



PAPER 2 – BREAKING BAD

The following two passages focus on the American TV series *Breaking Bad*.

Note

No knowledge of the programme is needed to understand the passages or to answer the questions.

In the first passage Neil Mackay, writing in *The Sunday Herald* newspaper in October 2013, discusses the status of *Breaking Bad* as art.

Passage 1

In our multi-channel world of endless choice, many readers might not have seen *Breaking Bad*, but they will certainly have heard of it. Here's a brief catch-up: it started five years ago with an ordinary, dull, middle-aged high-school chemistry teacher, Walter White, who discovers that he has terminal cancer and turns to the illegal manufacture of 'crystal meth' in order to make enough money to provide comfortably for his family after his death. Come last Monday, and five seasons in, Walter White had descended to sulphurous depths of evil, his family and everyone who came within his orbit destroyed by his ambition, pride and ruthlessness.

The show ended in a crescendo of fan hysteria, media hype, five-star critical adoration, and ratings studio chiefs would open a vein for. Its finale was a seminal moment for television and a masterclass in what TV can do as an art form. This is a type of television that is trying to be almost Dickensian. In fact, forget trying – it is Dickensian. This is writing that takes powerful, believable characters, places them in a contemporary, realistic setting and allows their lives to play out over a long period of time in order to deconstruct our society and entertain and excite the viewer.

Dickens was the master of the long-form novel – he drip-fed his stories out in the pages of Victorian magazines, hooked his public, had the straightforward punters hanging on his every word and the arty critics standing on their hind legs to applaud. And, of course, once Dickens had told his story in the pages of magazines such as *Household Words*, he then brought out the complete novel – often in time for Christmas. (The complete box set of *Breaking Bad* is in the shops at the end of November.)

The literary comparisons, though, get even loftier. What started as a darkly comic crime show deepened into a drama commonly referred to as Shakespearean, with White often compared to Macbeth. The Shakespearean analogy is only a little overblown – because
 25 in terms of what Western culture is producing at the moment *Breaking Bad* is among the very best. The novel may still be the high point of that culture, but a show like *Breaking Bad* comes thrillingly close to challenging its supremacy. If even 20 per cent of television was like *Breaking Bad* then the novel might have to step into second place among the art forms that best express and analyse the spirit of the age.

30 *Breaking Bad* is the pinnacle of a decade-long march by US programme makers that threatens to elevate television to real art, not just in terms of storytelling, but in its capacity to fulfil art's most fundamental role: to eviscerate the society from which it emanated. It began with *The Sopranos*. Then came *The Wire*, *Mad Men* and a slew of other long-form TV serials that left nearly everyone looking hopelessly amateur in their wake.

35 *Breaking Bad* isn't just a spur-of-the moment fad that bloomed this summer and will be forgotten about in a month or two. Great art lives on because people talk about it, because it becomes embedded in culture and because people interpret it in many different ways as they start to co-opt it to fit their own worldview. There are bloggers in Beijing today dissecting the show and musing that it proves the degeneracy of America. Walter White
 40 breaks bad because he reckons he is poor, and he is not just rejecting his fate, but also rejecting the evils of the capitalist system.

Meanwhile, over in the States, a writer uses *Breaking Bad* to support her fundamentalist Christian agenda. The show, while morally ambivalent throughout – often putting the viewer in the position of emotionally supporting the most villainous characters – did end
 45 with what some critics saw as a rather black-and-white morality, with evil punished, good rewarded and those in need of redemption redeemed.

However, as with all good art, I suspect the audience hasn't yet realised how subversive and dangerous it is. It says something very dark about American capitalism: it says it will eat you up and spit you out; it will destroy you; it will make you a monster. It also says
 50 something horrible and powerful about the state of modern masculinity. Walter is on the ultimate male power trip: his fragile, dangerous male sense of self has been beaten down by what he sees as humiliations of enormous proportions – being a failure in the bedroom, being poorer than some of his students – and he will do anything to even the score against a world that he believes wronged him at every turn.

55 Walter White is truly a tragic character – because he is his own nemesis and the agent of his own ruin – and like all tragic characters he is also a fool. He may be smart, but he doesn't see the truth about himself until it is too late.

ROAL practice paper

In the second passage, Jenny McCartney, writing in *The Telegraph* newspaper in August 2013, discusses her reaction to the programme.

