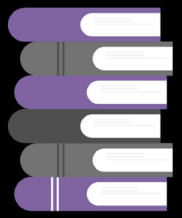
Unfamiliar Text (1.4)

Cheat Sheet & Study Guide



NCEA Level 1

English

External

Updated for 2026

Title

Demonstrate understanding of significant aspects of unfamiliar texts (AS 91927)

Credits

5 (external)

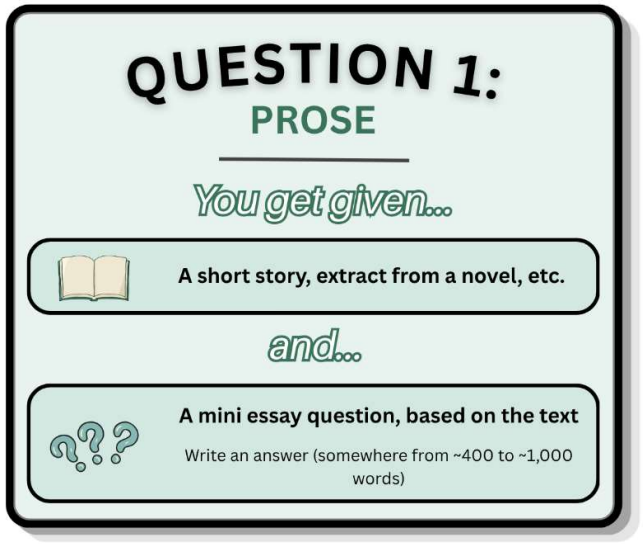
Exam layout

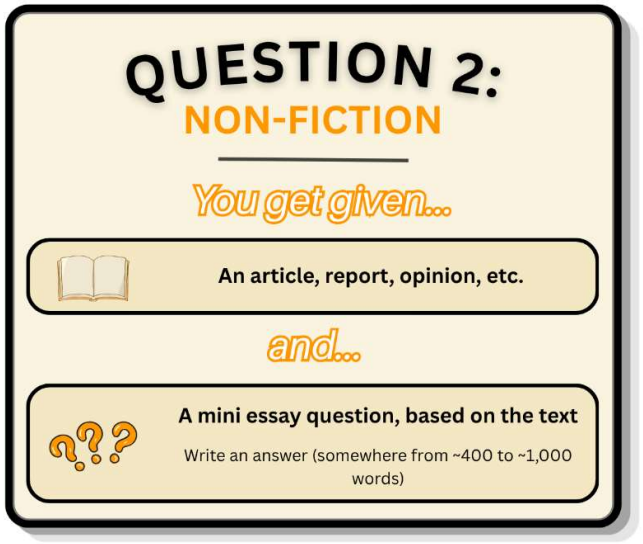
Three unseen texts will be provided to students along with **three** questions. One text will be prose, one non-fiction, and one a poem. Each question will require students to write a mini-essay, approximately 400 – 1,000 words long.

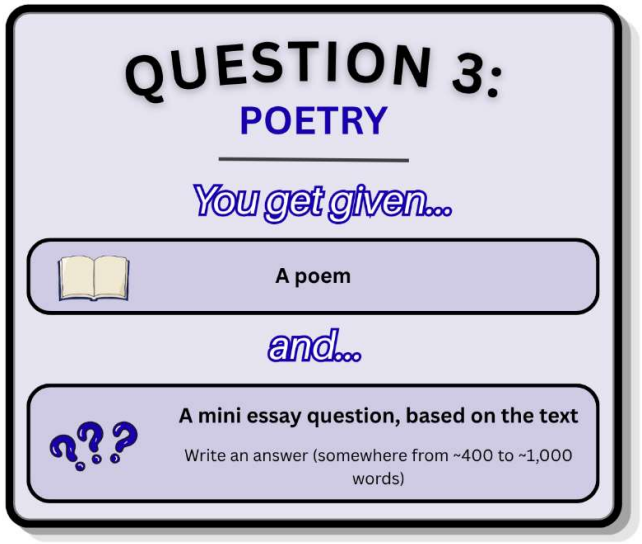
To get the grade you want...

