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How to Word Comprehension Answers That Earn Full Marks

This guide is built from the actual DBE marking guidelines and DBE's diagnostic reports used to mark National Senior Certificate English HL Paper 1 comprehension papers. It explains exactly how markers are instructed to allocate marks, what separates a full-mark answer from a partial one, and gives you full model answers for every major question type that comes up year after year, so you know precisely how to word your response under pressure.

1. How NSC Markers Actually Think

Before you learn question types, you need to understand the system you're being marked by. The DBE's own marking guidelines (issued to every marker before marking begins) reveal exactly what separates a 3/3 from a 1/3 — and it isn't about having the 'right' idea. Here is what markers are explicitly instructed to do:

- **Marking is holistic, not a checklist of magic words**

The guidelines tell markers your response must be 'considered on merit' and assessed 'holistically' — meaning a well-argued answer in your own words, even if phrased differently from the memo, earns full marks. This is good news: you are not hunting for one exact sentence. But it cuts both ways — a vague answer that merely echoes the question back will not earn marks just because it's 'on topic'.

- **The single biggest silent killer: lifting**

'Lifting' means copying words or phrases straight from the passage instead of expressing the idea in your own words. The marking guidelines are explicit that a lifted answer is capped — even when the content is completely correct, a purely lifted response earns only partial credit (often just 1 mark on a 2-mark question), never full marks. If a 2-mark question asks for two reasons and you copy both reasons word-for-word from the text, you are instructed by the memo's own rule to be marked down. This is worth internalising: full marks requires proof that you understood the text, not proof that you found the right lines.

- **Zero-credit answers: yes/no, true/false, agree/disagree — alone**

For any open-ended question ('Do you think...', 'Do you agree...'), the guidelines state explicitly that no marks are awarded for the YES/NO or AGREE/DISAGREE itself. The entire mark allocation sits in the motivation that follows. Candidates who write 'No, I do not agree' and stop, or who under-develop the justification, lose every mark on that question

regardless of which side they chose.

- **'Award marks only if...' — the phrase that decides everything**

Scan any real marking guideline and you'll see this instruction attached to almost every 3-mark question: 'Award 3 marks only if a comment/discussion/critical discussion is included.' This means naming the correct technique or idea is worth nothing on its own — full marks are reserved for candidates who explain the effect, significance, or reasoning behind it. This single rule is why so many technically-correct answers still lose marks: identification without explanation is treated as an incomplete answer, not a correct one.

- **Language errors are not usually the problem**

Markers are instructed not to penalise spelling or language errors in comprehension answers unless the error changes the meaning of the answer. This means the marks you lose are almost never about handwriting or grammar — they are about precision of thought and whether you answered in your own words, at the depth the mark allocation demands.

The real formula markers are using

Full marks = correct idea + your own words (not lifted) + explained/developed to the depth the mark value demands.

Partial marks = correct idea, but lifted, OR under-explained, OR only one idea where two/three were required.

Zero marks = a stance (yes/no/agree) with no reasoning, OR an answer that doesn't address the specific paragraph/line referenced in the question.

2. The Universal Method — Adjusted for How Marks Are Actually Split

Your original three-step method (Identify → Evidence → Explain) is the right skeleton. Here's how to calibrate it so it matches real NSC mark allocations, question by question:

- 1 mark: One precise idea, in your own words. No evidence quote needed — a quote wastes time here.
- 2 marks: Either one idea + a one-line explanation of why it matters, OR two distinct ideas stated clearly (check the instruction word — 'give TWO reasons' wants two separate points, not one point explained twice).
- 3 marks: This is where 'comment', 'discuss', 'critically discuss', and 'explain' questions live. You need a named idea/technique + short evidence (a word or short phrase, never a full sentence) + a developed explanation of its effect on the reader or its link to the writer's purpose. Memos repeatedly state marks are only awarded 'if a comment is made' — so never stop at identification.

