



Making the Leap!

moving from GCSE to
A Level Literature study



An English and Media Centre Student Resource

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Published on <https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/publications>

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What This Pack Is and How to Use It

Are you thinking about studying English Literature at A Level? The activities in this unit will help you start to make the move from being a great GCSE student of Literature to being a great student at A Level – and beyond.

Some of the activities ask you to step back and think about what it means to study literature, while others encourage you to try out some different ways of approaching your learning – whether that’s reading, discussing, writing or learning how to reflect on your own work.

Some of the activities are short, others might take a couple of sessions to complete, others, such as reading an award-winning novel, are longer projects which you might keep going over several weeks. Begin by simply picking those which appeal to you most, but between now and the start of your A Level course try to complete a selection of differently coloured activities from the ‘Making the Leap’ bingo card on page 6. That way you will be practising and developing a good range of the skills an English Literature student needs. (And do spend five or 10 minutes simply flicking through the whole collection of ideas, even those you don’t think you’ll attempt. Even this will give you a really good sense of the wide range of approaches to Literature you’ll have chance to explore during your A Levels.)

A Key to the ‘Making the Leap’ Bingo Card

Yellow: Reading, watching and listening to the experts

Red: Creating your own anthologies

Turquoise: Critical challenges

Green: Reading, watching and listening to texts

Pink: Critical and creative ways of exploring Literature

The activities make use of a wide variety of freely available online resources, either on the EMC website or via sites such as the National Theatre, the *Guardian* and other newspapers, YouTube, university websites, the Poetry Foundation. We’ve checked the links but if you find one that is not working or which requires you to take out a paid subscription, please email web@englishandmedia.co.uk and we’ll find an alternative for you. (If the hyperlinks don’t work for you, copy and paste the web address into your browser.)

Many of the activities can be completed on your own, but some will be more fun and more productive if you can join up with others who are also thinking of studying literature. For these activities your teacher will be able to advise you about setting up a virtual discussion using platforms recommended and validated by your school.

14. Dive into the world of short stories, listen to interview and discussion about it <input type="checkbox"/>	12. Investigate what an essay actually is, read some great examples and write one of your own about any subject you want <input type="checkbox"/>	24. Immerse yourself in a university lecture <input type="checkbox"/>	7. Try exploratory writing <input type="checkbox"/>
18. Write a graphic novel version of one of your GCSE texts. How well can you get across what is most important and distinctive? What gets lost? <input type="checkbox"/>	19. Put together a short anthology of poems and write the introduction to the collection <input type="checkbox"/>	20. Listen to literature (audio books) <input type="checkbox"/>	2. Read an <i>emagazine</i> article and select 3 interesting points to share <input type="checkbox"/>
11. Read a prize-winning novel – just for pleasure <input type="checkbox"/>	15. Visit a virtual library – the British Library’s Discovering Literature website <input type="checkbox"/>	16. Take a risk by sharing an idea you’re not sure about <input type="checkbox"/>	1. Let a poem brew over time <input type="checkbox"/>
22. Collate a taster anthology of your favourite books to tempt another reader into giving them a try <input type="checkbox"/>	4. Watch a play online and write the script for a podcast/online discussion reviewing it <input type="checkbox"/>	3. Watch a film or TV adaptation of a novel you know. Then write a pitch for a novel you think would make a great film adaptation. Explain why! <input type="checkbox"/>	13. Listen to a literature podcast and share what you found interesting with a classmate/your teacher <input type="checkbox"/>
10. Play with a text, messing about and transforming it in 2 or 3 different ways. What do you learn about the original? <input type="checkbox"/>	5. Experts in the spotlight – watch a selection of emagClips <input type="checkbox"/>	21. Take part in a ‘Critics’ Conference’ role play <input type="checkbox"/>	17. Create a ‘Five Books’ list and publish your list <input type="checkbox"/>
8. Read the opening pages of 2 or 3 books about literature and explain which you’d most like to go on to read <input type="checkbox"/>	23. Explore the art of the review – read 3 or 4 online reviews for a novel you enjoyed, then either write your own or write a response to one of them <input type="checkbox"/>	9. Write a poem in response to a poem <input type="checkbox"/>	6. Take a risk with your reading and read a novel outside your comfort zone and write or record a review <input type="checkbox"/>

1. Let a Poem Brew Over Time

- Choose a poem. You could choose one from your exam anthology or (and this would be both more fun and more useful for you as a student of Literature) browse the websites listed below.

Online poetry libraries

Poetry Foundation

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>

The Saturday Poem

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/series/saturdaypoem>

National Poetry Library

<https://www.nationalpoetrylibrary.org.uk/online-poetry/poems>

Poem Hunter

<https://www.poemhunter.com/>

Poetry by Heart anthology

<https://www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/anthology/>

Scottish Poetry Library

<https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/>

Library of Congress Archive

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/archive-of-recorded-poetry-and-literature/about-this-collection/>

<https://poets.org/>

<https://poets.org/>

- Use the platform recommended and validated by your school to swap poems.

Set a timer for 10 seconds.

- Do a 'snapshot' look at the poem for 10 seconds – don't try to read it – and jot down anything you notice about it.
- Do the same again but this time for 30 seconds.
- Now put the poem to one side.
- On three different days over the next week or so, spend about 10 minutes reading the poem and writing about it in any way you want. You might write about what you like or what you are puzzled by or you might just ask questions. It's up to you whether you read over what you wrote on the previous occasion – there are advantages to both ways. Over the course of the next few weeks you could try the activity both ways.
- On the last day, read the poem again, read over all your writing, then make a few notes or record a voice message exploring how your response to the poem changed and developed.

Sharing what you notice

- If possible, use the platform recommended and validated by your school to join up with your partner. Together talk both about the poems and your thoughts on how your response to the poem changed and developed over time.

