GCSE English Revision Guide

Language & Literature · Fiction, non-fiction & set texts

GCSE English is really two subjects wearing one name: Language, which tests how well you read and write under exam conditions, and Literature, which tests how well you understand and can argue about specific texts. Both are marked on your ability to select precise evidence and explain its effect — vague description of a text never scores as highly as focused analysis of one well-chosen detail.

For Language, Paper 1 focuses on reading and writing to describe or narrate, based on an extract of fiction. The reading questions build in difficulty: identifying information, explaining language choices, analysing structure across the whole extract, and finally evaluating how successfully the writer achieves an effect. The structure question in particular catches students out — examiners want you to track how the focus shifts across the extract (a zoom from wide to close-up, a flashback, a change in pace), not just list language techniques again. Paper 2 shifts to non-fiction and viewpoint, comparing two texts and writing to argue or persuade, where structuring a formal argument with counter-points is the skill most students under-practise.

For Literature, the exam tests whether you can build a whole-text argument, not just recall quotations. Strong answers open with a clear line of interpretation, then use short, precisely chosen quotations to support it, always linking back to how a writer's choices create meaning — and, where relevant, the historical or social context that shaped them. For poetry, comparing two poems means finding a genuine point of connection (a shared theme, a contrasting structure) rather than writing two separate mini-essays side by side.

The single most effective use of revision time for English is timed practice: writing full answers against the clock so that pacing becomes automatic, then reviewing them against the mark scheme to see exactly what separates a grade 5 answer from a grade 7. Memorising twelve to fifteen flexible quotations per set text — short enough to embed in a sentence — is far more useful than memorising long passages you'll never fit into an answer in time.

Topics that come up most

- Language analysis (word choice, imagery, tone)
- Structural analysis of extracts
- Comparing viewpoints across two texts
- Descriptive & narrative writing
- Character & theme essays on set texts
- Context and its effect on meaning
- Poetry comparison

Exam technique

Use the PEEL structure (Point, Evidence, Explain, Link) but spend most of your time on the "Explain" — that's where analysis marks live. Plan for two minutes before any extended answer; it saves far more time than it costs.

Common mistakes

Quoting without analysing, "technique-spotting" (naming a device with no explanation of effect), and running out of time on the final question because Question 1 was over-answered.