

HSC English Advanced

Module C

The Craft of Writing

By Austin Har

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PREFACE

The Series

The *HSC Achievers Study Notes* series are based on the new NESA syllabus for the HSC Exams 2019 - 2023.

Each study book gives a comprehensive insight into the subject; comprising of:

- a breakdown of the syllabus requirements and rubrics
- study tips and the authors' HSC journey
- in-depth analysis of the core elements and concepts
- revision and practice test question papers and
- solution set of exemplar responses.

The books are envisaged as a one stop all-in-all study resource to assist the student prepare for the HSC new NESA syllabus.

The Book

The author of this book, Austin Har is a very insightful, accomplished writer and HSC English teacher. Through this book, he shares with his readers his passion for the *craft of writing* and his mastery over the HSC syllabus content.

The book unravels some of the mysteries of achieving at the HSC, giving the reader an insight through the lens of an experienced HSC teacher who takes students through the HSC journey with the ultimate goal of helping them succeed in the HSC exams.

The Support

For extra support there is a Special Essay Marking and / or Mentoring Program by the author or a qualified Achievers mentor – this is open to every student who buys a HSC Achievers Book. Limited places, book early to avoid disappointment.

Kajal Sen

Editor, Achievers Publications &
Principal, Achievers Academy Australia

Achievers Publications

Achievers Publications is the publishing division of Achievers Academy Australia, which started in 2018 with the publication of their HSC Achievers Study Notes for the new NESA HSC syllabus 2019-2023.

The hugely popular *HSC Achievers series* has best sellers in all subject categories – English, Mathematics and Sciences. The books are original works written by some of the best state-ranked HSC students, HSC teachers and tutors, under the guidance of their Editor - Principal Kajal Sen.

Each book is considered a one stop resource for the subject comprising of well researched theory notes, in-depth explanation of concepts, practice papers, solution sets, band 6 responses and essays.

The books have gained a commendable reputation for their quality resulting in increasing demand from HSC students all over NSW state.

We Don't only cover the syllabus We Uncover it!

- Principal Kajal Sen,
Achievers Academy

About the Editor

Kajal Sen Gupta

Kajal Sen is an educationist and a teacher educator with over three decades of English teaching and teacher-training experience, spanning three continents and four countries. She has trained more than 2500 secondary teachers in her long university teaching career. As Principal and Founder of Achievers Academy Australia, she has been serving the educational needs of Australian students for nearly two decades.

She has always had a keen interest in academic writing and producing quality teaching and learning resources. The HSC Achievers Publications is a culmination of her passion and commitment to education.

Besides education and teaching, Sen is a qualified IT professional and her other interests include software development and innovations in the use of technology in education.

HSC English Advanced Module C: The Craft of Writing

This four-part study book provides students with an easy to read and comprehensive discussion of the writing techniques and craftsmanship of the authors and poets of prescribed texts from Module C. It also discusses the craft of many other writers that students are encouraged to use as an inspiration for their own HSC creative writing pieces, given NESA's recommendation for students to engage in their 'own wider reading.'

Part One: includes an overview of the HSC English syllabus as a whole, a discussion of writing as a craft and an art-form, and specific notes on Module C and what students need to do in order to be successful in the HSC.

Part Two: A discussion of the imaginative, discursive, and persuasive writing techniques of prescribed texts – including a short story, lecture, speech, and poem. Plot overviews, glossaries of key terms, study exercises, information about the writer's background, purpose, and inspirations, and tables discussing their use of different writing techniques and their composition of the work as a whole are included.

Part Three: Includes quotes from famous writers on the writing process, tables on things to avoid doing in the HSC paper, tables on creative and reflective writing decisions, examples and discussion of more advanced writing techniques specific to the HSC assessment criteria, and more study exercises.

Part Four: Includes tips for writing under HSC exam conditions, then six sample questions and responses based on previous HSC Module C papers.