Passage 2

For some time now, the British viewing public has essentially been divided into those who have and those who haven't yet seen the US television show *Breaking Bad*. The people who haven't seen it may be dimly aware that it is an enormously successful series in America. The people who have seen it have quite often become obsessed.

5 I stumbled on *Breaking Bad* by accident one night and pretty soon I was hooked too. As you travel through the series, the sense of danger sporadically thickens, tightens and relaxes again, but the inexorable direction is towards the heart of darkness. The creator of the show, Vince Gilligan, describes Walter White's dramatic trajectory as 'from Mr Chips to Scarface'.

10 Yet since the first eight episodes of series five finished, fans have been suspended in a state of high anticipation, awaiting the eight final episodes to come. The burning question of how the saga of Walter White's expanding drug empire will end has been tormenting aficionados. He's now definitely getting very close to Scarface, or perhaps something even harder and darker, more precisely focused in his ruthlessness. Unlike the cocaine-addled

15 Scarface, Walter doesn't sample his own merchandise: his high comes from winning the criminal game.

We've had box-set fever before, of course, with series such as *The Sopranos*, *The Wire* and *Mad Men*, but *Breaking Bad* has triggered perhaps its most extreme outbreak yet. Like *The Sopranos* the show features a protagonist who is also an antagonist, but while Tony Soprano

20 was someone born and raised in darkness, Walter White deliberately abandons the light for the darkness.


The critical acclaim for *Breaking Bad* also represents the most recent triumph for the medium of television. As recently as 15 years ago, television was routinely considered the poor cousin of film. Cinema, it was thought, boasted the panoramic vision, the auteurs

25 and proper actors, the big ideas, the philosophical depth: television churned out soapy schlock for loyal couch potatoes. Cinema, of course, still retains its power to move and mesmerise. Yet in recent years the studios have too often seemed to believe that success lies in bludgeoning audiences into awed submission with spectacle, rather than enticing them with close developments in character and plot.

30 Is *Breaking Bad* the best television series I have seen? Yes, if by 'best' one means possessing a narrative strong enough to nail viewers to their seats, while making us care about characters we might once only have despised. Spectacle is when we gawp at a tower block collapsing, and reach for more popcorn. Drama is when we are rendered breathless by the fear of what might happen to a specific individual in a single room on the 12th floor. One

35 of the rules of *Breaking Bad* is that the drama is always in the driving seat: in this case, the drama of how badness can creep into a man's character – bit by bit, choice by choice – until it has slowly consumed him from the inside, leaving only a hollow where the soul should be. Finally, it peeps out through his eyes. For all his intelligence, Walter seems oblivious to the takeover – but we can see it.

40 Walter is a wolf in suburban lamb's clothing. He seethes with paradoxes: he lowers himself into the toxic criminal **underworld with an apparent** purity of motive – the desire to provide financially after his death **for his pregnant wife** and their teenage son with cerebral palsy – yet the nature of his **business places his family** in enormous danger from Mexican cartels and their US-based representatives.



- 45 He displays, at times, extraordinary diligence and courage in the service of a corrupt and corrupting enterprise: all his positive qualities flow into a vast negative. Walter's vigorous efforts to dominate the crystal-meth business are like a dark parody of the American dream of enterprise and reward. The closeness of death, in some ways, has freed him from the dull constraints of good behaviour: he has less to lose.
- 50 *Breaking Bad* is certainly a violent series, unfurling as it does in a world wherein violence is the ultimate means of economic conversation. It is also a highly moral one: throughout the series, in a string of differing, extreme situations, each character reveals – sometimes surprisingly – the relative elasticity of their ethical code. Actions are taken, and rebound upon their perpetrator; killings exact their toll on both the victim and the murderer;
- 55 no death is free of consequences. *Breaking Bad* is a series that eschews didacticism but remembers that moral arguments are the most exciting ones audiences can have.


