

Discursive Writing for the HSC

Mel Dixon and Kate Murphy

Discursive writing and syllabus intent

The 2019 HSC brings with it many changes, not least being the new module *The Craft of Writing*. While we all welcome the increased emphasis extending the types of writing and the additional time allocated to this very important skill, there is some unpacking that needs to be done with this new module. The idea of crafting writing is close to our hearts, but the stipulation of the different forms – informative, imaginative, persuasive, discursive and reflective – has led to questions about their conventions. Imaginative and persuasive writing have been part of classroom writing, enshrined as these forms are by the NAPLAN testing regime; informative writing we may consider as lower order but discursive and reflective writing are less easy to dismiss. Discursive writing, in particular, should be examined closely given the very varied definitions offered of this form. Perhaps rather than identifying this as a form we could consider it as a style that can be manifested in many different forms. (I would also argue that reflective writing invites as many questions, even if it has been an informal part of our class teaching.)

The emphasis in this article will be on discursive writing, defining it and offering some suggestions on ways to teach this form/style. To understand what is needed, it is important firstly to think why this module has been added and why these forms have been mandated. I think we could all agree that one of the issues with our previous syllabus was the gradual narrowing of the teaching focus, in response to examinations which heavily favoured argument and analysis and occasional imaginative writing. That isn't to say that the previous syllabus didn't originally require more; however, the reality of the competitive nature of the high stakes testing of the HSC meant that emphasis fell on those two forms. Early in the syllabus history, HSC examinations required greater creativity with more openness about the form with texts being examined through speeches, interviews and even feature articles. The loss of this variety in the examination led to an associated narrowing of classroom formative and summative assessment because of the reality of student results and the pressure of accountability. From this background, we can infer that the justification for *The Craft of Writing* is to return to a more creative classroom practice which supports creativity through different

forms. In other words, we need to do more than analytical and imaginative writing to fulfil the brief of the syllabus.

This may appear to be a digression but it has a bearing on the way we define discursive writing: that is because discursive writing ranges from a balanced analytical essay all the way to a loose personal conversational commentary. If we then return to the purpose of Module C as being to extend the repertoire of classroom writing we can see that to focus on the analytical essay and add a discursive element is to cut off access to the richness of texts that are available as discursive samples. This article would therefore advocate a more creative approach to teaching discursive writing to allow students to enjoy themselves and go beyond strictly defined boundaries of a formulaic discursive essay. In exploring various definitions of the form we can see a direction that allows this.

Defining discursive writing

Given that one of our responsibilities is to support students in the attainment of good HSC marks, it is pertinent to consider the definition offered by NESA in the glossary that accompanies the new syllabuses

Discursive texts: Texts whose primary focus is to explore an idea or variety of topics. These texts involve the discussion of an idea(s) or opinion(s) without the direct intention of persuading the reader, listener or viewer to adopt any single point of view. Discursive texts can be humorous or serious in tone and can have a formal or informal register.

While the first part of the definition ('to explore an idea or variety of topics') may be loosely translated as the usual analytical essay, the next sentence debunks that view with a dismissal stating that it is *not* an act of persuasion or 'to adopt any single point of view'. In contrast, our students' essays declare a position immediately the thesis is stated (usually in the first paragraph) – a position which they defend as the essay develops through details and examples that create a unified response. The final sentence about tone and register confirms that this is not going to be the usual essay: 'humorous or serious in tone and can have a formal or informal register'. I don't usually have a laugh over an essay on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* nor do I expect to read informally about

Discursive Writing for the HSC

what pyjamas Winston may have worn (this could, however, be an interesting point of discussion). The NESA definition is clearly signalling that the usual class and examination essay form is not the approach we want for discursive writing. The definition is opening up composition with a lot of latitude about the desired writing outcome.

This is very different to the formulas that you may have encountered online from UK sites. The UK curriculum views discursive writing as being comparative and persuasive in nature, involving a series of opposing arguments being presented in a structured way (Topic or position / For / Against / For / Against / Conclusion). This is absolutely not what our syllabus is wanting. In NSW, discursive texts do not have a prescriptive structure or require every point to be weighed up and considered with evidence for or against. Our understanding of discursive writing is more in line with the winding and leisurely style demonstrated by great essayists.