2. Explore *emagazine*

emagazine is a magazine and website for A Level students with articles written by academics, critics, writers, teachers and students on texts and topics set for A Level – and on literature and language more generally.

If your school has a subscription and you are able to get the logins from your teacher, log in and spend some time browsing the site, dipping into articles, then choose one that interests you. (It doesn't even have to be on a text you have read.)

For those of you who are not able to get hold of the logins or whose school doesn't have a subscription, we've collected together a small selection of articles for you to browse and choose from. A few are on authors or texts you may have come across at GCSE, a few are more general and a few explore books you may want to read just for pleasure. (See the '*emagazine* Resource Pack' accompanying this download.)

If you are able to use the platform recommended and validated by your school to share ideas, then the activity will be most interesting and productive. If you can't just do it on your own.

- Dip into the openings of several articles and choose the one that most immediately grabs your attention.
- Read the article and pick out three points to share. These could be ideas you find interesting, that you want to question (perhaps because you disagree, perhaps because you want to find out more), a point you don't understand.
- Take one of the points and add your own ideas to it or write a new point of your own.
- Use the platform recommended and validated by your school to share your ideas on what you noticed about the way the article is written – its organisation and development, the style, the voice and what difference that made both to your enjoyment and understanding.
- At some point before you begin your A Level course, why not have a go at writing an *emag*-style article yourself? You could join up with a friend and arrange to be editors for each other, adding the title, standfirst (the little overview that introduces the article) and sub-heads. You could write about one of your GCSE set texts – or you could choose something completely different: a novel you've enjoyed, one of the poems or short stories you've come across in this pack, a broader literary topic.

1. Adapting Literature for Film
2. Crossover Fiction
3. Openings in Contemporary Fiction – Questions, Challenges and Surprises
4. Dickens and Realism
5. Comedy in Shakespeare's Tragedies
6. William Blake: The Tyger
7. William Wordsworth: A Poet of the Ordinary
8. Michael Rosen: Defining Poetry
9. Bloodlust, Savagery, Obsession and Excess – Gothic *Macbeth*
10. Navigating Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde's London
11. Structures of Innocence – Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*
12. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* – A Question of Trust (don't read this article until you have read the novel – it's a quick and enjoyable read, so if you haven't, give it a go).

3. Books on TV

- Watch (or think back to) a film or TV adaptation of a novel you know, for example *Northern Lights*, *Noughts and Crosses*, *Emma*, *David Copperfield*, *Sherlock Holmes*, Agatha Christie.
(See BBC iPlayer for freely available dramas; Netflix and Amazon Prime have a wide selection if you have a subscription. Some complete dramas are also available on YouTube)
- Read Jenny Grahame's article for *MediaMagazine* about the recent adaptation of *David Copperfield* in the 'emagazine Resource Pack'. (Like *emagazine*, *MediaMagazine* is a magazine for A Level students – but for those studying Media or Film.)
- Write your own review of the adaptation you have watched.

Your own adaptation

- Now write a pitch for a different novel you think would make a great film or film adaptation. Explain why and how you would approach it.

4. Watch an Online Play

Why not watch a play online?

Here are some of the places you can watch theatre online.

Students working at home are now able to access the [National Theatre's on-demand site](https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/learning/schools/secondary-and-fe/on-demand-in-schools) for free – please ask your teacher to sign up or send you your school logins.

<https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/learning/schools/secondary-and-fe/on-demand-in-schools>

[Digital Theatre](https://www.digitaltheatre.com/) also offers a wide range of plays to watch on-demand (including from the Royal Shakespeare Company). Although this is a subscription site, some of their plays are available on their YouTube site. They are also currently offering a 30-day free trial.

<https://www.youtube.com/user/digitaltheatre>

<https://www.digitaltheatre.com/consumer/productions>

[Shakespeare's Globe](https://globeplayer.tv/all) also has a wide range of plays which can be rented or bought at

<https://globeplayer.tv/all>

A Shakespeare play

- Choose a Shakespeare play you have never studied before.
- Watch the play online. (If you can arrange to watch the same play at the same time as one of your classmates, have an interval break in the middle, so that you can chat about it.)
- Record a 2-minute review of it to send to your teacher.

(Watch a second play if you want to!)

- On a different day, watch the Shakespeare play you studied for GCSE. What difference does it make to the experience of watching it to have already studied it? What difference does watching it make to your understanding?

A play not Shakespeare!

- Enjoy watching the play.
- Write the script for a podcast/online discussion between a critic and the director. (If you have been watching the same play as some of your classmates, hold an 'After Show' discussion. One of you could play the director, one a lead actor and one the interviewer/critic. Use the platform recommended and validated by your school to do this.)

You can see examples of this sort of discussion on the following websites (all are freely accessible):

1. [National Theatre YouTube channel](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjz6LNDQOWaCkQegAHxyo2g)
http://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJgBmjHpqgs7citDojiasj-nMABL_DXku
2. [National Theatre podcasts](https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/nt-talks/id486761654?mt=2)
<https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/nt-talks/id486761654?mt=2>
3. [Young Vic](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjz6LNDQOWaCkQegAHxyo2g)
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLqth0oZ0oHJJYftVHd2ZHwaKQ_shhRGhf
4. [Shakespeare's Globe](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjz6LNDQOWaCkQegAHxyo2g)
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjz6LNDQOWaCkQegAHxyo2g>
5. [RSC](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjz6LNDQOWaCkQegAHxyo2g)
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjz6LNDQOWaCkQegAHxyo2g>

5. emagClips: Experts in the spotlight

The *emagazine* website includes a collection of video interviews with leading writers, academics and critics. A taster selection from emagClips is available without a subscription to accompany this download.