- 4 marks (synthesis questions comparing two texts): You must explicitly reference material from both texts and show the connection between them, not just discuss them side by side. Memos specifically withhold full marks if only one text is engaged with.

3. The Ten Question Types That Appear Every Year

These categories cover the overwhelming majority of NSC English HL Paper 1 Question 1 sub-questions from the past several years' November, May/June, and IEB papers. For each, you get: what the instruction word is really asking for, a full-mark model answer, why it earns full marks, and what a partial-mark version looks like — so you can see the exact gap markers are trained to detect.

- **Type 1 — Purpose of a one-sentence (or very short) paragraph**

This tests whether you understand structure, not just content. A one-sentence paragraph is never accidental — it exists to slow the reader down, isolate an idea, or create a hinge between two arguments.

Example Q Refer to paragraph 4, which consists of a single sentence. What is the purpose of this paragraph? [2]

Full-mark answer:

The single-sentence paragraph isolates the writer's central claim from the surrounding detail, giving it visual and rhetorical prominence. It also acts as a hinge, linking the specific example discussed before it to the broader argument developed afterwards.

Why this earns full marks:

It identifies two distinct structural functions (emphasis AND linking), both explained in terms of effect on the reader, rather than simply restating that it is 'short' or 'for emphasis'.

What a partial-mark answer looks like: "It is used for emphasis." — correct in spirit, but too vague to show understanding; markers need to know emphasis of what, and why that matters structurally.

- **Type 2 — Explain the reason(s)/argument in your own words**

These questions test paraphrasing under a strict no-lifting rule. The instruction word 'explain' or 'in your own words' is a direct signal that copying the text will cap your mark.

Example Q Give TWO reasons, in your own words, why the writer believes social media use among teenagers has increased. [2]

Full-mark answer:

Teenagers feel pressure to imitate the curated, flawless images they constantly see online, and they use social media to build a sense of identity and belonging separate from their

families.

Why this earns full marks:

Two fully separate, paraphrased ideas are given (comparison/pressure, and identity-seeking) — neither borrows the passage's exact wording, satisfying both the 'TWO reasons' instruction and the no-lifting rule.

What a partial-mark answer looks like: "Because they see perfect bodies in magazines and on social media." — this is lifted almost directly from the text; the memo rule caps this at 1 mark even though the idea is correct.

- **Type 3 — Comment on diction / the effect of a specific word or phrase**

This is the classic connotation question. The trap is naming the emotion without tying it to the specific word tested, or quoting a whole sentence instead of the 1–3 words the question is actually about.

Example Q Comment on the writer's use of the word 'infected' (line 14) in describing how the rumour spread. [3]

Full-mark answer:

The word 'infected' carries connotations of disease and contamination, implying that the rumour spread involuntarily and harmfully, much like a virus passing between unwilling hosts. This suggests the writer views the rumour as something destructive that people could not resist or control, reinforcing his critical stance on gossip culture.

Why this earns full marks:

It names the specific connotation (disease/contamination), links it precisely to the single word tested, and explains the effect on how the reader understands the writer's attitude — matching the memo instruction that marks are awarded 'only if a comment is made', not for identifying 'negative connotation' alone.

What a partial-mark answer looks like: "It has a negative connotation." — correct but unexplained; this identifies without commenting, which memos explicitly refuse to reward with full marks.

- **Type 4 — Discuss a paradox or irony**

The word 'paradox' means two things that seem to contradict each other but are both true. Full marks require you to state both halves of the contradiction and then resolve or explain it — not just point out that something is 'ironic'.

Example Q Discuss the paradox evident in paragraph 6. [3]

Full-mark answer:

The paradox is that teenagers reject their parents' rules in the name of independence, yet

immediately submit to the equally strict, unspoken rules of their friendship group. What appears to be a rebellion against conformity is, in fact, simply conformity to a different authority. The teenager believes they are asserting individuality while actually surrendering it just as completely as before.

Why this earns full marks:

Both halves of the contradiction are named explicitly (rejecting one authority while submitting to another) and the answer explains why this counts as paradoxical, rather than just labelling the paragraph 'ironic'.

