or two) for a story that you've already practised, and then just manipulate the story during the exam to suit the prompt. You **MUST** adhere to the question though, so don't just write out a formulised answer that has nothing to do with what they want in the story.
- ▶ If short stories are not your thing, try to go into the exam with some idea of what you'll be doing for the composition. In my case, I knew speeches were my strongpoint, so I went into the exam, my head buzzing with every speech technique I knew. I think it's important to know what you want to do so that you won't waste time in the exam humming and hah-ing over which option you'll choose and what way you should do it.
- ▶ Make sure you know what the examiner is looking for from each option. For example, if you're doing a personal essay, the examiner will be expecting a very personal piece about the chosen subject, rife with memories, anecdotes and personal thoughts and opinions. You'll also need descriptive and reflective paragraphs. This shows that you know what is being asked of you and it will get you those extra marks. If you're doing a short story, the examiner will expect to see dialogue, character descriptions, a twist at the end, etc. Know the traits and aspects of each option!
- ▶ Finally, as practise, I would read as much as you can. Read a newspaper, read a book, read articles online, anything. This will, unknowingly to you, improve your vocabulary and your writing.



Question B

- ▶ There are three comprehensions in the exam, each with separate Question As and Question Bs. You need only do 1 Question A and one Question B from the choice of three. Question A is questions on the comprehension at hand, and Question B is a short composition that is mildly connected to the comprehension at hand.
- ▶ I'm starting with Question B because that's how I did it in the exam. You cannot do Question A and Question B from the same comprehension, so, because Question B tends to be harder and perhaps only one option might appeal to you, it makes more sense to choose it first. For example, I loved letters and speeches, so when a letter came up on our exam, I chose it straight away and chose my A part after.
- ▶ Question B is quite similar to the composition, only that it is shorter (usually you only need to write about 2 ½ pages) and things such as interviews, memos and reports can come up too. Like with the composition, I recommend having a fair idea of what you'll be writing and know how to write it. In my case, I was hoping for and expecting a letter, so I made sure I knew the layout of a letter and how best to write one. It's important to have more than one option prepared though, as your preferred prompt may not come up.
- ▶ Practise, Practise, Practise!! I'm sorry, but it's the only way to improve your work. Question B should only take 35-40 minutes so if you get the chance in the evenings or at weekends, I really recommend doing out some questions and getting your teacher to correct them so you can see where you can earn more marks and also to ensure you have all bases covered.

Question A

Question A, for me, is the easiest part. Mostly, all you have to do is find information in the comprehension and put it in your own words to suit the question.

- ▶ Usually, in the third part of Question A, if the comprehension is text-only, the question will have something to do with the writer's style of writing, and you have to acquire samples of this or prove it in some way. Therefore, it's important to be able to know the traits of certain styles of writing, e.g. descriptive, persuasive, emphatic, personal, etc.
- ▶ Sometimes, the comprehension will be images only, so there might be 4 or 5 images which you have to discuss or perhaps one on its own. In this case, you need to be able to discuss



the image in depth, describing lighting, body language, colours, etc. and how they portray the message of the image, for example.

- ▶ Other times, a comprehension may be a mix of both text and images. In this case, you put your skills and knowledge on answering both types of questions to use. As always, make sure you have all aspects of the course covered.

Paper Two

Paper two has three parts to it;

- ▶ The Single Text,
- ▶ The Comparative Study
- ▶ Poetry (Prescribed and Unseen).

If you're anything like me, the prospect of completing all of these within 200 minutes on the day of the exam is quite daunting. But don't worry! I'm confident it will work out on the day for you. Exam conditions really help you concentrate and focus on the task at hand and in the end, you'll have no bother with finishing each section, and finishing it well.

Timing

Unfortunately, you'll have even less time to finish each section in this paper than in Paper 1. But don't let this freak you out. If you plan your timing out the same way you did for Paper 1, finishing the paper in time is possible. As I've said, practise is the key to success, the more you practise, the more prepared you'll be.