About the Author

Austin Oting Har – Author and Co-Editor

Austin Oting Har has been studying philosophy since 2007. He holds a bachelor's degree in philosophy from Sydney University and a master's degree (with merit) in ancient philosophy from Edinburgh University, with a thesis on Plato's metaphysics. He has worked as a HSC English Advanced tutor since 2017. He has published in an internationally peer-reviewed journal by Melbourne University, presented at conferences in both music composition and classics, and is currently editor for a journal of musicology.

He is also a professional composer and conductor, signed under the artist name 'Omelas' to the experimental German music label Berlin Atonal. He has been composing an opera for his interdisciplinary Doctor of Musical Arts on Greek tragedy and contemporary classical composition, and will conduct the premiere in Berlin in 2020.

Just as we watch television shows, go to music concerts, travel to sporting tournaments, and make conversation with our friends, we are also naturally predisposed to enjoy the process of reading and writing. And just as we should at least know the names of the most celebrated athletes and their respective teams, their rivalries and claims to achievement, we should also at least develop our own taste in authors and poets of cultural significance and be able to approximate their various schools and works. Being acquainted with the classics of literature, art, film, music, sport, and other such timeless pursuits of beauty is the key that unlocks the secret to a life of interconnectedness, beyond oneself.

The beauty of the craft of writing is always and already happening in the simplest of ways. It is already happening a block away from where you are sitting, by that stooped eucalyptus, in an exchange between two neighbours walking their dogs. It is happening in a conversation with your barista that leaves you both feeling satisfied afterwards for having taken part in that discourse. It is happening in a turn of phrase from that song you are still enjoying days later. It is happening in a eulogy for a loved one at their funeral. When words are used in a way that is both pleasing to the senses and suited to their purpose – *imaginative*, *discursive*, or *persuasive*, and different combinations of these three – that is when we appreciate the craft of writing by participating in its world of beauty and meaning.



Deciding on genre is one of the first and most important decisions for a novelist. It determines not only the form, content, and style of their writing, but also its plot: how they go about telling the story. Like Mozart composing a violin concerto, which is based on a very specific structure of three movements with different moods, and the use of certain techniques and modulations, the genre of a ghost story also entails a very particular use of writing techniques. The writer's creativity is bound by the genre. But this kind of limitation does not poison creativity; instead, it nourishes their creativity by lighting up clear paths in which they can express their own unique craftsmanship. As the popular saying goes, 'the absence of limitations is the enemy of creativity.'

A ghost story immediately brings to mind things such as the supernatural, magic, morality, and fear – although ghosts are also occasionally seen in comedies. The ghost story is age-old and told in every culture; from Homer's *Odyssey*, to the 11th century Japanese masterpiece *The Tale of Genji*, to the Middle Eastern classic *One Thousand and One Nights* or *Arabian Nights*; not to mention many religious texts, including the Christian biblical canon and the Tibetan Buddhist classic *The Life of Milarepa*.

In *Spotty-Handed Villainesses*, the third text that we will study in Part Two, Margaret Atwood categorises a ghost story as a 'complex type' of story. She says:

... in [ghost stories], the threat is from outside, true, but the threatening thing may also conceal a split-off part of the character's own psyche.⁶

In her speech, Atwood also mentions the 'deeply Jungian possibilities of a Dr Jekyll-Mr Hyde double life for women.'⁷ Jacqueline, the flawed protagonist of Mistry's story, embodies these two quotes. She is someone who leads a 'double life.' She presents herself in public as a good and chaste Catholic woman; in private, under the cover of night, she does the opposite of what she believes a good and chaste Catholic woman should do, and hides this truth not only from everyone around her, but also from herself.

