

UNIT 14

Look Both Ways

by Sarah Watt

THE EXCELLENT ESSAY



An excellent text response essay about Sarah Watt's *Look Both Ways* reflects most of the following top-range grade descriptor qualities as specified in the *VCE English / English as a Second Language Assessment Handbook: 2008–2011* for Unit 4, Outcome 1:

41–50 marks: A highly-developed and well-sustained interpretation of a selected text supported by the considered selection and use of highly appropriate textual evidence. Thorough and insightful understanding of the ideas, characters and themes constructed and presented in the selected text. Complex discussion and critical analysis of the ways in which the author constructs meaning and expresses or implies a point of view and values. Highly appropriate use of relevant metalanguage to support analysis. Highly expressive, fluent and coherent writing.

SAMPLE TOPIC

'Fear and anxiety are endemic in contemporary society and must be controlled and harnessed for a healthy life.' Is this a central idea in *Look Both Ways*?

Content features

- Names the film director, title of film, context and genre.
- Quotes used to define context – shows knowledge of text.
- Links to film's purposes and intended audience responses.
- Discussion and relevance of text title.
- Starts with a textual moment, with precise detail.
- The beginnings of essays need a brief discussion of the characters and their roles, as well as their interrelatedness to others, but do not storytell; only use characters and events that are relevant to any given topic.

Excellent essay

Sarah Watt's contemporary film *Look Both Ways* (1) offers viewers a cross-section of her characters' lives, which are exposed on 'a scorching weekend with little relief before Monday'. (2) Even the title suggests there are dangers and warnings that we (3) must adhere to if we (4) wish to be happy, healthy and safe. (3) (4) And, certainly, the predicaments that confront the characters are testimony to the stark fact that we, like children at a crossing, need to look beyond the obvious to find contentment and joy in life. 'Like a freight train', problems and difficult situations (5) assail us without a great deal of warning, but how well someone copes depends on their ability to allay their fears and anxieties. (6) Watt recommends that we should remember that others also suffer and that if we look hard enough, (5) we will find others to comfort us in our time of need, that 'contrary to your usual belief, you do hold fate in your own hands'.

(5) The card that the unnamed train-driver gives Julia at the end of the film is a consolation that aims to unite them in their synonymous grief: his for being 'the train-driver' in the freak accident that killed her beau, Rob, and hers in her inability to comprehend why he was taken from her just when they were, symbolically (7) and literally, building a life together. (6) It is Meryl's job to 'paint things that make people feel better', and the card Julia opens displays a calming scenario of a picturesque beach. (8) Ironically, Meryl is a mass of similar (7) fears and anxieties; she admits to Nick that she sees death and tragedy around her 'all the time', (9) and Watt provides

Expression and mechanics features

- Italics (or underlining) for titles.
- Seamless weaving in of direct quotes.
- Use of 'we' replaces 'the audience', and the effect on an audience must be a key focus for Area of Study One.
- Note the blend of discussion about characters and how the audience ('we', 'our') might interpret the text and its characters and events.
- Sophisticated and exact vocabulary used.
- Words from the topic, and synonyms to substitute them, are used freely throughout the essay to show relevance to the topic.

'Fear and anxiety are endemic in contemporary society and must be controlled and harnessed for a healthy life.' Is this a central idea in *Look Both Ways*?

Content features

- 7 Synthesis of different filmic moments and characters to prove points being made.
- 8 Visual and aural cues are described and analysed for how they help the film make meaning.
- 9 Precise detail and discussion of film moments relevant to the topic and point made in the paragraph.
- 10 Character stories are synthesised to show both knowledge and evidence for the points being made.
- 11 Various filmic effects (such as motifs, narrative choices and editing of contrasts) are discussed.
- 12 Precise quotes and also discussion of visual and aural cues assist in proving the points here about the media.
- 13 Setting is analysed for meaning.
- 14 In this paragraph, a range of disparate examples from throughout the film are synthesised.
- 15 Note the shift in filmic content here: the conclusions of the essay are shown through positive examples and character reactions.
- 16 Again, precise use and analysis of film language.
- 17 A range of major and minor characters and film moments is used, showing the student's knowledge of the text and providing a thorough discussion of the topic.