Questions

Passage 1 Questions

1. Analyse how the writer's word choice in lines 1–8 emphasises the change in Walter White in the course of the series. 4
2. Re-read lines 9–21.
 - a) Identify in your own words what, according to the writer, makes *Breaking Bad* 'Dickensian'. 4
 - b) Analyse how the sentence structure in these lines clarifies what the writer is saying about *Breaking Bad*. 4
3. Re-read lines 22–34.
 - a) Explain in your own words the reasons the writer gives for considering *Breaking Bad* to be 'art'. 3
 - b) Analyse how the writer's imagery in lines 30–34 conveys the power of recent US TV dramas. 4
4. 'people interpret it in many different ways as they start to co-opt it to fit their own worldview.' (lines 37–38)
Explain in your own words the evidence provided for this statement in lines 35–46. 2
5. Re-read lines 47–57.
 - a) Explain why the writer thinks *Breaking Bad* is 'subversive' (line 47). 2
 - b) Explain in your own words why the writer thinks Walter White is a 'tragic character' (line 55). 2

Passage 2 Question

6. Both writers express their views about *Breaking Bad*. Identify key areas on which they agree. In your answer, you should refer in detail to both passages. 5
- You may answer this question in continuous prose or in a series of developed bullet points.




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MARKING INSTRUCTIONS FOR EACH QUESTION

Question	Expected response	Max mark	Additional guidance
1.	<p>Analyse how the writer's word choice in lines 1–8 emphasises the change in Walter White in the course of the series.</p> <p>Candidates should analyse how the writer's word choice emphasises the change in Walter White in the course of the series.</p> <p>Marks will depend on the quality of comment on word choice. For full marks there must be comment on 'before' and 'after'.</p> <p>2 marks may be awarded for reference plus detailed/insightful comment; 1 mark for reference plus more basic comment; 0 marks for reference alone. Thus 4 marks could be gained as 2 + 2 or 2 + 1 + 1 or 1 + 1 + 1 + 1.</p> <p><i>Possible answers are shown in the 'Additional guidance' column.</i></p>	4	<p>Possible answers include:</p> <p>Before:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'ordinary' depicts him as normal, typical, conventional, nothing special • 'dull' depicts him as boring, uninteresting • 'middle-aged' might be seen as suggesting conservative, settled • 'provide comfortably for his family' might be seen as suggesting mainstream, conventional aspiration <p>After:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'descended' suggests a decline, degeneration • 'sulphurous' suggests toxic, hellish, satanic • 'depths of evil' suggests extremes of wickedness • 'destroyed' suggests total demolition, devastation • 'ruthlessness' suggests cold-blooded, cruel <p>or any other acceptable answer.</p>
2.	<p>a) Re-read lines 9–21. Identify in your own words what, according to the writer, makes <i>Breaking Bad</i> 'Dickensian'.</p> <p>Candidates should identify in their own words what, according to the writer, makes <i>Breaking Bad</i> 'Dickensian'.</p> <p>Candidates must use their own words. No marks are awarded for verbatim quotations from the passage.</p> <p><i>1 mark for each point from the 'Additional guidance' column.</i></p>	4	<p>Possible answers include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the characters are strong, compelling, realistic, credible (explanation of 'powerful, believable characters') • the setting is up to date, present day (explanation of 'contemporary') • the story follows characters' lives for an extended time (explanation of 'and allows their lives to play out over a long period of time') • there is an exploration of the way we live, a critique of contemporary mores (explanation of 'deconstruct our society') • it exploits the serial form to entice the audience (explanation of 'drip-fed his stories ... hooked his public ... hanging on his every word') • its producers are commercially savvy (reference to 'complete novel ... box set') <p>or any other acceptable answer. →</p>

