

English

How to get an A in the Junior Cert English Exam



by **Eimear D.**

Eimear got an A in the Junior Cert English paper. Here she shares what she learned.

The English exam can seem really daunting if you're not someone who is passionate and confident about the subject, this doesn't have to be the way though! Once you know the structure of the exam and what the examiner is looking for in each question, it's just like every other exam you'll do and you can ace it no problem. Follow this guide so you know how to tackle it in the best way possible to ensure you get those top marks.

Paper 1

Reading	3
Personal Writing	4
Functional Writing	5
Media Studies	6

Paper 2

Drama	7/8
Poetry	9
Fiction	10

Timing	11
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Paper 1

Reading

- ▶ There are 40 marks going for this section and it's quite straightforward so there's no reason you shouldn't get close to full marks here once you know what you're doing.
- ▶ You're given a text to read, something like an extract from a book or an article, and then you must answer the 3 questions that follow.
- ▶ Your best friend in this section is **"PQE"; Point, Quote, Explain**. Always follow this method to ensure high marks, if you have those three things, you're bound to get awarded marks. How it works is, you make your point, e.g. "This passage really appealed to me because of Browne's highly descriptive and colourful style of writing". Then, you would give a quote, showcasing this descriptive and colourful style of writing, a sentence with many adjectives in it, for example. Finally, you explain your point. This will be the lengthiest part of your paragraph where you go into detail about how the style of writing affects you, makes the passage more enjoyable, etc.
- ▶ Try to **get quite personal** in this section, examiners love to see you connecting with the passage, it shows you really understood it. The only time when this isn't very acceptable is when the question asks for something about the text only or someone within the text's actions, so therefore you don't need to go giving your personal opinion.
- ▶ **Referencing the passage is vital**, you needn't always directly quote but I would recommend it all the same. They tell you to do this in most questions anyway but ALWAYS do it. It's just a good way to keep on track within your answer and stay focused and it backs up whatever point you're making.

Personal Writing



- ▶ In this section you're asked to write a composition under 1 of 7 titles. It's marked out of 70, which is the highest amount of marks going on the paper so make sure and put some effort into this one.
- ▶ The titles are generally very broad so you should be able to find at least one that suits you. I'd **make out a quick plan of the outline of your essay** on a sheet before you start too.
- ▶ You're allowed to write the composition in any format you like, unless stated otherwise (e.g. a speech), so use this fact to your advantage. **Play to your strengths.** If you know you're better at descriptive writing than narrative writing, then be sure to follow that.
- ▶ That being said, make sure you know how each style of writing works and is awarded marks for. For example, if you choose to go for the short story format, you'll need to include lots of detailed characters descriptions, dialogue, etc. Or if you're doing the speech, you need to include common speech traits like rhetorical questions or address the audience frequently.
- ▶ I would recommend **reading a lot in advance to ensure high marks** in this section. Anything at all, articles, novels, it doesn't have to be Junior Cert related, but reading in general will really improve your vocab and writing skills without you even noticing!
- ▶ This is a section that although you can't prepare for it in a very detailed manner, you can still be very prepared in it. **Practice at home** doing out essays and find out which one you can do best. Do some extra ones if you get the time and give them to your teacher to correct and to show you where you can improve. If you don't practice this section you won't get high marks, it requires work.



Functional Writing

- ▶ Within this section you are required to write one short piece from a choice of two prompts. There are 30 marks going for this.
- ▶ The aim of this section is to judge how well you can write practically and how well you can follow required structure, etc. So here isn't really like the personal writing where you can be emotive and dramatic, this is just testing your grammar, spelling, expression, tone, etc.
- ▶ Usually you'll be asked to write a letter, guidelines/instructions, a report, a review, a speech or structured things like these.
- ▶ It's essential you **know how to format these pieces of writing**, and know the register (how you should speak – formal/informal, etc.). For example, if you're doing the letter, you need to know where to put the address (your address in the top right hand corner with the date below it), how to address the person in question (Dear Sir/Madam, etc.) and how to structure your paragraphs.
- ▶ Because there's 30 marks at stake, you should be aiming to write about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a page to 1 page, including about 3 or 4 paragraphs with an appropriate intro and conclusion, depending on which prompt you choose.
- ▶ You'll need to **know what is expected from each piece of writing**. For example, if you're doing the speech you'll need to know the speech norms, like rhetorical questions, or if you're doing a report or a review you need to include a title, etc. Ask your teacher if you're stuck with this.
- ▶ Keep in mind that you're being marked heavily on grammar, structure, expression, spelling, etc. Practicing this section often will help with this. If you notice the same grammar or spelling mistakes coming up all the time in your corrected work, just put away some time some evening to learn off the correct way so you won't make that mistake again.



Media Studies

- ▶ This section is worth 40 marks and you really have to know your stuff and have to have done your research to get top marks. That doesn't mean you can't do really well in it, you just need to study. 😊
- ▶ Like in the last section, you have a choice between two questions. Within these questions are 3 sub-questions so make sure you read each question all the way through to avoid picking a question you thought seemed easier, but turned out the last section was impossible.
- ▶ A lot of the questions will say, "from your knowledge of Media Studies" or something similar to this, meaning they expect you to be well informed on common aspects of media writing, the workings of a media company, the functions of the media, the tactics of the media, etc.
- ▶ So, what all do you need to know? Honestly, an awful lot. From knowing how tabloids differ to broadsheets, to how the editor of a paper works, to knowing a target audience, to spotting advertising techniques, etc. etc. I could go on all day. **Set aside a day each week where you focus on Media Studies alone**, perhaps.
- ▶ Basically, you need to cover a large spectrum of stuff here. Bad news is, this means doing out a whole lot of questions. If you want to succeed in this section you'll have to do out a lot of the **past papers** so you know you'll have most topics covered and that you can be prepared for whatever appears on your paper on the day.
- ▶ Even if you feel totally lost and useless, still write something, make an effort. Write so it sounds like you know your stuff, even if you don't. It sounds silly but sometimes, bluffing it can work. If you sound well informed an educated on the subject, you can still get a nice amount of marks for effort and you'd never know where you could gain marks on expression, structure, etc.