Excellent essay

(10) an intimate insight into her fearful thought processes in the numerous animated sequences (11) that strike her in relation to any ordinary event. For example, at the swimming pool her first thought when she sees a girl floating in the water is that the child is in danger. The close-up (11) (12) of Meryl's face, (8) etched with fear for the girl, emphasises her irrational anxieties. When she dives into the water, she imagines being devoured by a shark, her fears and anxieties metaphorically (7) represented by the predator who seizes her mercilessly. (9) It is no wonder that in her dark personal paintings, which she jokes are 'cheaper than therapy', she is a tiny figure in a turbulent sea of worry. Nick is also (10) guilty of allowing his fears to dictate his behaviour and his reaction to the diagnosis of testicular cancer; he immediately (13) remembers the many moments in his life thus far that may have contributed to the eventuality of the disease. The linear rapidity of the images (11) – growing up with family and visual references to his father (Jim) who has already died of cancer – shows how fixed and rigid he is. Likened to the recurring motif (11) of the train in the film, which runs on a fixed track in only one direction, Nick must realise that sometimes we (14) have to break with our habits. He does not, at this stage of the film, take the warning offered in one of the websites used for research of the disease: 'Negative attitude equals cancer'. (12) (9) (14)

But this pessimistic (15) mindset is hardly surprising, given the grisly (15) nature of the material Nick (14) takes photographs of in his role of working for *The Southern Mail*. He quips (15) to Meryl that his assignments overseas entail him witnessing 'poverty, war, natural disasters, then back to the mini-bar', and his casual flick through his past repertoire of photographs on his hard drive reveals that he indeed has 'thousands of photos' of starving children, homeless beggars and environmental destruction. Even (16) at his work, (13) the framed (12) front covers of past *Mail* issues that grace the walls include the massive headlines: 'Disorder' and 'Virus'. When (16) his subjective narration takes control of his reasoning and logic, he consecutively (13) recalls various hazard signs in his memory: 'Cancer Hazard' and 'Danger – High Voltage', and he Google-searches testicular cancer to find such suitably morose articles as: 'Your body invaded' and 'You are your disease'. As a photographer whose occupation it is to take images of personal suffering, it is likely that his fears and anxieties are a consequence of his profession. Similarly (16), Cathy (14) instructs (15) Andy to 'cross at the lights' and not to 'feed them ice-cream' when he picks up his children for a parental visit, and this fear for her children's safety is understandable given the bombardment of dire messages repeated by the media, as explored in *Look Both Ways*. Andy (14) flicks channels and hears: 'Unlikely to find any survivors'; his grim comment piece on male suicide seems to be a direct result of the negativity surrounding him. The film (17) opens, poignantly, with the ubiquitous news that 'trapped in a crush of twisted steel', twenty innocent lives have been lost in the Arnou Hill train disaster. Clearly, the film argues that fears stem from personal tragedy, but are also fed and magnified by unnecessarily dramatic media exploitation (18).

Anna (17) offers some sage advice (15) to the viewer (19) (and to Andy) when she admonishes him for believing that 'everyone has an agenda'. She asserts (15) that sometimes 'things just happen' and her pragmatic attitude towards the problem of their unplanned pregnancy reveals how her fears and anxieties (20) have been overcome. She offers (21) to allow him to assume custody of the child so she can work; the low camera angle (12) used here

Expression and mechanics features

- 7 Metalinguage relevant to textual analysis: 'symbolically', 'metaphorically'.
- 8 Visual cues need to be described precisely while using a high level of vocabulary.
- 9 Note that quotes in film texts come from both dialogue and visual cues, such as signs, newspapers and computers.
- 10 The inclusion of the director here shows the student understands there are meanings the director wishes the audience to have.
- 11 Use of metalinguage specifically related to filmic devices: 'animated sequences', 'close-up'.
- 12 Precise use of film language: 'close-up', 'framed', 'low camera angle', 'animation'.
- 13 Words such as 'immediately' and 'consecutively' show the student knows the text's plot well.
- 14 Finishes with a relevant quote from the text.
- 15 Adjectives used to describe filmic moments ('pessimistic', 'grisly'), but also verbs that perfectly describe tones of voice or actions: 'quips', 'instructs', 'asserts'.
- 16 Liberal use of linking words and connectives throughout: 'even', 'when', 'similarly'.
- 17 The text is called a 'film', which is correct.
- 18 A range of syntactical structures is used.
- 19 'The viewer' is the focus in film texts.
- 20 The words of the topic are used liberally.
- 21 Present tense used for events in texts.

18 Not only description, but also evaluation of filmic elements (balloons, computer and so on) is used here – the student is making meaning from the film's cues.

19 A variety of quotes and visual cues are used to show knowledge and to evidence the essay's claims.

20 The conclusion concentrates on the final moments of the film and how they prove the student's contention.

21 Discussion of music and explanation of how it contributes to the film's messages.

22 Direct discussion of the director's perceived intentions.

23 Links to the viewer and the meaning inherent for audiences in the film, with a focus on the themes in the topic given.