⁶ Margaret Atwood, *Spotty-Handed Villainesses*, 1994; 6
<https://syllabus.nesa.nsw.edu.au/assets/global/files/margaret-atwood-speech-2019-2023-english-prescriptions.pdf>

⁷ Margaret Atwood, *Spotty-Handed Villainesses*; 1

guilt. Throughout the story, Mistry has extensively revealed that Jacqueline's guilt comes from her difficulty identifying with her sexuality as a Catholic woman. By describing the sexual nature of her interactions with the *bhoot*, how it reminds her of Cajetan, and how she hid these weekly encounters for one year, Mistry shows her struggle to accept herself and to trust others. By making Bai a sexually active and attractive young woman, Mistry uses her character as a foil and a target for Jacqueline to unload her anger in the form of minimisation and contempt.

Guilt, pride, and fear are perhaps the three emotions that Jacqueline struggles with most. Mistry wrote in the year-long period where she goes through the motions of going to Church but without confessing to emphasise Jacqueline's longstanding inner conflict: 'Jaakaylee, where is your head, do you really want the ghost to come sleep with you and touch you so shamefully?' This not only uncovers the layer of her psyche that has been struggling with guilt, but also her repression of the feelings of pride. Being proud of one's spirituality is not true spirituality but *spiritual materialism*. Mistry depicts Jacqueline as joining the Church from a young age, but this year-long period shows her to be a skilful actor who finds comfort in pretending to be spiritual. Fear is a weapon of the ego. It protects the ego. By writing that the ghost appears to her on Christmas and Easter, days when the religious ego is at its brightest, Mistry is subtle yet profound in crafting her ambiguous and paradoxical behaviour. All in all, Mistry has crafted her as a flawed protagonist with real richness and complexity.

This intriguing statement is our **first key** to understanding Stevens's purpose in writing the thirteen tercets of this poem, and also points to his influences and inspirations. By describing his purpose in writing the poem as such, it is apparent that he does not want the reader to overthink nor overanalyse it. He does not want us to dig too deeply and get caught in the trap of looking for hidden meanings; or worse, inventing false meanings. Given that our task is to analyse his craft of writing – perhaps, *appreciate* is more appropriate in the case of poetry – this may seem counterproductive; but in fact, it is the first key that unlocks the *way* in which the poem should be read.

Most importantly, by stating that his poem is not 'a collection of epigrams or of ideas', this indicates that Stevens intended it to be read first and foremost as a piece of *imaginative writing* – precisely what his mentor George Santayana valued above all else. The poem was not written to be discursive nor persuasive, although elements of both do seep through his philosophical training and therefore tendencies and we will discover its tangible traces. In other words, while primarily imaginative, this poem, true to the rubric of Module C, should be considered an engaging hybrid text that also features elements of discursive and persuasive writing. The discursive element manifests in Stevens's progressive study of contrasts and the contemplation on the nature of beauty throughout the thirteen tercets. The persuasive element manifests in his exposition of the values and attitudes that were passed down to him through his rich philosophical background. This reading of the poem is also supported by the fact of Stevens's fight with Hemingway, whom he called 'the antipoet poet, the poet of extraordinary reality.' Their fight suggests that Stevens identified with the opposite: a poet of extraordinary imagination; or, at least, he believed fiercely that the primary function of poetry is to stir the imagination.

The **second key** to grasping Stevens's purpose in writing this poem is the influence of his mentor, George Santayana; other prominent 20th century thinkers such as Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung; the ancient philosopher Plato; and also, Japanese culture (haiku and Zen Buddhism). These influences all shaped the way that he wrote this poem. It reflects his way of connecting with the world. Santayana's influence on Stevens's poetry cannot be overstated; it opened him to receive the other influences:

His [Santayana's] naturalism and emphasis on constructive imagination influenced both T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens... Stevens follows Santayana in his refined

VI
Icicles filled the long window
 With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
 Crossed it, to and fro.
 The mood
 Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.

With the ‘long window’ we have now entered the realm of manmade society – a world of meaning making and conceptual analysis which was not previously seen in the purer sensations.

