

## Summary of public engagement for GCSE English Literature closed book exams

The Petitions Committee asked TES online and the Student Room online forums to discuss the issue of open book exams for GCSE English Literature ahead of the petition debate on Monday 24 April. Below is a summary of the key themes raised in the forum discussions. You can read the full comments in the links below. Members are invited to use these comments as they wish to help inform the debate.

### TES online (views of teachers):

- **Education news** forum: <https://community.tes.com/threads/what-do-you-think-about-the-new-closed-book-examinations-for-gcse-english-literature.754456/>
- **English** forum: <https://community.tes.com/threads/what-do-you-think-about-the-new-closed-book-examinations-for-gcse-english-literature.754457/>
- **Secondary** forum: <https://community.tes.com/threads/what-do-you-think-about-the-new-closed-book-examinations-for-gcse-english-literature.754458/>

### Summary:

#### Memory

Contributors said that the ability to memorise quotations was a different skill than being able to analyse and compare written texts. The later skills were considered to be more important to focus teaching on and more beneficial to students in the "real world". Some contributors argued that they had to memorise large chunks of texts when they were at school and so didn't see a problem. Some argued that it was good to learn short quotes and that it avoided time wasting during exams searching for them. Some discussed the specific challenges memorisation of large numbers of quotations and poems would have on certain students, particularly those of a lower level.

"[...] Memorising quotes or learning chunks of text is not usually that hard for a bright student. Indeed, there is a certain challenge to it which some relish [...]. For the less able or those who struggle academically, learning quotations by heart may be extremely difficult or a non-starter. We need to find a way to challenge the brightest students in the right kind of way and provide meaningful learning experiences for the less academically inclined. We talk a lot about differentiation in the classroom but then expect everyone to jump through the same hoop. Why?" ViolaClef Comment 8

"[...] I teach students who are capable, intelligent, articulate people with excellent appreciation and critical faculties - in short, brilliant Literature students - but who don't have great memories. I myself can't quote from films or songs that I've heard a hundred times. These students will gain average-poor grades despite their deep knowledge of, appreciation of and critical analysis of these texts simply because they cannot remember the precise wording from the text. Either we're testing memory *or* we're testing skill and in a *Literature* exam, I believe that critical appreciation is more important than ability to memorise quotations.

Secondly, it's made it that much harder for those students at the lower end of the ability range. No tiers means all ability levels are tested in the same way, and making it that much harder for students who are never going to get a pass grade if they spend 50 years studying the subject is not going to help. The texts did at least level the playing field in terms of weaker students being able to check something or support their ideas appropriately. In real life, if you need to check something...you check it. You don't 'best guess' and hope it fits - you double check the fact, figure, sentence or whatever you need to check.

Thirdly, I think it's a step backwards for students to learn a hundred quotations or more when they should be revising skills, analysis and critical appreciation." SecretSiren [Comment 9](#)

"[...]It is good to learn pithy and well selected quotations. My students do ok this way. Isn't it better that they do this than muck about looking for quotation skills they haven't a clue about in the exam and lose time? Learning things off by heart boosts confidence and the Shakespeare is pretty easy, two or three word phrases are fine. The plays were written to be learnable! Might be an argument to have texts for the novel, but they would have to split the paper." MrsMumbles [Comment 15](#)

"I don't think closed book exams are an accurate reflection of how the skills the study of Literature endows you with are employed in real life. When I studied Literature at University, I had access to the text (and, indeed, the whole library); when I worked as a journalist and critic, I had access to the text. MPs would not be expected to criticise the language of a bill without having that bill in front of them; Lawyers would not be expected to memorise witness testimony; I would hope the Judges would rely upon written records that their own recall when writing legal opinions - so why do we expect students to memorise vast tracts of text? It shifts the focus away from teaching the higher order skills of analysis and critical thinking." Tb9605 [Comment 4](#)

"I have just completed my NQT year, having started it in September 2015, and the new GCSEs in Lang and Lit are putting me off teaching English. The boring memory test \*\*\*\* I have to teach has no resemblance to my degree in the subject I love, or the Masters I am planning on studying. I hate it." Blueskythinking [Comment 33](#)

### **Time for teaching English literature**

"English Literature is now a separate GCSE in Progress 8 - and has more value now than ever before for Performance 8. Schools have usually tagged it onto English lessons - but they cannot do this anymore otherwise they face problems with their Performance Results. And GCSE Lit just got tougher and bigger in content too. So, for example how long does it take to study and know 15 poems really well and be able to compare them?" Install [Comment 11](#)

### **The Government's response**

"The response says clearly students are not expected to learn texts by heart, and my interpretation of what they're saying is students should know the texts well enough to be able to refer to different parts or contrast them with other works / extracts given to them in the exam. If this were the case, I agree they should know the works well, as it is - after all -

an English Literature course. Is my understanding / interpretation incorrect?  
I don't see an issue with students having closed book exams, as I think they spend more time looking for quotes than actually thinking about, and answering, the questions when they have a book in front of them." Roamingteacher [Comment 3](#)

### Questions for the Government:

- Why are not English teachers the ones to drive assessment of their own subject? Question from Mr Media ([Comment 18](#)).
- The key question I would ask the government is this: what do you want us to assess? A student's memory or their talent/capability in our subject? Englishtt06 [Comment 2](#)

## The student room (views of students):

<https://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/showthread.php?p=70845564>

### Summary

Contributors differed greatly on their opinions on closed book GCSE English Literature exam. There is no clear consensus or view that could be said to represent the majority of contributors on the Student Room.

