

External assessment 2025

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Stimulus book

# English & Literature Extension

## General instruction

- Work in this book will not be marked.



Queensland  
Government

**QCAA**

Queensland Curriculum  
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## Stimulus 1

### *Searching the Void*

Notorious artist and provocateur, Void, published his final artwork online in early January 2020. After this, he disappeared suddenly — spawning an online explosion of pointless speculation. Had he quit? Was he still alive? Had he been assassinated? Answering these questions with any certainty was impossible, as Void had skilfully maintained complete anonymity throughout his career. From his early, iconic street art — involving images of uniformed chimpanzees — to his later installation work of human-sized sculptures of anthropomorphised consumer products, Void was insistent on keeping his identity completely secret. No one knew who he was, where he lived, or what he was like.

As a lifelong fan of Void’s biting criticism of the shallowness and alienation caused by consumer culture, and as a young journalist eager to make my mark in the world, I decided to make it my mission to solve the mystery of his fate. I started a blog to record my search, which soon became a sprawling record of dead-end leads and repeated failures. Then after two years of searching, I received an email from a woman who claimed to be someone who knew Void intimately. Her name was Cypher.

Of course, I was sceptical. But Cypher assured me she could prove her connection to Void. Perhaps, I replied, but why help me? What was in it for her? Did she want money? No, she didn’t need money — she had just been following my attempts to track down the real Void and thought that I had earned some answers.

Cypher’s address sent me downtown to an old block of brick flats separated from the main street by an alleyway that crawled between two storefronts. The area was deserted, eerie, and the four-storey apartment block looked like it was ready to be torn down. But looks can be deceiving. Cypher buzzed me inside, and where I was expecting to encounter a dark, damp interior that smelt like mould and wet garbage, I encountered instead a well-lit stairwell and an interior that, though unrenovated and bare, was immaculate.

Cypher was waiting at the open door of her apartment. On seeing her, I was struck first by her quiet confidence. She possessed a gaze that looked out at the world, indifferent to anyone who was looking back. She was beautiful, but it was a beauty that expressed itself more in demeanour than in looks. She wore no make-up. Her blonde hair — nearly white — was worn in an unpretentious bun. Black suit, grey shirt, and no shoes, her appearance was pure, sterilised — an emanation of the building’s austere interior.

She welcomed me inside. It did not take me long at all to realise that Cypher was not a fraud. In the living room were two installation-sized sculptures. One, an ATM machine trying to hug a frightened kitten, was well-known, though I had never imagined I would see the original in person. The other was something I have not seen before, an expensive handbag that had been given legs and weeping eyes, posing in front of a distorted mirror. Even without verifying Void’s trademark ‘V’ insignia marked clearly on the base of the work, I could see immediately that this was Void’s work. Unless Cypher was a millionaire, there was no way she could afford this collection. She was the real deal.

‘Yes, that is Void’s last piece. It was never named, though I liked “I see only copies of myself”. What do you think of the title?’

I was too stunned to reply. Here I was, in front of a piece that had been touched by Void’s hands. I had never been so close to him.

‘I can’t believe it. Void was here. Void has been in this room.’

‘Many times, yes.’

‘I have so many questions.’

‘I’m sure you do. Would you like some coffee?’

I nodded. I was shaking as I followed Cypher to a small bare table in the middle of the studio apartment, taking a moment to soak up the sacred energy of the room. Cypher brought two coffees over, smiling politely.

‘I’ve read your blog. You are quite a fan of Void, I notice.’

I nodded vigorously. ‘Yes — I have never encountered an artist who expressed the truth of our time so directly, with such force.’

‘And what truth is that?’

‘Well, one obvious truth is that we don’t know who we are anymore. We have become so caught up with products, with consuming, that we’ve forgotten to take the time to make ourselves real, to give ourselves souls. We’ve become products ourselves, selling our time and services into an amorphous market that is completely indifferent to who we really are.’

Cypher nodded. ‘I take it that you are not one of the many critics who argue that Void is complicit in the society that they criticise. Void’s art is just another product.’

