

# ***Strategies for the TExES Constructed Response Assignments***

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The essay portion (officially the “Constructed-Response Assignment”) counts 35 percent of your score. (It used to be 20 percent, but with the addition of the second writing, it is now 35.) The two assignments are now (1) a literary analysis, which is precisely the same as in previous years) and (2) a writing assessment and pedagogy assignment (for which you evaluate a piece of student writing and suggest strategies for improvement. Both essays will be written on a computer.

## **The Literary Analysis Question**

The general assignment for the literary analysis will always be the same—writing an essay in which you are given two literary passages (usually poems or excerpts from long or short fiction) and asked to compare them based on theme or themes and the authors’ use of literary elements and/or literary devices. There is no carved-in-stone length for your essay, but suffice it to say that you need to write a developed, well-supported response. According to the preparation guide, you should spend 60 to 90 minutes on this essay portion. Your literary analysis essay will be scored holistically on a 4-point scale. You need to prepare for this essay task with the “4” score point as your objective. You might not be able to reach that score, but you need to try to score at least a “3.” For more information, plus a sample essay assignment, see the TExES preparation guide (available online at the SBEC website). (For links to this and other sites, as well as other information about preparing for the TExES, visit the English Department certification website: <http://www.shsu.edu/academics/english/certification/>)

**The Rubric.** The criteria against which your essay will be evaluated is also shown in more detail at the State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) site, but, briefly, here is what they mean to you.

1. **Purpose.** It’s hard to know exactly how this criterion plays into the evaluation process. The “content knowledge addressed in the test framework” is not pedagogy but rather the traditional aspects and components of literary studies as demonstrated in the traditional critical explication. I believe that the “purpose” of your essay needs to be along those lines. For instance, if you wrote an essay which addressed how to teach the passages, you would have failed to address the purpose.
2. **Demonstration of Knowledge.** This is a measurement of your knowledge of literary themes and literary devices and/or elements and how authors make use of them.
3. **Support.** “Quality and relevance of supporting details” means precisely that. You need to demonstrate or illuminate your ideas through specific references to the passages. In other words, it is not enough to say what you think an author intended; you must *show* it.
4. **Rationale.** “Rationale” refers to the “soundness of reasoning and depth of understanding” of your ideas and interpretations. You need to read the pieces carefully and arrive at as enlightened an understanding of them as possible. If you have difficulty seeing a deeper meaning, be satisfied with a more straightforward idea, but make sure your support for that idea is clear and fully developed and supported.
5. **Written Expression.** You need to provide the best, clearest, most effective writing you are capable of in an hour or hour and a half. You simply must plan your essay well. You

cannot just plunge into it and write it off the top of your head. Although content is the more critical factor, good writing is imperative. Since this is an on-demand writing, a small number of non-distracting writing errors are permissible, but you should reserve time to go back over your writing to correct errors and polish your written expression.

6. **Other Factors.** Implicit in the rubric but not stated as separate criteria are at least two other factors that you should take into consideration. First, it seems obvious that, since your essay is going to be scored holistically (meaning quickly but accurately) it needs to be carefully organized. Do not make an evaluator strain to find your thesis or other main points. Make certain that your essay begins with a strong, emphatic introduction in which you clearly and decisively introduce your main point. This is a little tricky, since it is a two-part essay, but you need to state your main idea or ideas unequivocally, even if it is a two-part idea.) On the other hand, do not resort to artificial but crude organizational arrangements, such as the five-paragraph essay. The second “other factor” is sufficient development. It may be implicit in “demonstration of knowledge” and “support” that your essay should be sufficiently developed, but it bears emphasis here. While there is no magic number for the length of your essay, you are very, very unlikely to receive a 4 for one page. What you need to shoot for is full development of your ideas. Try to produce sufficient length of meaty writing. Finally, as mentioned above, you should provide a strong, emphatic introduction. The conclusion is not as important. In fact, you might simply end your essay with a sentence or two which brings your essay together and ends it well. But your opening paragraph needs to be strong and clear. You should not begin it until you have fully planned the essay. (You might even consider leaving space and coming back to write the introduction last, especially since new ideas are likely to occur to you as you write.)