The Single Text

- ▶ There are 5 options to choose from here, but in reality you'll only have studied, and therefore can only choose one. Within these options there is a further choice of two questions. The question is worth 60 marks. In my experience, the Shakespeare option is the most popular one for LC students to do, as doing a Shakespeare play is mandatory, so it's either here, or in the Comparative Study. My class did 'Othello' by Shakespeare for this



section, but it may be different for you. Generally, and I believe it's the same for the other options, there are only about 3 different types of questions that can come up, just in alternated ways. For example, with 'Othello', our class was expecting a question on characters, a question on themes or a question on techniques.

- ▶ Therefore, my advice for this section would be to cover all bases. Ensure that you could answer a question well on any character, any theme or any technique.
- ▶ A common question for 'Othello' was to give a response on the imagery and symbolism used by Shakespeare. I used to avoid this question like the plague, thinking I would just answer whatever other question came up. Unfortunately for me, in the mocks, this question came up, along with a horrendous character question that I didn't fully understand, yet had no other option but to do. After that, I forced myself to learn imagery and symbolism, quotes to back up my points and I also did out a question for my teacher to mark. Turns out, that kind of question was my forte! Never underestimate yourself!
- ▶ Make sure you know the plot of the play (or novel), the order of events, and the characters. If you don't know these well, it will become clear in your answer that you didn't study well enough and that you don't really understand the play, thus losing you marks.
- ▶ Quotes are quite important for this section, as they help reinforce the point you're trying to make. If you're having trouble remembering them all, there are a couple of ways to help:
- ▶ Record yourself saying the quotes out loud and listen back to them as if they were a song. You can remember song lyrics when you listen to them, so why not quotes?
- ▶ Write them out and read over them several times, and then recite them to someone else without looking.
- ▶ Categorise them if you already haven't. For Othello, because the main themes were jealousy, love, irony and appearance versus reality, we categorised our quotes under these headings and learned them off category by category.
- ▶ Laying out the question correctly can help you gain a lot of marks. I found that an intro, 3 good, well detailed paragraphs and a conclusion is the best layout. It's clear and it's to the point. For example, if the question was about Othello's character traits, you could have a



paragraph on his loving nature, his jealous nature, and finally his noble nature. Within these paragraphs however, you NEED to discuss in depth what point you're making as this shows the examiner that you know your stuff. There's no point making a bold statement and having nothing to back it up with. I find that backing up your statement with a quote then an explanation of that quote is a good idea.

- ▶ **Don't just tell the story** You will get docked LOADS of marks for this. Remember, the examiner is an English teacher, they will know the plot, they want to read about YOUR opinion on it, so make it personal. Use phrases such as "I believe that Othello..." or "In my eyes, Othello was...".
- ▶ **Make sure you understand the question** and answer it accordingly. Another thing that will lose you a lot of marks is answering a question that you've learnt off but has nothing to do with the question. My advice would be, when you're starting off a new paragraph, start with a topic sentence that includes the key words of the question, but rephrased. For example, if the question was 'The characters in 'Othello' have both virtues and vices', you could start off a paragraph about Othello like this: "I found the character of Othello undoubtedly loving in this captivating drama, however, he also showed terrifyingly jealous and murderous traits". This will show you're focused on the question. Try to slip in the question throughout the paragraph and at the end again to reinforce your point.
- ▶ Finally, remember that the examiner will be correcting a lot of similar looking answers, so **try to make yours stand out**. Start your essay off with a captivating statement about your opinion of the play, or with a quote from the play if appropriate.



The Comparative Study

- ▶ Worth 70 marks overall, this section is definitely one to put effort into and make sure you can do well in. It involves comparing and contrasting 3 different texts, usually a film, a play and a novel. You can either do one 70 marks question or a 30 marks and 40 marks question.
- ▶ Personally, I found the 30/40 mark questions easier because that way, you can discuss one text on their own in part (a) and then compare the other two in part (b). With the 70 mark question however, you usually have to discuss all 3 texts together, constantly comparing them whilst trying to adhere to the question too, so it gets messy. The 70 marks question could save you time in the exam though, so if you feel confident with it, go for it!
- ▶ Each year there are different aspects of the texts to study; Theme or Issue, Literary Genre, General Vision and Viewpoint or Cultural Context. Usually, you study two and either one or two of those will come up in the exam (there are only three on the syllabus for each year). Like everything in English, it's important that you understand what all of these are and their importance in the text. For example, if you were studying General Vision and Viewpoint(GV+V), you need to know the GV+V of the text at different moments, what changes the GV+V, what the GV+V is of (eg. Family life, relationships, war), and what the GV +V tells you about the author's outlook on the subject.
- ▶ Key moments are a major part of The Comparative Study and they often appear in exam questions. It's essential you know the key moments of each text, why the moment is important, and how it changes the text.
- ▶ Quotes, again, are very important to back up your point. Make sure you know different ones to suit the aspects of the texts you are studying. It's called the comparative for a reason, so it's imperative that you compare the texts at all times (apart from in the 30 marks Q). Use terms such as 'similarly', 'much like in..', 'in both texts..' etc. to link the texts and show how they are similar. Equally, you could show how they are different. I used to freak out in the middle of a question if I couldn't compare texts because of their differences but I learned that contrasting the texts shows your understanding of the texts just as well so don't be afraid to do that if you feel that the question is difficult in terms of comparison.