<https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/video-clips/clip-listing/making-the-leap-moving-from-gcse-to-a-level-literature-study-emagclips>

The screenshot shows the emagClips website interface. At the top, there is a title 'Making the Leap: moving from GCSE to A Level Literature study (emagClips)' and a subtitle 'A taster selection of emagClips'. Below this is a video player showing a man speaking. Underneath the video player is a section titled 'Video Clips' which contains a list of video topics. The list includes:

- Dr David Dwan discusses Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*
- Professor David Punter discusses the Gothic
- Professor Nicolas Tredell discusses American Literature
- Dr Priya Gopal on Postcolonial Literature
- Poet Owen Sheers reads and discusses the poetry of William Blake
- Professor John Mullan on Key Aspects of Narrative
- Dr Pamela Bickley discusses the contemporary novel
- Dr Jeremy Noel-Tod on Poetry
- Dr Margaret Reynolds discusses poetry
- Professor Nicolas Tredell on the 19th Century Novel

Below the list, there are links to 'How to Read a 19th Century Novel', 'Reading in the 19th Century', 'Jane Eyre: Themes', and 'Jane Eyre: Genre & Style'.

On this page you will find short discussions on a wide range of literary texts and topics including: how to read 19th-century novels (and how to read poems), *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, why George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* continues to be important, William Blake's poem 'London' (along with a reading of it), the difference between horror and terror, and dialogue in novels.

- Over the next few days or weeks dip into these clips. You could make a note of new ideas you come across or share them with classmates or you could just let them brew in your head. As you complete some of the other activities in this pack, you might want to return to specific clips to help you develop your thinking.
- Once you have done some of the reading, thinking, writing and discussion activities in this pack, why not record your own emagClip? In role as the expert talk for three or four minutes about an aspect of one of the stories, novels, poems or plays you have read, watched or listened to. (You might find it helpful to ask and then answer a specific question.)

6. Take a Risk With Your Reading

- What sort of books do you usually read for pleasure? If you always read the same sort of novel or the same author or have got stuck in a rut of not knowing what next to read, why not try to read something completely different? Always read novels? Why not try a graphic novel? Always read horror? Why not try a novel written in verse?

How to find your new read:

- [Look at EMC's list of great 21st-century reads for 6th formers.](https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/blog/50-great-21st-century-novels-for-6th-formers) (https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/blog/50-great-21st-century-novels-for-6th-formers)
- Ask friends. Ask the people you know have really different tastes to you.
- Follow writers, book clubs and book podcasts on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter.
- Read book reviews.
- Look at lists of 100 best books, for example, the [Guardian 100 Best Novels](https://www.theguardian.com/books/series/the-100-best-novels) (https://www.theguardian.com/books/series/the-100-best-novels) and [Guardian Best Books of the 21st Century](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/sep/21/best-books-of-the-21st-century) (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/sep/21/best-books-of-the-21st-century).
- [Read a book in translation](https://www.theguardian.com/books/fiction-in-translation) (https://www.theguardian.com/books/fiction-in-translation).
- Write or record a review of your 'out of your comfort zone read'. Share your review via the platform recommended and validated by your school.
- Then take another risk with your reading. Keep being a risk taker! (What risk is there really? You don't have to finish it if you hate it...)

7. Try Exploratory Writing

- Choose a short text you have not studied before. This could be the opening of a novel, a poem, a scene from a play – it doesn't matter what. (Some suggestions for where you can find extracts from different types of texts are suggested below.)
- Read the text, without making notes.
- Now write about it. Just write, in any way you want, almost as though you are having a conversation with yourself. Let your ideas develop and change, contradict yourself, ask questions – it's up to you. The only rule is that you should write in full sentences, not notes or bullet points.

For novels, poetry, non-fiction, drama

[Amazon's](#) 'Look inside' feature for a wide range of its book (search for a book, then click on 'Look inside')
<https://www.amazon.co.uk>

Short stories

[A Personal Anthology](#)

<https://apersonalanthology.com/>

[Granta](#)

<https://granta.com/discoveries-24/>

[New Yorker](#) (limited number of articles/stories per month before subscribing)

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/fiction>

[Electric Literature](#)

<https://electricliterature.com/>

[Selected Shorts: Let Us Tell You Story](#)

<https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/selected-shorts/id253191824>

First chapters

[New York Times – First Chapters Archive](#)

<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/first/first-fiction.html>

Online poetry libraries

[Poetry Foundation](#)

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>

[The Saturday Poem](#)

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/series/saturdaypoem>

[National Poetry Library](#)

<https://www.nationalpoetrylibrary.org.uk/online-poetry/poems>

[Poem Hunter](#)

<https://www.poemhunter.com/>

[Poetry by Heart anthology](#)

<https://www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/anthology/>

[Scottish Poetry Library](#)

<https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/>

[Library of Congress Archive](#)

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/archive-of-recorded-poetry-and-literature/about-this-collection/>

<https://poets.org/>

<https://poets.org/>

8. Dip a Toe into Books about Books

As well as critical books about specific writers, there are also a wide range of books available about literature more generally. Some of these are written for people studying literature at university, others are written for a more general audience.

The opening pages of all the books listed below are available online via Amazon's 'Look Inside' feature.

- Read the opening pages of two or three (or more) of these books. Which would you most like to go on to read? Why?
- Select tiny quotations which interest or please you. Use these to create a poster, an Instagram post, or a Twitter thread.
- If you can, talk to a classmate about your choice, or share your selected quotations via the platform recommended and validated by your school. If you can't do this, explore your ideas in a written or voice message to yourself.

