

Study Guide for the 2026 National English Olympiad

Some suggested responses to the ‘Points to Consider’

(A4 – PRINTABLE VERSION)

NB – The following are not model answers!

1. A Man for all Seasons

- Thomas More is deeply committed to God first, and to people of England. He is probably well aware of the King’s selfish motives. He knows that “Ye cannot serve God and Mammon”, and he has complete focus in his religious beliefs, with no distractions.
- *What were some of More’s alternatives, and why did he not choose them?* – More could have relented and sworn allegiance to the King, but in so doing he would have betrayed his commitment to God; he could have left England and fled to France, but in so doing he would have betrayed the people of England. His beliefs and his conscience prevented such choices. He was in a ‘Catch 22’ situation. He had made his commitment to God, and it ran so deep that he could not turn back and betray God. No-one and nothing could dissuade him to do otherwise. Only his daughter really understood his choice. He had strong self-discipline and a lack of self-indulgence and self-pity that would have led him to follow the common man.
- *‘We are all the Common Man’* – The Common Man ‘wears many hats’, unlike the disciples who were committed to Christ and his message, and the early Christians who died in the Colosseum. Not many people are prepared to die for their beliefs.

Does this limit ... ? – Alison Botha had deep religious belief, grace and calm, enabling her to be absolutely focused, and the love for her mother prevented her memories from being overwhelmingly horrific. We could be like an Alison (or a More, or a Mandela) if we had deep convictions, but mostly the average person (the common man) is distracted because of the ‘many hats’ we wear and the influence of others - or because of our ambitions and our commitments to others.

- *‘Are we superior beings?’* – (Candidate’s personal response/s.)

2. The Merchant of Venice

- *‘What may ambitious people have to relinquish ... ?’* – They may have to sell their souls; have no scruples regarding who they walk with; neglect their families; compromise themselves and values (often in the workplace).
- *Is Shylock’s demand reasonable?* – (Candidate’s personal response.)
- *Is the play anti-Semitic?* – Generally history has shown many people have been anti-Semitic. In the play Shylock is taunted by Gratiano, Bassanio’s friend, and he is treated as a non-person. The characters do not even see how hypocritical their treatment is in the way they treat him. He is mocked, but is also used to get money. His name is not used in addressing him – Gratiano calls him ‘Jew’. Others want to make him renounce his faith and his money.
- *Consider the hypocrisy of some of the Christians in the play.* – Portia’s speech about the ‘quality of mercy’ shows hypocrisy in the way Shylock is treated at the end of the trial. Where was Christian mercy then? Also shown is how far modern society has changed, not expecting Jewish people to give up their faith as was expected in the play. Antonio’s expectation of Shylock’s money is, by modern standards, untenable. The negative attitude of many toward Shylock as a money lender yet nevertheless borrowing from him when in need is hypocritical. Look to the present day and the political ‘theatre’ being staged around the world.

3. The Ballad of Reading Gaol

- This is a complex topic. Victorian society's views on personal relationships and punishment differed strongly from those of many cultures today.
- *How much did his prison experience change Wilde's life?* – Wilde's experience was partly affected by society's rejection of his chosen lifestyle, whereas he had had huge success as a writer. His rejection was hard to bear, and prison life was boring, inhumane and brutal. This was tough for his sensitivity to accept. But in the poem he shows sympathy and compassion for the prisoner who dies. He seems to have a realistic acceptance of his lot, but his health suffered greatly. The ballad shows black humour - '... not so sweet with nimble feet to dance upon the air!' Although Wilde's body succumbed to prison circumstances, his soul and faith were strong. He is bitter at times about 'Justice', calling it 'parricide', and other remarks he makes. He also shows nostalgia – 'The loftiest place is that seat of grace'.
- *How does Wilde describe the brutality of the penal system and the hypocrisy of the justice system?* – He describes his 'three plank bed', the system of justice condemning people with the aim of slaying the strong, and slaying the weak, and calls it grim justice. He describes the boredom, the lack of any warmth from guards, and the 'tread' of the prisoners when they walk around the prison yard. There is the wail of impotent despair – of being helpless. He refers to the barrenness of his surroundings, the gallows, never a human voice to speak a gentle word, loneliness and despair, and degradation.

4. The Face of Justice

- *Why would Chessman spend so much energy on appeals?* – Is this an indication of how sure he is that he was framed and of his doubts about the legal system? He seems determined to prove his innocence.
- *What do his appeals show about his character?* – Grit and perseverance under difficult circumstances; his belief in himself and survival.
- *Ponder about all his writing in jail* – three books, many letters to influential people, one book filmed. He blossomed in jail, having regular meals, discipline in his life, while he grew in character, and did not wallow in self-pity. People all over the world saw his film and could read his books.
- *Sufficient extenuation?* – Grim justice does not always take extenuating circumstances into account, and does not operate from the heart. His criminal record might have prejudiced judgment in his kidnapping trial. Many people do not believe in giving criminals a second chance. Consider his early childhood and teen years and how he overcame disadvantage.
- Ponder the different attitudes to prison life in the anthology.

