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**Time to KILL IT!**
A lot of people think they’re terrible at English simply because they don’t have that natural ‘English’ gift others have. Maybe you didn’t read as much when you were younger, or maybe you just aren’t as into English as much as Mary over there, who quotes Shakespeare when she talks to her English teacher (seriously, who does that?).

I was what you’d call an average English student. I didn’t write essays that scored aces, didn’t participate in class discussions (because I had nothing to say), and overall, wasn’t particularly interested in the subject. I would’ve never guessed that by the end of Year 12, I - the self-proclaimed Maths and Science student - would achieve a raw study score of 45 out of 50, placing me in the top 2% of the VCE cohort.

How did I do it?

I always struggled with English because it had no singular answer to questions like my Maths subjects. However, over time, and with many experimentations, I came to develop my own method for English. I realised that despite English being a humanities subject, one can still adopt a process so that a killer essay is created. In this book, I’ll share with you that secret recipe.

What this book will do is offer you the right tools to get you started. I will show you the inner workings of my brain when I come across a new essay topic - what I think, how I think about it, and why I think about it in a certain way. By showing you the why, I hope to guide you to take a step in the right direction, and to be confident with your skills so you can keep venturing beyond this book’s philosophy.

I strongly believe it’s important for all students to understand that a method (like Think and Execute discussed in this book) is not the be all and end all. It took me a long time to develop this recipe for myself, and I’ll be continuously improving and refining it even after this book is written. This may be a great starting point for you, or perhaps you have your own method and will incorporate some of my techniques into your own, but ultimately it’s essential that you create something that works for you. Develop and refine your own method for success, because everyone has unique recipes that work for them.

Let’s kill it.

-Lisa Tran
I’ve got a question for you. It’s multi-choice, so this shouldn’t be too hard!

Examiners are primarily looking for:

a) Students who sound smart through use of excellent vocabulary.
b) Sound articulation of ideas and issues explored in the book.
c) Essay structure that fits TEEL so they can clearly track what you’re doing.
d) Essay responses that sit on the fence.

Alright, what’s the right answer?

You see, some of these answers are not necessarily wrong, but what I’m after is hinted through the keyword, ‘primarily’. The answer is b.

I’m willing to bet that half or more of the students guessing this answer will get it wrong. So, let me explain.

First, we need to reset your mindset.

Essay writing, although commonly seen as the main component of an English subject, is only half of what you need to do. And more importantly, it’s the second half. The first half is your brainstorm, exploration, and development of ideas.

Excellent essay writing is heavily dependent on idea exploration. Without strong idea exploration, don’t expect your essay to be a good one. You could write all the essays in the world, but if your idea foundation isn’t strong, then your essay isn’t going to deliver.
This is why the first half of this book will show you how to THINK (idea exploration). The second half will show you how to EXECUTE (essay writing).

When you start to prioritise THINK, you give yourself the opportunity to write with more substance. Cut this time short, and you’ll most likely write a mediocre essay using the first few ideas that pop into your brain. Often, those first ideas are not necessarily the best because they tend to be the most obvious points (say goodbye to standing out against the twenty other people in your class), or they’re not fully fleshed out, meaning that you might miss out on discussing something truly insightful.

As you can see from the illustration above, Student 1 spends minimal time THINKing, leaving them with little to EXECUTE. Meanwhile, Student 2 spends longer THINKing and is therefore able to offer a stronger EXECUTION. The THINKing work done before writing has a dramatic impact on the outcome of your essay.

So, do you understand the importance of the hard work done (THINK) even before your pick up a pen (EXECUTE)?

If so, let’s jump straight into a deeper understanding of Part 1 - THINK.
Part 1: Think

Everything begins at the essay topic. You have to understand the topic first in order to write a stellar essay. Let me introduce you to:

ABC
A – analyse
B – brainstorm
C – create a plan

Here’s a quick overview:

A – Analyse
It sounds really obvious, but here you need to work out exactly what the essay topic is asking of you. Many students struggle to answer a prompt properly and go on to write mediocre essays because they don’t take the time to figure out exactly what they’re expected to do. Instead, they go ahead with half-baked ideas conjured when skim-reading the essay topic, or worse, write an essay based on a topic they would’ve wanted, not what’s in front of them!

B – Brainstorm
Once you know exactly what’s expected of you, it’s time to write down ALL the ideas that come to your head. This practice ensures that you have all your budding thoughts on a piece of paper so you can properly flesh them out.