The act of looking through a long window is also evocative of the idea of looking at the unadulterated beauty of nature through the secondary lens of meaning-making. The ‘indecipherable cause’ reinforces this idea of concepts being unable to capture the full scope or richness of nature’s beauty. The rhyme between ‘window’ with ‘shadow’ at the beginning and end of the tercet can also be interpreted as Stevens reinforcing this idea of secondary evaluation.

The repetition of ‘shadow’ brings this word to the foreground. A shadow – like a window – is evocative of the world of concepts and symbols that is only an image of the thing itself. Shadows are also prominent concepts in both Plato and Carl Jung’s thought – in Plato’s allegory of the cave and Jung’s notion of the shadow of a person which contains the sum of their hidden and repressed qualities.

‘Barbaric’ is also a strong word. In Western society, this word is derogatory in tone, and

	<p>represents a wild, untamed, dangerous, and otherwise uncivilised and inferior man.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">VII</p> <p style="text-align: center;">O thin men of Haddam, Why do you imagine golden birds? Do you not see how the blackbird Walks around the feet Of the women about you?</p>	<p>The number ‘seven’ carries significant symbolic meanings in many cultures. It represents ‘a complete period or cycle’ and is also ‘the number forming the basic series of musical notes.’</p> <p>Here Stevens uses question marks for the first and only time in the poem. They are interrogative questions that explicitly challenge one’s concept of beauty. He is claiming that the beauty of a common blackbird is more beautiful than the beauty of rare and expensive objects (golden birds). By using the strong adjective ‘thin’ to describe the ‘men of Haddam’ – a city of Hartford where he was working at the time of writing this poem – he is contrasting his values with theirs. He is asserting his view that the pursuit of worldly desires for expensive and rare objects will only bring about the decay of the spiritual life – in the same way that healthy and beautiful bodies would become ‘thin’.</p>

In today's society, the processes of doing and judging – thinking and feeling – are normalised and indeed glorified on many digital and social media platforms. We are presented with a false dichotomy of whether to like or dislike something, whether to swipe left or to swipe right on someone; and even if we do not respond, having only these two judgments presented to us has already conditioned us to function in an unnatural and overly judgmental way that only causes more unhappiness and strife in our lives. Through this culturally-induced, unnatural mode of perception, things are presented to us in a way that encourages more doing and judging that we forget to simply relax and be this moment, just as it is.

Reading Stevens's poem is like taking a walk in a garden.

It is a deeply meditative and contemplative experience – indeed, as we have seen, his poetry has been appreciated from a Zen Buddhist perspective. It balances out our everyday social responsibilities, expectations, and activities of doing, judging, planning, and decision-making with the ongoing, non-judging, and non-doing processes of receiving pure sensations and intuitions. Nature gives us many good things without asking us for anything in return. Like the common blackbird, beautiful colours, shapes, and sounds are always and already there for us to appreciate if we only let ourselves be this moment. They are good and necessary for our inner harmony. If we cannot gaze contentedly at a work of art and appreciate the wonderful sound of a blackbird whistling from that tree, then we are missing out not only on the big picture, but on a world of unfathomable richness.

Words can only ever be a commentary on that greater harmony of which we are all participants, not spectators.

This poem guides us back to that way of simple seeing.

Writers on Writing

This section was written to put you in the shoes of a writer, to get you thinking like a craftsman. A craftsman shapes a material – a block of wood, a set of words – into something beautiful. Writing is called a craft because it is an art-form.

Below are quotes on writing from exceptional writers, each selected to get you seeing the world like an artist. As veteran writers like the ones we studied in Part Two, they speak from decades of experience in writing novels, short stories, essays, speeches, and poems. They have lived all the excitements, frustrations, and apathies of writing, as Zadie Smith illuminated. As young writers, we should absorb their wisdom.

To master the craft of writing – like the sculptor’s craft of statue-making, the luthier’s craft of violin-making, or the chef’s craft of preparing of a five-course meal with wine pairing (red, white, and dessert) – takes years of failure, blood, sweat, and tears. As Smith said: ‘You are what you eat: reading good stuff equals writing good stuff.’ And you *will* be reading and writing every day for the rest of your life. You will be reading and writing emails and reports and surveys for work, essays for university, filling out applications for jobs, or even publishing your first novel or poetry collection.

