



A Level English Literature top tips

1. Read the set texts

Ok, so this is THE most obvious statement. But it's also the absolutely most important thing.

First time through, read it quickly. If it's a novel, try to get it read in a week or so. Read it as a reader. Then, when you've finished, write a quick response to it. Don't worry about being academic here, but think about what you remember about it, your first impressions on finishing, the characters and ideas of it.

Read all the set texts. Get the list in advance and read all of them – a large part of the A-Level will be about comparison so don't wait until you're *required* to read them but read them in advance so that you can start comparing straight away.

2. Buy your own copies.

If you can't afford it, have a chat with your teacher and TT UTC might well be able to buy you a copy. But there's also loads of second-hand, good quality copies through Amazon marketplace, so you can pick up most of the set texts for a couple of pounds. It makes a massive difference.

3. Read beyond the essential

You have been given a recommended reading list and a wider reading list. Read it all. Make quick notes at the end on what you think, the storyline, major characters and themes.

Studying *Literature* means setting the books and plays you read in their wider contexts – both historical and literary. Make sure it's a mixture of classic and modern, genre, style – but read good quality stuff. There's so much of it! Marketplace, charity shops and the library are great sources. 4.

4. Know your study sources

Shmoop, Wikipedia, Sparknotes, Litcharts and so on aren't going away any time soon. But you need to know *how* to use them well. They're fine for broad overview. They can be a good confidence boost, giving them a quick skim read when you've read the text, to check you haven't missed anything major. But they're not going to give you A-Level quality analysis. They're not really going to give you *GCSE* quality analysis. So use sparingly.

Instead, up your game. Look for academic, rigorous sources that have a pedigree behind them – sites by teachers, academics, and academic institutions. Some good ones in particular include www.victorianweb.org and the [British Library Romantics and Victorian section](#). Reading these sources will challenge you a little bit more, and you'll have to apply what you're reading to your specific text, which is also great for the contextual elements of the exam as well as being good prep for university if that's what you're planning.

5. Learn key quotes

This is a place where some of those online study sources can be helpful in looking up some quotes – but remember that everyone else has that too! Try to go for some ideas and quotes that not everyone will write about. Many of your exams will be closed book, so you'll need to know the quotes. Even if they're *not* closed book, then having the quotes at your fingertips is better anyway

because it means you don't have to hunt around for the quote in the book and waste precious writing time.

Write them down as you come across them use your reading journal to make a quotes log, or a space in your folder. That way you won't have to go hunting for them all again.

6. Use your essays well

As a teacher, there's nothing more heart-breaking than a student who doesn't really look at anything other than the grade on their essay. That is useful, but more useful is the feedback – and your own writing. When you get that essay back, look at the following:

What did you do well? Great, fantastic! Keep doing it.

What do you need to improve? Do you understand what the teacher means and where you'd do it?

It's a good idea to redo a paragraph or two, and ask if that's what they're looking for.

Which aspects of analysis have really worked well? Add those key quotes into your quotes log.

7. Buy stationery

I love it. I spent an hour in Paperchase at the end of August choosing the right marking pens. You don't need loads of stuff. But a few things can really help:

- [Highlighters](#) and a decent biro – get over the not writing in books. Write in your books. Make notes on lines, language, connections to different pages. Add in extra notes if you need to – my A-Level copy of Great Expectations still has a printed and glued in plot summary by chapter in the back cover!
- [Flag post its](#) – use them colour-coded by theme or character, or scribble a quick word on them to help find things quickly in class

8. Practice your writing, not just your content

It's a true fact that if you *write* confidently you sound more academic, more like you really understand the text. Think about your style of writing when you're writing essays. You can also read online, and in your library about the best ways to structure essays. Your teacher should have some good examples from previous years as well – don't be afraid to look at the ways they start sentences or paragraphs, the way they write conclusions, the language they're using beyond the subject vocabulary. Writing at a high level is great for the future too.

9. Contribute in class

It's such a struggle when students are off because at A-Level, I'd estimate that around 65% or more of the lesson is discussion-based. Try to contribute as much as you can, to share ideas and comment on other people's thoughts too. If you find that kind of thing hard, you can scribble a quick note and then read it, or make a comment that links to something similar somewhere else in the novel. If you are pretty confident, then think about improving your level of discussion, your academic language, and what you can learn from your teacher who is, after all, an expert in this! Confidence and an eloquent speaking style is a great bonus when you're going to uni or for a job.

10. Learn how to make great notes

Great note-taking isn't about writing down everything. It's a mixture of getting down the discussion, interpreting it, interrogating it, and responding to it.

I like the Cornell system, which encourages you to think about it as you write, and uses a wide left-hand margin where you essentially add sub-headings as you write, forming a kind of cue-system. I also tend to either underline key vocabulary or write it in capitals so it's clear.

http://lsc.cornell.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Cornell-Note_Taking-System.pdf

Write notes by hand. It'll help keep in practice for exams, which have to be handwritten, and there's also a great connection between hand and memory – you're more likely to remember something hand-written than typed.