



GCSE AQA English Literature: *Macbeth*

Paper 1 – Section A (Shakespeare)



EXAM & TIMING

- Question type: extract + whole-play essay
- Marks: 30 + 4 SPaG
- Paper 1 total time: 1 hour 45 minutes
- Suggested timing for *Macbeth*: 55 minutes
- Suggested 25% extra-time timing: 69 minutes
- Suggested breakdown: 5 mins plan, 45 mins write, 5 mins check
- With 25% extra time: 7 mins plan, 56 mins write, 6 mins check



1 BIG IDEAS

- ambition and power
- guilt and conscience
- the supernatural
- kingship and tyranny
- appearance vs reality
- masculinity and femininity
- fate vs choice

2 KEY CHARACTERS

- Macbeth**: brave soldier; ambition awakened; consumed by guilt and paranoia.
- Lady Macbeth**: manipulative and determined; pushes Macbeth to kill; later unravels.
- Banquo**: noble and cautious; foil to Macbeth; linked to honour.
- Macduff**: loyal and just; avenges Duncan; restores order.
- King Duncan**: good king of Scotland; trusting; murdered.
- The Witches**: agents of chaos; tempt and mislead.
- Malcolm**: Duncan's son; tests loyalty; becomes king.

3 PLOT JOURNEY

- Prophecy**: witches predict Macbeth's rise.
- Rise to power**: Macbeth and Lady Macbeth plot; Duncan is killed.
- Murder of Duncan**: Macbeth becomes king but guilt follows.
- Growing paranoia and tyranny**: more murders, Banquo's ghost, fear everywhere.
- Downfall and restoration of order**: Macbeth defeated by Macduff; Malcolm crowned.

4 CONTEXT

- Jacobean beliefs**: strong belief in heaven, hell, demons and the supernatural.
- James I and witchcraft**: *Daemonologie* and fear of witches.
- Divine Right of Kings**: regicide seen as sinful and unnatural.
- The Gunpowder Plot (1605)**: audience alert to treason and betrayal.
- Tragedy and moral consequences**: unchecked ambition leads to chaos.

5 WRITER'S METHODS

- Soliloquies**: characters reveal inner thoughts and conflict.
- Imagery of blood and darkness**: blood, night and violence reflect guilt, fear and evil.
- Symbolism**: dagger, crown, sleep and nature carry deeper meanings.
- Contrast and foils**: Banquo vs Macbeth; Macbeth vs Macduff; Duncan vs Macbeth.
- Dramatic irony**: audience knows more than the characters (e.g. Duncan is in danger).
- Equivocation**: the witches' ambiguous language misleads Macbeth.
- Tragic structure**: tragic arc: *hamartia* (flaw) → downfall → recognition → catastrophe.

6 WHAT A STRONG ANSWER DOES

- ✓ Answer the exact question.
- ✓ Use the extract and the whole play.
- ✓ Track an idea across the play.
- ✓ Analyse methods in relation to meaning. Explain how the method creates meaning and its effect on the audience.
- ✓ Use relevant context naturally. Weave in concise context to support your points.
- ✓ Stay focused and avoid retelling the plot. Don't summarise—analyse.

7 MUST-KNOW MOMENTS

	Meeting the witches	The witches' prophecies spark Macbeth's ambition.	Act 1 Scene 3
	Dagger vision	Macbeth sees a floating dagger before the murder.	Act 2 Scene 1
	Duncan's murder	Macbeth kills Duncan while he sleeps.	Act 2 Scene 2
	Banquo's ghost	Banquo's ghost appears at the banquet.	Act 3 Scene 4
	Lady Macbeth sleepwalking	Lady Macbeth shows her guilt and madness.	Act 5 Scene 1
	Birnam Wood advances	The army advances with branches to hide their numbers.	Act 5 Scene 4
	Macduff defeats Macbeth	Macduff reveals he was "from his mother's womb untimely ripped" and kills Macbeth.	Act 5 Scene 8



AQA LITERATURE SUCCESS REMINDERS: know the text well • answer the question asked • analyse meaning, not just techniques