The definitions of discursive that appear in online dictionaries also reject the UK's very rigid and narrow approach to discursive writing. The Merriam Webster Online Dictionary offers these definitions:

- 1a:** moving from topic to topic without order:
Rambling
- 1b:** proceeding coherently from topic to topic
- 2:** *philosophy*: marked by a method of resolving complex expressions into simpler or more basic ones: marked by analytical reasoning
- 3:** of or relating to discourse – discursive practices

In this list of definitions we start to understand the problem with the term 'discursive': definitions 1a and 1b contradict each other from 'rambling' to 'coherent' and therein lies the problem with our new oxymoronic form. Like all forms, the discursive form has adapted and changed to fit in with its context and the definition has subsequently become more fluid. This isn't necessarily helpful in a high-stakes examination environment. It is when the Merriam Webster Dictionary qualifies the definition, that we see a direction to follow:

The Latin verb *discurrere* meant "to run about", and from this word we get our word *discursive*, which often means rambling about over a wide range of topics. A discursive writing style generally isn't encouraged by writing teachers. But some of the great 19th-century writers, such as Charles Lamb and Thomas de Quincey, show that the discursive essay, especially when gracefully

written and somewhat personal in tone, can be a pleasure to read. And the man often called the inventor of the essay, the great Michel de Montaigne, might touch on dozens of different topics in the course of a long discursive essay.

(See Student Activity 1 based on the Merriam Webster Dictionary)

So a discursive essay is not as much 'rambling' as it is 'graceful'; the 'rambling' is more about the exploratory nature of the form, meandering and 'touching on a few topics.' The twentieth century essayist Narayan gives us more insight into the definition (the bold has been added):

I have always been drawn to the **personal essay** in which you could see something of the author himself apart from the theme – a man like Charles Lamb, or more recently EV Lucas or Robert Lynd (to mention some names at random) are good examples of **discursive essayists**. The **personal essay** was enjoyable because it had the writer's **likes, dislikes and his observations** always **with a social flavour** of humour sympathy aversion, style, charm even oddity

Unfortunately, this style of essay is not in vogue today ... yes we have feature writers in magazines and newspapers, but not the **discursive essayist**. This is because **the discursive essay can come not out of scholarship or research but out of one's personality and style**. The scope for such a composition is unlimited – the mood may sometimes be sombre, hilarious, satirical and the theme may range from what the author notices from his window to what he sees in his wastebasket to a cataclysm.

Narayan's explanation of the personal/discursive essay aligns with the NESA definition especially in the description of tone. When he explains the discursive essay by referring to Charles Lamb and others he moves fluently between the term 'personal' and 'discursive' suggesting that it is a more personal form. Our model could be the great traditional essays but Narayan reminds us of the feature article. As a contemporary audience, the model to follow may be the modern opinion columns, or even the extended feature article where topics are explored with a personal, sometimes humorous tone, with a formal or informal register as indicated by the NESA definition. I would argue against Narayan and state that we have not lost the great essay tradition: with the internet, there has been a rise of the personal

Discursive Writing for the HSC

essay often in the better written blogs. Newspapers such as the *Guardian* and the *New Yorker* specialise in articles that have a discursive style (see ‘Pearls before Breakfast’ lessons in the ETA *Reading to Write* e-Book). In Australia, we have Philip Adams, Nikki Gemmell, Richard Fiedler, Fiona Wright, Helen Garner, David Malouf: all essayists who engage us as they discourse about topics of interest. If we look at the selection of writing for *The Craft of Writing* we also see discursive writing included: Zadie Smith’s ‘That Crafty Feeling’, Helen Garner’s ‘Dear Mrs Dunkley’, Geraldine Brooks’ ‘A Home in Fiction’ among others. What we realise as we look closely at these texts is that the discursive texts we encounter and enjoy are not formulaic and not always identified as one type or another – there is a merging of forms that makes the writing more complex and interesting. It is also clear that there is a return to the creative discursive essay with many younger writers such as Fiona Wright.

