



# **Preparing for the Examination in Higher English**

**Information for Lecturers**

**October 2004**



## Background

This guide is designed to assist lecturers preparing candidates for the external examination in Higher English. It gives a brief overview of changes in the exam over the last few years, and then provides information, suggestions and ideas to help during the period of exam preparation.

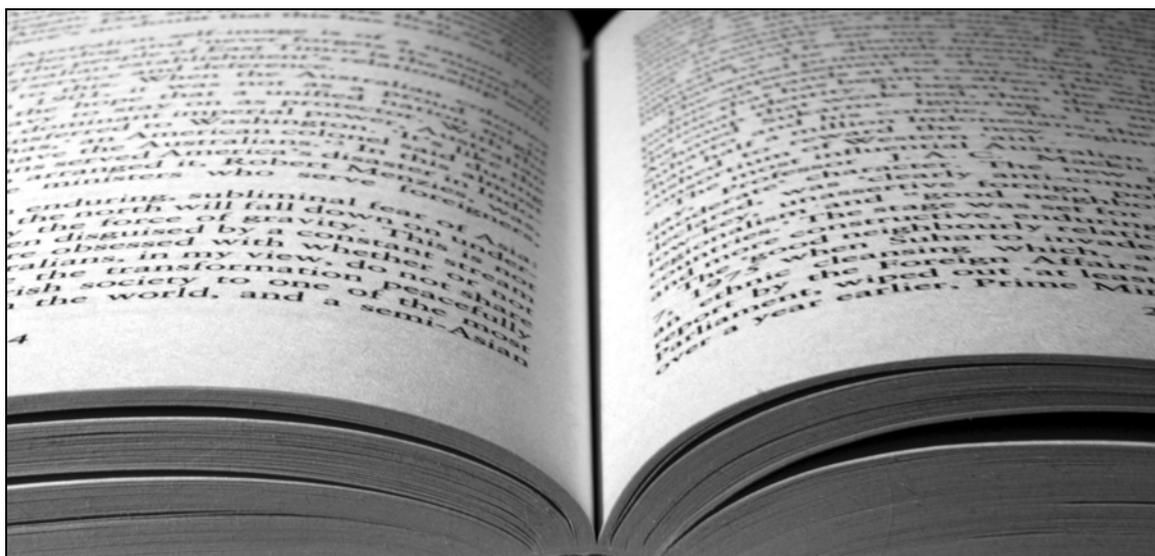
Lecturers (or students) who have access to back papers can easily become confused. Much has changed in recent years, although much also remains familiar. A brief summary of changes during the last few years may prove useful to new staff, especially if working with candidates who once sat an earlier incarnation of the paper:

- **Before 2000:** The 'Revised' Higher was in place. *Paper 1* consisted of interpretation (normally questions on two passages, though sometimes there was only one) and a written report (based on sets of information supplied). The interpretation was worth 40 marks, the report 35. Time allowed was 2 hours and 5 minutes. *Paper 2* included sets of questions on passages from 'specified texts' – candidates had to tackle one of these or an unseen practical criticism. Candidates were also required to write one critical essay. Time allowed for the whole paper – 95 minutes. Additionally, a folio of candidate work was submitted to SQA (then SEB) for external assessment. It comprised the 'Review of Personal Reading' (the dreaded RPR) and one other piece of writing – usually a reflective or discursive essay. The folio work was worth 33.3% of the total grade. There was no internal assessment.
- **2000-2002:** the Revised Higher became 'English and Communication Higher'. The course (like all Higher Still Courses) was divided into units (which had to be internally assessed according to outcome and performance criteria) and an end examination, externally marked and graded. *Paper 1* became *Interpretation* (renamed *Close Reading* in 2002). The paper consisted of two reading passages – marked out of 60, with a time allowance of 90 minutes. *Paper 2* became *Analysis and Appreciation* – another 90-minute paper. It consisted of two sections, each marked out of 30. The first was an unseen textual analysis, the second a critical essay. The requirement to study 'specified texts' with students was removed. There was a folio of work, internally assessed as part of the course units and then externally graded. This was worth 40% of the end award: it included a Specialist Study (similar to RPR), a shorter piece of writing for language assessment, and the internal mark of an oral or critical listening component.
- **2003-present:** the English and Communication Higher has become 'English Higher' again. There are still two papers – *Close Reading* and *Critical Essay*. Each paper must be completed in 90 minutes and each is marked out of 50. The folio of externally assessed work has been removed, although internal assessments for units (somewhat reduced) remain. The *Close Reading* paper, consisting of two reading passages with questions, remains much as in the previous version. However, the *Critical Essay* paper is now simply what its title suggests – a paper requiring the candidate to write two critical essays.