What a partial-mark answer looks like: "It's ironic because teens want to be different but end up the same." — gestures at the idea but never states the two contradictory halves clearly enough to prove understanding of what makes it a paradox.

- **Type 5 — Critically discuss the implications of a statement**

'Critically discuss' is one of the highest-order instructions in the paper. It asks you to unpack consequences the writer doesn't spell out directly — you have to reason a step beyond the text.

Example Q Critically discuss the implications of the statement that 'individuality has become an anomaly' (line 40). [3]

Full-mark answer:

This statement implies that being different is no longer viewed as healthy self-expression but as a deviation to be corrected. If individuality is treated as unusual rather than normal, young people may begin to see their own uniqueness as a flaw rather than a strength, actively suppressing it to avoid standing out. The long-term implication is a generation that polices itself into sameness without needing external enforcement.

Why this earns full marks:

The answer goes beyond the literal statement to trace its consequences (self-suppression, internalised conformity) — this is what 'critically discuss' demands, and matches the memo pattern of only awarding full marks when a genuine discussion, not a restatement, is present.

What a partial-mark answer looks like: "It means individuality is rare now." — restates the line rather than unpacking what that scarcity implies or leads to; no critical reasoning is shown.

- **Type 6 — Personal response with motivation ("Do you think...", "Do you agree...")**

Remember: your YES or NO is worth zero marks by itself. The entire mark allocation is in the quality and specificity of your motivation.

Example Q Do you think the experiment described in paragraph 9 made a meaningful contribution to our understanding of conformity? Motivate your response. [3]

Full-mark answer:

YES. The experiment exposed how quickly an individual's confidence in their own judgement collapses under group pressure, even when the correct answer is visually obvious. This is significant because it demonstrates that conformity is not primarily a matter of weak character, but a near-automatic social response — a finding with real implications for how peer pressure operates among teenagers today.

Why this earns full marks:

The stance is stated in one word, then the full 3 marks go into two developed points of motivation (what the experiment revealed, and why that finding still matters) — exactly where memos say the marks live.

What a partial-mark answer looks like: "Yes, I think it did." — the stance alone; because memos award zero for the yes/no itself, this answer scores 0/3 despite 'agreeing' with the expected answer.

- **Type 7 — Visual and verbal text analysis (cartoons/comic strips)**

These questions pair a cartoon or comic strip with the main article. You must read both the words in the speech bubbles and the visual details (facial expression, posture, framing) — using only one loses marks.

Example Q Study the boy in FRAMES 1 and 2. Discuss what the visual and verbal texts reveal about his character. [3]

Full-mark answer:

The boy's declaration, 'I refuse to be like everyone else!', reveals a self-image built on defiance and individuality. Visually, however, he is drawn marching in step with an identical group of similarly dressed 'non-conformists' behind him, undercutting his own words. The contrast between his confident speech and the visual irony of the frame reveals that his rebellion is, ironically, just another form of conformity.

Why this earns full marks:

Both channels are used — a verbal quote AND a specific visual detail — and the two are connected to reveal a single insight about character, which is what 'discuss' requires when both text types are named in the question.

What a partial-mark answer looks like: "He seems confident and rebellious." — uses only the dialogue and ignores the visual frame entirely, so it cannot earn full marks on a question that names both the visual and verbal text.

- **Type 8 — Critically assess the logic/reasoning of a statement**

This question type wants you to test whether an argument actually holds up — look for contradictions, unsupported leaps, or self-defeating logic.

Example Q Critically assess the logic of the statement in FRAME 4: 'If everyone says it, it must be true.' [3]

Full-mark answer:

This reasoning is logically flawed because popularity of a claim has no bearing on its accuracy — an idea repeated by many people can still be entirely false. The statement also contradicts the character's own position two frames earlier, where he insisted that truth should not be dictated by group consensus. His argument therefore collapses under its own inconsistency.