On novels:

John Mullan: *How Novels Work* (<https://tinyurl.com/hownovels>)

David Lodge: *The Art of Fiction* (<https://tinyurl.com/lodgefiction>)

Francine Prose: *Reading Like a Writer* (<https://tinyurl.com/prosereadwrite>)

On poetry

James Fenton: *An Introduction to English Poetry* (<https://tinyurl.com/fentonpoetry>)

Ruth Padel: *The Poem and the Journey* (<https://tinyurl.com/padelpoetry>)

Mark Yakich: *Poetry – A Survivor's Guide* (<https://tinyurl.com/yackichpoetry>)

On Shakespeare

Bill Bryson: *Shakespeare – The World as a Stage* (<https://tinyurl.com/brysonshakes>)

Emma Smith: *This is Shakespeare* (<https://tinyurl.com/smithshakes>)

On Drama

David Edgar: *How Plays Work* (<https://tinyurl.com/playswork>)

Richard Eyre: *Interviews with Theatre People* (<https://tinyurl.com/talktheatre>)

Steve Waters: *The Secret Life of Plays* (<https://tinyurl.com/lifeplays>)

On English in general

Robert Eaglestone: *Doing English* (<https://tinyurl.com/doingenglish>)

9. Write a Poem in Response to a Poem

A great way to get to grips with a poem is to write your own poem in response to it. There are some brilliant examples of poems and critical commentaries by A Level students on EMC's *emagazine* website. We've put together some of these examples for you in the '*emagazine* Resource Pack' accompanying this download.

- Read two or three of the sequences (poem, poetic response, critical commentary). Reflect on (and, if you can, talk with a friend about) the different ways the students responded to the poems they read. What do their commentaries reveal about what they have learned?
- Now it's over to you. Begin by choosing the poem you'd like to respond to. It might be a poem you know well, a poem you like but feel you've never really got to grips with, a poem on a subject you are interested, a poem with a form that intrigues you. The choice is really up to you and you can always have a go at a different approach on another day. (To find your poem you browse the websites suggested on page 16.)
- Read the poem several times – including out loud. Leave it to one side, let it live in your head, come back and read it again after you've mulled it over a bit.
- Write your poem in response. If you need to, try several different ways of writing it. Experiment with it, changing the line breaks, or the images. Read it out loud. Record it and listen back to it: what do you notice when you hear rather than see it?
- When you are satisfied with your poetic response, read both poems.
- Write a short critical commentary on the two poems, along the lines of the examples you read.
- Create a visual and audio presentation of the two poems – the original and your response. Use your critical commentary as the starting point for a short introduction to the two poems.
- Share your visual presentation and audio reading with your teacher/classmates, using the platform recommended and validated by your school.

10. Play with a Text

Playing and messing about with a text or transforming it in two or three different ways is a really effective and fun way to investigate and clarify for yourself what is distinctive about the original. It's something both creative writers and critics do.

- Read Andrew McCallum's *emagazine* article on recreative and transformative writing. (See the 'emagazine Resource Pack' accompanying this download'.)
- Now experiment with one or more of the activities suggested here:

Experimenting with the form and layout of a poem

- Choose a poem you like. This could be one you have studied at school or one you find online. Some great websites to browse to find a poem are suggested here.

Online poetry libraries

[Poetry Foundation](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/)

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>

[The Saturday Poem](https://www.theguardian.com/books/series/saturdaypoem)

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/series/saturdaypoem>

[National Poetry Library](https://www.nationalpoetrylibrary.org.uk/online-poetry/poems)

<https://www.nationalpoetrylibrary.org.uk/online-poetry/poems>

[Poem Hunter](https://www.poemhunter.com/)

<https://www.poemhunter.com/>

[Poetry by Heart anthology](https://www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/anthology/)

<https://www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/anthology/>

[Scottish Poetry Library](https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/)

<https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/>

[Library of Congress Archive](https://www.loc.gov/collections/archive-of-recorded-poetry-and-literature/about-this-collection/)

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/archive-of-recorded-poetry-and-literature/about-this-collection/>

<https://poets.org/>

<https://poets.org/>

- Copy and paste the poem into a Word document or type it up. Make a copy of it and arrange it so it looks like one continuous piece of prose.
- Now experiment with different ways of making the lines break. What different effects can you create? Try reading your different versions out loud. Do your line breaks make you read it differently?

If you enjoy doing this, you might be interested in reading this [Poetry Foundation article](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70144/learning-the-poetic-line) (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70144/learning-the-poetic-line>).

A transformation from prose to drama

- Take a short extract from a novel you know well (for example, *A Christmas Carol*, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*) and try turning it in a piece of drama.
- What changes do you have to make? Is anything lost in the transformation? Is anything gained?

A visual experiment with fonts

In 2012 graphic artists were invited to play with the first page of *Great Expectations* using their choice of font and layout to reveal the meaning they see in the opening to the novel. Each designer was also asked to explain the thinking behind their transformation. Their designs were collected in the book *Page One*.

- [Look at some examples here.](https://www.graphicdesignand.com/product/page-1-great-expectations)
- Can you do the same for a text you know well?
- Present the original and transformed text side by side, along with a short reflection on what you have discovered. Share it with your classmates via the platform recommended and validated by your school.

11. Read a Prize-winning Novel

- Have a go at reading a prize-winning novel. You can find lists of novels which have won prizes by searching in Google or by using the links below.

[Booker Prize](https://thebookerprizes.com/)

<https://thebookerprizes.com/>

[Crime Writer's Association](https://thecwa.co.uk/the-daggers)

<https://thecwa.co.uk/the-daggers>

[Carnegie Prize](https://carnegiegreenaway.org.uk/)

<https://carnegiegreenaway.org.uk/>

[Wellcome Book Prize](https://wellcomebookprize.org/)

<https://wellcomebookprize.org/>

[Costa Prize](https://www.costa.co.uk/behind-the-beans/costa-book-awards/welcome)

<https://www.costa.co.uk/behind-the-beans/costa-book-awards/welcome>

[James Tait Memorial Prize](https://www.ed.ac.uk/events/james-tait-black)

<https://www.ed.ac.uk/events/james-tait-black>

[Women's Prize for Fiction](https://www.womensprizeforfiction.co.uk/)

<https://www.womensprizeforfiction.co.uk/>

- To help you make your choice use Amazon's 'Look Inside' to dip into some first pages. Search online for reviews. (*The Guardian*, *New York Times*, *Independent*, www.goodreads.com are all good places to find interesting reviews – sometimes more than one for the same book.)
- Choose one to read. (Visit your local library's website to find about borrowing digital downloads.)
- That's it. Just read and enjoy it. (Go on to read another from the list or by the same author if you want to. Talk to someone about it if you want to. Write about it if you want to. But you don't have to. You could just read it.)