5. Lifer

- *Is our full potential reachable if we have no faith in ourselves? What helps develop our potential?* – Faith in a higher power; maybe also a mentor; influence of parents and older siblings; reading about people who have achieved.
- *The importance of parents in our formative years:* – Consider this with regard to a number of individuals in the anthology. Doyle's mother was a very strong positive influence in his early childhood. He had a strong religious background and support from his mother, who gave him unconditional love.
- *Why was the period in the 'hole' so helpful to Doyle?* – His anger at unjust repression erupted into bitterness, hate and cynicism which nearly drove him to madness. He turned against his former friends, was rude and hurtful to them. As he fell apart they contacted his mother who came from her sickbed: this was his turning point.

6. Trial by Jury

- *Success in building tension and emotion:* Morton uses lots of detail, many words painting a picture of the judge and the rest of people in court. The public want to hear the verdict - helps to create tension and impatience - formality vs emotion and tension. This technique of detail is used throughout, but with more emphasis on the emotion of the people involved as the verdict approaches and people's nerves are stretched and strained.
- Morton's use of imagery is brilliant in creating the portrayal of a man facing a possible death sentence. There are two predominant literary techniques:
 - Morton uses colour to show 'heart' (compassion) vs the death sentence: used in the description of the judge's robes – black = death or despair, vs red = heart pumping life blood and compassion into the judgment of the jury.
 - The web and net metaphor – the prisoner is caught and helpless; he may be devoured by the law which has many ways of catching criminals. The tentacles, like the strands of the web (or strings of net), are the various groups involved in this procedure. Clever use of the web for the predator and the net to catch the one falling in this case. These images are used throughout and show how well-crafted this story is. Words vs feeling and experience; person vs robot.

7. Famous Trials

- *What (is) the public ... fed through the media?* – How objective is our news? Look at various broadcasts - SABC, BBC, CNN and others. Sensationalism draws many listeners and viewers. How biased are various channels? The BBC now has an insert that informs whether a report has been verified. Many people watch crime, violence, death, trials (Oscar Pretorius, O.J. Simpson, Mandela). Loeb, however, is an historian so his style is more objective and factual.

8. Life plus 99 Years — Introduction

- *How much do you agree with Gardner's statements?* – (Candidate's personal opinion.)
- All four pages give a clear indication of Gardener's opinion on the four points in the second bullet. Regarding each of the four points, consider to what extent you agree with him, and why. (NB - This introduction was written in the mid-1950s. A lot has changed since then. For example, in South Africa we no longer refer to prison services, but to Correctional Services.)

9. Life Plus 99 Years

- *What verdict would you have wanted, and why?* – (Personal response.)
- *Why did Clarence Darrow accept appointment as defence lawyer?* – Darrow was strongly opposed to capital punishment which is what the family thought would be the verdict. It was a good opportunity also for Darrow to strike a blow for leniency. Also the trial would be covered worldwide, and give him an opportunity to express his views on capital punishment.
- *More favourable portrayal of Leopold?* – Referring to 'Maria' makes Leopold sound more religious. There is no reference to the murder, as that would put him in a negative light; no longer an arrogant monster or insufferable creature. How far ahead is he thinking of parole? He also says he doesn't want to refer to family or friends of that time and spatter them with the same mud that covers him. It 'sounds' very noble. Dick is dead so he cannot contradict what Leopold says about him and Leopold seems the better person. Dick is a Jekyll and Hyde personality. Leopold can present him in a less favourable light - amoral; a liar; had power over him; casual about what he (Dick) did - 'going to play tennis' as if nothing had happened.
- *Leopold's actions in Puerto Ricco?* – Had he really changed so much? Maybe his book reinforces what he wanted the Parole Board (committee) to see when he came before them to ask for parole.

10. Beyond Reasonable Doubt

- *Opportunities for Archer to further his career, and how he used them.* – (Refer to the Study Guide.)
- *Why did his fortunes (luck) change?* – (Candidates should draw their own conclusions.)
- *Were Sir David and his wife cowardly in the choices they made about dying?* – Sir David possibly more so than his wife, as it seems that he could not face his peers and judgment; Millie, according to her doctor, was close to death and in great pain.
- *The relationship between Sir David and Mrs Rogers:* The feeling of dislike is mutual. Rogers ignores him. Does not defer to him. Makes it clear she does not respect him or his drinking; thinks he is mistreating his wife (perhaps biased, possibly based on her own experience?); no understanding of their marriage relationship which is on a different level from hers (class differences perhaps); is over-protective of Millie; perhaps jealous of their love which she can't understand.
- *The implications of the Assisted Dying Bill:* The procedures may work if properly administered. How will the doctors and nurses feel about administering assisted death? The dying person must be consulted with a doctor and a legally objective person present. Family must also give consent. How will the person's death affect their finances if, for example, he/she is in debt?