1. Understand the **exam structure** (pages 1 - 2 of this Guide)
2. Remember the **language features** (pages 3 - 6 of this Guide)
3. Understand **how to write your answer** (pages 7 - 10 of this Guide)
4. **Practice** (pages 11 - 12 of this Guide)

1 Exam Structure







HOW WILL MY ANSWERS BE MARKED?

For each question, you will be graded from 1 – 8 (**N0, N1, N2,** A3, A4, M5, M6, E7, E8).

You will be graded based on:

- how well you answered the actual question;
- your ability to find language features in the text, and explain their effect;
- your ability to connect the ideas in the text to:
  - the writer's purpose;
  - the real world;
  - human nature.

For excellence, you need to be **perceptive** (come up with ideas that are below the surface) and original (find ideas that are new). You also need to be super clear in explaining what the writer's purpose is (what is the writer trying to achieve with this text?). **This assessment is VERY subjective, meaning that there is not necessarily a 'right' or 'wrong' answer about what the writer's purpose is.** The worst thing you can do is not write anything.

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OFFICIAL (NZQA) MARKING SCHEDULE

Below is the NZQA marking schedule. **It's not overly helpful** for understanding what the examiner is looking for. Like all English assessments, this test is marked 'holistically' (meaning that the examiner will look at your answer **as a whole**, and make their overall judgement on what grade it's worth).

NZQA Marking schedule

Achieved	Merit	Excellence
• **Identify or describe** aspect(s) of the text relevant to the question		
• **Include specific and relevant details** from the text to support the points made.		
• **Explain** how **one or more** significant aspects of the text **create** meaning or effect prompted by the question	• **Explain** how **two or more** significant aspects of the text **work together** to **create** meaning or effect prompted by the question	• **Explain** how significant aspects of a text **have been deliberately used to create** meanings and effects prompted by the question **in order to communicate ideas relating to:** ○ the writer's purpose ○ wider contexts, beyond / outside of the text (such as human experience, society, and the wider world)

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2 Language features

The language features that we **strongly recommend** that you memorise are coloured orange. We've chosen these language features because:

- they always or very often show up; and
- it is easy to explain their effect and connect them to the author's purpose.

The other language features listed below will be useful, but not crucial.

There are obviously many more language features you could learn – however, it's far better to focus on remembering a small handful well, rather than remember heaps averagely. Remember, **you don't get extra credit for using 'difficult' language features. You get marked based on how well you explain the effect of language features and connect them to the writer's purpose.**

Tip - Create flashcards to help you memorise!

Language Feature	Definition/meaning	Example	Effect(s)
Collective (personal) pronouns	Using either 'we', 'our' or 'us'.		• Involves the reader. • Suggests that the reader and the writer are 'together' in their mission.
Colloquial language (a.k.a. 'slang')	Use of informal language – language that you'd use in a conversation with mates, but usually not a formal piece of writing.	'***Ah yes***, the famous Nigerian email scam! ... Could you please lend him, ***oh I dunno***, ***like*** $5,000?' 2014 exam, Text C	• Makes writing more relatable to the target audience. • Helps the audience trust the writer more.
Connotations	The feeling that words create. 'ice cream' can have a happy connotation, a summery connotation, or a childish connotation. 'rust' can have an old connotation, or a neglected connotation.	'The internet can be a ***scary*** place... Behind its cuddly kitten.gif exterior lies a ***shady*** pack of ***wolves*** ready to ***bully, steal,*** and ***deceive,*** while ***cloaked*** in the ***shroud*** of anonymity.' 2014 exam, Text C Connotation created by highlighted words: **fear/danger.**	• Creates a mood. • Makes the reader understand how they should feel about something (positive, negative).

