At HL, students are required to write a formal essay of 1,200-1,500 words, which develops a particular line of inquiry of their own choice in connection with a work previously studied in class.

Candidates must select the work and topic for their essay independently; however, consultation with the teacher is essential in this process. Care must be taken to make sure that the chosen literary texts or works are rich enough to support a developed, focused, and analytical argument.

In the case of a collection of short stories, poems, song lyrics or any short literary text, candidates may choose to use just one literary text from the work as their focus. However, students and teachers should bear in mind that **the assignment is a broad literary investigation rather than a more narrowly-focused stylistic commentary task**. It may be necessary to use more than one literary text from the work chosen in order to achieve this. In this instance, it is possible for a student to also explore texts from the author of the work that were not studied in class provided at least one of the texts was covered in class.

Determining the topic  
The chosen topic should enable a broad literary focus for the essay. In achieving this focus, the seven central concepts of the course may be a helpful starting point in generating or determining a topic for the essay. While students do not have to trace their essay back to one of the seven concepts and the assessment criteria do not require it, working with one of the seven concepts will allow students to begin their thinking about their topic as they refine their ideas and arguments. The seven concepts are briefly discussed here in relation to the assignment. The Language A teacher support material has more specific examples for further guidance.

Identity

The student might be interested in an aspect of the representation of identity of a particular character or group of characters in the work, or on the way in which the work itself relates to the identity of the writer.

Culture

The student might be interested in an aspect of the representation of the culture of a particular place, institution or group of people, or on the way in which the work itself relates to a particular culture.

Creativity

The student might be interested in an aspect of the representation of individual or collective creativity, or lack of creativity, within the work, or on the way in which the work itself represents the creativity of the writer.

Communication

The student might be interested in an aspect of the representation of acts of communication, or failures in communication, in the work, or on the way in which the work itself represents an act of communication.

Transformation

The student might be interested in an aspect of the representation of transformation or transformative acts in the work, or in the way in which the work itself is a transformative act either of the other works (through intertextual reference to them) or of reality (by means of a transformative effect on the reader’s identity, relationships, goals, values, and beliefs.)

Perspective

The student might be interested in an aspect of the representation of a particular perspective or perspectives within the work, or on the way in which the work itself represents the writer’s perspective.

Representation

The student might be interested in an aspect of the way in which the work itself represents different themes, attitudes and concepts, or in the extent to which literature can actually represent reality.