2.	b)	<p>Re-read lines 16–29. Analyse how the sentence structure in these lines clarifies what the writer is saying about <i>Breaking Bad</i>.</p> <p>Candidates should analyse how the sentence structure clarifies what the writer is saying about <i>Breaking Bad</i>.</p> <p>Marks will depend on the quality of comment on sentence structure.</p> <p>2 marks may be awarded for reference plus detailed/insightful comment; 1 mark for reference plus more basic comment; 0 marks for reference alone. Thus 4 marks could be gained as 2 + 2 or 2 + 1 + 1 or 1 + 1 + 1 + 1.</p> <p>Possible answers are shown in the 'Additional guidance' column.</p>	4	<p>Possible answers include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> list ('fan hysteria ... vein for') suggests the extent of the excitement the finale generated 'forget trying' – direct address to the reader suggests <i>Breaking Bad</i> is so special, the writer is prepared to be daring dash (line 12) creates a dramatic pause before the bold claim that a TV series is on the same level as one of the most revered writers of all time structure of 'This is writing ... the viewer' suggests a methodical, calculated approach, that the programme makers are confident, self-assured dash (line 16) introduces a detailed list of the calculated, successful Dickensian method with which <i>Breaking Bad</i> is being compared 'And, of course ...' creates a rather colloquial tone with which to introduce the entrepreneurial skills of both Dickens and <i>Breaking Bad</i> dash (line 20) creates pause before the pointed afterthought that Dickens had an eye on the commercial potential of Christmas the parenthetical reference to the <i>Breaking Bad</i> box set is a light-hearted conclusion showing just how much the two have in common <p>or any other acceptable answer.</p>
3.	a)	<p>Re-read lines 22–34. Explain in your own words the reasons the writer gives for considering <i>Breaking Bad</i> to be 'art'.</p> <p>Candidates should explain the reasons the writer gives for considering <i>Breaking Bad</i> to be 'art'.</p> <p>Candidates must use their own words. No marks are awarded for verbatim quotations from the passage.</p> <p>1 mark for each point from the 'Additional guidance' column.</p>	3	<p>Possible answers include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> it has taken on a depth and quality comparable to the world's greatest dramatist (explanation of 'deepened into a drama commonly referred to as Shakespearean') it is (with other quality TV shows) beginning to compete with the novel as the pre-eminent form of story-telling (explanation of 'close to challenging its supremacy') it fulfils a key requirement of art to explore the times we live in (explanation of 'express and analyse the spirit of the age') it is able to open up, dig deep into, rip apart and make people uneasy about the culture in which they live (explanation of 'eviscerate the society from which it emanated') <p>or any other acceptable answer.</p>

3.	b)	<p>Re-read lines 22–34. Analyse how the writer's imagery in lines 30–34 conveys the power of recent US TV dramas.</p> <p>Candidates should analyse how the writer's imagery conveys the power of recent US TV dramas.</p> <p>Marks will depend on the quality of comment on imagery.</p> <p>2 marks may be awarded for reference plus detailed/insightful comment; 1 mark for reference plus more basic comment; 0 marks for reference alone. Thus 4 marks could be gained as 2 + 2 or 2 + 1 + 1 or 1 + 1 + 1 + 1.</p> <p><i>Possible answers are shown in the 'Additional guidance' column.</i></p>	4	<p>Possible answers include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'pinnacle' – just as the pinnacle is the highest point of a roof or tower, so <i>Breaking Bad</i> is the leader among a range of high-quality US TV drama • 'march' – just as a march is the purposeful advance of soldiers, so US TV in the last 10 years has moved forward with great strength and purpose • 'elevate' – just as to elevate is to raise up to a higher level, so TV is about to rise to the highest level: art • 'eviscerate' – just as to eviscerate is to disembowel an animal, so art (in the form of <i>Breaking Bad</i> and other TV dramas) ruthlessly opens up society <p>or any other acceptable answer.</p>
4.		<p>'people interpret it in many different ways as they start to co-opt it to fit their own worldview' (lines 37–38). Explain in your own words the evidence provided for this statement in lines 35–46.</p> <p>Candidates should explain in their own words the evidence the writer provides for the statement that 'People interpret it in many different ways as they start to co-opt it to fit their own worldview.'</p> <p>Candidates must use their own words. No marks are awarded for verbatim quotations from the passage.</p> <p><i>1 mark for each point from the 'Additional guidance' column.</i></p>	2	<p>Possible answers include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people in communist China see it as proof that capitalist America is corrupt, immoral (explanation of 'proves the degeneracy of America') • some Christians in the USA see the conclusion as support for their strict ethical stance on good and evil (explanation of 'a rather black-and-white morality') <p>or any other acceptable answer.</p>
5.	a)	<p>Re-read lines 47–57. Explain why the writer thinks <i>Breaking Bad</i> is 'subversive' (line 47).⁴</p> <p>Candidates should explain in their own words why the writer thinks <i>Breaking Bad</i> is 'subversive'.</p> <p>Candidates must use their own words. No marks are awarded for verbatim quotations from the passage.</p> <p><i>1 mark for each point from the 'Additional guidance' column.</i></p>	2	<p>Possible answers include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it challenges, criticises the dominant political philosophy in America (explanation of 'capitalism ... it will eat you up and spit you out; it will destroy you') • it challenges views of the male in society as confident/successful, presenting him instead as susceptible to violent reactions in the face of weakness (explanation of 'the state of modern masculinity ... do anything to even the score') <p>or any other acceptable answer.</p> 