16 as she stands on the stairs physically above Andy emphasises that the director favours her level-headedness. Similarly, Phil is first filmed with his body turned away from Nick (who desperately needs to confide in him that he's 'got cancer'). Phil **17** is so busy staring at his work on the computer that he did not even remember how old his daughter will be or when her actual birthday is. His fear of contracting cancer is **(21)** overcome when he resolves to throw away his cigarettes and in the lovely scene of him blowing up many red and yellow balloons (colours denoting hope and fun), **18** his lungs show **(21)** they are still powerful enough. Pointedly, the balloons cascade on top of his computer; his remedy for staving off the effects of fear and anxiety are to immerse himself in his family. His daughter rewards him for his hard work by beaming at him when she opens up her gift of the cricket bat that 'she said she wanted'. **19** When Meryl and Nick have sex, their respective interior visions show fears (AIDS, disabled triplets and cancer malignantly spreading), but when they allow themselves to enjoy the moment, these fears disappear. Meryl's fear of abandonment and loneliness is assuaged by her willingness to laugh at herself after a truck splashes a puddle all over her. **19** Her final animation **(12)** involves two African boys joyously returning her own clichéd rationalisation **(22)** for their poverty: 'It was meant to be'. **19** as she sits drenched. **19** This self-examination that characters themselves engage in shows they have controlled and harnessed their fears, and the optimistic ending **(22)** of the film proves this is a valuable skill to hone.

The signs of a better future, one in which people can minimise their fears and anxieties, **(20)** are foregrounded by Watt **(23)** in the film's denouement. **20** The soothing, regenerating rain that engulfs all of the characters breaks the drought and even Andy swallows his pride by apologising to Anna. For his shift in attitude, he gains Nick's friendship (shown in the final rapid flash-forward **(24)** photo montage, when Nick holds his child) and Anna's forgiveness. Nick and Meryl apologise for their respective fears and insecurities and embrace in an affectionate and heart-warming final moment. The song that accompanies the rain is 'Lonely Won't Leave Me Alone', but its triumphant harmonies **21 (24)** and the visual cues on the screen belie any notion of loneliness or alienation; **(25)** in fact, all of the characters manage to find brightness and hope in reaching out for others, as the sun permeating the rain indicates. Even though not 'everyone who loses someone' has their story splashed across the front page of a newspaper, Watt argues **22 (25)** that there are many moments of joy and friendship available to us **(23)** if we embrace the possibility that they can occur. And just like the wonderful surprise of five-year-old Caitlin who was found three days after the Arnou Hill accident, alive but lying next to her dead grandmother, despite the tragedy that is inevitable in life, all of us **23** can control and harness our fears and anxieties if we seek and maintain hope. **(26)** (1497 words)

22 Correct terminology for textual analysis: 'clichéd rationalisation', 'optimistic ending' – describes and analyses how the film makes meaning, as related to the topic given.

23 Emphasis on the director's name and effects on the audience dominate the conclusion.

24 Description of aural and visual cues, using appropriate terms: 'rapid flash-forward', 'harmonies'.

25 The tenor of the conclusion is bold and deductive.

26 Note the final sentences: referring directly to the film's director and perceived impact on audiences, as required in Area of Study One.

THE SATISFACTORY ESSAY



A satisfactory text response essay to Sarah Watt's *Look Both Ways* reflects most of the following medium-range grade descriptor qualities as specified in the *VCE English / English as a Second Language Assessment Handbook: 2008–2011* for Unit 4, Outcome 1:

21–30 marks: A generally well-sustained interpretation of a selected text supported by textual evidence. Knowledge of the ideas, characters and themes constructed and presented in the selected text. Discussion and some analysis of the ways in which the author constructs meaning and expresses or implies a point of view and values. Use of mainly relevant metalanguage to support analysis. Generally expressive, fluent and coherent writing.

A satisfactory text response essay presents a mostly relevant response to the topic and also contains adequate content and adequate expression. An essay of this standard reads as though it is unfinished, or 'half-baked'.

Read the following sample satisfactory text response essay on *Look Both Ways* and complete the tasks in order to improve the standard of the essay.

SAMPLE TOPIC

'How does the film convey its message that everybody needs to "find a way to deal with their own death ... and life"?'