12. The Art of the Essay

We know that essays are what you write in English. But, beyond knowing they are the way you show your knowledge in an English exam, what is an essay? And can its meaning outside the classroom help us write better essays inside the classroom (and get more enjoyment from doing it)?

- Spend a couple of minutes jotting down what you think an essay is. (Does it have anything in common with a review, for example? Does it have to answer a question? Can you write an essay about anything?)
- If possible, share your ideas with classmates via the platform recommended and validated by your school.
- Now read these short definitions of the essay:

Essay is derived from the French word *essayer*, which means ‘to attempt’ or ‘to try’.

A short form of literary composition based on a single subject matter, and often gives the personal opinion of the author.

A famous English essayist, *Aldous Huxley* defines essays as, “A literary device for saying almost everything about almost anything.” (Aldous Huxley, novelist and essay writer)

A short piece of writing on a particular subject. Oxford English Dictionary

A scholarly work in writing that provides the author’s personal argument.

A short piece of writing on a particular subject, especially one done by students as part of the work for a course.

Essays are how we speak to one another in print — caroming thoughts not merely in order to convey a certain packet of information, but with a special edge or bounce of personal character in a kind of public letter. (Edward Hoagland, Introduction, *The Best American Essays: 1999*)

The novelist and essayist Blake Morrison explores the art of essay in ‘A Loose Sally of the Mind’, an article published in *emagazine*. In itself it is a great example of what the essay can do. This essay is included in the accompanying ‘*emagazine* Resource Pack’.

- Have a go at reading his essay – don’t panic if it feels like a bit of a challenge. Read it slowly, read it out loud, write out short quotations which grab your attention or which interest you.
- Dip your toe into the world of the essay by reading (bits of) some really brilliant examples of the form. Try to think about which ones you like, which ones you want to carry on reading, which ones help you discover something new or understand something better. How much is it to do with the subject matter? How much is it to do with the style and voice of the essay?

The ideas below are just suggestions to get you started. If while browsing these you spot another essay title that intrigues you, read it instead.

1. [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: “Beware Of Feminist Lite” From We Should All Be Feminists](https://ideas.ted.com/Beware-Of-Feminism-Lite)
<https://ideas.ted.com/Beware-Of-Feminism-Lite>
 2. [Zavi Kang Engles: My Mother’s Tongue](https://therumpus.net/2019/04/My-Mothers-Tongue/)
<https://therumpus.net/2019/04/My-Mothers-Tongue/>
 3. [George Orwell: Politics of the English Language](https://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e_polit)
https://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e_polit
 4. [Zadie Smith: Some Notes On Atunement](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/12/17/some-notes-on-attunement)
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/12/17/some-notes-on-attunement>
- Now read a short extract from Professor Judy Simon’s chapter on the essay in *The Literature Reader*, EMC’s book for A Level students. (See the accompanying ‘emagazine Resource Pack’.)
 - It’s now over to you to join the long tradition of essay writers. Choose a topic – it might be related to a book you’ve read, but it doesn’t have to be. Think about what you liked in the essays you dipped into. Imagine your reader. And have an ‘essai’ at an essay.
 - Put your essay away. In a few weeks either come back to this essay and redraft it. Alternatively, choose another topic and have another stab at essay writing.

13. The World of Literary Podcasts

- Listen to a literature podcast. Any of the following would be good places to start (try two or three – the styles and approaches are very different).
- Use the platform recommended and validated by your school to share what you listened to with friends. Which podcast would you most recommend and why?
- Follow up the suggestions from your classmates.
- Keep listening to any of the podcasts you enjoyed (or try out some others), follow the ones you like on Instagram or Twitter and let the presenters know what you thought.

[The Guardian Books podcast](https://www.theguardian.com/books/series/books)

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/series/books>

[Radio 4 Books and authors](https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/books-and-authors/id331296649?mt=2)

<https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/books-and-authors/id331296649?mt=2>

[Not Another Books podcast](https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/not-another-book-podcast/id1370122551?mt=2)

<https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/not-another-book-podcast/id1370122551?mt=2>

[The Literary Salon](https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/the-literary-salon/id495583876?mt=2)

<https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/the-literary-salon/id495583876?mt=2>

[Simon Mayo's Books of the Year](https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/simon-mayos-books-of-the-year/id1402579687?mt=2)

<https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/simon-mayos-books-of-the-year/id1402579687?mt=2>

[Anything But Silent](https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/anything-but-silent/id1464701909) (British Library)

<https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/anything-but-silent/id1464701909>

14. Dive into the World of Short Stories

This sequence of activities is based on a short story 'Heads of the Colored People' by the African American writer Nafissa Thompson-Spires. Some readers have found this prize-winning story a challenging, even controversial read. For that reason, your teacher might decide it is a story they would rather you read when back in class, so that they can guide discussions and mediate any issues that come up. However, we wanted to include it here because it takes literature to a place quite far beyond what you experienced for GCSE. Because of the challenge it offers, we really recommend that you listen to the interviews with the author, Nafissa Thompson-Spires, before reading. This will give you some important context.

Imagine that while browsing online one day you come across an interview with the author Nafissa Thompson-Spires. In the interview she discusses her first collection of short stories *Heads of the Colored People*.

- [Listen to the interview.](https://www.npr.org/2018/04/10/601184986/heads-of-the-colored-people-takes-on-the-pressures-of-being-the-only-one)
<https://www.npr.org/2018/04/10/601184986/heads-of-the-colored-people-takes-on-the-pressures-of-being-the-only-one>

In May 2019 the collection was chosen as Washington DC's 'DC Reads' book of the month and Nafissa Thompson-Spires took part in book clubs, interviews and discussions.

