

Guide to Literature Essays

Matthew Williams • English Literature • May 10, 2026

A CSEC literature essay has five paragraphs: an introduction, three body paragraphs (each answering one part of the question), and a conclusion. The question always has three parts, and each body paragraph addresses one of them.

The Introduction

The introduction has several required components, and each one does a different job. Getting all of them in the right order makes the rest of the essay easier to write.

Hook. Open with something that draws the reader in: a relevant observation, a short quotation from the text, or a statement about the central idea. The hook does not need to be dramatic; it just needs to establish the territory.

Title and playwright/author. Name the text and its writer in full. Write *Twelfth Night* or Anansi, never abbreviations like "12th Night."

Background information. Provide enough context for someone unfamiliar with the text to understand what you are about to discuss: the setting, the central conflict, the relevant character or theme. This is not optional and cannot be replaced by the thesis statement.

Definition (if applicable). If the question centres on a theme, define it briefly. A clear one-sentence definition shows the examiner you understand the concept before you start applying it.

Explanation of any opening quotation. If the question gives you a quotation to consider, explain what it means and how it connects to the focus of the essay before moving on.

Thesis statement. Identify the three main points your essay will make, one for each body paragraph. The thesis statement answers all three parts of the question in one or two sentences. Keep each point concise: the detail belongs in the body. Do not begin the thesis with "In this essay I will..."

Exam Tip

The thesis statement and the background information are two separate things. A common mistake is to treat a strong thesis as a substitute for background context. Both must appear.

Sample Introduction

"A crafty spider's what I am / I'm never without the smartest plan." In the play *Anansi* by Alistair Campbell, the titular character is a complex figure: simultaneously a villain and a hero, sometimes manipulative and selfish, other times unknowingly teaching lessons about resilience and strength. In his initial soliloquy, Anansi is presented as crafty and resourceful; this resourcefulness is further demonstrated when he tricks Tiger into removing his fat; and the dramatic technique of humour is used throughout to reinforce these qualities.

Notice what this introduction does: the opening quotation is identified and its speaker named, the title and playwright appear in the first full sentence, background context establishes Anansi's complexity, and the thesis identifies all three points the essay will develop, one per body paragraph.

Body Paragraph 1

The first body paragraph answers the question about incidents or character presentation. It almost always asks about **two** incidents. An incident is a specific event, not a general pattern. For example, Viola disguising herself as Cesario is a plot device; a specific scene in which her disguise directly causes a misunderstanding is an incident.

Use the **PEER** structure:

| Step | What to write |
|----------------------|--|
| P Point | Answer the question directly in your first sentence. Identify the two incidents. |
| E Evidence | Quote or closely describe each incident from the text. |
| E Explanation | Explain how each piece of evidence supports your point. |
| R Restatement | Conclude the paragraph by restating your main point in different words. |

The topic sentence must name both incidents. When you move from the first incident to the second, use a transition word or phrase.

Do not refer to characters as "a male" or "a female." Use their names or descriptors like "the young man" or "the woman."

Sample Body Paragraph 1

In the initial rap where Anansi is introduced in "Naming the Stories", he is depicted as crafty and resourceful. He confidently states, "A crafty spider's what I am," and goes on to reveal that his craftiness is what keeps him alive: he survives by outwitting creatures far larger and more powerful than himself. He says, "I am never without the smartest plan / The smartest plan and the cleverest head / Is how I keep from getting dead," showing that he is fully aware he cannot compete on the basis of size and so relies entirely on intelligence. His resourcefulness is therefore not incidental: it is his primary survival strategy, and he names it clearly from his very first appearance.

Body Paragraph 2

The second body paragraph addresses a character's response to something, the way a character is affected by an event, or the impact of something on the story. It usually focuses on one character named in the first body paragraph.

The most common mistake here is retelling the plot. Your paragraph must be targeted: select the aspect of the character's experience that directly answers the question and develop only that. You are not being asked to summarise the character's journey through the whole play.

Use PEER as above: state your point, provide evidence, explain it, and close with a restating sentence.

Body Paragraph 3

The third body paragraph focuses on a **dramatic technique** and explains how it is used to explore the theme or character the question is asking about.

Your paragraph must do two things: identify the technique clearly, and explain its **effectiveness**. Effectiveness means its impact on the play, on the characters, and on the audience. Ask yourself: what does this technique add? Does it create tension, humour, sympathy, irony, dramatic irony? Does it change how the audience understands a character or theme?

Sample Body Paragraph 3

Humour is used to present the character of Anansi. Whenever Anansi appears, he is involved in a scheme that highlights his wit. In his opening rap, he describes using two of his eight legs for "scratching my head and picking my nose," a detail that establishes his irreverence immediately. When he persuades Tiger to remove his fur coat and fat before swimming, his greed surfaces:

he cooks and eats the fat the moment Tiger is in the water. To cover his tracks, he convinces Ratbat to enter a fictional singing contest with a song about tiger fat, and Ratbat, too flattered to question the scheme, walks into it completely. The audience finds this sequence comic precisely because the size difference between spider and tiger is so extreme, which makes Anansi's success feel both surprising and satisfying. The humour does not merely entertain; it underscores Anansi's wit, greed, cleverness, and resourcefulness by showing them in action.