Clearly the importance of the external examination has increased significantly since 2003. Previously, the folio work – where most candidates did well – could bolster the final grade.

The number of entries in 2003 was slightly higher than the previous year; the pass rate was lower. Although changes meant that less time was now required for folio work, the 'extra' time did not seem to have paid off in terms of better performance in the end exam.

## The Close Reading Paper



### Guidance from PA reports

Feedback on exam results from the Principal Assessor, provided in report form on the SQA website each October, is a valuable source of information. It suggests that:

- questions testing understanding are generally well done
- analysis questions pose significant difficulties
- answers on imagery are often weak, especially in terms of showing how the literal 'origin' of the image is exploited
- word choice answers often fail to explore connotative areas of language effectively
- fixed expectations about what the final question(s) is going to assess can lead candidates to focus on wrong area.

There are four main issues for most candidates:

1. Understanding the two passages properly.
2. Identifying the question-type (apparently straightforward, but students don't always find it so).
3. Using an appropriate method to answer each question.
4. Completing the paper satisfactorily in the time allowed.

If the candidate is unable to understand the passages well enough to answer clearly by prelim stage – s/he is being presented at too high a level. No amount of work on method will solve this problem. Equally, good timing is crucial – but it's no use finishing on time if question method is wrongly applied. Continuous, highly-focused teaching on question method is therefore crucial.

There is a wide range of published material to assist with this. However, sometimes candidates who have previously undertaken the exam at Intermediate 2 fail to realise the difference in marking rules – they simply don't go *far enough*. It needs to be driven home from the start that identification of feature is crucial but usually not enough – on its own – to score marks.

Continuous practice on questions grouped according to question type is also useful, especially in the early stages. At this point, it is helpful if individuals make their own notes on what to remember when doing questions of this type. Sometimes course notes make perfect sense to English teachers, but not to the candidate. Candidates will readily admit they are not good at 'analysis', but still don't really understand what analysis *is*.

### **Methods of Developing Analytical Skill**

- Early practice with method notes can be helpful (some are included in the candidate guide but it is better if candidates make their own).
- Rewriting weak answers in order to provide exemplars may help.
- After each practice session, candidates can be encouraged to note down where they went wrong and what they still need to practise.
- Discussing a set of exemplar answers in order to encourage candidates to 'think like a marker' may be helpful.
- A set of questions tackled early in the course and then reviewed in depth may be re-done under test conditions much later. The second mark should be much higher if the candidate has developed analysis skills. This will help build confidence (or highlight a significant problem).

### **Developing Accuracy**

- Candidates can be encouraged to use highlighter pens to make sure they refer correctly to the lines mentioned in the question.
- Each time an answer scores poorly because the question has been misread or inaccurately read, the candidate can mark their own work with some kind of amusing symbol – a dunce's hat perhaps. (It's even possible to keep stickers handy.) If such symbols occur frequently, it will help raise awareness.
- Each time a candidate produces an excellent answer for a particular question type, they should be encouraged to keep that answer in their notes for reference.

### **Developing Speed**

- Timed practice on back papers is the most common method of developing speed. The downside to this is that it soon becomes very boring, as well as creating huge swathes of marking.
- Timed practice on small groups of questions can be less onerous and encourage highly-focused concentration.
- Candidates can be encouraged to make the connection between the marks and time allocation. If 50 marks have to be acquired in, say, 70 minutes, a two-mark question should take no longer than 2.5 minutes. This principle can be used in class for timed practice on sections of papers, rather than the whole paper.
- Discussing how to get full marks concisely may help. Several candidates in a class may have scored full marks for one question. Who has written the shortest successful answer? Can it be usefully shared?
- Candidates who persist in copying out the question as a preface to answering it, should be discouraged from doing this, since it is so time-consuming. If this method has become a comfort-blanket for them, they will need to find another approach with which to feel confident.
- Candidates can be encouraged to use bullet-point formats where appropriate – it's often a useful way of counteracting the habit of rewriting the whole question.