- ▶ Personal opinion, as always, is of extreme importance. You should let the examiner know the effect the texts had on you and how they made you feel.
- ▶ I like to conclude my essays with an insight I gained from reading the texts. For example, one I often used for Theme or Issue was 'the capability violence has to bring out the best or worst in human beings'. This shows the examiner you fully comprehended the texts and that they had an effect on you.

Poetry (prescribed)

Prescribed Poetry is worth 50 marks and there are 4 poets to choose from with always at least one woman and at least one Irish poet. Each school is different, but generally, you will study 5/6 poets and 5/6 of their poems. There is a lot of speculation about how many poems are actually needed for a Leaving Cert response but the most common answer seems to be 5. From my own experience however, doing everything else on that paper along with 5 poems is a difficult task, so if you only get around to 4 on the day, I wouldn't beat yourself up over it.

- ▶ If you're one of those people who 'doesn't get' poetry, then think again. Anyone can do poetry, because it's all about your personal interpretation of the poems. As long as you can back up your point, you're on the road to success.
- ▶ In terms of length, I wouldn't write more than 5 pages because you probably will not have time for more.
- ▶ When learning poetry, you really have to know poetic techniques and what they do; alliteration, onomatopoeia, sibilance, erratic punctuation, etc. Some poets have their own personal style that makes their poetry stand out, like Dickinson's punctuation or Montague's intimate style of writing. It's not enough just to mention the technique, you must say what effect it has, for example, "Dickinson's use of dashes in the poem 'I heard a Fly buzz when I died' slows down the pace of the poem and mimics one's short-breaths during their dying moments".
- ▶ Themes are very important too, and often they are a good topic on which to base each paragraph in your response on. You should know each poet's main themes and which themes apply to which poems.
- ▶ As always, you must focus on the question. You will not get high marks if you merely dissect the poems without reference to the question being asked. Try not to repeat the question word for word throughout your answer though, my advice would be to use a thesaurus when you are practising essays and find synonyms for the key words used in the question.

Ensure you explain each point you make. It's not good enough to make a bold statement and then not discuss it in detail. The examiner needs to know WHY you have that opinion, HOW the poet achieved a certain effect, etc.

- ▶ Again, make it personal. How did the poem make you feel? How did the poet's emotions portrayed throughout the poem affect you?
- ▶ Quotes, once again, are essential. Pick out lines from each poem that you find most appropriate and that you feel you would use in the exam. Try using the same techniques as I gave above for remembering them. Writing them out is what I found most effective, so what I did was; write out the quotes without looking and then write underneath them the techniques used, what the techniques do and also the theme of the poem.

Poetry (unseen)

This section is worth only 20 marks therefore I would recommend doing it last. It's quite hard to prepare for it, as you most likely won't have seen it before.

- ▶ There's a choice of two questions which you can answer, one worth 20 marks and one with two sub-questions worth 10 marks each.
- ▶ Luckily, the questions are quite similar each year, so you can have a good idea of what you'll need to answer. The 20 marks question is usually something about your personal response to the poem. Therefore, to gain the most marks, be extremely personal. How did it make you feel? Why? How? Etc.
- ▶ Other questions may ask you to comment on the appropriateness of the title, the language used or your favourite images and why. Again, talk about the techniques used because it shows your knowledge of poetry. Don't forget to quote the poem as well as a reference.



Good Luck!

I'm sure you'll do great.