### Memory

- Some contributors believe that a closed book exam is **testing memory rather than knowledge**. They commented that English is already a complex subject to study for and this element of memory made it more difficult for some.
- Some contributors argued that the exam should **assess the candidates' ability to interpret the text, not their ability to memorise it** as these skills are transferrable for later life whereas learning a poem or piece of prose will not be relied upon in the workplace.
- Also of concern was the fact that exam **questions are not known in advance** meaning that candidates must memorise a wide variety of quotes to ensure that they are prepared.
- Some contributors were in favour of closed book exams, stating that they believed **time was saved by not searching through a book for a quote**. Similarly, some suggested that teachers had said **quotes did not need to be reproduced word for word** in the exam and that a reasonable margin for error would be permitted.
- There was some confusion over whether closed book exams were a **new introduction** with many older contributors stating that they had sat closed book exams in previous years and did not find this to be problematic.

### Example posts

"GCSEs are increasingly becoming a memory test, and not just English literature. It's about how much of the revision guide you can parrot off, rather than any actual understanding of the subject. I got all As in all 3 sciences without understanding science at all (and not being

taught it properly) I just learnt the revision guide off by heart because that's the way you do well at GCSEs! closed book exams will just give kids more pointless knowledge to cram into their heads at the expense of genuine understanding and enjoyment of the subject. It's all facts facts facts." Amelia\_G (Comment 33)

"I mean theres good things about it and bad things. Even though it is hard to learn quotes for every character/theme etc. I think its going to save a lot of time when it comes to writing the quotes down. You won't have to look through the book to find relevant quotes to use. And I find it very reliving that you don't have to remember quotes word for word (my english teacher also told me that you only have to use one word quotes or short phrases so that helps a lot)." LJones191 (Comment 113)

"It's an English Literature exam, not some memory test on how many quotes you can learn" mez\_merising (Comment 119)

"I agree. I did closed book GCSE English and not having the book meant I had more time to answer and make a point rather than parroting, which they don't expect you to do for closed book exams anyway. Heck, my teacher told the class we didn't need to learn quotes and we got the highest grades our school has seen in a while (mind you I did look over quotes the night before the exam to make myself feel better lol) Funnily enough an exact quote from the History Boys was said in my uni interview which was quite funny. So yeah, I have no issue with closed book exams. What I do have an issue with is the removal of coursework (which is a good opportunity to investigate something further and thus commit it to memory more) and non-British books, two decisions which I think are extremely short sighted." Steliata (Comment 121)

### **The Government's response**

- Contributors did not agree on whether the Government's response to the petition was appropriate.
- Many did however highlight that it is **now too late to change the exam** for this year's candidates so the Government was, in their opinion, always unlikely to announce a change.

### **Example posts**

"Quite frankly I think the government's response to the petition is poor. They state the content requirements in the first 2 paragraphs, which at no point mention that it is necessary for the exams to be closed book. They also say "Students will not need to learn and remember the exact words of poems or texts by heart.", however in the higher bands one of the points students must have is "precise textual references", which shows that quotes are definitely needed to be memorised exactly, despite us apparently not needing to memorise them. This seems quite contradictory. [...] Overall, therefore I feel the government response is not only inadequate in that it does not fully respond to the topic in question, but also is vague, and does not have evidence to back up their points, as such evidence does not exist. Thus, I think the response is overall poor. (Also, it was identical to

the response to the petition last year, which I think is poor form considering the amount of time it took for them to respond." Lemur 14 (Comment 38)

"I think the response is fair enough. I wouldn't expect the rule to be changed now, with so little time left to the exam." LlamaLikeEllie (Comment 62)

"[...] I just think the Governments response to that peition was so generic and bland and just more "politician" talk. It seems like the Government is more fixated on results, results, results rather than education, education and education." Popsiclez (Comment 69)

"The government has said that we "will not need to remember the exact words of poems by heart in order to succeed". Yes, this is true in some cases. We can refer to sections of the poem, play or novel; however I find that this doesn't allow me to fully explain my point nor allow me to go into the detail should I need to. I don't think the government's response fully appreciates exactly how much the English Literature course requires us to learn, as well as having the pressure of several other subjects on our backs. Previous years have allowed opened book exams, and as far as I am aware, it worked fine. The exams have moved from testing our abilities in different skills to testing our memory and I don't believe this allows students to show their full capability." Caitlynstudies (Comment 105)