5.	b)	<p>Re-read lines 47–57. Explain in your own words why the writer thinks Walter White is a ‘tragic character’ (line 55).</p> <p>Candidates should explain in their own words why the writer thinks Walter White is a ‘tragic character’.</p> <p>Candidates must use their own words. No marks are awarded for verbatim quotations from the passage.</p> <p><i>1 mark for each point from the ‘Additional guidance’ column.</i></p>	2	<p>Possible answers include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • he is the cause of his own downfall (explanation of ‘his own nemesis’; ‘the agent of his own ruin’) • despite his apparent intelligence he is unaware of himself (explanation of ‘smart, but he doesn’t see the truth about himself’) • he only reaches self-awareness when he can do nothing to save himself (explanation of ‘until it is too late’) <p>or any other acceptable answer.</p>
6.		<p>Both writers express their views about <i>Breaking Bad</i>. Identify key areas on which they agree.</p> <p>Candidates should identify key areas of agreement in the two passages.</p> <p>There may be some overlap among the areas of agreement. Markers will have to judge the extent to which a candidate has covered two points or one.</p> <p>Candidates can use bullet points in this final question, or write a number of linked statements.</p> <p>Evidence from the passage may include quotations, but these should be supported by explanations.</p> <p><i>Approach to marking is shown in the ‘Additional guidance’ column.</i></p> <p><i>Key areas of agreement are shown in the grid below. Other answers are possible.</i></p>	5	<p>The mark for this question should reflect the quality of response in two areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identification of the key areas of agreement in attitude/ideas • level of detail given in support <p>The following guidelines should be used:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 marks – identification of three key areas of agreement with insightful use of supporting evidence • 4 marks – identification of three key areas of agreement with appropriate use of supporting evidence • 3 marks – identification of three key areas of agreement • 2 marks – identification of two key areas of agreement • 1 mark – identification of one key area of agreement • 0 marks – failure to identify one key area of agreement and/or misunderstanding of task

	Area of agreement	Neil Mackay	Jenny McCartney
1.	Highly praised, successful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • acclaim from fans, critics; envied by other producers (‘crescendo of fan hysteria, media hype, five-star critical adoration, and ratings studio chiefs would open a vein for’) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • several references, e.g. ‘enormously successful series in America’, ‘burning question ... tormenting aficionados’, ‘critical acclaim for <i>Breaking Bad</i>’
2.	Its addictive power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • comparison with Dickens, who ‘hooked his public ... punters hanging on his every word’ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • some fans ‘become obsessed’ • writer was ‘hooked too’ • before finale fans were ‘suspended in a state of high anticipation’
3.	Quality of drama	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • many references, e.g. ‘powerful, believable characters’, ‘places them in a contemporary, realistic setting’ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the narrative has the power to ‘nail viewers to seats, while making us care about characters we might once only have despised’

4.	Status as art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it is challenging the novel • it does what all good art does: digs deeply into society and exposes its flaws ('eviscerate the society from which it emanated') • it can be interpreted in different ways by different people • it is 'subversive and dangerous' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it is challenging cinema as an art form • no longer thought inferior to cinema
5.	Main character's development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • his descent from ordinary family man to the 'sulphurous depths of evil' • comparison with Macbeth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • many references, e.g. 'abandons the light for the darkness', 'how badness can creep into a man's character ... until it has slowly consumed him from the inside, leaving only a hollow where the soul should be', 'the inexorable direction is towards the heart of darkness', 'Walter White's dramatic trajectory'
6.	Main character as tragic hero	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • brings about his own end; despite intelligence, unable to see his fate until it is too late; 'his own nemesis ...' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can't see what is happening to him, but audience can ('Walter seems oblivious to the takeover – but we can see it')
7.	Commenting on society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • various references, e.g. 'deconstruct our society', 'express and analyse the spirit of the age', 'says something very dark about American capitalism' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the story is a caricature/parable of a key aspect of US society, about the virtues of hard work and making money ('dark parody of the American dream of enterprise and reward')
8.	Moral values ultimately upheld	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mentions, although doesn't explicitly endorse, an underlying moral code: 'what some critics saw as a rather black-and-white morality, with evil punished, good rewarded and those in need of redemption redeemed' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • asserts that moral values underpin the series ('It is also a highly moral one', 'eschews didacticism but remembers that moral arguments are the most exciting ones audiences can have')