You do a bit of searching and discover that Thompson-Spires has done some more interviews – including one in which she reads the opening of her book's first story, called 'Heads of the Colored People: Four Fancy Sketches, Two Chalk Outlines and No Apology'.

- Before reading this title story, think about the title. What do you make of it?
- Listen to the reading and interview (from 25 seconds to up to 7 mins 30 seconds) [here](https://www.kcrw.com/culture/shows/bookworm/nafissa-thompson-spires-heads-of-the-colored-people)
<https://www.kcrw.com/culture/shows/bookworm/nafissa-thompson-spires-heads-of-the-colored-people>
- You discover that the title story 'Heads of the Colored People: Four Fancy Sketches, Two Chalk Outlines and No Apology' is available online and decide to read it. Given the interview you heard and the opening you listened to, what do you expect from the rest of this story? How do you think it might be written?
- Now read the story. Sometimes as a student of literature you'll be asked to pause, to reflect on what you have just read, to predict what you think will happen. Other times you will want simply to immerse yourself in a story and read it in one setting, before thinking about what it means, how it is written and how it makes you feel. In this case, the choice is up to you.

[Read the story here.](https://www.npr.org/books/titles/601183690/heads-of-the-colored-people-stories#excerpt)

<https://www.npr.org/books/titles/601183690/heads-of-the-colored-people-stories#excerpt>

- As soon as you have finished reading, start to explore your response either in writing or by recording your thinking out loud on your phone.
- Pull together your thinking by crystallising for yourself what you think the story is about. Write a sentence which goes something like

'Heads of the Colored People' is about and But.....

- Write a message to your teacher and the rest of the class, telling them what interested you about the interviews and what you thought about the story itself. Do you think the rest of the class should read it? If you can, share your message via the platform recommended and validated by your school.

Reading and listening to more short stories

Short stories are a great way of immersing yourself in a really wide range of narrative texts. In just a few hours you can have read a 19th century ghost story, an experimental short story, a recent prize winner, a translated story, stories from all different parts of the world and in all sorts of different narrative traditions. Some of the websites with stories you can read for free are listed here:

[A Personal Anthology](https://apersonalanthology.com/)

<https://apersonalanthology.com/>

[Granta](https://granta.com/discoveries-24/)

<https://granta.com/discoveries-24/>

[New Yorker](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/fiction) (limited number of articles/stories per month before subscribing)

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/fiction>

[Electric Literature](https://electricliterature.com/)

<https://electricliterature.com/>

[Selected Shorts: Let Us Tell You Story](https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/selected-shorts/id253191824)

<https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/selected-shorts/id253191824>

Finding out more about the short story

As you go through your A Level course and beyond you might also be interested in reading more about the short story form and getting ideas for what to read by browsing Chris Powers' *Guardian* series 'A Brief Survey of the Short Story'.

15. Immerse Yourself in a Virtual Library – The British Library’s Discovering Literature Website

The British Library’s Discovering Literature website is a real treasure trove for anyone interested in Literature. It includes hundreds of articles on texts from Chaucer to 21st century novels such as Andrea Levy’s *Small Island*, plus images of many of the fascinating items in the British Library Collection.

The Discovering Library website is divided into the following periods:

Medieval

<https://www.bl.uk/medieval-literature>

Shakespeare

<https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare>

[Including: *Macbeth*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Tempest*]

Restoration and 18th Century

<https://www.bl.uk/restoration-18th-century-literature>

Romantics and Victorian

<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians>

[Including: Wordsworth, Blake, Coleridge, *Jane Eyre*, *Frankenstein*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *Oliver Twist*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Hard Times*, Christina Rossetti]

20th Century

<https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature>

[Including: *An Inspector Calls*, *Animal Farm*, the poetry of Wilfred Owen, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*]

The first thing you could do is simply spend an hour or so exploring the different sections of the website, allowing yourself to follow whatever paths interest you. (It might be worth having a Word document open so that you can copy and paste titles and web addresses of anything you might want to return to later. But on this first visit, you could just be an interested browser!)

Over the next few weeks you could complete the British Library Critical Treasure Trail

- Read an article that’s caught your attention and select one key point – bit of treasure – from it.
- Use the links on the right-hand side of the web page to follow a critical trail through the site.
- Read two more articles, collecting bits of treasure as you go.
- Share your treasure as quotations on the platform recommended and validated by your school.
- You could also record a short audio guide to the trail you followed and the treasure you found.

16. Take a Risk by Sharing an Idea You're Not Sure About

In some ways this is the simplest of all the activities. In some ways it is the trickiest. It is certainly at the heart of becoming a confident and successful student of literature.

It's a cliché to say that there are no right answers in English. And that's true – it would be a very dull and limited subject if it was just about learning someone else's interpretation of a text. On the other hand, there are wrong answers: *Romeo and Juliet* is not about an alien invasion. That is pretty clearly not a convincing interpretation of the text. Sometimes it's a lot less clear whether an interpretation is convincing and justifiable. You need to explore it, mull it over, test it out by sharing it with someone – and that means taking a risk. Your idea might open up a whole new way of thinking about a text – or it might be questioned or challenged. That questioning and challenging will help you clarify and develop or refine your idea – or make you realise it is going nowhere.

- You could try this out on one of the new texts you have read or for one of your GCSE set texts.
- Choose an idea that's been nibbling away at the back of your mind – an idea you think is interesting but you are a bit unsure of. It won't be an interpretation that your teacher has shared with you or one that you have read in a study guide.
- Spend a few minutes pursuing your idea either in writing or by recording yourself thinking out loud. Think around it, being open to its complexity.
- Now take the plunge and share your idea with a classmate, using the platform recommended and validated by your school.
- After your discussion, let the new ideas brew and settle, then have another go at developing them (again in writing or by recording yourself).