The Conclusion

The conclusion is two to three sentences. Restate your thesis in different words, drawing together the three points your essay has made. You may add a final thought about the significance of the theme or character, but do not introduce new evidence or arguments.

Remember

The conclusion is not a summary of the plot. It is a restatement of your argument: the three claims you made and what they collectively show about the text.

Quick Reference (Drama)

| Paragraph | Purpose | Key requirement |
|--------------|------------------------------|---|
| Introduction | Context, background, thesis | Title and playwright, background info, all three points in the thesis |
| Body 1 | Two incidents | Topic sentence names both; PEER structure; transition between incidents |
| Body 2 | Character response or impact | Targeted to one aspect; no plot summary; PEER structure |
| Body 3 | Dramatic technique | Name the technique; explain its effectiveness on play, characters, and audience |
| Conclusion | Restate thesis | 2-3 sentences; no new evidence |

The Poetry Essay (Paper 2)

The poetry question is Question 3 or Question 4 on Paper 2. Both questions have the same format and are worth the same marks — **35 marks total** (10 for language and organisation, 25 for content). You answer one question only.

- **Question 3** gives you two specified poems you must write about.
- **Question 4** lets you choose any two poems from the syllabus.

A complete poetry essay is **5 paragraphs** and approximately **600–800 words**.

The Mark Scheme

The 35 marks break down as follows:

| Category | Maximum marks |
|--|---------------|
| Language and organisation | 10 |
| Content (knowledge and understanding of poems) | 25 |

Organisation marks reward: a coherent format, effective linkages between points, a well-executed introduction, clear paragraph structure, and accurate sentence structure.

Content marks reward: deep understanding of the poems, well-developed arguments, and specific references to the texts.

The Question Structure

Every poetry question has three parts, always in this order:

- **1. Both poems** — describe, discuss, or identify something in each poem (e.g. a decision each parent makes; a situation each speaker faces).
- **2. One poem** — discuss how something in the first part affects, impacts, or shapes one speaker.
- **3. Both poems** — for each poem, examine one device used to portray the focus of the question.

This creates the **2-1-2 formation**: both poems, then one poem, then both poems again. Each body paragraph of your essay addresses one of these three parts.

Essay Structure

- **Paragraph 1 — Introduction:** States all three parts of the question without explaining any of them. Open with a **hook** (1–2 sentences, not a plot summary), name both **titles and authors** (first and last name on first mention, last name only after), then state all three parts — example, effect, and device — in a single thesis sentence. Do not begin with "In this essay I will..."
- **Paragraph 2 — Both poems (theme):** Develops Part 1. Show how both poems engage with the same theme — compare them, do not list them side by side.
- **Paragraph 3 — One poem (impact):** Develops Part 2. Focus tightly on one speaker and one aspect of their response. Do not summarise the whole poem.
- **Paragraph 4 — Both poems (devices):** Develops Part 3. Identify one device per poem, explain where it appears, what it does, and why it is effective.
- **Paragraph 5 — Conclusion:** Restates your argument in 2–3 fresh sentences. No new evidence, no plot summary.

Conventions

- **Tense:** Discuss poems in the present tense — the father decides, not decided.
- **Titles:** Put poem titles in inverted commas — "Little Boy Crying", not italics or underlining.
- **Insertions:** When adding your own words inside a quotation for grammar or clarity, use square brackets: "he [the father] dares not ruin the lessons."
- **Stanza references:** Mentioning which stanza a quotation comes from demonstrates detailed knowledge.
- **Comparison:** This is a comparative essay — always connect the two poems, showing how they are similar, different, or in dialogue with each other.

Sample Introduction

The most difficult decisions a parent must make are not those made in anger, but those made in love. In "Little Boy Crying" by Mervyn Morris and "The Woman Speaks to the Man Who Has Employed Her Son" by Lorna Goodison, both poets explore the theme of parenting through the hard choices parents are forced to make. Morris uses metaphor to portray how the father's decision to discipline his son leaves him tormented by guilt and longing, while Goodison uses simile to convey the crushing weight of the woman's hope as she raises her son alone against poverty and an absent father.

Notice: hook in the first sentence; both titles and authors named; all three parts of the question briefly stated; no explanation yet; no "In this essay I will."

Quick Reference (Poetry)

| Paragraph | Purpose | Key requirement |
|--------------|--|---|
| Introduction | Hook, both titles/authors, brief answer to all 3 parts | Present tense; inverted commas for titles; no "In this essay I will..." |
| Body 1 | Both poems: theme or content | Comparative — show how both poems engage with the theme |
| Body 2 | One poem: impact or response | Targeted to one speaker and one aspect; no plot summary |
| Body 3 | Both poems: devices | One device per poem; explain effectiveness, not just identify |
| Conclusion | Restate argument | 2-3 sentences; no new evidence |