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Contrast	Showing a difference between two things (could be any two things; words, ideas, moods, etc).		• Helps emphasise something, usually for some kind of purpose.
Dialogue	Speech. If it's in "speech marks", it's dialogue.		• Varies, depending on the dialogue.
Emotive language	Using language that is intended to make the reader feel a certain way.	"You have ***stolen*** my dreams and my childhood with your ***empty*** words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. ***People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. How dare you!"*** Greta Thunberg, UN address, 2019 Emotive language (***highlighted***) is used to make the reader feel **angry/outraged.**	• Used to show how the writer feels about something, and also make the reader feel a certain way about something.
Hyperbole	Exaggeration.	"***I spent all summer*** on my surfboard, chasing the thrill." "I was ***scared to death*** of dropping my phone in the water."	• Helps emphasise something, usually for some kind of purpose.
Imagery	Use of language that paints a picture (including sounds/smells/tastes /feelings) in the reader's head.	"Matariki. It's the time of frozen rising before dawn, of the ***wet-dog fug of old blankets, of puffer jackets rustling and the clunk of car doors. Bleary faces in headlights; greetings called into the night. Muddy gumboots stamping icy ground. Beanies and gloves and warm hugs***." 2023 exam, Text A	• Helps immerse the reader (make the reader feel like they're actually there).
Listing		"Gardening is a rich mix of diligent effort followed by ***frustration, confusion, sunburn and soiled hands."*** 2014 exam, Text C	• Helps emphasise just how much of something there is.
Metaphor	Comparing one thing to another thing, <u>without</u> using 'like' or 'as'.	"...the sun unrolls a ***flashy carpet*** right across the harbour, and almost onto my front lawn***."*** 2024 exam, Text B	• Helps the reader understand something in an interesting/particular way. • Helps the reader visualise something.
Multiple adjectives	Adjectives are describing words.	"Along the most ***rugged*** stretches of the Wairarapa coast you find ***blackened*** stones, the remnants of ***old*** campfires..." 2023 exam, Text C	• Varies a bit, depending on the adjectives used.

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	Multiple adjectives is using 1 or more adjective in the same sentence or paragraph.	"Above us – ***silent, dark, small*** – a swift scythes through." 2023 exam, Text B	• Usually helps the reader understand something in a particular way, or visualise something.
Multiple verbs	Verbs are action words. Multiple verbs is using 1 or more verbs in the same sentence or paragraph.	"We ***burrowed*** into hedges // ***wrestled*** branches and reeds // into ceiling and wall // ***lashed*** everything together // with tough prickle-free vines." 2025 exam, Text B	• Varies a bit, depending on the verbs used. • Usually helps the reader understand something in a particular way, or visualise something.
Personification	Giving human characteristics to an object.	"...the sun was ***sulking*** and ***pulling a pillow of cloud over its head. "*** 2024 exam, Text B	• Helps the reader understand something in an interesting/particular way. • Helps the reader visualise something.
Point of view	The point of view that the text is written in. This could be: - 1st person ('I', 'me', 'my', 'we') - 2nd person ('you', 'your') - 3rd person ('he', 'she', 'they')		• 1st person: Helps the voice of the writer come through. This usually makes the reader relate to the writer (and understand their message). • 2nd person: Involves the reader by speaking to them directly. • 3rd person: Reduces the voice of the writer. Allows the reader to be more immersed in the text.
Repetition	Repeating of words or phrases. The words/phrases don't need to be next to each other. Repetition can also go from paragraph to paragraph.	"Koro's watching you." [repeated multiple times throughout 2024 exam, Text A]	• Helps emphasise something.
Rhetorical question	A question which does not expect an answer.	"***Once on the beach what do we do?*** We head to the farthest rock, of course. ***Why this need to occupy the last speck of land?"*** 2023 exam, Text C	• Involves the reader. • Makes the reader pause and reflect on something.

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Simile	Comparing one thing to another thing, using 'like' or 'as'.	"From take-off, it takes just a few minutes to clear the hills of Great Barrier, where ***tree fern crowns pop like green starbursts*** from the otherwise dark bush." 2025 exam, Text A	• Helps the reader understand something in an interesting/particular way. • Helps the reader visualise something.

Got other language features you'd like to remember?

Add your own here.