### Preparing for the TExES Literary Analysis

1. **Study the preparation guide.** Begin your preparation by reading the preparation guide carefully, every word of it. You need to be thoroughly familiar with every aspect of the assignment, including the score-point descriptions and the scoring process. The more you know, the better you will understand what is required to score a 4.
2. **Think about theme and literary elements.** Do some independent thinking and musing about themes in literature. What is the range of meaning of the term, and what are some common ones? Think about specific pieces of literature you have studied and different authors have illuminated them. Then, do some work (background reading or focused thinking or a visit to a professor) on literary elements and devices and how authors employ them variously. (By the way, the term “devices” probably suggests the more technical elements of literary and rhetorical criticism, but “elements” is a softer term. You need to know that your essay may rely on hard-core literary devices, but it does not have to. If you do a good job of analysis by using less technical language, such as “author’s voice” or “descriptive detail” you’ll be fine.) You might combine this study of literary elements and devices with your review of literary and rhetorical terminology for the multiple-choice portion of the test.
3. **Review the comparison essay.** Do some thinking or background reading about comparison and contrast essays. There are a variety of approaches to writing comparison/contrast essays. Don’t just walk into the exam without having considered some of the variations on the theme. Also, think about this specific task. It’s a little odd—sort of a two-headed monster. Both sections are about theme, but the first is to “identify and discuss themes that connect the passages,” and the second is to “explain how the authors use literary elements and/or literary devices in each excerpt to develop and support these themes.” I’m not suggesting that there is a canned approach for you,

- but you should not go into this exam without having considered the specific nature and the specific structural factors of the essay you are going to write. You need to do some thinking about and to have some practice in this somewhat tricky essay assignment.
4. **Review your literary background and treatments of theme.** At some point prior to the test, possibly three weeks before, review your notes from the literature courses you have taken. Generate a list of themes or topics covered in the courses you have taken. For each major theme, sketch out a summary of the different approaches authors have used to address the theme. You might also consider how contexts, such as time period, genre, literary movement, or critical framework, contribute to the treatment of a particular theme. When you are able to articulate the whole, visit with a favorite professor and ask for some feedback to your overview.

*Before you write*

1. **Read the general assignment.** If you have done your preparation up this point, there is nothing is the framework of the essay assignment that can surprise you. They are all stated in essentially the same way as the sample constructed-response assignment in the preparation guide.
2. **Read the passages carefully.** The only unknown material will be the two literary passages. (I can't speak to you about the passages specifically, but I can tell you that they will be poetry or fiction. It would be nice if you were familiar with one or both passages or authors (and if you are, you should try to use that familiarity to your advantage in the essay), but this essay is a test of your analytical and critical abilities, not of your background. If the passages are strange to you, don't panic. Some of them are a little demanding, but none is overly difficult. All of them are accessible thematically and structurally. Don't panic. You may want to begin by scanning the two pieces, but at some point read each one slowly and carefully, jotting down ideas in the margin or on your scratch paper and underlining key words sentences in the passage.
3. **Plan your essay carefully.** Spend at least 15 minutes reading the passages and planning your essay. Do not try to write the essay off the top of your head. First, read the passages slowly and carefully, making notes as you go. Try to arrive at a general idea of the prominent theme or themes they share and write them down. Go back and read again, jotting down specific representations of these themes and some elements or devices that the authors are employing. (Remember that the assignment asks you to write about "similarities or differences." Both pieces will treat common themes, but they may treat them differently. As ideas and examples come to you, jot them down on scratch paper so that you won't clutter your mind trying to remember everything.) Try to leave yourself some wriggle room, especially for ideas that might occur to you while you are writing. Plan carefully, but stay flexible as you write. (But don't let yourself go off on tangents. Remember the need, stated above, for clear organization.)

*While you write*

1. **Write carefully.** You know your best writing habits and practices, but try to avoid writing this essay in haste. (You have five hours for the whole exam. You can't waste time, but on both sections you need to relax and to avoid writing or answering hastily. Let this be your best thinking and your best writing. Don't spoil it by trying to go too fast, even though you need to produce a developed essay.) Budget your time, allowing time for proofreading and any unexpected emergencies (such as taking longer than you expected on an essay or going blank for a while.)
2. **Write a clear thesis.** Be sure your essay has a clear and emphatic thesis that responds directly to the essay assignment. State this thesis clearly in the first paragraph. You may

want to state the thesis in the first sentence or two or lead up to it and present it at or near the end of the opening paragraph.

3. **Provide support.** Provide specific as well as general information in your response by including examples, quotations, and details taken directly from the passages (or from other of the author's works, if you are familiar with some). Make sure that the details you provide help illuminate your thesis and that they are not simply the details in a plot summary. (There's an important difference.)
4. **Use appropriate diction and terminology.** As you write (type), try to use the technical vocabulary appropriate to the subject (though see comments above on the differences between "devices" and "elements").
5. **Don't panic.** If your mind goes blank or you don't know much about a question, relax and brainstorm for a few moments or go back to your notes. Try to recall some of the assignments you have read for class, particular lectures, or class discussions to trigger your memory. If nothing works, try some pre-writing or discovery technique, such as clustering or freewriting. If you're just stuck, go to the multiple choice section or the other essay and do some work there. Pay attention to your time, of course, but keep remembering that you have plenty of time for this exam. Take all of it if you have to. Don't panic.

