

Gobbets

I have often heard that Quintus Maximus, Publius Scipio, and other illustrious citizens of our state, used to say that the sight of their ancestors' portrait masks fired their hearts with an ardent desire to merit honour.

(Sallust, Jugurthine War)

'Gobbets' are passages from your set texts on which you are asked to comment. You may be set them in an exam, in preparation for a seminar, or as a course-work assignment.

The point of setting gobbet questions is to test

- your knowledge of set texts
- your awareness of the issues and problems relating to your set texts
- your ability to analyse in detail ancient sources
- your ability to apply your knowledge of the whole to text and the questions it raises to a particular passage

Whether you are being asked to respond to gobbet passages for an assessed assignment, for a seminar presentation, or an exam, there are a few simple guidelines which will help you handle gobbet questions effectively.

Friend, I have not much to say; stop and read it. This tomb, which is not fair, is for a fair woman. Her parents gave her the name Claudia. She loved her husband in her heart. She bore two sons, one of whom she left on earth, the other beneath it. She was pleasant to talk with, and she walked with grace. She kept the house and worked in wool. That is all. You may go.

Funerary Monument, Rome, 2nd Century AD

1. Read the gobbet carefully and ask yourself these questions.

- Why has the lecturer set this gobbet?
- Who is the author (if known) and where is it taken from?
- Is it from a set text or a source-book or collection of evidence?

- How does this gobbet relate to the topics and issues discussed in this module and what does it tell us about these?

2. Context may be important, particularly if the passage is from a set-text (literary, historical or philosophical) that you are reading as a whole. But if the gobbet is from a source-book (e.g. if it is an inscription or fragment of a lost work), what will matter most is the evidence provided by the gobbet. If you also know the context from which the source-book extract comes, you may comment on this too. In all cases, take note of whether the exam or coursework question asks for comment on the context or not.

3. Avoid, on the one hand, simply paraphrasing the gobbet and, on the other, talking around it without analysing it closely. Explain any names or references in the gobbet (incorporate this information as part of a connected explanation of the passage, and avoid just listing facts). If the passage is ambiguous or difficult in its wording or is ambiguous and puzzling in the evidence it provides, say so; and (if you know this too) discuss how modern scholars have interpreted the evidence.

While, therefore, the rest of the fleet lay at Salamis, the Athenians returned to their own harbours, and at once issued a proclamation that every one in the city and countryside should get his children and all the members of his household to safety as best he could. Most of them were sent to Troezen, but some to Aegina and some to Salamis. The removal of their families was pressed on with all possible speed, partly because they wished to heed the warning which had been given them by the oracle, but more especially for an even stronger reason.

Herodotus, Histories

4. Write concisely, setting out the main points in order of importance. Write in full sentences and paragraphs but briefly. On most exams, 45 minutes is allowed for 4 gobbets: allow just over 10 minutes for each gobbet to complete the question in time. Typically, you should expect each gobbet- answer to be one quarter as long as an essay. If gobbets are set as coursework, stick to the word-limit.