## **Confirming Understanding**

- After considerable practice and dedicated teaching, some candidates still do not understand how to answer certain question types. One method of identifying who has this problem – before doing something about it – is to give candidates a revision quiz which requires *them* to explain method. The results of such a quiz can be illuminating.
- A sample quiz is included as Appendix A.
- After the quiz has been undertaken, it's crucial that each candidate arrives at a set of explanations s/he understands.
- The candidate should be encouraged to use their personalised document to revise just before the next timed practice. It can make a significant difference.

## Critical Essay Paper

### Feedback from PA reports

- 'Drama' and 'Prose' responses may contain excessive amounts of narration with insufficient relevance to the question.
- In 'Poetry' answers, candidates can be so technique-oriented that they lose sight of central meaning, as well as losing relevance to the question.
- Preparation of at least two reasonably substantial texts is essential. Two flimsy texts (typically one story and one poem) can lead to transparently desperate measures when there is no suitable question.
- Though the Personal Study text can be used in the examination, answers which seem to be based on this are usually weak.
- Though there are now more non-fiction questions, there has not yet been an equivalent uptake.
- Answers from the 'Language' section are poor.
- Accuracy in sentence boundaries continues to give cause for concern.

Generally, relevance to the question is improving, suggesting that performance criterion d) is being carefully taught. Most candidates do succeed in producing two substantial pieces of writing and the removal of unseen textual analysis does not seem to have had any negative effect: candidates previously did not perform well on this question.

The main challenge for exam preparation, therefore, is to develop strategies which will maximise each candidate's potential on the day.

### Suggestions for Preparation

- The candidate who has prepared two substantial texts thoroughly, from two different genres, should find two appropriate questions on the paper. (Examples of 'substantial' novels mentioned by the PA last year at development sessions included *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *The Cone-gatherers*, *The Great Gatsby*.)
- The candidate who prepares four texts 'skimpily' cannot be similarly assured that questions will suit preparation.
- Poetry questions generally are tighter and more restrictive than they were at one time. They cannot be undertaken without thinking hard about how the text(s) can be used. If only one poem is prepared, there is no guarantee that a suitable question will come up. A 'rehearsed' essay is to be strongly discouraged.
- Answering on a short story is not an easy option – it requires active insight and awareness of relevant technique.
- If the Personal Study text is being relied on for exam purposes, it needs the same level of preparation as any other text. It is unlikely that an exam question will address the same issues as those previously chosen by the candidate for classroom assessment. If a candidate is keen to use the Personal Study text in the exam, it would be a good idea to have unseen and timed question practice in class before the exam to test viability.
- The greater number of questions on non-fiction makes this option well worth considering.

## **Practical Tips**

- Time is short but it's very important for candidates to allow thinking time before commencing an essay. Misreading the question or choosing one from the wrong section can prove a costly mistake.
- The structure of the essay question is important – and it is meant to be helpful. The second sentence (not the third) must drive the answer. If the answer does not do what the second sentence requires, the essay will fail on relevance.
- It is crucial not to lose sight of the 'central concerns' of the text as a whole. This should be a prominent part of the answer.
- Longer quotations need to be set out effectively on the page. This may need focused practice if time pressure creates weakness here. Normally such a quotation will be followed by a new sentence.
- Spelling, syntax and punctuation need to be 'sufficiently accurate' to pass. This does not mean performance has to be error-free, but does mean that accuracy needs to be consistently encouraged during the preparation period. The most common error is the comma splice. One way of reducing the number of comma splice errors is to draw attention to the fact that words such as 'however', 'therefore' and 'this' cannot be used as connectives. Focused punctuation practice on this point can pay off ('spot-the-error' exercises are easy to draw up).
- Many candidates commonly combine two words in phrases like 'a lot', 'in fact' and 'as well' – this could also be included in the 'spot-the-error' task.

