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## Writing a GCSE essay on *Oliver Twist*

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Your teacher will give you the essay title: make sure you focus on it and only include information that is relevant to the question.

If your teacher gives you the assessment objectives linked to this piece of work make sure you understand them and how they affect this essay. If you don't understand: *ask*.

**Do** refer to: Charles Dickens or Dickens.

**Don't** refer to: Charles (he's not your friend).

Always distinguish (show the difference) between Oliver Twist the character and *Oliver Twist* the novel by putting references to the novel in italics, like this: *Oliver Twist* or underlining it, like this: Oliver Twist.

Your teacher and the examiner are interested in your knowledge of the novel, the question you've been set and your ability to write a coherent answer (one that makes sense). Downloading text off the internet shows none of these and is also plagiarising (passing off others' work as your own) and is therefore *cheating*. The only way it is acceptable is to place the writing in quotation marks and cite the source (show where you got it from) but it is far better to use all your own words (except quotations from the novel) and show your knowledge.

For most GCSE essays of this type you will need to show understanding of the social and historical context: this means recognising when the novel was written, what would have influenced the author and how the time is reflected (shown) in the novel.

For this novel some of the points to consider for the social and historical context are:

The book was published in 1837-1839, only three years after the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834). Readers at the time would have been very aware of the Act in the same way we are aware of what goes on around us and affects our daily lives. People would have been interested in the Act and its effect. By 1839 350 workhouses had been built so they were common across the country.

The Act strengthened the authority of the workhouse and led to great hardships amongst those forced to enter it: meagre diet; separation of families; lack of exercise; repulsive and monotonous nature of work done in the workhouse. Dickens highlights these problems for his readers by having Oliver suffer many of these indignities in the opening chapters of his novel.

The novel was first published in monthly instalments in *Bentley's Miscellany*, a new magazine. This meant every chapter had to be a cliff-hanger in order to persuade the reader to read the next instalment similar to the way soap-opera episodes always finish with 'unfinished business'.

The novel deals with many issues which were current: poverty (particularly for those who were vulnerable such as children); villains; unmarried mothers; the class system; justice.