‘I do not see Void as a sell-out. It is not his fault that our sick society wants to turn his art into products.’

‘Really? You know, Void would say that in the art object, the artist loses its identity. For Void, art is a means of losing oneself, or at least of asserting that the artist is already missing.’

I didn’t quite follow this, but I noticed that Cypher was speaking in the present tense. ‘He’s still alive.’

She ignored my statement.

After a while she said, ‘What I am trying to say is that even if Void was sitting in front of you at this very moment, even if you could ask any question you wished, you would never get closer to finding what you are really seeking.’

‘And what is that?’

‘Some truth about Void. About the reality behind the art. Behind the product. Because whatever questions you asked, you could never be sure that the answer was the truth. The moment we speak language, we are elsewhere. You cannot find the artist inside the art — the artist is always missing.’

‘I just want to know facts. Is he alive, or isn’t he?’

‘A yes or no question. One I cannot answer without lying.’

‘I think he’s alive.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘Whenever you’ve spoken about Void, you’ve used present tense, not past tense. He’s not dead.’

My detective skills did not bother Cypher, who looked back at me with the same polite smile. ‘You are a careful listener. But you haven’t noticed a much more important detail.’

When she raised the cup to her lips, I noticed her fingers — the ink stains and the scarring. These were the fingers of someone who worked with their hands.

‘Masculine pronouns. You haven’t used a masculine pronoun. Void was not a ‘he’?’

‘*Is* not a he,’ Cypher replied. ‘But as I have been saying, are any of us *really* anything?’

## Stimulus 2

### *Stranger*

By 10 am, the shade reaches an intolerable 38 degrees. Standing on the verandah of our two-room cottage, I look out through the waves of heat that blur the antipodean horizon, into the vast and oppressive nothingness. I was told this land meant freedom. A place of new beginnings. But new beginnings suggest growth, and nothing grows here. The dirt won't let it. Cracks form in the earth and heat seeps out, suffocating the eucalypt seedlings. Death is part of the landscape here. The bones of long dead cattle litter the ground; scavenging animals struggle against the elements.

Clementine rubs herself against my ankle, drawing my attention downwards. Against the odds, she has survived in this environment. Ever the opportunist, she has forged an existence for herself. The native wildlife has provided enough sustenance for the old maiden. Purring enthusiastically, she asks me for some attention and, as always, I provide it. I bend down to her and she lifts her chin to me. *Scratch me under here, she says.* The fur under her chin is thinning, rubbed away from years of enthusiastic attention.

She hears it first ... the rusty hinges of the broken gate protesting as they are forced open. Her back arches. She hisses but she doesn't scamper. She is a lioness — a protector — and her post is next to me. I look up as a silhouette approaches. The sun frames the body, making it impossible for me to discern a face until it is one metre in front of me.

'Ma'am.' His clothes are dirty and torn. Red dirt has stained his skin and tributaries of sweat roll from his brow, snaking their way down his rugged face.

'If you could help me out with some water, ma'am, I would be grateful.'

He speaks with a softness that almost denies his desperation. The urgency is clear, though. To be out here without a horse means that he must have walked for days.

'There is a well around the back. My husband is on his way home,' I lie. 'Be quick about it.'

I am not expecting my husband any time soon, but my instincts tell me that I should not disclose this information.

I watch the man walk around the house and I notice the staining on the back of his clothes. Blood. Lines of blood criss-cross his back. *He's taken a whipping. He's escaped. This man is an outlaw.* This is not the first stranger who has sought refuge on this property. Strangers are a threat. And threats must be treated as such.

The man appears again; his chest is wet. He ambles toward me. Reaching his hand out, he offers the formality, 'My thanks to you.'

I take his calloused hand and shake it.

I assert confidence by squeezing hard and looking directly into his eyes. *Show no fear.* He places a second hand across mine, slowing the movement down. Making it gentle.

'There's no need to be afraid, ma'am. I won't hurt you.' His eyes are genuine.

Clementine glides over to him, leaning into his shin. She approves.

'Like I said, my husband will be home soon. He will not take kindly to you being here.'

'I'd like to stay if you don't mind. It's your husband I've come to see, Beatrice.'