## **Methods for Improving Essay Performance**

Clearly essay performance is developed steadily during the year. However, in the last few weeks before the exam, when time is at a premium, the following suggestions may add variety to standard back-paper practice:

- Give candidates 15 minutes to choose a question and write the first page of an answer. When time is up, they should be ready to discuss whether that essay was working for them. If not, where were they going wrong?
- Give out a back paper, with five minutes to choose preferred questions. Then rate the questions according to popularity and investigate why certain choices proved most popular. This allows a tutor who knows the prepared texts to highlight how well they really suit the chosen question – and even to point out snags.
- Give candidates the first third of an exemplar essay and ask them to make bullet point notes on what should be included in the rest.
- Give candidates exemplar essays and ask them to highlight points they thought particularly relevant to the question, as well as any part they think not relevant. This should lead into whole class discussion.
- Exemplar essays can also be used to help students spot technical errors: 'find the 12 mistakes on page 3 ...'
- Ask them to sum up the plot and/or central concerns of each text they have prepared in not more than 75 words. This may help them avoid writing 2/3 of an essay explaining what the text is about before they start answering the question. A similar task is useful for key scenes of plays or significant chapters in novels.

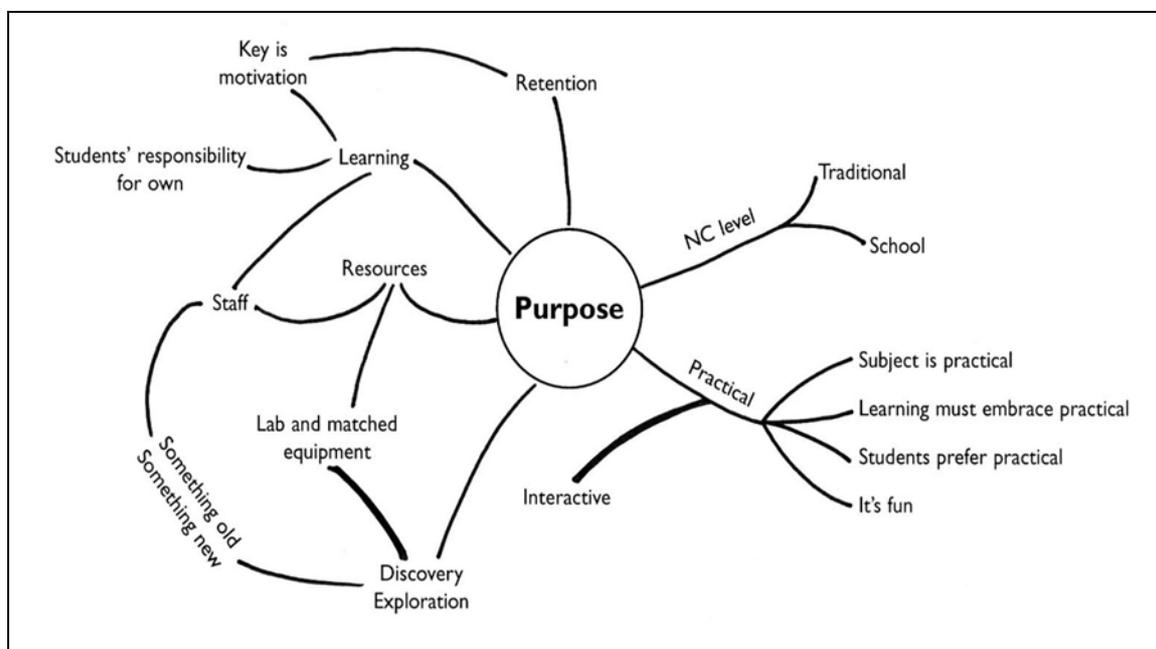
Often candidates have written some good critical essays by the end of the year, but not under time pressure. For appeal purposes, examples of essays need to be clearly undertaken in exam conditions. Prelim examinations may provide suitable material, but can be too early in the year to show the candidate performing well.

Later essay work can provide appropriate evidence, at the same time as offering useful practice. In this case, however, the assessment instrument needs to comprise appropriate *unseen* question choices, with time allowed for completion clearly stated. Back papers are in the public domain and may not be suitable. Focused revision, followed by a formalised 45-minute essay ‘test’, is very useful. Even when classroom time is less than generous, it should be possible to do this. It does not help candidates in the exam if classroom practice always offers easy questions. A tough ‘test’ assessment develops thinking skills.

## Memory Work

Clearly candidates need both to understand their prepared texts, and to be able to quote from them confidently. Revision of quotations through the year is helpful, so that candidates may start to ‘absorb’ certain textual references, rather than sit down at the end and memorise cold. Posters on the classroom wall (if it’s a classroom and if there are walls) can be excellent prompts. Once certain quotations are familiar to everybody, it is well worth discussing how each quotation could be used to illustrate several different things – perhaps to highlight different aspects of technique, or different themes/ideas. Three or four quotations used well in an essay are worth three times that number used without appropriate comment.