Satisfactory essay

This (1) is one of the most important quotes (2) in the film and when I (3) watched it, that's what I learnt. There is the death of the guy (4) who got killed by the train and also the big train crash that killed over 20 people in Arnow Hill. (5) But the film is really quite positive (6) with people getting back together and finding love anyway.

Nick (7) (8) has just found out he's got cancer and he sees death 'everywhere' 'all weekend'. (9) So does Meryl. (7) (10) She sees sharks and trains crashing and he sees warnings of cancer in his photos. (11) Both of the main characters (12) fear death and must make the best of the fact that both of their fathers have recently died. (13) That's why even when they sleep with each other, Nick can't sleep and he has to go home where he paces all night worrying about cancer and his death. (14) He remembers his father's death and he reckons (15) that his will be the same. (16) That's why he says to Meryl that 'I'm not in a position to start anything right now'. (17) (18)

Andy (19) is having a hard weekend too and when he reports on the guy's death, (20) he reckons (15) it's another case of male suicide. But (21) that's only because he hates his ex-wife (22) and because his girlfriend, Anna, is pregnant. He has to work out how to deal with his life and in the end he says sorry to Anna and they have a baby which we see in the end of the film. (23) The two train crashes (24) are very different because many more people were killed in the Arnow Hill disaster than in the little one outside Julia's house, but people have to deal with all of these deaths and their grief no matter how bad the crash was. (25) Meryl paints and Julia builds a cross. At the end they are both OK (26) and have dealt with death and grief.

Even though it is a really sad film (27) and all of us have to go through what Julia and Meryl do, it is also really positive (28) because

Improvement tasks

- 1 What? A floating referent. Make the start of the essay clearer.
- 2 Avoid the word 'quote' in essays. Instead, contextualise who said it, and state in relation to what textual moment it was said and whether the film endorses the idea or not.
- 3 Avoid 'I' in text essays. How else can you describe the effect on the target audience?
- 4 Too casual. Make this more sophisticated.
- 5 Rewrite this sentence so it flows better and doesn't sound like a list.
- 6 Unclear point here. Use a better word than 'positive'.
- 7 Explain who Nick is. If possible, give a surname, an occupation and some adjectives to describe his personality. Do the same for Meryl when introducing her.
- 8 This paragraph lacks a topic sentence related to the question. Include one.
- 9 This is clunky quoting; find a different quote or link these ones better.
- 10 Sentence fragment. Revise so that it is syntactically correct.
- 11 Accurate textual detail, but still vague. Can you make it even more specific through quotes and better descriptions, to show your knowledge of the text?"
- 12 A problematic term since there are many 'main characters'. How can you change this to be more accurate?
- 13 Give more specific information here: how long ago, of what?
- 14 Long, rambling sentence. Make the point more succinctly and with more sophistication.

Satisfactory essay

it shows us how important it is to 'look both ways', at the positive and negative, and only then can we see what's good in our lives. (29) Nick's mum has flowers and Julia gets heaps (30) of cards from people. The train driver says sorry to her and he feels better and he's started talking to his son. Even Nick lives through the cancer and him and Meryl (31) get back together. The birds in the film (32) and the kids at their parties and at the gallery show that there are some good things in the world if we look for them.

In conclusion, (33) the film *Look both ways* (34) is both a positive and a negative (35) film and it shows us that everyone has to deal with life and death in their own way. (36) (515 words)

Improvement tasks

- 15 The word 'reckons' is colloquial; find a better synonym, and avoid repeating words (see above).
- 16 Use film language here to describe the textual moment when Nick remembers.
- 17 Choose only the best part of this quote and rewrite the sentence so that it flows better.
- 18 Include a concluding sentence to finish off the point and make the paragraph relevant to the topic.
- 19 Similar opening to last paragraph. Include a topic sentence related to the question.
- 20 Make the expression more exact and explain why he is 'having a hard weekend'.
- 21 Find a better linking word here.
- 22 Does he? Prove it, or explain more accurately.
- 23 Long, rambling sentence. Express the point more succinctly. Use film language to explore the techniques used at the end of the film.
- 24 Are the two points made in this paragraph linked in any way? If so, how? It is not clear here.
- 25 Another boring sentence that goes on and on; rewrite it as two sentences with better vocabulary.
- 26 The word 'OK' is colloquial; find a synonym.
- 27 Find a synonym for 'sad'.
- 28 Find a better word than 'positive'. In what way? How does it impact on the viewer exactly?
- 29 Good point, but express it better.
- 30 Again, good point, but make the sentence, especially 'heaps', more sophisticated.
- 31 This is a grammatical error. Fix it.
- 32 A simplistic analysis of this motif. Would you keep it here or would you discuss the birds in more detail here or elsewhere in the essay?
- 33 Avoid 'in conclusion'; it's boring and overused. Can you think of other ways to start the conclusion?
- 34 How are text titles usually referred to in essays? What is missing here?
- 35 Repeated, general and boring phrase. Make it more accurate or rewrite the sentence.
- 36 Conclusion lacks depth and any kind of statement about the film's methods of conveying theme, as is asked for in the topic. What else can you include in this conclusion? Rewrite it into at least three sentences that address the topic, but also come to conclusions about the film.