The sound of my name spilling from the stranger's lips unsettles me. *How can this man know me?*

'I can see that I've worried you. Please don't be afraid. All I ask is that I'm allowed to wait for your husband. He owes me a favour and now it's due.'

*The list of William's favours extends far and wide, I muse. I think back to the many promises he had made me. I'll make us rich ... I'll treat you well ... I'll stop drinking.* Each promise was as empty as the life I have attempted to grow in this unforgiving environment. The withering landscape mirrors my hope, which has slowly atrophied over the years of my unrewarding marriage. I had once allowed myself to be a victim of William's broken promises. *I will never again be a victim to a man.*

'What do you want from him?' I enquire. 'If it is money you need, you are out of luck.'

I know that no matter how long the stranger waits, William will not be returning. The little money I do have will not last a month if William's 'favours' keep appearing with their hands out.

'Money would be nice,' he says, 'but it's not what I need most.'

Money is freedom out here. I think of William's drunken body, laying prostrate on the verandah — holding my breath as my fingers wormed their way into his pockets to claim the few remaining shillings that hadn't been squandered on rum. *What could be needed more than money?*

'I need shelter. A place to hide. Not for long — just until I've been forgotten.' He waits for me to answer and the silence grows between us. I wonder whether he knows what he has walked into. 'William won't be home any time soon, will he?'

He watches me, carefully assessing every muscle twitch, gauging my commitment to the lie. I don't answer.

'Like I said, I only need a few days. I'm not here to hurt anyone.'

I contemplate the situation. I ask Clementine, *What do you think?* She purrs.

'Around the back, not in the house. You can sleep in the shade, if you can find any.'

He nods, almost imperceptibly.

'I appreciate your hospitality, Beatrice.'

He turns and starts off around the corner. Pausing briefly, he calls over his shoulder, 'William has a nice life here with you. He's a lucky man. Even your cat knows that.'

'William could never see past the end of his nose,' I joke. 'Men have a habit of underestimating what it takes to survive out here.'

And with that the stranger takes his leave, Clementine in tow.

## Stimulus 3

### *Know-Brain-R*

#### INFOMERCIAL TRANSCRIPT

PRESENTER:

The Know-Brain-R app helps you make lasting connections with the undead! Seven years since zombies were legally recognised as people, our society moves further into a diverse and inclusive future. Each year, our zombie community grows, becoming a larger proportion of the world's population. Every zombie helps our environment by minimising high-protein food waste and digesting harsh chemicals that no longer end up in our ecosystem. Every zombie contributes towards our growing economy through physical, labour-heavy jobs that help the living deliver high-quality service. Doesn't every zombie deserve a chance for love and companionship?

Know-Brain-R recognises the growing need to connect our post-life friends to zombie-friendly pulsers. It's estimated that 92% of the living population know a zombie, but only 27% would call one a friend. The dark days of prejudice and fear have subsided, especially with plant-based brain products readily available on supermarket shelves. Now everyone knows a zombie. Your friend, a family member, your neighbour. Even Grandma can be a zombie.

But while you might know a post-lifer, have you ever thought about reaching out to truly connect with one? Join the growing number of the living who are recognising the unique friendships, bonds and partnerships that can be formed between the cognisant and those who no longer command their cerebrum.<sup>1</sup>

Just watch these testimonials from our happy subscribers!

JUNE:

I never thought of dating a zombie before ... I guess I still had bad memories from the uprising days. But now that many of my family members have naturally moved on to their post-life stage, I've come to learn more about the zombie community. They are still the ones we always remembered, just quieter. And hungrier. We all go through changes, right? So, my Pop introduced me to Know-Brain-R. His version of the app looks different ... it's more accessible for anyone who only has access to their brain stem.<sup>2</sup> But it lets him connect with other post-lifers and pulsers. Then I got it for

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1 the upper part of the brain, consisting of two hemispheres, that is responsible for higher-order cognitive functions like memory, reasoning and emotional regulation

2 the base part of the brain that is responsible for lower-order processes like heart rate, blood pressure and breathing

myself and started making a lot of new contacts. My friendship circle is so much wider now ... I joined a 'slow walking in nature group' that has made my weekends so much more enjoyable. We really connect. And then I finally mustered up the courage to go on a date with Ron. He's great. We've been together for a year! But, I keep making more friends by staying subscribed to Know-Brain-R.

