

“I appeal to you as a father.” (Ransom)
“Always physical, never afraid to show her feelings.” (The Queen)
Compare the difficulty characters in both texts have with reconciling family, leadership and power.

Outline of purpose, context and audience

Comparative essay questions need a number of elements to work: an understanding of both texts and the themes they explore; the differing ways each text examines an idea; and what conclusions each text draws. Most important of all is the students’ ability to discuss what emerges when the texts’ differing approaches are lined up with each other. It is not enough to write about their similarities and differences, the student is wise to consider whether any universal truths are revealed by their comparisons. The topic itself is posing a question about family and power in a wider sense. The task asks students to reveal the ways that the texts examine the topic’s key ideas.

It is essential for students to compare the two texts in detail. Within the essay, the texts can be explored in counterpoint to each other. Students should build up a list of comparative words, and use them to add coherence to their discussion of topic and texts.

A topic like the one above, with quotes attached, will expect the student to be able to place them, and their context, in this instance Priam pleading with Achilles, and Charles speaking to his mother about Diana.

The audience is logically the teacher; thus, the essay’s language should reflect this, in this case, a formal style is expected. There is also an expectation that the teacher has read the texts, obviating the need for scene setting and character and plot description, in place of analysis and comparison. While there is nothing inherently wrong with briefly providing an explanation of what has happened, it will cost the student time needed for analysis and comparison if greater detail is given, in any timed piece of assessment.

Planning

Break down the topic, in this case, reflect on the idea that family and power are incompatible. The student would need to define ‘family’ and ‘power’ and reconsider how these ideas are expressed in both texts. Students should include as many families from both texts as possible, not just the central ones. This filtering and grouping might include deciding whether Achilles’ relationship to Patroclus was familial, just like Diana’s to the Queen, Prince Philip and the Queen Mother. They should be encouraged to look not just at the central characters, but others like Somax, the Blairs, and even perhaps the Queen’s relationship to her people as familial.

Students would then reflect on the effect of power on those families, both in its exercise and impact on others. The central question of this topic really is how power and families are warped by each other, and what compromises must be sought and agreed to in order to make them function. Another way would be to think about whether these are institutions and ideas that operate without influence. Students would then be encouraged to look at the direction the quotes are encouraging the exploration of ideas to go, in this instance, a focus could be on the role of family and how it can operate above ideas of ruling and being a monarch, or a member of the ruling class.

After this, the student should come up with a contention that addresses the topic’s focus in some detail and they should map out their introductory paragraph: e.g. ‘Both *The Queen* and *Ransom* present the idea that family and power typically change and alter when they come into contact with each other, producing sharp breaks and traumas. While this lack of compatibility is difficult for some, the ability to compromise and forgive means

these ideas can operate, if not in concert, then at least with a degree of harmony.’ This style of contention and introduction reveals the student’s view of the ways that the texts examine the main themes which have been flagged by the topic.

From there, the student should be able to construct a series of topic statements about the insights offered by the texts on the selected ideas and concepts, and logically order them. Suitable examples should be noted. If students pursue the argument that the texts reveal how power and family do not operate together well, two good examples would include a reference to Achilles’ thoughts as described at the start of the text, and a reference to the way that the Windsors decide to go to Balmoral instead of meeting with the public immediately after news has broken of Princess Diana’s death. Students could then move on to offer examples of where it appears to work well, such as is the case for the Blairs or the royal family of Troy. For the third and later paragraphs, students could choose to look at the way some families manage to balance the two concepts, in particular, the Queen’s willingness to appear to be contrite and forgiving, and her surrendering, in effect, of power to Tony Blair. Similarly, Achilles’ and Priam’s moment of communing, derived from their shared understanding of fatherhood, speaks much of the significance of compromise and of the power of some characters’ emotions. These examples are important since they show a degree of change in the characters over the course of both texts. Understanding and showing awareness of change is likely to indicate that the student has understood the text, and its key themes.

Students would then draw together reflections on their comparison of the main ideas in the conclusion, making sure they didn’t introduce new material.

They would also try to reiterate the significance of their conclusions about the ways that the texts have explored the selected ideas, noting whether the texts are ascribing any degree of universality in their respective conclusions.

Sample introduction

Family and power are constants in many people’s lives. Both David Malouf’s *Ransom* and Stephen Frears’ *The Queen* explore the conflict between power and family through their characters and settings. Family and power typically change and alter when they come into contact with each other, producing sharp breaks and traumas. While this lack of compatibility is difficult for some, the ability to compromise and forgive means both power and family can operate, if not in concert, then at least with a degree of harmony. While the lives of their characters may be difficult, and the barriers that need to be crossed are significant, both texts show that they can be crossed, albeit with the assistance of sacrifice.

Notes

- The introduction starts with a statement about the selected ideas and without any reference to the texts; it helps the student show the examiner they understand the focus of the topic.
- The second sentence introduces the two texts, and their general relationship to the topic.
- The following sentences offer the direction of the essay’s contention.
- The last sentence tries to open out the topic and helps the reader see the direction the essay will take.

Sample body paragraph

The initial contact between family and power is typically fractious. Achilles’ reaction to the death of Patroclus is filled with grief, a grief he cannot get over. Even when he kills Hector and drags his body around in revenge, he tells himself that this ‘is for [you] Patroclus. But it is never enough.’ He is unable to assuage his grief. His role as a leader of men is undermined by the agony over his closest family member, Patroclus’ death, even

after he has enacted his revenge. Similarly, the murder carried out by Neoptolemus, Achilles' son, of King Priam in familial revenge proves not enough to reconcile his desire for power and family vengeance. The Windsors by contrast respond initially to the news of the death of Diana as something to be excised from their family; they intend to carry out the funeral only as a 'private matter' and not a 'matter of state'. The Windsors, here, are expressing their leadership style even within the context of their immediate family. Diana is seen by the older royals as an ex-royal, no longer one of them, yet this private definition is continually contested by the people, who regard her almost as another 'queen'. They want a full ceremonial celebration of her life.

This reluctance to comprehend and appreciate that their family's view is out of sync with that of those they rule both hinders and diminishes the royals' power. These characters' lack of understanding threatens their control over both their rule and family relationships.

Notes

- The paragraphs start with a general statement, in this case since it is the first paragraph it is about ideas as revealed at the start of both texts, leaving the essay open to discuss how they change later on.
- The first set of examples includes Achilles as a central character, but also presents Neoptolemus' act, showing an understanding of the text as a whole and an ability to use peripheral characters to illuminate the central ideas.
- The transition to *The Queen* acknowledges the difference in the examples offered by the text on the subject under discussion.
- The last sentence draws the texts and different examples together, presenting them as different in scope, but similar in consequence.