So, why not do it well?

Let us begin with three quotes from Freidrich Nietzsche:⁴⁵

1. *First, one must determine precisely “what-and-what do I wish to say and present,” before you may write. Writing must be mimicry.*

Form what you want to express before putting pen to paper. Picture it, even if it's blurry, even if it's not a story; even if it's a mood or a feeling that you want to evoke, or a smell that you want to leave in your reader's nose. By participating in that form you will be steered in the right way. Writing mimics what you saw, before the words.

2. *The more abstract a truth which one wishes to teach, the more one must first entice the senses.*

Know the value of engaging the senses. Smell and touch are the most direct ways to take your reader into your literary world. If you want to express something abstract like an idea that is not easily understandable, then you first need to make it accessible to your reader by pleasing their senses. The simple sight of a blue rose or the sound of laughter will make them more receptive to the ideas floating about the literary world.

3. *Strategy on the part of the good writer of prose consists of choosing his means for stepping close to poetry but never stepping into it.*

Although 'poetic' may sound like praise when used to describe one's writing, you must always moderate your use of figurative language in text types outside of poetry – especially in discursive and persuasive writing. 'Purple prose' is a term used to criticise writing that is extravagant and flowery: writing that sacrifices clarity and concision for an overindulgence in similes, metaphors, adverbs, and adjectives.

What you want is a well-placed simile, a well-timed metaphor. Good placement and timing gives more meaning to your words; you don't want to detract from your intention, you want to enrichen it. Similes and metaphors are spices and herbs; adverbs and adjectives are the

⁴⁵ Josh Jones, 'Nietzsche's 10 Rules for Writing with Style (1882)'

On the other hand, you'll be writing a reflection statement that explains your choices. You need to be able to talk about what inspired you: this writer, that genre. So, a degree of self-awareness is also necessary. How does my writing fit within the big picture? A balance of thinking, feeling, sensation, and intuition is necessary.

Some choices are good, others bad, some better, and some worse. What word should I use? How can I strengthen this description or character? How can this phrase *sound* better, flow more smoothly into the next?

Character and Thematic Development

Definition

Character is how someone reacts to a situation based on what they know and have experienced. It is defined by their choices; the way that they dwell in a moment of decision, of conflict, is most indicative of their character. Think of the adjectives we use to describe someone's character: strong, weak, stubborn, flexible etc.



<p style="text-align: center;">Personal</p>	<p>The character’s psychological make-up. Their beliefs, convictions, fears, paranoias, desires, hopes, ambitions, and complexes. A state of mind, like a body, is always subject to change, growth, and decay. People can change throughout the whole spectrum of bad to worse to good to better. They can be redeemed and they can also regress.</p> <p><i>Questions:</i></p> <p>What do they value? If their house were burning down what would be the first thing they reach for? Are they an idealist? Do they believe in God? How open to change are they?</p> <p><i>Food for thought:</i></p> <p>The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus said: ‘[it is not possible] to come into contact twice with a mortal being in the same state [of mind].’</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Social</p>	<p>The social forces and relationships bearing upon the character. These are often structured around some sort of hierarchy, through which a character is conditioned into behaving and thinking in particular patterns and ways.</p> <p><i>Questions:</i></p> <p>What is expected of them (if anything)? What are they trying to hide? Who are they trying to hide this from? Who or what has influenced them to behave this way?</p>

- (i) ‘Gulliver’s Travels’ – prescribed text for HSC English Extension 1
- (ii) ‘The Left Hand of Darkness’ – prescribed text for HSC English Extension 1
- (iii) ‘The Great Gatsby’ – prescribed text for HSC English Extension 1
- (iv) ‘Love and Honour and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice’ – prescribed text for HSC Advanced English

1. Sophisticated vocabulary usage and choices

Sophisticated vocabulary *does not* equate to long and complicated words. This is a trap that many young writers fall into. Expressing complex ideas with clarity and simplicity is the true mark of sophistication.