Discursive writing has a unique purpose: to approach a topic from different angles in a rich, sometimes meandering style. Unlike an argumentative essay that seeks to develop a thesis statement in a persuasive manner, discursive writing explores and examines themes and issues in a style that balances personal observations with different perspectives. An effective discursive text may simultaneously entertain and inform the responder.

The implied audience of discursive writing possesses a curiosity about the topic and is open to different views. When discussing the nature of discursive writing, you may wish to refer to the *English Textual Concepts* website to examine the importance of perspective and style. While discursive writing may not adopt a neutral perspective or a personal style, students are still able to use a first person narrative voice when composing discursive pieces of writing and may also wish to conduct research to locate a variety of ideas about a central topic or proposition.

Backward Mapping from the HSC

Another way to come to an understanding of what this form means for the HSC is to look at the examination questions that have been set which require discursive writing and then backward map to determine what is needed to teach it. The question that has raised some discussion appears in the Advanced Paper 2 sample questions published by NESAs.

HSC Examination

Example A for Section III *The Craft of Writing* states:

Guard your roving thoughts with a jealous care, for speech is but the dealer of thoughts, and every fool can plainly read in your words what is the hour of your thoughts.

Alfred Lord Tennyson

Use this warning as a stimulus for a piece of persuasive, discursive or imaginative writing that expresses your perspective about a significant concern or idea that you have engaged with in ONE of your prescribed texts from Module A, B or C.

The problem lies in the request to ‘expresses your perspective about a significant concern or idea that you have engaged with in ONE of your prescribed texts from Module A, B or C’. This question – an instruction about expressing a perspective on the ideas in texts that have been studied – sounds so familiar that immediately we are tempted to revert to past practices. This was the understandable view of many teachers across all regions in the Professional Learning course ‘The Common Elements’ run by ETA in 2018 on *The Craft of Writing*. However, the reality is that Module C is not designed to duplicate what exists but to offer an alternative – to offer other ways to understand texts and textuality, encouraging learning through writing. With this in mind, Simon Day, Eva Gold and Mel Dixon worked together to design the best possible example of a piece of writing for students to read and teachers to use in the classroom. The example appears in full in the *Cambridge Checkpoints 2019* book which is partnership of ETA and Cambridge University Press. The difficulty of the question is that it requires synthesis of three parts: the quotation, the class text and the need to write in a choice of form which includes discursive. In the sample response, the text being discussed was Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations* and the significant concern or idea (taking into account the instruction in the stimulus about guarding ‘roving thoughts’) was social interaction and the way we present ourselves. The introduction appears below:

In a world where the news may be accused of being ‘fake’ every day, a society that is manipulated via one hundred and forty characters, and where image is more appealing than reality, Alfred Lord

Discursive Writing for the HSC

Tennyson's warning about guarding one's roving thoughts with jealous care remains more pertinent than ever. His contemporary Victorians were certainly aware of the danger of roving thoughts, if the novels of that period are to be believed. However, if we hold our Facebook society against a novel like *Great Expectations*, we find that sometimes secrecy and guarded thoughts are just as bad as its opposite: a world where everything is blurted out before there is any time to think. We may know too much about everyone's secret business but maybe Victorians didn't know enough.

So what are the features of this piece of writing that distinguish it as discursive using the NESA definition?

- Its focus is to explore an idea
- It is not written with the intention of persuading the reader
- It is not arguing a single point of view
- It displays wide ranging but idiosyncratic knowledge
- It is light in tone with a semi-formal register

The response is very wide ranging, moving from the contemporary world of social media, to Tennyson's Victorian world and using this to link to *Great Expectations*. The idea of connecting *Facebook* and *Great Expectations* is unexpected but the examination quotation is unpacked in a way that effectively includes the two worlds. It has a personal tone, and a hint of familiarity and of the conversational, inviting the reader to be part of the thinking through the first person plural address. If we go to a later paragraph, we see just how varied the examples are, moving from the Victorian fascination with serials in print, to Netflix, Facebook and back to the novel:

Many Victorian novels were first published as serials in newspapers. Not able to access the wonders of Netflix and binge TV, the Victorians couldn't get enough of these serialised novels. This was the age of the social novel where, unlike the Facebook society, we find discretion the mark of all communications. Dickens' *Great Expectations* is a perfect example; there, society is not open but secretive, guarding 'roving thoughts' often so as not to betray wicked intentions or social improprieties. Consequently, the novel is riddled with treachery: Miss Havisham's fiancé's ditching

her on the very day of her marriage, her half-brother's plot to defraud her of her inheritance ...