Why this earns full marks:

The answer identifies the specific logical flaw (popularity $\neq$ truth) and also flags a self-contradiction elsewhere in the text — this double layer of critical assessment is what separates a 3/3 from an answer that simply disagrees.

What a partial-mark answer looks like: "That's not true, because not everyone is right." — gestures at disagreement without naming the actual reasoning flaw or connecting it to anything else in the text.

- **Type 9 — Synthesis: does the second text support the first?**

Usually the final, highest-value question (4 marks) in Question 1. Full marks require explicit reference to specific content in BOTH texts and a clear statement of how they relate — agreement, contrast, or complication.

Example Q Does TEXT B support the argument made in paragraphs 10 and 11 of TEXT A? Provide a critical evaluation in your response. [4]

Full-mark answer:

TEXT B supports TEXT A's argument. In TEXT A, the writer argues that outside pressures — 'commercials and social media' — are largely responsible for teenage conformity. TEXT B reinforces this: the cartoon's characters change their opinions the moment a louder voice repeats a claim, visually dramatising exactly the kind of unthinking social pressure TEXT A describes in prose. Both texts ultimately place the responsibility on external social forces rather than individual weakness.

Why this earns full marks:

The answer names specific material from TEXT A (a short quoted phrase) and specific material from TEXT B (the cartoon's action), then draws an explicit connecting judgement between them — meeting the memo's requirement that full marks need engagement with paragraphs from A and content from B, not just one or the other.

What a partial-mark answer looks like: "Yes, TEXT B is similar to TEXT A." — states a conclusion without citing any specific content from either text, so a marker cannot

verify genuine engagement with both.

- **Type 10 — Tone and attitude**

Tone is the writer's attitude; mood is how the reader feels. Confusing the two costs marks even when the description itself ('serious', 'urgent') is accurate.

Example Q Comment on the writer's tone in the final paragraph. [3]

Full-mark answer:

The tone is resigned yet hopeful. This is created through the concessive phrase 'it's not entirely the fault of teenagers', which shifts blame away from young people, combined with the forward-looking suggestion that 'conformity can be lessened' — signalling the writer's belief that change, though difficult, is still possible.

Why this earns full marks:

The tone is named precisely (not just 'positive' or 'negative'), grounded in a specific short phrase, and linked to what that phrase reveals about the writer's underlying attitude — the full identify-evidence-explain chain required for a tone question.

What a partial-mark answer looks like: "The tone is serious." — a plausible single word with no evidence and no explanation of what in the language creates that tone; too thin to earn more than 1 mark.

4. The Five Habits That Quietly Cost the Most Marks

Habit that loses marks	What to do instead
Lifting words/phrases straight from the passage as your 'own words' answer.	Read the relevant lines, look away from the text, then write the idea in completely different vocabulary.
Answering YES/NO or AGREE/DISAGREE and stopping there.	Treat your stance as a one-word throwaway — the real answer is the 2–3 sentences of motivation after it.
Naming a technique (e.g. 'metaphor', 'irony', 'diction') without explaining its effect.	Never end a sentence on the name of a technique — always continue with 'which suggests/reveals/emphasises...'

Quoting a full sentence as 'evidence' instead of 1–3 key words.	Underline only the specific word(s) doing the work, and quote just those.
Only using the article's words (or only the cartoon's visuals) on a question that names both text types.	When a question mentions 'visual and verbal', physically write one sentence about each before connecting them.

5. Final Pre-Submission Checklist

- Did I answer every part of a multi-part question (identify + explain + comment are often combined)?
- Is every quote 1–3 words, not a full sentence?
- Have I paraphrased instead of lifting, especially on 'in your own words' questions?
- For any YES/NO question, is 90% of my answer the motivation, not the stance?
- Did I explain effect/significance after naming every technique, word, or idea?
- For visual+verbal or two-text questions, did I explicitly reference both sources?
- Does my answer length roughly match the mark allocation (a 3-mark question needs more than one sentence)?

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