C – Create a Plan
A plan is so underrated, but it is a vital tool to ensure you answer the prompt. Here, you’ll refine your ideas so only the most relevant and insightful points of discussion make their way into your essay. Moreover, having a plan in front of you will allow you focus on what’s important next – writing the essay itself, rather than writing and trying to recall ideas simultaneously.
A for ANALYSE

Here I’ll teach you how to identify the type of essay topic within 5 seconds. Sussing out a topic starts by looking at the bigger picture, and then moving into the finer details like keywords later on.

5 Types Of Essay Topics

There are many types of essay topics. Depending on which essay topic you get, you may need to respond with a different approach. I have grouped these different essay topics into 5 types:

1. Theme-based prompt

‘Ambition in the play Macbeth leads to success.’ Discuss.
‘Gattaca presents a world destroyed by the pursuit of perfection.’ Do you agree?

THINK: With a theme-based prompt (perfection, ambition), your essay will understandably revolve around themes. Remember that themes are often interconnected – that is, your understanding of one theme is only possible through the exploration of other themes.

For example, the prompt for Macbeth centres around the theme of ‘ambition’. Ambition is strongly connected to power (he only has the ambition to kill because he wants power), and guilt (the consequences of his ruthless ambition).

‘Ambition in the play Macbeth leads to success.’ Discuss.

Sample body paragraph 1: Shakespeare demonstrates how the taste of power fuels Macbeth’s unbridled ambition.

Sample body paragraph 2: Once Macbeth begins his journey of immorality, he becomes increasingly tormented by his guilty conscience.

Sample body paragraph 3: However, Macbeth’s success is portrayed as a double-edged sword and ultimately, he dies as a tragic hero.
Similarly, in the Gattaca prompt, ‘perfection’ is the main theme. You could connect this to utopia (since the ultimate goal of perfection is to achieve utopia), and human flaws (since humans are innately imperfect and any attempt to have a perfect world is futile). In the illustration below, you can see that I’ve added some more themes to the mix. This is so you understand that themes in a text are interconnected, and it’s up to you to decide which to discuss when you have limited essay-writing time.

All this means that your essay response cannot just be about ‘ambition’ or ‘perfection’. You’ll find that your response will be quite restrictive and you may run out of things to say. Instead, include discussion of other connected themes so you can offer a more sophisticated response.

2. Character-based prompt

‘Macbeth is a heroic character.’ Do you agree? (Macbeth)

‘Frankenstein’s hubris is what punishes him.’ (Frankenstein)

THINK: Simply spot a character’s name and there you have it, it’s a character-based prompt. However, it’s important to recognise that your essay does not need to revolve around only the character(s) in the prompt. A better approach is to acknowledge that our understanding of a character is only possible through their interaction with other characters. See, characters (just like themes), don’t exist in solitary. Your understanding of a character is only heightened through other major or minor characters. For example, in The Hunger Games, the theme of love is shown through Katniss’ self-sacrifice to save her little sister, Prim. Had Prim not been in the story, then the author wouldn’t have been able to warrant Katniss’ anger and consequent desire to take down the Capitol.

Additionally, characters function to express an author’s ideas or themes. Ask yourself, what is the meaning behind this character’s story and decisions? How does this character express or relate to this theme? By linking the characters to themes explored, you are able to expand your discussion to include important observations made by the author.
‘Macbeth is a heroic character.’ Do you agree? (Macbeth)

Sample body paragraph 1: Initially, Shakespeare portrays Macbeth as a person of great stature.

Sample body paragraph 2: However, Shakespeare also exposes Macbeth’s flaws through his vaulting ambition and impressionability.

Sample body paragraph 3: Ultimately, readers sympathise with Macbeth as he is a good-natured character whose encounter with fate leads him to his demise.

3. How-based prompt

‘How is Macbeth’s guilty conscience illustrated throughout the play?’ (Macbeth)

‘How does Grenville showcase Rooke’s inner conflict in The Lieutenant?’

THINK: These prompts include, and often begin with, the word ‘How’. Unlike other prompts, the ‘How’ positions you to focus more on the author’s writing intentions. This can be achieved by discussing metalanguage – language that describes language (read my blog post about it here). Common metalanguage terms you may be familiar with include: characterisation, narrator perspective, symbols and imagery. It’s a great idea to include discussion about metalanguage as a form of evidence to support your body arguments.

