Deconstructing questions in English

There are four types of keywords that you need to consider when deconstructing a question:

- **Command words**
- **Concept words**
- **Condition words**
- **Critical words**

Command words

Command words are the verbs that provide the instruction as to what kind of skill you need to apply in this question. SCSA publish a full list of command or instructional words that all ATAR examiners use.

The ones commonly used in English include:

- **Explain, discuss, show how, compare, evaluate, analyse, respond to, explore, create**

Not as commonly used, but equally applicable to English, include:

- **Account for, argue, comment on, consider, construct, examine, interpret, justify**

Not included in the SCSA list, but commonly used, is the command word:

- **Compose**

Their definitions are included as an appendix to this document.

These terms are important to know because they determine the type of response you need to provide. They require you to do different things within your response. For example, to **analyse** means to deconstruct and figure out how a text 'works', whereas to **evaluate** means to weigh up and provide a judgement. A **discussion** requires you to look at a topic from a variety of angles, whereas **argue** means you are typically expected to adopt a single line of reasoning. **Compare** means to look at the similarities (and, possible, differences) between two things while **comment on** requires your thoughts on something.

As you can see, it is important to identity the command word and to determine what kind of skill you need to apply within this question and what kind of response is expected by the marker.

Concept words

These are the terms that refer to specific **syllabus concepts** that are being examined in this particular question. Sometimes, they are literally taken from the syllabus, and you will be familiar with them. These include words such as representation, perspective, voice, genre and context. It is essential that you are familiar with the terms used in the syllabus. Their definitions are typically included in the Glossary attached to the syllabus, although not all are included. You must directly address these terms, as they apply to the question and your choice of text, in your response. These must inform the content of your response.

Sometimes, syllabus concepts are inferred from the question. For example, a question may ask you about the 'careful construction' of a text in order to offer a perspective. You may not find the phrase "careful construction" in the syllabus documents, but Unit 4 does point to "the selection of language features" that are used to offer perspectives. Thus, this phrasing still refers to a syllabus concept of the constructed nature of texts.

Condition words

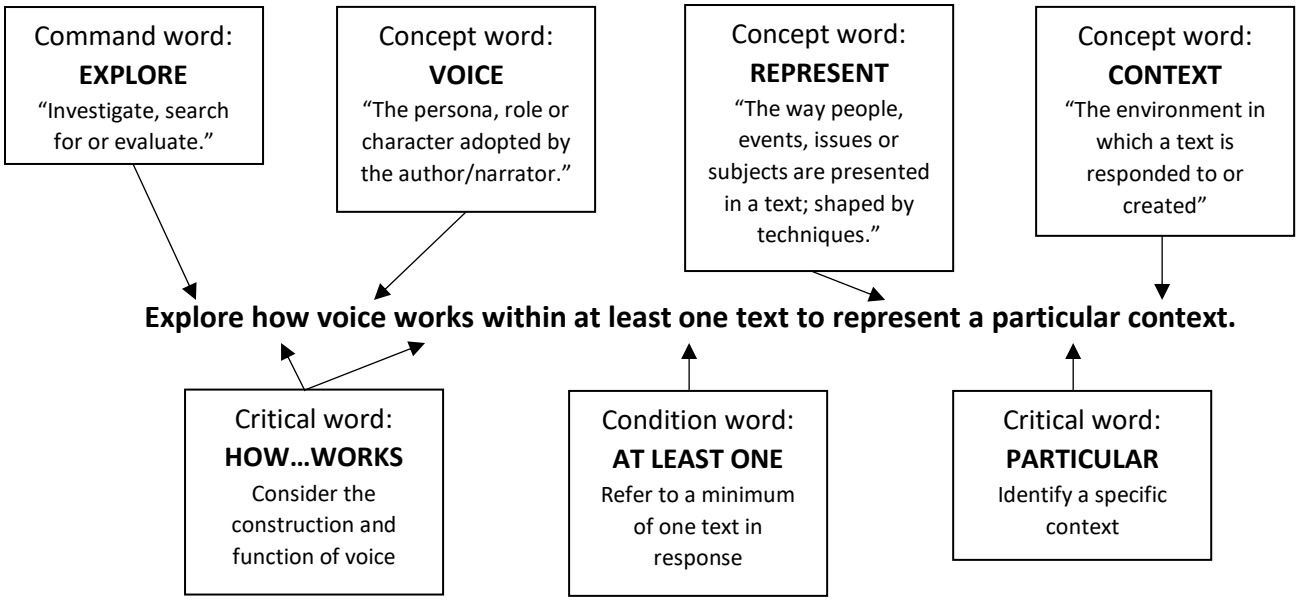
This type of keyword refers to the **conditions, parameters or constraints** placed on you in your response to the question. Many questions will just dictate that you must answer a question 'with reference to a studied text'. This is straightforward, but it does mean you shouldn't answer the question discussing what you watched on TV last night! Other questions set more specific conditions; for example, you might have to refer to 'three language features' in the Comprehending section, or the Responding section may ask you to address 'two texts' or 'texts of different modes.' In the Composing section, you might be asked to create an 'interpretive text' as opposed to any other type, or you might have to write 'the openings of two narratives'. You must follow these instructions, as they dictate the parameters which your response is expected to fit within. If you were asked to refer to two texts, and you only discuss one, it is improbable that you will score as highly as a student who addresses two texts.