17. Create a 'Five Books' List

Every few weeks the website [Five Books](https://fivebooks.com/) (<https://fivebooks.com/>) asks a writer to recommend five books on their area of particular expertise or interest. Sometimes these are new books, sometimes they are classics, sometimes they include books that were important to them in their childhood. But they are all linked to a topic in some way. The writer explains why these books are important to them – or should be read by everyone.

It's a great way of finding something brilliant to read. Here are some examples of their young adult lists.

[The Best Young Adult Science Fiction Books recommended by Estelle Francis](https://fivebooks.com/best-books/the-best-young-adult-science-fiction-books/)

<https://fivebooks.com/best-books/the-best-young-adult-science-fiction-books/>

[The Best Coming-of-Age Novels About Sisters recommended by Laura Wood](https://fivebooks.com/best-books/coming-of-age-novels-sisters-laura-wood/)

<https://fivebooks.com/best-books/coming-of-age-novels-sisters-laura-wood/>

[The best books on Political Engagement For Teens, recommended by Adrienne Kisner](https://fivebooks.com/category/best-kids-books/young-adult/)

<https://fivebooks.com/category/best-kids-books/young-adult/>

- What about creating your own list of Five Books on a topic or genre you have read a lot about?
- For each book include the title and author, a cover if you can and why you have chosen it.
- Start your list with a general introduction to you and your list.
- Share your list with other people in your school – or publish it on the [Five Books website as one of the Reader Lists](https://fivebooks.com/create-new-list/). (<https://fivebooks.com/create-new-list/>)

18.A Graphic Novel Adaptation of a Text

You are going to experiment with getting to the heart of a set text by thinking about how you would adapt it into a graphic novel.

- Begin by having a look online at some other graphic novel adaptations. If you can, choose another text you know reasonably well. There are lots of the texts set for [GCSE in graphic novel format here](http://www.classicalcomics.com/book-shop/) (<http://www.classicalcomics.com/book-shop/>). You might also want to have a look at [some original graphic novels such as the prize-winning ones listed on this website.](#))
- Outline the way you would re-tell one of your GCSE set texts in the form either of a graphic novel.
- Without looking back at your copy, make notes on the text, under the following headings:
 - Story
 - Themes and ideas
 - The way it is told
 - The things that make it distinctive and special.
- Create a page plan for the re-telling and choose one section to work up in detail. (If you have time and are interested you could create the whole adaptation.)
- How well can you get across what is most important and distinctive? What gets lost?

19. Put Together a Short Anthology of 6-10 Poems

- Begin by spending some time browsing online poetry libraries (see the links below), to get a sense of what you like and what you are not so keen on. As you read, make a note of any poems that appeal to you and why.
- Decide what the main idea behind your anthology will be, for example:
 - A theme e.g. love poems across time or cultures
 - A type of poem e.g. sonnets, lyrics
 - Humorous poems
 - Poems for reading aloud
 - Poems which do something interesting with form and layout
 - Poems which ‘speak to each other’ – for example, a poem from the 19th century which pairs well with a more recent one
 - Your own favourites.
- Now write a short introduction, to give readers a sense of what the collection offers, picking out something special about each of your chosen poems.
- Use the learning platform recommended and validated by your school to swap anthologies. If you can, take it in turns to interview the ‘editor’ of the anthology (either in written form or online, if your school platform allows that).

Online poetry libraries

Poetry Foundation

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>

The Saturday Poem

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/series/saturdaypoem>

National Poetry Library

<https://www.nationalpoetrylibrary.org.uk/online-poetry/poems>

Poem Hunter

<https://www.poemhunter.com/>

Poetry by Heart anthology

<https://www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/anthology/>

Scottish Poetry Library

<https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/>

Library of Congress Archive

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/archive-of-recorded-poetry-and-literature/about-this-collection/>

<https://poets.org/>

<https://poets.org/>

20. Listen to Literature

[The audiobooks listed below are available to listen to online free of charge.](#) They are all ones you might come across in your A Level literature course. Even if you don't go on to study any of these particular texts, each will contribute to your wider understanding of literature.

- If you can, arrange with a few other people to try this activity at the same time – that way you can share your choices and your reviews.
- Listen to the opening few minutes of each and choose the one that most grabs you. Make a brief note of what made you want to keep on listening.
- Listen to your choice of audio book.
- Write a review to share via the platform recommended and validated by your school. Focus on the big picture – what the story is, what it is about (underlying themes and ideas), anything that seems particularly interesting about the way it is written. Read over your review and see if you can reduce it to 150 words – while still getting across your main points.

The audio books

- *Jane Eyre*
- *Frankenstein*
- *Pride and Prejudice*
- *Brave New World*
- *My Antonia*
- *Ethan Frome*
- *Picture of Dorian Gray*
- *The Age of Innocence*
- *The Metamorphosis*
- *The Age of Innocence*
- *Wuthering Heights*
- *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Stories*
- *The Jungle*

https://stories.audible.com/discovery/enterprise-discovery-21122353011?ref=adbl_ent_anon_ds_ds_dml_cntr-4

21. The 'Critics' Conference' Role-play

For this activity you will need to use the platform recommended and validated by your school so that you can take part in a discussion. With three or four other students you are going to role-play being critics at a conference.

- Together choose a shared text. This could be one of your GCSE texts (if you have all studied the same one), a short story or novel you have read while working through this material. For now you are using this activity to develop your critical skills – you don't need to worry too much about the text you use to do it.

You are each going to take on the role of a particular critic who has been invited to take part in the conference. You'll be playing a part, not necessarily discussing your own ideas – it's a chance to test out ideas, to experiment with different ways of making a point, to ask a question or challenge an idea.