Language Feature	Definition/meaning	Example	Effect(s)
			• •
			• •
			• •
			• •
			• •

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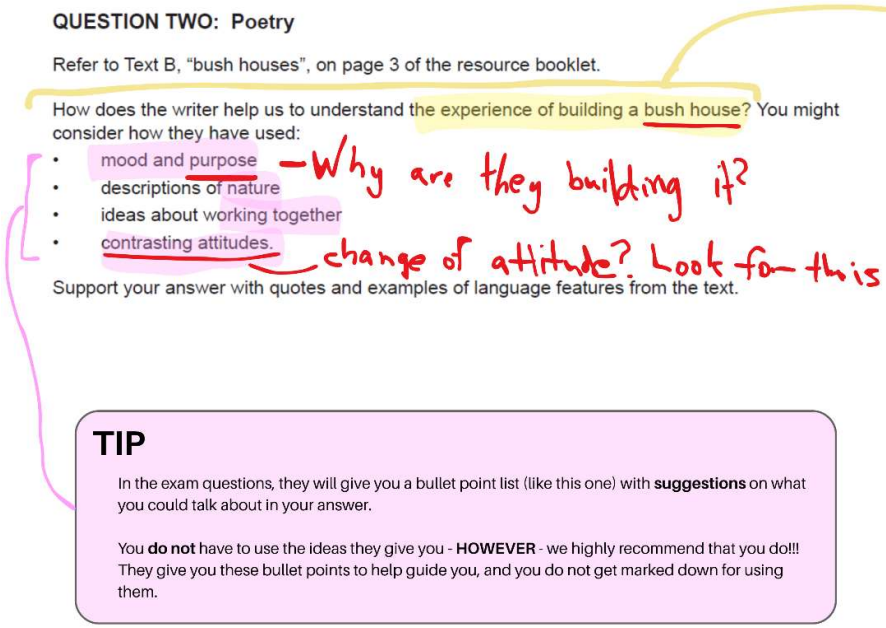
3 How to write your answer

#1 Start by reading & annotating the question

Before you even look at the text, carefully read the question. This will help guide what you're looking for when you read the text.

You should also annotate (highlight/underline/make notes, etc) **your question with the key words.** This will help make sure that your answer is on point.

EXAMPLE BELOW



QUESTION TWO: Poetry

Refer to Text B, "bush houses", on page 3 of the resource booklet.

How does the writer help us to understand the experience of building a bush house? You might consider how they have used:

- mood and purpose — Why are they building it?
- descriptions of nature
- ideas about working together
- contrasting attitudes. — change of attitude? Look for this

Support your answer with quotes and examples of language features from the text.

TIP

In the exam questions, they will give you a bullet point list (like this one) with **suggestions** on what you could talk about in your answer.

You **do not** have to use the ideas they give you - **HOWEVER** - we highly recommend that you do!!! They give you these bullet points to help guide you, and you do not get marked down for using them.

TIP

This is a common type of question: *"How does the writer help us to understand the experience of....."*

'Experience' can be quite broad. You can talk about the writer's feelings, the writer's views, and what the writer feels is important.

No matter what though - **you need to talk about the writer in your answer.**

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#2 Read the text (highlight language features as you go)

Some students like to do a 1st reading of the text (without looking for language features), and then do a 2nd reading to find language features. Other students like to read through the text once (slowly), and highlight as they go. **Find what works best for you and go with that.**

EXAMPLE BELOW

TEXT B: Poetry

In this poem, the writer shares a childhood experience with their children

bush houses

1st person POV

my sisters and i
spent our childhoods
constructing bush houses
in the scrub between braids of river
in estuary wastelands
and in poppa's famously manicured
macrocarpa hedge

imagery

we were environmental architects
selecting materials for strength and
ability to melt into the landscape
not because our vision was green
but to protect ourselves from
property-pouching cousins
and poppas bent on eviction

metaphor/hyperbole

alliteration

we burrowed into hedges
wrestled branches and reeds
into ceiling and wall
lashed everything together
with tough prickle-free vines
never once tempted by rope
even when frayed or discarded