‘How is Macbeth’s guilty conscience illustrated throughout the play? (Macbeth)

Sample body paragraph 1: Even before committing the crime, Shakespeare showcases at Macbeth’s guilt when he contemplates the idea of murder.

- Foreshadowing Macbeth’s inner conflict, Banquo says: “Why do you start and seem to fear, /Things that do sound so fair?”
- The hallucination of the ‘dagger’ symbolises Macbeth’s conflict between guilt and temptation
Sample body paragraph 2: Shakespeare intensifies Macbeth’s guilt following the murder scene through physical manifestations.

- Duncan’s murder occurs offstage to emphasise Macbeth’s soliloquy about his tormented mental state
- Macbeth’s insomnia is a motif his paranoia (Lady Macbeth sleepwalks)
- His loss of appetite suggests that he is too traumatised to care for himself

Sample body paragraph 3: Guilt completely consumes both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

- Imagery such as “the yellow leaf” demonstrates how Macbeth has been burdened for “long enough” and is ready to surrender on his hollow victory.
- Lady Macbeth cannot rid the smell of blood, symbolic of her guilt and this ultimately leads to her suicide.

4. Metalanguage - or Film-technique-based prompt

‘Discuss Shakespeare’s use of symbols throughout the play and how they represent certain themes.’ (Macbeth)

‘Hitchcock’s use of film techniques offers an unnerving viewing experience’. Discuss. (Rear Window)

THINK: This type of essay prompt is similar to ‘How’ essay prompts because you want to ensure adequate discussion about metalanguage.

Just like how we have metalanguage in novels, we use film techniques in film. Film techniques enable the director to achieve added meaning to the storytelling through the use of cameras, lighting, music, costumes and more. Therefore, your essays need to have a strong exploration of film techniques or metalanguage adopted by the director/author and discuss how these techniques help them present certain ideas/themes/characters.

Metalanguage (The Great Gatsby – novel):

Gatsby’s ‘platonic conception of himself’ is an allusion to the Greek philosopher Plato, who argued that ideas are separate from reality. Gatsby believes he has carefully crafted his ideal life and has built a perfect reputation, yet he is oblivious that to others, he is still only the son of a poor farmer.

Film technique (The Great Gatsby – film):

When Gatsby introduces Nick and Daisy to his home, close up shots of his material wealth such as his golden ceiling adorned with extravagant chandeliers showcases Gatsby’s intention to win back Daisy using his new affluent status.
5. **Quote-based prompt**

“Out, damned spot!” How does Shakespeare explore the burden of a guilty conscience in *Macbeth*?

“...the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever.” Gatsby is destroyed because reality overwhelms his ideals. (*The Great Gatsby*)

**THINK:** The best approach here is to directly discuss the quote in your essay. Avoid simply throwing the quote in the introduction or conclusion but instead, contextualise the quote. This means that you try to decipher when the quote was said and who said the quote. Then, try to understand the importance of the quote in the prompt – what themes and issues does it address?

Of course, we don’t always have the luxury of an open book SAC or exam. In situations where you can only rely on your knowledge, try your best at contextualising the quote. Even if you don’t remember exactly when the quote was said (think - what happened before and after?) or who said the quote, if you can at least discuss its relevant themes and issues, you’ve started off on the right foot.

I recommend discussing the quote a body paragraph. It weaves seamlessly into your essay if you decide to use the quote as supporting evidence for an idea. This also shows your teacher or examiner that you’re dealing with the prompt with enough consideration.

“...the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever.”

*Gatsby is destroyed because reality overwhelms his ideals. (*The Great Gatsby*)

Fitzgerald scrutinises the American Dream, depicting it as empty of all its promises people so faithfully pursue. When Nick introduces Gatsby, the link between Gatsby and his romanticised ideal of Daisy is immediately established through the green light, “minute and far away”, symbolic of a dream still outside of Gatsby’s reaches. By extension, the green light functions as Fitzgerald’s commentary on society’s desire and the seeming impossibility of achieving the American Dream. It is only when Gatsby reunites with Daisy that “...the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever”, signifying the destruction of Gatsby’s dream as he is confronted with reality. In contrast to its earlier description, the light is no longer enchanting but strikingly ordinary, a symbol Fitzgerald uses to represent the vacant American Dream.
You’ve only learnt part of the THINK and EXECUTE strategy...

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