Many candidates say they find mind-mapping extremely useful for revision purposes. An individual mind-map can also help a candidate explain how s/he understands the text (and occasionally can help a tutor to address a *misunderstanding*). Candidates should be encouraged to include quotations on mind-maps – perhaps in speech balloons. One quotation can be arrow-linked to different ideas or themes. At the end of the year, when candidates are reviewing revision notes, it is an excellent use of time to incorporate key points into mind-maps.



An individual question can also be mind-mapped. This is often an interesting way of discussing how an essay could match a question. The second sentence of the question goes in the middle of the map. Students can then offer suggestions for which aspects of the text could connect with this central idea.

It is likely that a group discussion will suggest more than any one essay can handle – and this is helpful in illustrating the necessity of being selective if the candidate is to finish a complete essay in 45 minutes.

### **Over-emphasis on ‘Techniques’**

The third sentence of each essay question lists specific ‘features’ which may be discussed in the answer. This is intended to be helpful, but not to encourage candidates to structure their essay according to ‘features’. If the candidate is focused on the second sentence, and is thinking carefully about how to address it, appropriate ‘features’ of the text should automatically be drawn into the discussion. In ‘Poetry’ questions, the list of features includes many aspects of poetic ‘technique’. An overly minute examination of such techniques is likely to lead to a ‘tour guide’ essay which will probably fail on p.c.d). Use of ‘cribs’ or notes which support poetry revision ‘technique by technique’ should be discouraged.

### **Building Confidence**

At the end of the year, if essay skills are still weak, it is important to highlight strengths as well as points for improvement. Although it helps no-one to mark essays more generously than they deserve, it is essential to find something to praise. If you can say, ‘do more of *this* in the exam’ and point to even one specific part of an essay, it will help the candidate feel that s/he has the potential to succeed and that some focused hard work in the last few days can pay off. Candidates need to feel that their teacher believes in them: that way they may start to believe in themselves. When a person loses confidence in an exam, they often stop writing. There are no marks for a blank sheet!

## **Appendix A: Revision Quiz: Close Reading**

Imagine you're trying to help someone who is having difficulty with close reading.

1. In simple terms, explain how to answer an imagery question.
2. Explain what is meant by 'connotations'?
3. Explain in simple terms how to answer a 'link' question.
4. Explain how to answer a word choice question.
5. List 4 possible features you might comment on in a sentence structure question.
6. What are 'language features'? List at least 5.
7. Explain what is meant by 'evaluation'.
8. What sort of things should you be discussing if asked to comment on 'style'? List at least 4.
9. How should someone tackle a question that asks him or her to comment on 'the writer's ideas'?
10. Why do Understanding questions usually require you to 'use your own words'?



# **Preparing for the Examination in Higher English**

**Information for Candidates**

**October 2004**



## The Close Reading Paper: Some Tips

### Close Reading Method

- Make sure you're confident about how to tackle each question type.
- Revise your answering method just before you tackle a practice paper in class.
- Make sure the time you spend on each question corresponds with the mark value (no use spending 10 minutes on a 1-mark question).

### Tackling Understanding Questions

- Read the question very carefully.
- Highlight the relevant lines of the passage.
- You must prove you *understand* the reference, so there is no use just quoting it – remember to explain in *your own words*.

### Imagery Questions

- Read question carefully.
- Highlight any examples of imagery in the lines you're asked to look at. This means looking for metaphors, similes and/or personifications.
- Quote the image(s) in your answer.
- Explain what is being compared with what (literal origin), using different words from the ones you quoted.
- Explain how this comparison helps the writer to make a point or achieve an effect.

### Word Choice Questions

- Read question carefully.
- Highlight any words that will help you answer the question.
- Decide which quotations you want to use in your answer.
- Quote *one word or phrase at a time* and discuss its connotations. (Connotations are the ideas or associations that come into your mind when you read this word or phrase.)
- Make sure you focus on particular words or phrases – don't quote too much at once or it won't be clear which bits you're talking about.

### 'Link' Questions

- Make sure you understand the point that has been made just *before* and *after* the link sentence.
- Highlight the word(s) in the link sentence that connects *back* to the previous point.
- Highlight the word(s) in the link sentence that connects *forward* to the point that follows.
- In your written answer, quote the word(s) that links back and explain the point to which it links *in your own words*.
- Then quote the word(s) that links forward and explain the point to which it links *in your own words*.

