

● SECTION A · ESSAY SKELETONS

How to Build a Skeleton for Any Essay

A "skeleton" is a reusable structural shape for an analytical essay, not a memorised example. The same skeleton works whether your text is a novel, a film, or a collection of short stories, and whether the prompt is about power, identity, family, or anything else. This guide teaches you the methodology, not a one-off example you'll never be able to use again.

THE PRINCIPLE

Most students improve their Text Response by memorising content: quotes, context, a model essay. That works until the prompt shifts slightly and the memorised essay doesn't fit anymore.

A skeleton fixes this the other way around. Instead of memorising **what** to say, you memorise **the shape** of how a strong essay moves. Then you slot in whatever textual moment actually fits the prompt in front of you. The shape stays constant. The content changes every time.

Why This Works Under Exam Pressure

In the exam, you don't get to choose a familiar prompt. What you can control is how quickly you can structure a response to *any* prompt, and that's exactly what a rehearsed skeleton gives you. Once the shape is automatic, all your thinking time goes into choosing the right textual moment and getting the analysis right, instead of figuring out how to organise the essay from scratch.

The two skeletons on the next page aren't the only ways to structure an essay. They're two reliable starting points. The last section of this guide shows you how to build your own once these feel natural.

The Structures, In Depth

SKELETON 1

Cause → Effect → Outcome

1 Cause

Identify a specific authorial choice, action, or moment in the text, something the author deliberately put there.

2 Effect

Explain the immediate impact of that choice: on a character, on the tension of the scene, or on how the reader responds in the moment.

3 Outcome

Zoom out to the bigger picture: how this moment connects to the text's broader themes, or what it reveals about the author's overall message.

GENERIC TEMPLATE

"When [character] [does/experiences X], it [causes Y reaction or shift], ultimately revealing [the text's broader idea about Z]."

Best for: analysing decisions, actions, or turning points, anywhere a character's choice sets something else in motion.

SKELETON 2

Choice → Contrast → Significance

1 Choice

Identify a specific authorial or character choice: a decision, a piece of imagery, a structural moment.

2 Contrast

Set it against something else in the text: an opposing character, an earlier moment, or what the reader would expect instead.

3 Significance

Explain what the contrast reveals: why the author chose to set these two things against each other, and what it says thematically.

GENERIC TEMPLATE

"Unlike [the contrasting moment/character], [character]'s [choice/action] highlights [the thematic idea this contrast exposes]."

Best for: comparative or thematic analysis, anywhere the text sets up an opposition worth unpacking.

Build Your Own Skeleton

Once these two feel automatic, you can build others the same way. Every strong skeleton follows the same underlying logic:

The 3-part logic behind every skeleton

Whatever you call the three stages, they need to do these three jobs, in this order:

1. **Ground it in the text.** Start with something specific and identifiable: a moment, a choice, a technique. Never a vague generalisation about the whole text.
2. **Show the movement.** Explain what that specific thing does: the effect, the contrast, the shift, the consequence. This is where most of your marks live.
3. **Connect it upward.** Link it back to the text's broader ideas, the author's purpose, or the prompt itself. This is what separates analysis from description.

TRY IT YOURSELF

Take a technique or moment from your own text and run it through both skeletons above. Notice how the *same textual evidence* can support either structure. The skeleton you choose depends on what kind of point you're making, not what evidence you happen to have.

WANT TO REHEARSE THIS PROPERLY?

Message us for a Section A session built around these skeletons.

We'll work through your actual text, build out essays live, and get the shape automatic before it matters.

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