Despite the clear knowledge imparted, there is a lot of information that we wouldn't use in a formal academic essay and it is all carefully woven together. This, I would argue, is the true aim of the discursive essay: to carefully connect seemingly unconnected ideas in an original and controlled way – not to ramble. There may be a sense of rambling but if we read closely this response does not ramble. Victorian serials become connected to our Netflix serials which get linked to the 'Facebook society' which is described as lacking in discretion – an attribute that leads us straight back to the novel. This is all about crafting and it is not haphazard or confusing – it is guiding the reader very purposefully through a series of connections to open up a topic in unexpected ways. The idea of our students writing with such control is exciting, challenging and it is certainly something we should aim for.

Having backward mapped from the examination we can refine the definition of discursive writing:

The discursive essay canvases multiple perspectives on a topic, text or idea. It often takes what might be an obvious phenomenon or perspective and problematises it. It may come to a new stance from the decided, the known, the familiar, from different angles / perspectives or points of view and invites the reader to reconsider what they might have known.¹

Distinguishing Discursive from Reflective writing

In order to further understand discursive writing, it is a good idea to distinguish reflective writing from discursive writing as the discursive response can have an element of reflection. We need first to discriminate between reflection and reflective writing for education.

A reflection is holding a mirror to ourselves: looking into our minds and what drives us. It is a very personal form of writing that may have discursive features: it may wander and be tangential as it is reflecting the movement of the mind and thought. The soliloquy and monologue are fine examples of formalised reflection but – depending on their purpose and audience – poetry and essays can also be reflections.

¹ Definition from Ann Small, ETA Education Officer and writer/editor of the ETA The Craft of Writing e-Book coming out in 2019

Discursive Writing for the HSC

Reflective writing for education is very different and very specific. The NESA glossary offers this definition for reflection: *The thought process by which students develop an understanding and appreciation of their own learning. This process draws on both cognitive and affective experience.*

Reflection in the HSC is about learning processes and developing metacognitive awareness of how one learns. Sydney University sums it up in this way:

Reflective practice is more than thinking about the nuts and bolts of ... [learning], it involves

evaluating the *processes* of ... learning, and questioning *why* we do something rather than *how*. Importantly it involves learning from this process and initiating change when and where required.

https://sydney.edu.au/education_social_work/groupwork/docs/Reflection.pdf

When we look at the sample HSC examination questions for *The Craft of Writing* it is clear that the addition of the instruction to *justify* writing decisions invites the type of critical reflection required for the HSC.

	Discursive	Reflection on Learning)
Voice and stance	Personal (unlike UK definition of impersonal) Looks ACROSS – ranges different perspectives	Subjective and personal Looking BACK, INWARD, FORWARD and OUTWARDS
Structure	Open-ended/loose structure (except in UK school examples which look at advantages / disadvantages) Opens up discussion; Explores different ideas/positions; May speculate; May/may not decide on a position	Reflects the process of thinking Linking ideas, knowledge and experience Reflecting on learning by looking at past practice through present knowledge and understanding to set goals for the future May be ‘cause and effect’ structure
Language	Conversational tone Descriptive, comparative – wide ranging – Informal, colourful, dispassionate or formal – Depending on audience and purpose	Personal (first person), Thoughtful (mental processes), Evaluative Introspective
Cohesion	Internal cohesion but not necessary to have lead thesis statement opening – bridges between sections Sections may be stimulated by questions	Bridges may be constructed between one idea and next. Motivated by questions Logical development of ideas
Purpose	To survey, explore and open up a discussion	To review, explore and learn about one’s own learning
Ideas	Offering diversity of views	Focused on personal view. Draws to a conclusion about oneself and can offer a future direction
Summary	Traversing a range of ideas	Exploratory and evaluative train of thought

Discursive writing examples

As stated above, a good place to look for discursive writing examples is among the Module C *The Craft of Writing* prescribed texts – they are rich and interesting – but we should also extend student contact with other texts and ideas.