BUILDING THE TEXT RESPONSE ESSAY PLAN

Complete the following tasks in order to plan your response to *Look Both Ways*.

ESSAY TOPIC

'*Look Both Ways* shows characters in crisis who are dealing with real and imagined fears.'

Discuss.

1 Key words

Write out the key words/phrases in the topic.

2 Synonyms

Give synonyms for the key words/phrases.

3 Paraphrase of topic – #1

Write a paraphrase of the topic by directly substituting the key words/phrases with appropriate synonyms.

4 Paraphrase of topic – #2

Write a paraphrase of the topic by reversing the order of ideas in the original topic statement – i.e. begin with the second half of the topic statement sentence.

5 What do I have to think and write about?

Complete the following sentence in order to understand the demands of the topic.

In order to answer this topic, I must think and write about

6 Questioning the topic

List your own questions about the topic and consider possible answers.

7 My point of view – Agree? Disagree? Maybe?

Revise your responses to the preceding tasks. Based on these responses, determine your point of view on the topic. Using a combination of words/phrases from your responses, write a sentence stating your point of view.

8 My first reason (body paragraph one)

Complete the following proforma by stating your reason for asserting this point of view. You may add more evidence as appropriate.

➤ Reason _____

➤ Evidence _____

➤ Evidence _____

9 My second reason (body paragraph two)

Complete the following proforma by stating your reason for asserting this point of view. You may add more evidence as appropriate.

➤ **Reason** _____

➤ **Evidence** _____

➤ **Evidence** _____

10 My third reason (body paragraph three)

Complete the following proforma by stating your reason for asserting this point of view. You may add more evidence as appropriate.

➤ **Reason** _____

➤ **Evidence** _____

➤ **Evidence** _____

11 My fourth reason (body paragraph four)

Complete the following proforma by stating your reason for asserting this point of view. You may add more evidence as appropriate.

➤ **Reason** _____

➤ **Evidence** _____

➤ **Evidence** _____

12 Conclusion

THE TEXT RESPONSE TRAINING ESSAY



Complete the following essay by writing appropriate paragraphs for each topic sentence by drawing on your knowledge of the text. Ensure that you develop your ideas in line with the contention and topic sentences. Incorporate both direct and indirect references to the text. Also write a conclusion for the essay.

When you have completed this essay, brainstorm other approaches to the topic.

ESSAY TOPIC

'In *Look Both Ways*, features such as silence and noise are used to emphasise how life can change so quickly.' Discuss.

Sarah Watt's bittersweet, yet realistic, exploration of a crushingly hot weekend in Adelaide explores the idea that life can change so quickly; an examination of intentional choices of features such as silence and noise illuminates this theme in *Look Both Ways*. Silence is typically chosen to portray the times when characters reflect on tragedy, themselves or the vicissitudes of the world, while dialogue and unexpected jarring sounds help viewers reach conclusions about characters and the consequences of their actions. The uniting and cathartic effect of the film's refreshing use of music and song lyrics works as a contrast to the other sounds chosen for the soundtrack, including silence. A visual text at its

core, though, *Look Both Ways* accompanies these soundtrack choices with potent and multivariate visual cues to stress its point that there is a 'natural order of things', but also that the nature of life and death is precarious – concepts that we all, as human beings, must face.

The film opens with a close-up of a generous bouquet of flowers filling the frame and, indicatively, this is the first of many moments where silence is purposely chosen to emphasise the overwhelming tragedy that life confronts us with.

Andy uses a dismissive and defensive tone when he lies to Anna that she hasn't 'been dumped' but that he's 'been busy'; this is only one example of how the speech that characters use often belies or submerges the truth.

The soundtrack is saturated with sudden, unexpected bursts of many different sounds; these remind the audience (and the characters) of the unexpected ways in which life changes.

The antidote to these aspects of the soundtrack lies in the music and songs chosen to accompany the characters' simultaneous journeys; a reminder to them and us that there is 'glowing in darkness' if we search for it.

Conclusion