Verbs

imagery

adjectives

change in mood (contrast)

imagine then my pride
when my own children
on their first tour
of my childhood plains
announced that they too
had built a hut from
carefully selected flora
and there it was
beautifully balanced and bound securely
with of all things *stickytape*
for though they played at being country kids
their hearts and problem-solving skills
were forever rooted in
the city

Glossed word	
eviction	a landowner forcing an occupant out of their property

Source: Tu'akoi, Feana. (2021.). bush houses, In A. Jansen, J. Begg, R Chester, W. Hollis, R.Ratchcliff (Eds,), *More than a roof: Housing, in poems and prose.* (pp. 86 - 87). Landing Press.

From the 2025 Level 1 Unfamiliar Text exam

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#3 Write your answer

In terms of structure, this assessment is very flexible. There is no particular structure you need to follow. That said, here is one structure you could use.

INTRO
(2 sentences)

- **Thesis statement,** incorporating:
  - words from the question; and
  - your own insights
- **Elaborate**

Language feature (or quote) #1
(4 - 5 sentences)

1. **Identify a language feature** (or quote) from the text.
2. **Explain the effect** of the language feature (or quote).
   a. How does it make the reader feel?
   b. What does it help the reader understand?
3. **Connect it back to the question** (Merit) **and the other language features used.**
4. **(Excellence) Connect to:**
   a. **the writer's purpose; or**
   b. **wider contexts (such as human nature, society, NZ, and the world).**

Language feature (or quote) #2
(4 - 5 sentences)

1. **Identify a language feature** (or quote) from the text.
2. **Explain the effect** of the language feature (or quote).
   a. How does it make the reader feel?
   b. What does it help the reader understand?
3. **Connect it back to the question** (Merit) **and the other language features used.**
4. **(Excellence) Connect to:**
   a. **the writer's purpose; or**
   b. **wider contexts (such as human nature, society, NZ, and the world).**

OPTIONAL

Language feature (or quote) #3
(4 - 5 sentences)

1. **Identify a language feature** (or quote) from the text.
2. **Explain the effect** of the language feature (or quote).
   a. How does it make the reader feel?
   b. What does it help the reader understand?
3. **Connect it back to the question** (Merit) **and the other language features used.**
4. **(Excellence) Connect to:**
   a. **the writer's purpose; or**
   b. **wider contexts (such as human nature, society, NZ, and the world).**

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EXAMPLE ANSWER (Excellence)

(483 words)

INTRO
(2 sentences)

The writer helps us to understand that the experience of building a bush house as thrilling, imaginative, and something that captures the adventurous spirit of children. The writer also wants us to understand how the bush houses that children build are a reflection of themselves and how they were brought up.

Language feature (or quote) #1
(4 - 5 sentences)

The writer uses a metaphor "we were environmental architects". The effect of this comparison between children and professional architects is that we get insight into the rich imagination of the children. Architects are careful planners of massive buildings with creative designs, and from the children's point of view, their construction of the bush house is a project with just as much importance and meaning as the architects. The writer's purpose is to help us see the beauty of childhood imagination, and how outdoor activities help young people to explore their imagination in fantastic ways.

Language feature (or quote) #2
(4 - 5 sentences)

Another language feature in the poem is the multiple verbs "burrowed", "wrestled", "lashed" which are used when the writer is remembering her building experience. These verbs all have a feeling of intense movement and also a bit of violence, so the effect is to make the building process feel like the children are battling the environment. This makes the audience understand the excitement and danger aspect of nature. This language feature works together with the 'environmental architects' metaphor to make the whole project feel not only important, but also very arduous and physically challenging for the children. Overall, the writer includes this description as it captures the physical demands of building a bush house, and also reminds us of the childhood excitement of 'fighting' against nature to create something awesome.