Paper 2

There are 3 sections in this paper; Drama, Poetry and Fiction. The layout of each of the sections are the same, there's a "Question 1" and a "Question 2" in each and you have to answer both. Question 1 is on an unseen aspect of the topic and Question 2 is on a studied aspect. Within each Question 2 you get a choice between two sub-questions so you should be able to find a question to suit you.

Drama

Question 1

- ▶ Question 1 is a set of 3 questions on your choice of either a Shakespearean unseen drama or another drama. Generally, the other drama tends to be easier to tackle, but if your class has studied Shakespeare traits and drama, then by all means go for it.
- ▶ With the set of 3 questions, you only have to choose 2 to answer, so make sure to read them all through and eliminate the one you don't think you'd answer well.
- ▶ Like I said previously, **PQE** is your best friend. Make sure to make your point, use a quote or reference the text, then explain your point, using personal opinion if appropriate.
- ▶ Using personal pronouns like "I", "my" and "me" indicates that it's your opinion, therefore, even if your answer and opinion is totally off the wall, they can't really dock you any marks because who's to say your interpretation is wrong? Once you have the quote and explanation to back it up, there's no reason you won't get marks.



Question 2

- ▶ The questions here tend to be really broad so that students can twist the question to suit whichever play they've studied. The question might be about a character's quest or a particular theme.
- ▶ Make sure you know **the plot of the play, the order of events, and the characters**. If you don't know these well, it will become clear in your answer that you didn't study well enough and that you don't really understand the play, thus losing you marks.
- ▶ Quotes are quite important for this section, as they help reinforce the point you're trying to make. If you're having trouble remembering them all, there are a couple of ways to help:
 - Record yourself saying the quotes out loud and listen back to them as if they were a song. You can remember song lyrics when you listen to them, so why not quotes?
 - Write them out and read over them several times, and then recite them to someone else without looking.
- ▶ **Don't just tell the story of the play.** You will get docked LOADS of marks for this. Remember, the examiner is an English teacher, they will know the plot, they want to read about YOUR opinion on it, so make it personal. Use phrases such as "I believe that..." or "In my eyes..."



Poetry

Question 1

- ▶ When you're answering Question 1, you have to answer all three components of it, each worth 10 marks.
- ▶ It's pretty much all **your own opinion** that matters here. Like I've said previously, once you can back up your answer with a good quote and explanation, you're on the road to success.
- ▶ I would recommend knowing a few **poetry techniques** to show you know what you're talking about. Know what alliteration is, onomatopoeia, similes, etc. If a question asks you for your favourite image in the poem, if you just throw the sentence "The simile of the ... really appealed to me because..." (where appropriate!), you're bound to get extra marks because it shows you've studied poetry well.
- ▶ That being said, make sure you know exactly what each one is, you'll look a bit silly if you say something is an example of onomatopoeia when it's not.

Question 2

- ▶ Like the drama question, they keep it quite broad so that whatever poems you've studied, you should be able to twist the question so that you can answer it easily using one of the poems you've studied.
- ▶ **Be personal.** I can't stress it enough. You have to show how you connected with the poem or the poet, even if you didn't in reality. It seems ridiculous but you will get a heap of marks for over-exaggerating your emotions.
- ▶ I would recommend knowing all the **important images in the poems and what they portray**. Also I'd learn the **themes of all the poems and techniques used** if you want high marks. I highly recommend quoting the poem too. It backs up whatever point you're making and makes your answer look better.
- ▶ Finally, know the name of the poet who wrote the poem.



Fiction

Question 1

- ▶ Here, you answer 2 of the 3 sub-questions given, each worth 15 marks.
- ▶ You're given a piece of unseen text and you have to answer questions on it. Like I've said before, it's what you think that matters. Give your **personal opinion** while answering the question (repeat the sentence in the question within your answer to stay focused, if you can).
- ▶ There's no major secret to answering this question, I would just recommend not straying far from the extract/text/question in your answer.
Stay on track and reference the text frequently to show what you're talking about.

Question 2

- ▶ Again, this is where you answer a question on the text you've studied.

- ▶ You'll need to **know the theme, plot, characters and emotions** of the text like the back of your hand and throw in your knowledge on these wherever you can within your answer, where it seems appropriate. Show the examiner how much you know and how much you studied.
- ▶ Quotes help a lot to back up your point. Learn a few important ones off, hopefully your teacher will have pointed out the stand-out moments/quotes that you need to know.
- ▶ I sound like a broken record at this stage but if you're not personal in this section you will not get high marks at all. The examiner wants to know your opinion of the text, they want to see your emotions, your reactions, etc., so please express personal emotion within your answer.



Timing

- ▶ I won't lie, unless you're very speedy, you will be **under time pressure for English**, in both Paper 1 and Paper 2. Writing that much content within a short space of time is hard, and **it does take practise**.
- ▶ You needn't write out an essay every night within the time limit to practise this though, even if you just wrote out one paragraph of an essay within 5/10 minutes, to ensure you can do it in the exam.
- ▶ You'll need time to **read through the paper first**, as well as **plan questions**, so make sure to put aside time for that too.
- ▶ You'll also need **time at the end to read over your work** to **notice mistakes** you may have made.





Best of luck!
I'm sure you'll do great.