DEV:

As someone who always found pulser relationships exhausting – all the psychological and emotional demands of reading everyone's social cues – I guess I was just looking to connect with a different set who I could vibe with. Without it feeling too intense. My anxiety kicks in and I just find groups of pulsers can be too much, y'know? I know I'm still one and everything, so I shouldn't like ... stereotype or anything ... it's just that I find post-lifers to be really Zen and cool with everything. They aren't like all up in your face with expectations or trying to guilt trip you or make you have FOMO. They just want to make sure they have brains, which like ... there's plenty of plant-based brains everywhere and it's really cheap. So, like that's sweet now – no violence anymore. Besides when they're hungry, they're just chill and go with the flow. I'm eager to try new things but still be low-key about it. So, I used Know-Brain-R to follow a few post-lifers that had similar interests to me. Hip-hop, the beach, stuff like that. Now I see Olivia a couple of times a week. She's a dog walker. Dogs love post-lifers.

It's so much fun just hanging out with her, walking dogs on the beach. Some people give us weird stares like we shouldn't be hanging out together. What-evs. Haters gonna hate, right? Like my generation grew up with post-lifers more, we don't remember the darker days when no one fed them or gave them what they needed to survive. We were babies. So, we didn't grow up hating them just because of who they are. I don't use the word zombie. It's offensive.

SAMMY:

So, the IT company I work at started an inclusive hiring policy. Fifteen percent of our staff are zombies now. I had a problem with it at first ... I must be honest. I thought they were taking our jobs. But they don't. They really add a lot to our company. We got rid of lots of automation ... delivery drones are gone and we're much more eco-friendly. They courier all our deliveries locally or by using public transport, they look after our kids in the company childcare centre ... like I'm actually amazed by how much good they do. I thought that I would never really have a friend who was a zombie, though. Like I just don't travel in those circles. But my pulser friends started to find their own 'chill mates' or whatever the term is. When my husband and I separated ... that kind

of changed my perspective. I needed to spend time with people who didn't expect so much from me. My friends, my husband ... we all just grew apart. So, I turned to Know-Brain-R. You can call it a mid-life crisis because I do too.

I have great friends now who want to stay in touch with me. Zombies remember how it feels to be around you. They pick up on your heartbeat's rhythm. They sense your emotions well, but they don't react to them really quickly. Because they can't, right? Slow reaction time. But it's more than that. Zombie eye contact is pretty deep, right? Like they see you, they aren't just thinking about the next thing to do or what they want from you. Like my ex always did, haha. They are so in-the-moment.

I meet up with Jamie every week and we even have plans to move in together. Thank you, Know-Brain-R! Another happy customer!

ROBERTA:

So, my dad is very anti-zombie. He's part of the Heartbeat League. I don't like to talk about it because his views are so antiquated. I can't really talk much with him, especially since I started hanging out with Keiko. I don't want him to come around and give her grief just because of who she is. He can say what he likes to me, I'm tough and I can tell him what's what. But she doesn't deserve that.

Keiko and I collaborate on art. We met each other through Know-Brain-R. She's so insightful, in just this raw, instinctual way, you know? She doesn't overthink to get her painting to signify anything specific. Or commodify it. She just responds to shape and colour and form. I've learned so much from her. We're kindred spirits almost. Every time I get all in my head about art, she brings me back. Thanks, Know-Brain-R!

PRESENTER:

Are you tired of feeling alone? Are you worried about what everyone around you is thinking all the time? The Know-Brain-R app can connect you with post-life individuals who share your interests and simply want to spend time with you. Download the app on all platforms today! First 30 days free! We'll leave you with a final presentation from one of our happy zombie customers! Just listen to his story!

JOHN:

Grrraaaahhhh ... raauugh ... brrrraaaugh ... raaaauugggh!!!

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