PLANNING EXAM ESSAYS ON ‘OTHELLO’

1. Explore how Shakespeare **presents**\* the **disturbing\*\* aspects of human nature** in Othello. You must relate your discussion to **relevant contextual factors** and **ideas from your critical** reading.

Total: 35 marks (split into 21 maximum for the essay, AO1,2 and 3 and 14 for AO5)

* \* presents: ie what dramatic techniques are used?
* \*\* disturbing: note the use of this word, this is NOT just a question on Othello’s character – you need to be specific in your selection of episodes and quotations.
* You can always expect the reminder to use relevant contextual factors (not genetic or vague ones) and to integrate the ideas from your critical texts. (Again, notice the emphasis on ideas: you must respond to the suggestions made by critics, not merely dump them on the page.)
1. **PLAN**

Think before you start. You cannot say everything or discuss every episode/line/scene. Which are the best moments to focus your discussion Othello and the disturbing aspects of human nature? (Remember, to move around the play: if you choose all your moments from the first acts or the most obvious events, the examiner might suspect that you do not know the play well and are not demonstrating a confident and fluent response.)

*(Keep your plan short. Jot down 5 key ideas here.)*

1. **INTRODUCTION**

Use your introduction to unpick (and define where necessary) the key words and the argument set out in the question. This could be a useful moment to turn your initial plan into a couple of straightforward sentences.

*(Write your introduction here. Avoid any context at this stage: it earns more credit if integrated within your specific and detailed discussion.)*

1. **PARAGRAPHS**

The following comment is merely a suggestion, but explore it as a trial, completing each of the associated points and then repeat with another point from your own list.

“When Othello first comes on stage, he appears to be confident, articulate and fully in control of both his emotions and career: he is the successful suitor of the beautiful and upper-class Venetian, Desdemona, and the unchallenged Governor of Cyprus. However, under Iago’s malicious insinuations, he rapidly changes and demonstrates highly disturbing behaviour.”

It is the speed of transition that is shocking here. Find **two quotes** both by Othello which demonstrate this.

Comment on **the presentation** of the latter of these moments. What **techniques** does Shakespeare use to demonstrate his transformation?

How does this idea of transformation or inconstancy link to **the context** of either Elizabethan/Jacobean England OR late 16th/early17th Venice – known as a successful and exotic trading port with global connections?

How can it be argued that **this demonstrates** the disturbing nature of human behaviour (move out from the examination of Othello and see him as an example of a human here) – what flaws might we recognise in ourselves or others in our own time?

Alternatively, how could **you contradict** this suggestion – maybe by suggesting that these flaws are unique to Othello, a minority Moor in Renaissance Venice, or that they show the potential of external forces to undermine even the most generous and strongest of human natures?

Now use one of your own points.

First write a topic sentence to explain the point you are making:

*(A single sentence to explain the topic of this paragraph)*

What episode will you use as evidence? (Make sure you ask yourself whether this is the best choice, rather than just the first one that pops into your head!)

Note down the Act and Scene numbers:

Now find one key quote and a second which could be used for further development?

Now identify the dramatic techniques used at this point in the play?

What specific points of context are relevant here (No sweeping generalisations please!)

What do other critics (use the Anthology or your own reading) say about this idea?

Now explain how this reinforces (or challenges) the assumption that Shakespeare is using the character of Othello to present the disturbing aspects of human nature?

Now that you have planned two points by breaking them down into specific smaller ‘bricks’, you are ready to start building the wall…… Pick another point from your initial plan and write a detailed analytical paragraph that embraces all of the factors listed above and clearly demonstrates **your ability to respond to the question you have been asked**. (Remember you will get no credit for describing what happens in the play or what Othello is like….)

1. **FEEDBACK**

Swap paragraphs with a peer. Ask your marker to add some constructive comments as to how your argument could be clearer, your writing more sophisticated (try to avoid using ‘you’ to help with this) and how your points could be more fully developed with a more detailed discussion of how/why Shakespeare presents Othello and how/why we respond as we do…..