### **Common mistakes**

- Not reading the question properly – discussing one example when it's meant to be two, for example.
- Identifying a language feature successfully but then failing to explain how it works.
- Spending too much time on low-mark questions and not getting to the high-mark questions at the end.

## The Critical Essay Paper: Some Tips

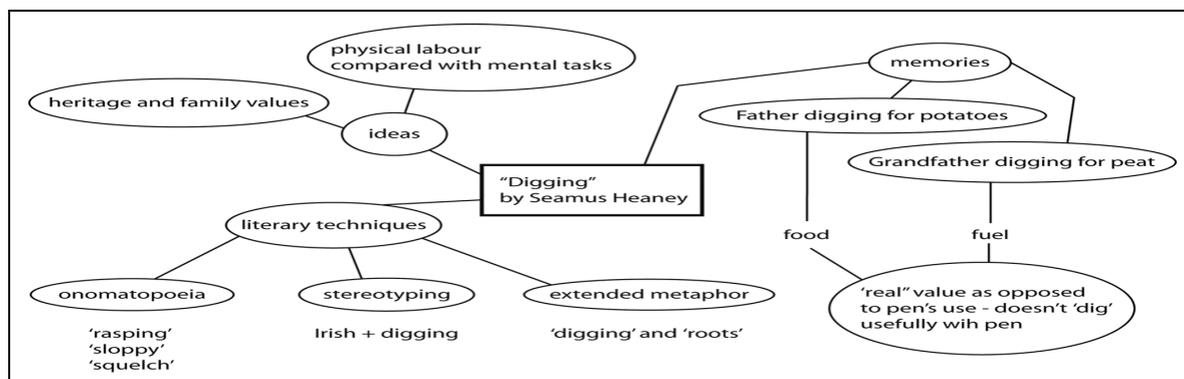
### Tackling the paper

- You haven't much time to choose your questions, so don't waste any by reading through genres on which you aren't going to answer.
- Identify quickly any questions you think are possible, preferably more than two. Make sure you have selected them from *at least two sections*. Then read those questions again very carefully indeed.
- Select the question you're most confident about and start with that. Whether or not you hate the whole idea of a 'plan', it's a good idea to bullet point what you plan to discuss in your essay.
- Make sure your bullet points are going to help you to discuss the *second sentence* of the question. If you're not doing that, you're not going to be relevant.
- Write a clear paragraph of introduction. Then structure your essay in paragraphs.
- Make sure you're confident about *how* to draw in relevant quotations. Can you lay them out correctly? Can you incorporate both short and longer references?
- Don't panic about not sounding clever enough. If you can communicate a genuine interest in the text, you'll be doing the right thing.
- Don't assume the marker has read your text. It's your job to explain everything in such a way that someone who *doesn't* know it can understand how it works.
- Only discuss those aspects of the text which are relevant to the question. If you have spent hours learning a scene of a play which isn't relevant here – you have to let that go. Only write about the bits you need.
- Don't try to say *everything* there is to be said on the subject. There isn't time.
- Do watch your time carefully. It's no use writing one brilliant essay and then only having time to write the introduction of the second.
- Don't 'learn' essays to write in the exam. The essays you write in the exam will be different from any you have written before. You *have* to think on the spot.

### Revising your texts

By the end of the year, you'll have a lot of notes. Far too many probably. Don't get lost wading through them for hours. It will help you to sort out your notes into sets and to highlight things in colour that you want to remember.

Consider mind-mapping each text you prepare. The more mind-maps the better. If you're not sure how to set about mind-mapping, talk your tutor or someone in learner support.



## **Before the Exam**

The only way to get better at writing essays is to write lots of essays. If you find this very painful, practise doing introductions plus a bullet-point plan. You should be able to do a few of these, allowing only about 10 minutes each. Later you can write one of them as a whole essay.

When your class essays are marked, look carefully at your strengths and weaknesses. Give yourself a pat on the back for what you've done well. Make sure you understand what you need to improve on and how to set about it. If you don't really understand how to make your essays better, it's not going to happen. Talk to your tutor!

## **Acknowledgements**

Writer: Helen Beaton, Programme Leader, Glenrothes College

Reviewer: Maureen Meeke, Consultant, Scottish Further Education Unit