*After you write*

1. **Re-read for content.** If you have time, re-read your whole essay and make any additions or changes necessary for clarity and completeness. Make any revisions you are able to.
2. **Check for clarity and correctness.** Check your response for errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation, as well as sentence clarity. (When you proofread for clarity, try to approach the writing as though it was written by someone else. Look at it as freshly and objectively as you can.)
3. **Re-read your introduction.** Re-check to see if your introduction remained appropriate for the essay or if the actual essay drifted from the original introduction as you wrote. Make any repairs or amendments or clarifications necessary. Also, check to see if your conclusion is emphatic and effective. It does not have to be long, but it needs to bring the essay to an effective close.

## **The Writing Assessment and Pedagogy Question**

The Writing Assessment and Pedagogy assignment is a new addition to the secondary English TExES. While the literary analysis question is purely literary, the writing assessment and pedagogy question is purely about teaching writing effectively. This will be a shorter section in this guide, because much of what has been said about the literary analysis question (especially about planning, thinking through your response, including detail, and attending carefully to your written expression) is essentially the same. Another similarity is that the basic structure of the question will never change from one exam to the next—all that will change will be the prompt the student has responded to and the actual piece of student writing that you are to respond to. The main structural difference is that this question is in three parts (or "tasks"): (1) identifying specific strengths in the student's response, (2) identifying one significant weakness in the student response and explaining how it interferes with the overall effectiveness of the response, and (3) providing the student one "specific, appropriate activity" that you would suggest to remedy that weakness. Since the scale of each task runs from zero to two, the maximum score you can receive is six points. You should shoot for at least a five on this question.

**The Rubric.** Each task has its own rubric, and these are much more straightforward and to the point than the complex rubric for the literary analysis. For Task 1, you receive full credit (+2 points) if you “clearly and correctly” identify a strength and provide an “effective and well-supported explanation.” Full credit (+2 points) on the Task 2 rubric demands that you “clearly and correctly” identify a “significant weakness” and provide an “effective and well-supported explanation” of what you are telling the student. The Task 3 rubric asks for similarly effective suggestions about an instructional activity that will address the weakness identified in Task 2. These rubrics are clear and should cause you little difficulty in understanding what you need to produce; however, you definitely should go to the preparation guide and study the rationale provided for the sample responses. Again, shoot for a two on each section, and think about crafting responses that will get you a five or, even better, a six on this section.

### **Preparing for the Writing Assessment and Pedagogy Question**

- **Study the Preparation Guide.** Again, the preparation guide is an invaluable source of information and context for you. Read very carefully the section on the writing assessment and pedagogy question. The preparation guide provides you with all the context you should need for understanding fully what is required on this assignment.
- **Review What You Learned in Your Coursework.** Your courses, especially English 3374, English 4364, and your methods block, have given you the framework you need for understanding what is demanded of you in this assignment. You should already have firmly in mind the assessment and response strategies articulated in *Bridging English* and other sources. You should review these sources carefully for both general pedagogy and assessment approaches, as well as (in the case of *Bridging English*) specific exercises and ideas that might serve as models for your response on this question.
- **Review the Texas State Standards and the TExES Competency Statements.** As stated earlier in this document, the TExES is drawn directly from the State of Texas ELAR standards and the TExES domains and competencies. Domain III (Written Communications) is obviously where you begin, but there is some good guidance in the other domains as well. When you are preparing for this section of the TExES (as well as the multiple-choice section), refer to those documents—especially the domains and competencies. Read through them and assess yourself your own familiarity with the instructional approaches articulated there. If you are foggy about them, go back and review. Your response in this question must respond directly to the classroom practices and objectives that drive the domains and competencies.
- **Do Some Preparatory Writing on Assessment and Providing Student Feedback.** Practice your response to this section. The three-part nature of this section makes it different from the literary analysis. Use the preparation guide or a source such as the chapter questions in *Bridging English* to pose questions to yourself that echo the tasks in this section. Write responses that fit the three tasks, concentrating on being clear, specific, and aligned with the pedagogies expressed in the standards and the competencies. Then test your responses by sharing them with a fellow student (study partner) or instructor who knows the pedagogy that applies to this set of tasks.

As for the advice about planning and writing the essay, please refer to the sections on planning and writing the literary analysis question, above. Most of the advice there (especially about careful planning and inclusion of effective detail) applies here, as well. Simply adjust accordingly for this different task.