

## A2 Essay planning

To write a successful AS essay, you must write a thorough textual analysis of the text you have been studying. For A2 you must continue this level of analysis, and *add a contextual* analysis.

### Textual analysis

To complete a thorough analysis, you should *seek* to answer some of the questions from *every* concept listed below. Depending on the text, it may be that

- a) there's no way to adequately address one or two of the concepts, or
- b) some of the questions or concepts have little relevance to the text.

However, if you can't answer at least half of the questions for *most* of the concepts, you're probably missing something.

### Media Representations

- Who is being represented?
- In what way?
- By whom? (links to institution)
- Why is the subject being represented in this way? (links to ideology)
- Is the representation fair and accurate?
- What opportunities exist for self-representation by the subject?

### Media Languages and Forms

- What are the denotative and connotative levels of meaning?
- What is the significance of the text's connotations?
- What are the non-verbal structures of meaning in the text (e.g. gesture, facial expression, positional communication, clothing, props etc)?
- What is the significance of mise-en-scène/sets/settings?
- What work is being done by the sound track/commentary/language of the text?
- What are the dominant images and iconography, and what is their relevance to the major themes of the text?
- What sound and visual techniques are used to convey meaning (e.g. camera positioning, editing; how are images and sounds combined to convey meaning)?

### Narrative

- How is the narrative organised and structured?
- How is the audience positioned in relation to the narrative?
- How are characters delineated? What is their narrative function? How are heroes and villains created?
- What techniques of identification and alienation are employed?
- What is the role of such features as sound, music, iconography, genre, mise-en-scène, editing etc. within the narrative?
- What are the major themes of the narrative? What values/ideologies does it embody?

## **Genre**

- To which genre does the text belong?
- What are the major generic conventions within the text?
- What are the major iconographic features of the text?
- What are the major generic themes?
- To what extent are the characters generically determined?
- To what extent are the audience's generic expectations of the text fulfilled or cheated by the text? Does the text conform to the characteristics of the genre, or does it treat them playfully or ironically?
- Does the text feature a star, a director, a writer etc who is strongly associated with the genre? What meanings and associations do they have?

## **Media Institutions**

- What is the institutional source of the text?
- In what ways has the text been influenced or shaped by the institution which produced it?
- Is the source a public service or commercial institution? What difference does this make to the text?
- Who owns and controls the institution concerned and does this matter?
- How has the text been distributed?

## **Media Values and Ideology**

- What are the major values, ideologies and assumptions underpinning the text or naturalised within it?
- What criteria have been used for selecting the content presented?

## **Media Audiences**

- To whom is the text addressed? What is the target audience?
- What assumptions about the audience's characteristics are implicit within the text?
- What assumptions about the audience are implicit in the text's scheduling or positioning?
- In what conditions is the audience likely to receive the text?
- Does this impact upon the formal characteristics of the text?
- What do you know or can you assume about the likely size and constituency of the audience?
- What are the probable and possible audience readings of the text?
- How do you, as an audience member, read and evaluate the text? To what extent is your reading and evaluation influenced by your age, gender, background etc?

## ***Contextual analysis***

Modules 4 and 6 require you to consider 'wider contexts' of production and reception. There is no exhaustive list of questions, but this short summary should guide your wider reading:

### **Historical contexts**

- What developments in genre, narrative and representation (for example) preceded the production of this text?

- How have audience expectations of this kind of text changed over time?
- What historical events have impacted on audience readings, values and ideologies?  
*For example: In an essay on 'Bram Stoker's Dracula' (dir: Francis Ford Coppola, 1992), the evolution of the vampire sub-genre and the representation of women would both be important, as would the extent to which Coppola bucked a trend towards realism with his deliberately stylised mise en scène.*

### **Social contexts**

- In what kind of society has the text been produced and received?
- What freedoms and/or restrictions might have affected audience reception of the text?
- What movements or values were widely popular in the society in question at the time the text was produced?

*For example: the presence of a psychotherapist ('ship's counsellor') in 'Star Trek: The Next Generation' (1987), was directly influenced by the popular rise of therapy on the west coast of the USA in the 1980s.*

### **Political contexts**

- What ideological framework underpinned the government in power at the time of production?
- What impact might political pressure have had on media institutions (the press, film studios etc.)
- What political ideas, priorities, hopes and fears were dominant when the text was produced.

*For example: 'The Invasion of the Body Snatchers' (dir: Don Siegel, 1956) is widely read as a commentary on American fears about the political threat of communism and the arrival of socialist ideas in American politics and society.*

### **Economic contexts**

- What economic factors might have influenced production of the text?
- What economic factors might have influenced audience consumption and reception of the text?

*For example: the success of 'Shrek' (dir: Adamson & Jenson, 2001) made a sequel both inevitable and necessary: film studios need sure-fire hits to cover the losses of less successful films, and Dreamworks needed to build on the credibility established by Shrek, after a selection of animated also-rans like 'Road to Eldorado' and 'Antz'.*

### **Combination contexts**

Of course, wider contexts are difficult to deal with in isolation – they tend to be interconnected, and sophisticated answers will recognise this.

*For example: 'Wall Street' (dir: Oliver Stone, 1987) is an entertaining critique of the culture of greed and self-service said to be encouraged by the economic and political policies of US President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. This was mirrored in Margaret Thatcher's UK policies, which made the text just as relevant to UK audiences.*