OPTIONAL
Language feature (or quote) #3
(4 - 5 sentences)

Finally, we have a contrast between the mood of the first 3 paragraphs and the last paragraph. The mood goes from excitement and chaos (as described above) to calm and order. The mood of the last paragraph is captured in words like 'carefully selected' and 'beautifully balanced' and 'bound securely'. The contrast in these moods suggests that the writer's children take a different approach to bush building, which is more methodical and calculated than the writer's rough approach was when she was a kid herself. The writer draws out the words 's t i c k y t a p e' to show her astonishment/bafflement at the fact that tape was used on a bush house. At the end, the writer reflects on the fact that her children have a different upbringing (in the city) and that this is what has inspired the different design of their bush house. Overall, NZ is a diverse country with young people having very different upbringings depending on where they were raised. The writer wants us to understand that these different upbringings are something to be celebrated, because they cause young NZers to have different approaches to solving problems. The writer's purpose is also to show how adventure and imagination in the outdoors are a valuable part of NZ kids' childhood experience, even if they are brought up in the city.

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4 Practice!

There are two main things you need to practice for this assessment.

1. Your ability to identify language features in texts (see page 8).
2. Your ability to write an answer (see pages 9 - 10).

Where do I find practice papers?

NZQA past exams

NZQA publish past exams on their website. Unfortunately, they tend to redact (block out) the texts for copyright reasons.

Your teacher/tutor

Your teacher should have access to the unredacted past exams. Ask them to provide them to you (if they haven't already).

Otherwise, feel free to email us at jacob@trajectory.co.nz and we can provide these on request.

Textbooks

There are some great Unfamiliar Text books out there. We recommend the AME books.

How do I mark my own work?

That's a pretty good question. As we've talked about, it's tough to self-assess what grade you got (since the marking schedule is not black-and-white).

After you complete a practice paper, we recommend sharing your answer with your teacher or tutor to get their feedback. If that's not possible, **give it to an AI model and ask it to give you some feedback.** See our recommended prompt below.

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Use this prompt to get feedback from an AI model

Copy paste this into your AI model (ChatGPT, Claude, etcetc). Make sure you fill in the blanks.

"I am a student practising for the NCEA Level 1 Unfamiliar Text external. You are an experienced NCEA English teacher and external marker in New Zealand. Please mark my practice answer and give me feedback I can act on.

Mark strictly and honestly against the marking schedule below. Don't inflate my grade to be kind. I would rather know where I really am.

NCEA Marking schedule:

Achieved

- *Identifies or describes aspect(s) of the text relevant to the question.*
- *Includes specific and relevant details from the text to support the points made.*
- *Explains how **one or more** significant aspects of the text create meaning or effect relevant to the question.*

Merit

- *Explains how **two or more significant aspects** of the text work together to create meaning or effect relevant to the question.*

Excellence

- *Explains how significant aspects of the text have been **deliberately used** to create meanings and effects relevant to the question, in order to communicate ideas relating to:*
  - *the writer's purpose*
  - *wider contexts beyond the text, such as human experience, society, or the wider world.*

Please do the following:

1. ***Give me an estimated grade:** Achieved, Merit, Excellence, or Not Achieved.*
2. ***Explain why** you have given me that grade. Refer to specific parts of my answer and the marking criteria.*
3. ***Identify what I am doing well.** Point out specific examples of effective analysis, evidence, explanations, or discussion of language features.*
4. ***Identify what is stopping me from reaching the next grade.** Be specific. For example, tell me whether I need to:*
   - *use more specific evidence*
   - *explain the effect of a language feature more clearly*
   - *analyse two or more aspects working together*
   - *explain the writer's purpose*
   - *connect the text to a wider idea, human experience, society, or the wider world*
5. ***Give me 2–3 specific suggestions for improving my answer.** Do not rewrite my whole answer for me. Instead, tell me what I should add, change, or explain further so that I can improve it myself.*

The question is:
[PASTE QUESTION HERE]

The text is:
[PASTE TEXT HERE]

My answer is:
[PASTE YOUR ANSWER HERE]"

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That’s it!

We wish you the best of luck in your exams.

> from the team at Trajectory Christchurch



Looking for resources for your other assessments/subjects?
Check out our full resource library at trajectory.co.nz/ncea-resources

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