Discursive Writing for the HSC

The eight examples below are modern texts that involve a discursive writing style representing a diverse range of authors. All these texts are available for free online. It is also worth searching through the archives of publications which have a strong emphasis on personal essays, discursive writing and fictocriticism (writing which unites fiction and critical analysis). *The Monthly* contains interesting topical discursive essays, and the 2016 'Writing NSW' series of essays in the *Sydney Review of Books* contains rich texts in a discursive style exploring different places around Sydney.

Author/Title	Topic	What makes this text interesting?
Fiona Wright, 'Back to Cronulla' (<i>Sydney Review of Books</i>)	Multiculturalism; regionalism in Sydney; the 2005 Cronulla riots	Wright examines suburbia in Sydney with an analytical eye: her use of the first-person and the inclusion of a personal narrative to explore her feelings about Cronulla link individual experiences to social and cultural ideas and events.
Zadie Smith, 'Monsters' (<i>The New Yorker</i>)	Stereotypes; racism; representations of Islam	Smith discusses the demonisation of images of Muslim boys and examines her own childhood experiences growing up in London. This piece is short and a good example of a succinct discursive style. Its comments on social divides are thoughtful.
Nakul Krishna, 'Enid Blyton, Moral Guide' (Aeon.co, 2016)	Literature as an ethical guide to life; an exploration of childhood literary experiences; adolescence and self-knowledge	Krishna blends a discussion of Blyton's place in literature with memories of his own reading experiences in childhood. A philosopher at Cambridge University, the author analyses the moral messages lying within Blyton's school stories and their depiction of adolescent development. When suggesting that these stories have wisdom to offer their readers and contain suggestions about ethical ways to live, he uses personal anecdotes and some references to other texts to support his ideas.
David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram: Fiction and US Television' (<i>Review of Contemporary Fiction</i> , available at thefreelibrary.com, 1993)	Television; mass media consumption	Although too long to discuss in its entirety with students, this essay is an interesting exploration of how watching television has changed the way we think about the world around us. Although less personal in nature than typical discursive writing, the author raises interesting points about the mass media's social conditioning.
Joan Didion, 'Why I Write' (<i>The New York Times</i> , 1976)	The craft of writing	Didion discusses her own growth as a writer and her memories of writing. She mentions several of the writers who influenced her as well as exploring the creation of imagery and the construction of characters.
Toni Morrison, 'Can we find Paradise on Earth?' (<i>The Telegraph</i> , 2014)	Oppression; history; slavery; materialism	Morrison examines her family's history amidst the broader context of slavery in America. She discusses how the ideal of paradise has changed in a modern world of excess, weaving her way through many intertextual references as she explores how language defines our social ideals. Her tone is personal and meandering.
John Jeremiah Sullivan, 'Where is Cuba Going?' (<i>The New York Times</i> , 2012)	Cuba; political oppression; cultural awareness	A travel narrative, this essay discusses Sullivan's experiences in his wife's homeland of Cuba. He combines stories of their holidays with reflections on the fraught political history of the nation.
Michael Mohammed Ahmad, 'Bad Writer' (<i>Sydney Review of Books</i> , 2016)	The craft of writing; life writing; teaching	Examines Ahmad's experiences teaching writing to disadvantaged students in Western Sydney. By turns humorous and poignant, the essay explores the divide between life and art. The elements of good and bad writing as well as responses to criticism are explored as the author's personal experiences are juxtaposed with critical discussion of the nature of writing. Ahmed's suggestions to writers in relation to genre, subject matter and technique are worthy of reading.

Discursive Writing for the HSC

There is also an excellent range of online resources that involve personal, reflective and discursive writing related to writing craft. *The Atlantic* explored writers talking about writing in the series 'By Heart', including Elizabeth Strout's rich discussion of 'Why Memories Are True, Even When They're Not'. ABC Radio's *The Hub* includes a series of podcasts with Tara Morris on writing where panellists of writers discuss the elements of effective fiction. *Six Degrees From the City* is a podcast from the *Sydney Review of Books* with writers in Western Sydney who discuss the link between their lives and their literary work.