On a related note, there is a big difference between accumulating information and demonstrating your understanding of how different ideas connect and interact. On one hand, you are only repeating and gathering facts; on the other hand, you are digesting what you’ve learned and then expressing your original point of view. The latter is what you want to show the examiner in your creative writing and reflection.

Example One

From *Johnny Got His Gun* by Dalton Trumbo:⁵¹

My left arm. I wonder what they’ve done with it. When you cut a man’s arm off you have to do something with it. You can’t just leave it lying around. Do you send it to hospitals so guys can pick it to pieces and see how an arm works? Do you wrap it up in an old newspaper and throw it onto the junk heap? Do you bury it? After all it’s

⁵¹ Dalton Trumbo, *Johnny Got Your Gun*, New Jersey: Bantam Books, 1970; 28

part of a man, a very important part of a man and it should be treated respectfully. Do you take it out and bury it and say a little prayer? You should because it's human flesh and it died young and it deserves a good sendoff.

My ring.

There was a ring on my hand. What have you done with it?

Commentary

While the words and sentences are simple and straightforward, Trumbo's writing is sophisticated through his use of a range of expressions that are unique to *first person*. In first person point of view, only what 'I' knows, thinks, feels, hopes, questions, imagines, guesses, remembers, perceives etc. can be told. 'I' can gather what other people feel and who they are only from what they themselves can perceive.

The listing of rhetorical questions is an effective and imaginative use of repetition and variation to build a moment of intensity. By using a wide range of sentence lengths (from two words to 20 words long) and the interrogative second person pronoun 'you', Trumbo engages his reader with what 'I' is feeling and thinking and imagining. The standalone sentence, 'My ring', is judiciously placed after the paragraph describing the character's horror at losing his left arm: it shows his even greater horror at losing his wedding ring. This leaves the reader to contemplate the sobering thought that a wedding ring is an even more important part of the character's sense of identity than his arm.

Example Two

This is an excerpt from *The Dispossessed* (1974) by Ursula K. Le Guin. It is considered one of her masterpieces (alongside *The Left Hand of Darkness*):

At this point of the paper, you will have already completed Sections I and II – which are both analytical and critical writing tasks. Your task in Section III is very different. It is creative and reflective writing. So, take a beat to wind down, read the question, contemplate it for a moment, then let yourself go.

Full absorption on the task at hand, with the right attitude, can work wonders. Below are four steps to cleanse, focus, and expand your state of consciousness to ensure optimum performance in this part of HSC exam:

1. Gently bring your awareness to your breath. Take three deep breaths, but don't force them. Breathe through the nose and from your lower abdomen. Then take another three deep breaths in the same way. As you exhale the first one, relax into your whole body; the second one, relax into your whole mind; and the third one, relax your entire being into the living creation of this present moment.

As you relax your breathing will naturally slow down by itself, without needing to force anything. This is the best way to write.

2. Contemplate the stimulus – this means *feeling* your way through it and not overanalysing it. Trust and open yourself to intuition and inspiration. Contemplate Beauty – Balance, Variety, and Unity. Contemplate **three texts** (two prescribed and one from your own wide reading) and how they can blend into your feeling. In this context, it is better to include a third text from your own reading; it will make you stand out from other students and impress the examiner.
3. Bring into focus one good idea. It doesn't have to be a fully fleshed out story, it can be a smell, an emotion. Vibe with this idea and fall into writing. As you write all the flavours of this idea will flow and come together naturally.
4. Don't try to force anything. Don't try to sound too clever or intellectual. Allow room for spontaneity. When you need to stop writing for a moment, gently return back to your breathing, and edit if necessary. Rinse and repeat. Let your original idea guide you. Keep flowing gently. Be one with the process – enjoy it.