- With your group choose which of the critics below should be invited to the conference. (Remember to bear in mind the text you have chosen!)
 - a. A journalist who has previously written articles defending adults who read young adult novels.
 - b. A university lecturer interested in the representation of women in literature.
 - c. A specialist in the way writers create tension in their work.
 - d. A controversial academic who thinks that only some books are good enough to be included in the curriculum.
 - e. A reviewer who hosted a TV series on the importance of books having a positive moral message
 - f. A novelist who thinks the only purpose of a novel is to entertain.
 - g. A critic who thinks that the 19th century was the golden age of literature.
 - h. A writer who is most interested in writers who experiment, break boundaries, play with form and language.
 - i. A politician who is most interested in writers who use their novels to make a point
 - j. A controversial academic who thinks that you can divide books into those men like and those women like.

22. Collate a Taster Anthology of Your Favourite Books

Publishers trying to encourage readers into reading a new author or new genre put together little taster anthologies. The anthology includes a cover and the opening few pages of 5 or 6 books, along with a mini-introduction.

- Put together your own taste anthology to encourage other readers to try the books you particularly enjoy.
- Begin by reminding yourself of some of the novels you have enjoyed over the last few years. (You can use the 'Look inside' feature on Amazon and Google books previews to do this if you don't have the books with you at the moment.)
- Decide what the idea behind your anthology will be: are you aiming it at a particular age? Or will it be genre or author-based? If these ideas don't appeal, why not pretend to be a well-known writer asked to create a taster anthology of their favourite books.
- Create your taster anthology.
- Use the platform recommended and validated by your school to create a virtual library of your anthologies.
- Browse the anthologies and choose a novel to read. (Libraries now have many books available to borrow as digital downloads: search online for your council or Local Authority.)

23. The Art of the Review

- Read three or four online reviews for a novel you enjoyed.

Places to find reviews

- By writers, critics etc: *Guardian*, *Independent*, *New York Times*, *Slate*
- By readers: Amazon, GoodReads, LibraryThing, Book Riot.
- Begin by thinking about your personal response to these – is there one you feel more in sympathy with, that captures what you thought and felt? Do you like the style/approach of one more than another?
- Then take a step back and look at each a bit more clinically. What do each of the reviewers focus on (the story, the characters, underlying themes, their personal response)? What approach do they take to writing the review?
- Drawing on what you have learned about the art of the review and the novel itself, either write your own or write a response to one of them. If you have time, you might like to read this article on [writing a great book review](https://www.stylist.co.uk/life/the-art-of-the-book-review/46762). (<https://www.stylist.co.uk/life/the-art-of-the-book-review/46762>)
- Send to your teacher to create a review database on the platform recommended and validated by your school.

24. Experience a University Lecture

In 2015 Professor Emma Smith from Hertford College, Oxford University, recorded her undergraduate lecture series on Shakespeare plays. These are all available via Apple Podcasts <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/itunes-u/id399194760> and via Oxford University (<https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/people/emma-smith>)

This is how she describes the approach she takes in the lectures:

Each lecture in this series focuses on a single play by Shakespeare, and employs a range of different approaches to try to understand a central critical question about it. Rather than providing overarching readings or interpretations, the series aims to show the variety of different ways we might understand Shakespeare, the kinds of evidence that might be used to strengthen our critical analysis, and, above all, the enjoyable and unavoidable fact that Shakespeare's plays tend to generate our questions rather than answer them.

Different approaches, a variety of different ways, thinking around a central critical question, enjoyable, more questions than answers – these lectures are the *perfect* way to experience what it means to be a student of literature (as well, of course, as discovering more about some Shakespeare plays).

The lectures were written and delivered for undergraduates at Oxford University, so you should expect to find them a bit of a challenge. But it's the sort of challenge which someone interested in Literature should find very satisfying, even exciting. And Emma Smith explores her ideas with real clarity and delivers the lecture with humour. So give them a go – don't worry about understanding everything, especially the first time you listen. Use the suggestions below to help you.

- Choose the play you studied for GCSE. Look at the mini-description of the lecture and make a note of your own ideas and questions about this idea.
 - *Macbeth*: This lecture explores ideas of agency – who or what makes happen the things that happen in *Macbeth*?
 - *Twelfth Night*: This lecture takes a minor character in *Twelfth Night* - Antonio - and uses his presence to open up questions of sexuality, desire and the nature of romantic comedy.
 - *Romeo and Juliet*: This lecture tackles the issue of the spoiler-chorus, in an already-too-familiar play.
 - *The Tempest*: This lecture asks if it's useful to think about the character of Prospero as a self-portrait of Shakespeare.
 - *The Merchant of Venice*: This lecture discusses the ways the play's personal relationships are shaped by models of financial transaction, using the casket scenes as a central example.
 - *Henry V*: This lecture asks whether the presentation of King Henry V in the play is entirely positive
 - *Julius Caesar*: This lecture focuses on the scene with Cinna the Poet to discuss structure, tone, and politics.
 - *Othello*: This lecture looks at the central question of race and its significance in the play.
 - *Much Ado About Nothing*: This lecture asks why the characters are so quick to believe the self-proclaimed villain Don John, thinking about male bonding and the genre of comedy
- Listen to the lecture in the background, as you are doing something else, just to get used to the approach and style.

- Listen to the lecture without worrying about taking notes. Afterwards see if you can jot down two or three ideas that interested you. Listen again another day and see if you can add to your notes.
- If you can, arrange with a classmate to listen to the same lecture and swap notes via the platform recommended and validated by your school.
- Listen to a second lecture on a play you haven't studied but are interested in. If you can, listen to an audio dramatisation of the play (see activity 30) or watch the play online (see activity 4) before you listen to the lecture.
- Reflect on what it was like to listen to a lecture – what did you enjoy? What did you find challenging?
- Draft an email to Emma Smith in which you explore your response to one of her ideas.
- Draft and record your own short lecture (aim for 10 minutes) on your Shakespeare play. Follow Emma Smith's model and focus your lecture on a specific idea or question.