Analysing a discursive text

The structure of a discursive text is not set in stone. It is inappropriate to teach a prescriptive structure and risk students producing a formulaic text that is solely analytical in nature. Consider some of the features of the following sample discursive introduction related to ideas in the *Texts and Human Experiences* module:

Can language adequately capture the depth and immediacy of human experiences? Our immediate response is to either reduce this all-encompassing question to a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Yes, of course, language is vivid and evokes visceral images and has the power to transcend wherever you are and draw you into another time, another place, another experience. Or, perhaps not: language can be reduced to a series of symbols and adjectives that represent reality but crucially rely on the individual's imaginative powers to conjure up visions of experience.

If I was to tell you about my freezing but exhilarating day on the stark snowy peaks of the Jungfrau mountains, do I need to speak from first-hand experience, or is it enough to imagine and employ vivid sensory images? Shaping an account of real moments in time risks losing the integrity of those memories. I could tell you that my day in such a stark and lonesome landscape was bleak and icy cold, or that my memory was one of warmth and the forlorn beauty of a white horizon. Both statements are subjectively true. If nostalgic recollections are deeply etched in and coloured by time, this may be a strength rather than a weakness of the narrative. No one would want to read about the height of the mountains, though you might want to hear about my strangely intimate conversation over hot chocolate in the café looking out onto the peaks.

The desire for absolute or logical truth can be viewed as a rational and scientific impulse – one that should not be applied to the world of art and literary creation. In our quest to convey and access human experiences, language enables us to convey our sense of perspective....

You will notice that the following introduction includes:

- Rhetorical questions that are used to convey a sense of speculation and mention both sides of an issue;
- Some use of first-person narrative voice and some use of an inclusive second-person narrative voice to engage the responder;
- A movement from reactions to a question towards a clarification of key ideas (from a discussion of representation into a discussion of perspective);
- The use of a tentative tone (including words such as 'can' and 'perhaps') to draw the responder in and encourage them to consider different aspects of the topic.

The tone, the use of rhetorical questions, the different narrative voices and a brief hypothetical example distinguish this introduction from the style and form of an analytical essay. (It is important to note that further detailed examples and references would be included throughout the text.) Although this example contains some of the features that are found in discursive texts, there is no one style, voice or form that defines discursive writing. Discursive texts may make use of personal anecdotes and contain a strong first-person narrative voice. Though personal in nature, they are not necessarily confessional and can often link individual experience to a central broader theme.

Students preparing to write discursive texts may want to:

- Think about different (even opposing) perspectives or opinions about the topic set for writing
- Make language choices that are descriptive and analytical instead of relying on the language of persuasion
- Consider their personal beliefs and attitudes about the topic where appropriate and perhaps include brief references to these in their texts.

Discursive Writing for the HSC

Conclusion

The great pleasure and richness of such writing lies in its openness to different structures and styles of writing. Whilst reflective writing has analytical elements and focuses on synthesis and evaluation, discursive writing often makes use of intertextual references and personal opinions to articulate an individual standpoint or belief. Students who are keen to explore ideas, to tarry in the woods of the craft of writing and to analyse, reflect on and speculate about different issues, themes and concepts will be drawn to the sometimes meandering and investigative nature of discursive writing.

For more on discursive writing, look out for the ETA *The Craft of Writing* e-Book to be published in early 2019.

APPENDIX: STUDENT ACTIVITIES

STUDENT ACTIVITY 1

Understanding Discursive Writing

The Merriam Webster dictionary has these definitions of discursive writing:

- 1a: moving from topic to topic without order:
Rambling
- 1b: proceeding coherently from topic to topic
- 2: *philosophy*: marked by a method of resolving complex expressions into simpler or more basic ones: marked by analytical reasoning
- 3: of or relating to discourse – discursive practices

- In what way are these definitions contradictory? The dictionary then has a list of example sentences from other texts using the word discursive.
- Complete the table, using the examples and the definitions above to understand the term.
- Determine if the term is used to indicate a positive or negative attitude