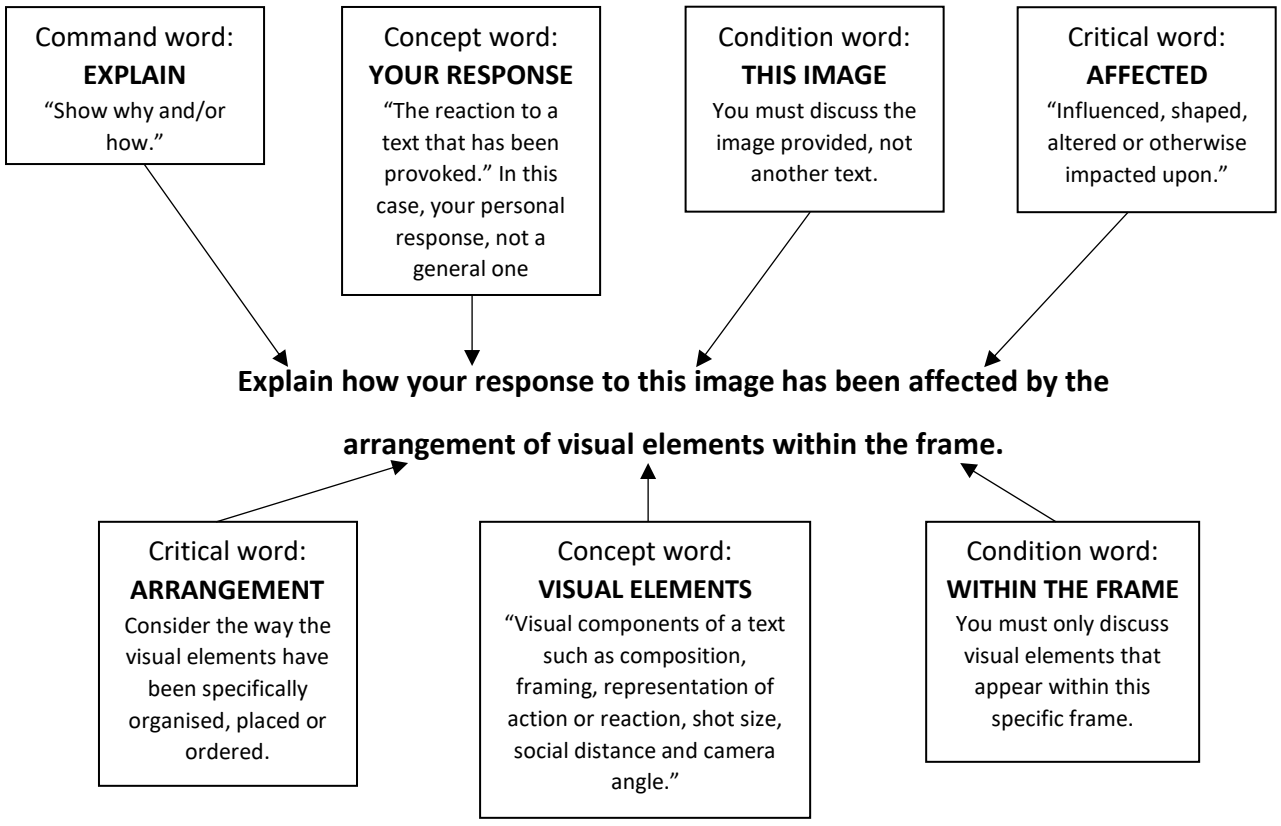
Critical words

This type of keyword works to **refine your response**; to add nuance. Typically, these are the keywords that are most often overlooked by students. The purpose of all test and exam questions is, of course, to assess your skills and understandings as described by the syllabus. But, to a point, such questions also need to differentiate between students, whether just within your class or across the whole state. Ultimately, students will be ranked by their WACE exam scores. The main way in which students are assessed is, of course, by their demonstrated knowledge of the syllabus as demonstrated within their response. However, one of the other ways in which students are differentiated is the degree to which they address these critical words within the question.

For example, a question in the Comprehending or Composing section may ask you to consider a *specific* audience or *particular* attitudes within texts in the Responding section. To be successful here, you must identify the precise audience or attitude, rather than just generalise. Alternatively, you may be asked to discuss a *central* idea or a *controversial* issue. In these cases, you need to justify that the idea or issue you are discussing *is* central or controversial, respectively. The extent to which you address these requirements will influence your success in responding to this question. If you just generalise about 'an audience' for example, you probably will not score as highly as someone who identifies the text's *specific* audience such as 'suburban, working-class West Australians,' because such a response will demonstrate more nuance and precision.

Examples:

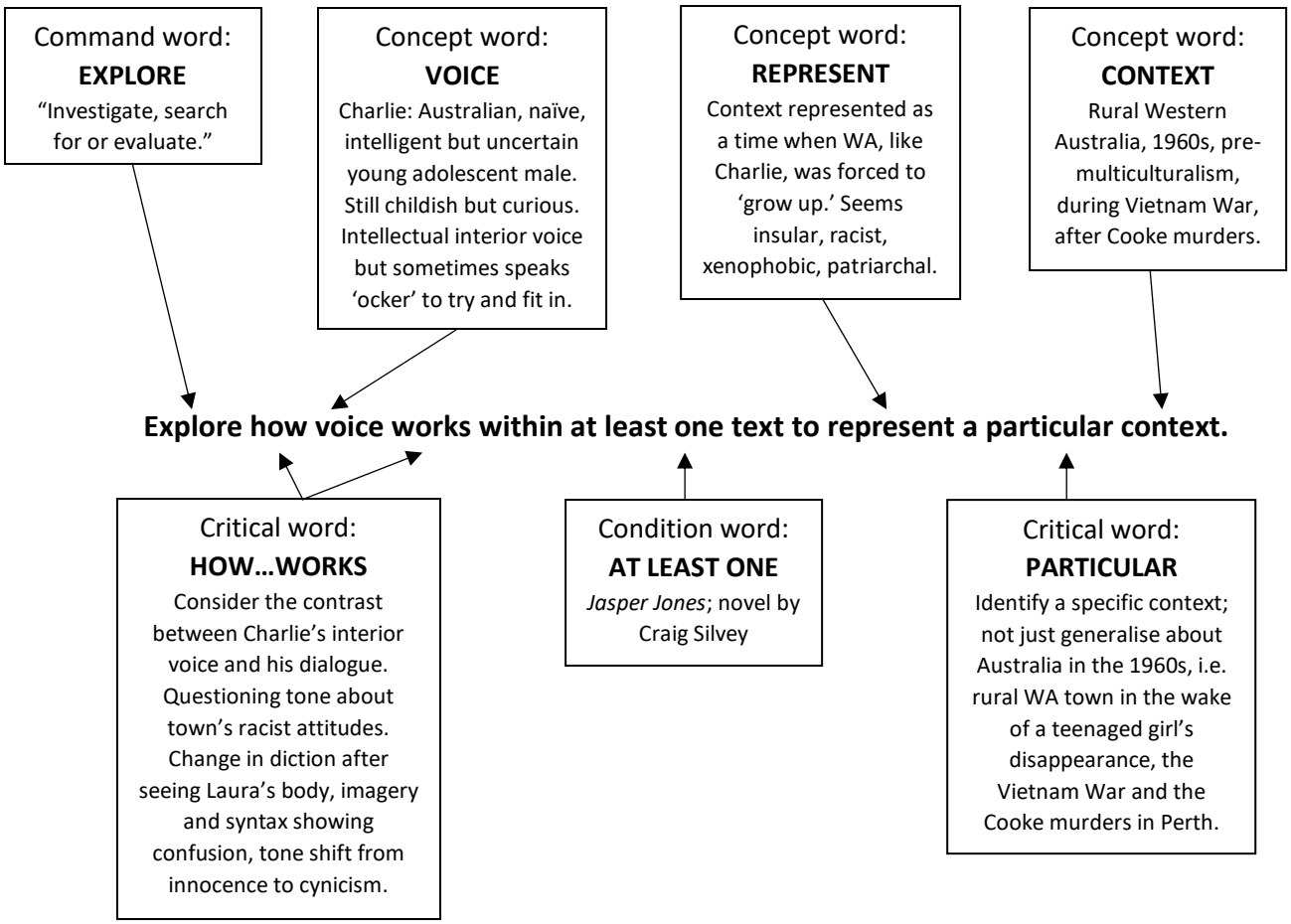




ETAWA
English Teachers Association Western Australia

Identifying each keyword and considering their meanings, can be a useful way to plan your response:

***Jasper Jones*, by Craig Silvey:**



Importantly, you need to make sure that your introduction, if not your thesis statement alone, clearly addresses *all* of the keywords. Markers are looking to see your engagement with the question. Hitting the keywords, formulating an argument around them and in relation to your text, is an essential component of any successful response.

Western Australia in the 1960's was a place changed entirely. Nationally, the Vietnam War shook the population's faith in their government and the righteousness of the West, while locally the Eric Edgar Cooke murders altered Perth from a sleepy, safe town to a city in the grip of fear. In addition, the White Australia Policy and the struggle for the rights of Aboriginal Australians suggests that this was an era where racism and xenophobia were the norm. Within this historical context, Silvey constructs Corrigan, a rural town where the tensions afflicting the nation are exacerbated by the disappearance of a local teenaged girl. This specific context, and its devastating outcomes, is represented as horrifying through the voice of the protagonist; twelve year old Charlie Bucktin. By constructing the voice of an articulate, intelligent but naïve Charlie as he matures from innocence to cynicism, Silvey invites the reader to look upon the injustices of this time from the perspective of a young teenager, who comes to realise the prejudice and corruption that poisons his hometown.

Read through this sample introduction and check whether each keyword has been attended to.

Glossary of Command words used in the formulation of questions.

Account	Account for: state reasons for, report on. Give an account of: narrate a series of events or transactions
Analyse	Identify components and the relationship between them; draw out and relate implications
Argue	Make a case, based on appropriate evidence, for and/or against some given point of view
Comment on	Make reference to and expand upon
Compare	Show how things are similar and different
Consider	Reflect on and make a judgement/evaluation
Construct	Make; build; put together items or arguments
Create	Make, invent something
Discuss	Identify issues and provide points for and/or against
Evaluate	To ascertain the value or amount of; appraise carefully
Examine	Inquire into
Explain	Relate cause and effect; make the relationships between things evident; provide why and/or how
Explore	Investigate, search for or evaluate
Interpret	Draw meaning from
Justify	Support an argument or conclusion; give reasons for your statements or comments
Respond to …	Provide an answer; reply
Show	Give information; illustrate
Compose	Write or create something