11. To Kill a Mockingbird

- *Consider the effectiveness of Atticus's role as a parent.* – Atticus makes time for his children; really listens to them; treats them like adults; gives reasons for decisions; lets them have their say. He is firm and fair, and understands and knows them well.
- *How does his role differ from those of other parents in the anthology?*
Chessman's parents are weak; father lost jobs; mother in motor car accident; parenting role reversed - he cares for them.
Doyle's mother loves him dearly, protects him; makes sure he goes to church with her; gives a sense of morals. Leaves her sickbed when friends contact her about her son's decline.
Leopold and Loeb: Dick has material advantages and some social benefits, but not such a serious background perhaps; Nathan's mother smothers him, but doesn't protect him from being molested by his tutor; both fathers seem very much in the background.

12. Long Walk to Freedom

- *How did Mandela prove that Thatcher's assessment of him as a terrorist was wrong?* – His perseverance never wavered; he used his time on Robben Island to better younger prisoners with education; when freed, he stood firm with other ANC members in their resolve to forgive instead of going for revenge, perhaps saving much bloodshed; his support of the Springboks in the 1995 Rugby World Cup was a huge rallying point for the nation; he led the establishment of a new, very enlightened constitution; employed a racially diverse staff to personally assist him.
- *What made Mandela's speeches during his trial so moving?* – His courage and simplicity; his love for his people in showing what they had endured during apartheid; his fearlessness and even his willingness to die for their freedom.
- *What may have led the judge to impose a life sentence, rather than the death penalty?* – Apart from international pressure, the judge noted in his judgement that the State had decided not to charge the defendants with treason, for which the penalty would normally have been death.

13. *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs*

14. *Soft Vengeance of a Freedom Fighter*

15. We, the People

- How do the words 'Jail-Fail-Fall-Fell-Feel-Feet-Fret-Free' link to events in the life of Albie Sachs?

Jail – Maitland Prison

Fail – ANC mission in early days

Fell – the bomb in Maputo

Feel – the pain of his injuries

Feet – getting back on his feet

Fret – during recovery in bed

Free – no longer in exile, back in South Africa, and no longer blacklisted

- *Were his choices noble? Justify your response.* – Evidence: He sacrificed much of his personal life; endured imprisonment in Maitland, and exile thereafter; the bombing in Maputo followed by a long period of recovery and rehabilitation in hospital in both Maputo and England. After his return to SA he helped to bring about important changes, including the structure of SA's new constitution and the planning of Constitution Hill and the court where Mandela appointed him as a constitutional judge.
- Significance of the title *Soft Vengeance* ...: Ponder the very personal nature of his journey during his time of recovery. Think about your own life in comparison. Reflect.
- *The effect of his handling of the bomb blast:* His matter-of-fact handling of results of the bomb blast; the personal way in which he includes the reader, without looking for self-pity; no blame; he knew the risk of being a member of the ANC; inspiring perseverance, patience and endurance.

What did the extracts tell us about his character? – Humility, great love for humanity, droll sense of humour, awareness of others, endurance under stress, objectivity and calmness.

- *How did attitudes of Mandela and Sachs differ from some of the other prisoners in the anthology?* – They were not bitter; they knew the risks associated with their involvement in the ANC; no complaints; acknowledged their choice; knew their choice could lead to the death penalty or life in jail; made the best of their circumstances; educated other prisoners; did exercises; sense of humour.
- *Before reading the anthology, did you realise ...?* – (Candidate's personal response.)
- *Was the TRC effective?* – Explain your response. Allowed people to be heard, to show emotion for their losses, to see each other as human beings. More inclination to let both sides speak from the heart and be ruled by the Constitution rather than in other courts that follow the letter of the law. More from the heart: not the law vs the people, but the law hearing the people.

16. *Number Four - The Making of Constitution Hill*

- Lauren Segal is talented and remarkable because of the choices she made to make best use of her talents (organisational and structural skills); her vision to bring heritage to our notice in practical ways, not only in South Africa, but in four other countries. She also wrote four books – the last, like Alison Botha's, to inspire sufferers like herself.
- *The remodelling of Constitution Hill* shows how we value and honour the sacrifices of others who fought for freedom, and how valuable this is. It links us to everything we value in our new constitution, which is highly regarded by other countries.

- it is important for us to pay respect to people who struggled for our freedom, who were prepared to die for us. Gratitude is a very important part of building humility and strength of character.

17. *I Have Life*

- *What are your feelings about Alison's experience?* – Admiration for her courage, calmness and fortitude, her faith and belief in herself; her consideration for her mother (not leaving a bad memory if she died in such horrifying circumstances); presence of mind when admitted to hospital and while speaking to the doctor (he was amazed at her bright eyes and attention to detail; her unselfishness when under threat of death).

- *The ability to rise above difficult circumstances:* In his inauguration address, Nelson Mandela quoted the following lines from Marianne Williamson's 1992 book *A Return to Love*:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.”

- Why was *Alison's Story* chosen to conclude the anthology? – Alison Botha and others in the anthology were able to go beyond the fear of greatness. Mandela, Chessman, Doyle - think of what they did. Think of the choices we make not to achieve our greatest potential.

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