Statements	Tick		Which Definition?
	+ve	-ve	1a/1b/2/3
1. The speaker's <i>discursive</i> style made it difficult to understand his point			
2. Honestly, the speech could be less free and less <i>discursive</i> .			
3. The love poems in Phillips's 14th collection embrace the paradox of desire and stability, with his customary long lines and <i>discursive</i> , inquisitive voice.			
4. But the Cello Concerto is even more <i>discursive</i> than that.			
5. Trump's response is so <i>discursive</i> that the Journal attempts to change the subject.			
6. Yet, out of the film's loose, <i>discursive</i> structure, an expansive view of the subject's eclectic output, and of the thought that goes into each new piece, comes together.			
7. That said, Ai's film becomes more digressive than <i>discursive</i> .			
8. Written in a rich, <i>discursive</i> style and yet plain-spoken, the fact-laden thousand pages of Robert K. Massie's book race by and draw you in.			
9. The film evokes this sense of perpetual migration with lyrical imagery and a <i>discursive</i> approach to storytelling.			

Discursive Writing for the HSC

References

1. Alexis Soloski, *New York Times*, “Review: In ‘Education,’ a Fictional Protest That Pales Next to Real Ones,” 15 Mar. 2018
2. *New York Times*, “New & Noteworthy,” 30 Jan. 2018
3. Peter Dobrin, *Philly.com*, “Philadelphia Orchestra a welcomes Christoph Eschenbach back, with cellist Alisa Weilerstein in mercurial Schumann,” 2 Feb. 2018
4. Jonathan Chait, *Daily Intelligencer*, “David Brooks Picked a Bad Week to Say Trump ‘Runs a Normal, Good Meeting,’” 12 Jan. 2018
5. David Rooney, *The Hollywood Reporter*, “‘Ryuichi Sakamoto: Coda’: Film Review | Venice 2017,” 3 Sep. 2017
6. Irene Hsu, *New Republic*, “Human Flow Tries to Capture the Magnitude of the Migrant Crisis,” 31 Oct. 2017
7. *WSJ*, “Five Best: Mark Helprin,” 27 Oct. 2017
8. Emily Buder, *The Atlantic*, “How Ai Weiwei Captures the Plight of Refugees,” 14 Oct. 2017 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discursive>

- Locate more sentences using the word discursive and share these with the class.
- Apply the word discursive in an interesting sentence referring to a text you have read.

STUDENT ACTIVITY 2

Testing for discursiveness

- **How does the reading experience feel?**
 - Does it feel like a journey of discovery or is it direct and clearly leading to an outcome?
- **How do you enter the text?**
 - Is the author conversing with you? Opening up a discussion?
- **Internal Links in the discursive essay:**
 - Find the links between the paragraphs. What connects one section to the next and gives ‘exploratory’ or ‘grazing’ effect?
 - Is there the occasional tangential effect?
- **Conclusion**
 - Is the ending still open for discussion or does it close down the conversation?
- **Important question: Personal or impersonal?:**
 - Describe the type of evidence the writer uses to support his/her case. What or who does the author reference?
 - Consider the balance of personal experience and official data. Highlight each in different colours and then discuss the way information has been distributed.

STUDENT ACTIVITY 3

Structure and Style of the Discursive Essay

Which of the following best describes the structure of the discursive writing you are reading?

Historical development style:

Chronological order – can include life cycle

Debating style:

Weighing advantages or disadvantages with final outcome

Reflective style:

Wandering through ideas which bounce of each other

Illustrative style:

Examples serving as evidence of a train of thought

Anecdotal style:

Sharing personal experiences and contacts to understand an idea through human examples

Categorising/classification style:

Breaking the whole into the parts; suitable for more informative purpose

Philosophical or Socratic style:

Questions used to frame and guide the essay

Funnel style:

Going from big idea to small parts or reverse funnel

Comparative style: Testing opposing views to determine the most acceptable perspective

Discursive Writing for the HSC

Referential style: Citing different people and their views in a search for an answer

- Rewrite the text using the same information but with a different structure from the list above

STUDENT ACTIVITY 4 Writing Introductions

Using the discursive essay in the Cambridge HSC Checkpoints Advanced English 2019 (Module C Sample A – it appears above in the article), rewrite the introduction to start with one of the following:

1. A relevant anecdote
2. A quotation or proverb
3. A question
4. Background information or context
5. A shock statement
6. The problem to be addressed
7. An opposing view
8. A definition

STUDENT ACTIVITY 5 Reflecting on Discursive Writing

Write a response on your experience of reading and writing discursive texts, considering which of the following aligns most with your experience:

- Like self-help – allows you to formulate thought processes
- Invites multiple perspectives
- Allows less restrictive creativity of response
- It's an aesthetic form

Acknowledgements:

Thanks go to Eva Gold, Tess Kenway, Ann Small, John Turner, Karen Yager and Louise Ward for their advice and editing.



2019 HSC Student Days

Opportunities to further Enrich, Enthuse and Inspire your students

- All presenters are highly experienced HSC presenters.
- Many are HSC markers
- Enrich your knowledge and understanding of the key concepts
- Enjoy the opportunity to visit a university
- Expand students' exposure to their HSC peers

Course	Date	Venue
Extension 2: All elements of the course	Sunday 17 March	Beverly Hills Girls' High School
Extension 1: All Electives	Sunday 19 May	Newington College, Stanmore
Modules (Advanced, Standard & EALD sessions)	Wednesday 26 June	University of Sydney
Introduction to Extension 2 for 2020 HSC	Friday 15 November	University of Sydney
Introduction to 2020 Texts and Human Experiences	October/November	Venue to be confirmed

All details on our website: www.englishteacher.com.au/ • Contact our office at admin@englishteacher.com.au

- Contact our Student Days Project officer, Jane Sherlock at janesherlock8@gmail.com

Texts and Human Experiences: using the module to plan teaching

Zenna Diab, Sefton High School

I started my first permanent appointment straight out of university in the same year the then new (now 'old') syllabus made its debut, in Term 4 1999. The following year, as Term 4 approached the overwhelming sense of first-time-HSC-class-excitement got lost as the first-time-HSC-class-fear engulfed me. Where should I start? What am I teaching, other than Peter Skrzynecki's poems and the cinematic techniques in Strictly Ballroom, and the elements of tragedy in Macbeth and the plot/characterisation of Raw? I knew I had to teach the texts, but what about them? How could I make sure what I did in A19 at this school would align with the pedagogy in English classrooms within my immediate vicinity, let alone in the English classrooms across the state? That was when my affair with the syllabus module descriptions began. And I have been oh-so-loyal since.

The following content tracks how I unpacked the 2019-2023 common module and exemplifies how I turned the module description into a pedagogical resource in my classroom. The activities I designed were used at the beginning of my program to introduce the module but could also be effective in revising the common module content in the lead up to Trial HSC Examinations, or even just post the summer break.

You will observe a pattern emerging, wherein the module is the agent of pedagogy in my English programs, providing a focus for content and directing resource preparation.

Unpacking the module

Teacher Task 1: Unpacking the new syllabus module

Unpacking a new module is always fun – and confusing. After rereading the common module a few times, I realised it was quite different to the Area of Study, albeit resonating to some degree with that last paragraph that seems to have carried

from 'Change' and been slapped onto the 'Journeys', 'Belonging' and 'Discovery' studies, respectively – that point about the AoS providing a reading experience that would allow my 17 year old students to 'make connections between themselves, the world of the text and their wider world' (2017 Common Module statement). Immediately that triggered my first lightbulb – this module sustains the focus on reader response. Combine that with the diction in the module's title: TEXTS and human experiences. This was a first. Just like the last big change to Module C in the 'old' Advanced course, when the gerund 'representing' was added to the elective titles. With these points in mind, two things became clear: this module is big. And explicit. And this sets both a good and bad first impression.

Big = not good (too much to cover!)

Explicit = great (clear direction to guide the unit.)

Tackling the 'big' problem comes naturally to English teachers: deconstruct. Pulling apart the module, being careful not to disturb noun groups and adjectival clauses, I decided to separate the sentences in the module into the following parts:

Text Requirements	Concept: Human Experiences	Representation	Reader Response	Composition
-------------------	-------------------------------	----------------	-----------------	-------------

The next thing was to decide which sentences fitted into each category, which wasn't too hard to complete, considering words such as 'how', 'represent', 'responding', 'compose', and all the verbs that depict reader response feature throughout the entire module. After a few drafts and consultation with my colleagues, every main idea in the module was organised into five parts (see Student Resource 1).