# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How to use</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The creative response</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behind the Beautiful Forevers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The study design</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading for meaning</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before reading</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning activities</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading the text</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning activities</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding to the text</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaping information and planning</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions and prompts</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contentions</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning activities</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastering the essay</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay types</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The essay</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Behind the Beautiful Forevers

Behind the Beautiful Forevers is set in the sprawling Mumbai slum, Annawadi, which is situated along the international airport terminal where the affluent and impoverished live side-by-side. It is the story of the slum’s inhabitants, including the Husains, and the tragedy that unfolds when their eldest son, Abdul, is falsely accused of a violent act upon his neighbour.

THE STUDY DESIGN

VCE Units 1 and 3 ask you to identify, discuss and analyse how certain features of texts create meaning and shape interpretation. In these units, entitled ‘reading and creating texts’, you are expected to be able to develop and justify your own personal and detailed interpretations of texts.

Key knowledge and skills

For this part of the course, you will need to produce both a creative response and a sustained analytical interpretation, known as a text response essay. This study guide helps you to develop a text response essay, although some creative suggestions are also included. You will need to plan, draft and edit your essay, and ensure that it includes relevant, detailed textual evidence.

You will also need to demonstrate a range of different knowledge and skills that you have developed through your reading of the set text.

■ KEY KNOWLEDGE
Your text response should demonstrate that you:
• understand the values the text conveys
• understand how readers can interpret texts in different ways
• understand the various features of a literary text, including structure, conventions, language, metalanguage and other stylistic features.

■ KEY SKILLS
On completion of this unit of work, you should be able to:
• explain and analyse the features of a text and how these influence interpretation
• identify and analyse the implied views and values of a text
• use textual evidence accurately to justify analytical responses
• read and understand different viewpoints to develop an interpretation of your own.
What the examiners are looking for

When writing your text response essay in the examination, you need to complete three fundamental components.

First and foremost, you must answer the given question. This means writing a response that is tailored and relevant to what is being asked of you. Many students fall into the trap of writing all they know about a text, ignoring what the question is actually asking of them. A better text response should demonstrate that you can analyse, understand and discuss ideas relating to the given topic.

Secondly, you must structure your response so that it reads as a properly formulated essay, composed of an introduction, body paragraphs with supporting evidence and a conclusion.

Finally, you need to concentrate your analysis on how the author has used literary devices to create meaning. This means that your analysis focuses not just on characters and plot, but rather on the way the text is written, particularly the language and style.

Checklist

- has an introduction
- develops and sustains a contention
- defines, outlines and explores the question in the introduction
- has at least three body paragraphs
- has a clear point encapsulated in a topic sentence
- uses supporting evidence
- uses a key quotation or quotations
- uses links and connectors between paragraphs
- has a conclusion
- restates and rephrases your contention in the conclusion
- answers the topic clearly, coherently and thoroughly
- uses formal language

Text response essay checklist
Reading for meaning

As you read, you need to become an active reader, seeking out and searching for meaning beyond the literal words on the page. Reading your text for a second and third time and understanding the following will help you to develop the skills you need to competently analyse the literary features within the text.

BEFORE READING

Context

Behind the Beautiful Forevers is set in the Annawadi slum on the western side of Mumbai, surrounded by luxury hotels and the international airport. Mumbai is India’s commercial and financial centre, as well as India’s most populous city with over 12 million residents, almost half of whom live in slums. The city is very crowded and its infrastructure including housing, water, electricity, roads, hospitals and schools is inadequate and unable to support the vast numbers of people who live there. Consequently, many thousands of people in Mumbai live in unimaginable poverty in the city’s many slums.

The living conditions in Mumbai’s slums are very inadequate, and people experience squalid, overcrowded conditions that are dangerous for the residents’ health and safety. Inhabitants have limited access to electricity, clean water, food and education. Violence is prevalent, and many women and girls experience domestic abuse. The slums have overcrowded communal toilets, often with open sewage that contaminates drinking water sources. The scarcity of food means that many families struggle to survive, and there is great pressure on children to work and contribute to the family income. Children in slums work as sewage cleaners, garbage sorters, rag pickers and in other dangerous and unsanitary jobs. Adults work in factories or as day-labourers for construction sites or they sew and tout wares they make in their homes. Many slums are often home to wild animals, attracted by the food scraps.

Annawadi is one such slum community, with over 3000 squatters living among 350 shacks. It is one of many slums in Mumbai. Settled in 1991 by Tamil migrants who had come to Mumbai for construction work, the Annawadi slum consists of hundreds of cramped, sprawling corrugated iron-roofed huts, next to an airport runway. Annawadi is home to 300 pigs as well as wild boar, goats, horses and stray dogs.

Did you know?

Mumbai used to be called Bombay. The official name change took place in 1995. The Shiv Sena party pushed for the change, and when they won the elections, they made it law. The name ‘Mumbai’ comes from the Hindu goddess Mumbadevi, the city’s patron deity.

Did you know?

India’s current prime minister, Narendra Modi, has promised to build 100 million household toilets and 500,000 community toilets by 2019 as part of his ‘Clean India’ campaign.
The air quality in Annawadi is very poor because of a nearby concrete plant, and local residents suffer from asthma, tuberculosis and other lung obstructions. Disease is widespread, including lice and gangrene, and cuts often become infected.

Many of the slum dwellers in Mumbai are not considered the official poor who live below the poverty line, but rather are the working-class who are unable to find adequate, affordable housing in the city. The proliferation of slums in Mumbai is primarily due to a combination of political factors and failed housing policies. A complex history of stagnant policy that did little to increase a market in private sector housing developments has meant that housing has remained insufficient and unaffordable for the last 30 years. More recently, the government promised housing for all, but little has been done to suggest how this will be implemented.

In addition, Mumbai’s slums are overcrowded because many families leave rural India and migrate to the city in the hope of a better future. Poor farming conditions including a lack of technology, unpredictable weather conditions, inadequate storage and a lack of water mean that many families cannot grow enough to sustain themselves year round.

Over time, the slums themselves have become important regions for politicians who periodically provide services to the slums in exchange for their votes. Such exchanges create erratic, inconsistent and often temporary improvements to the living conditions of the slums, in effect stabilising them and providing incentives for the establishment of new slums across the sprawling city of Mumbai.

**Author**

Katherine Boo is an American journalist and author known for her writing about suffering and disadvantaged communities and issues of social justice. Born in Washington DC, Boo worked as a secretary before graduating from the College of William and Mary and beginning her career in journalism. She contributed to and worked in editorial positions for the *Washington Monthly*, the *Washington Post* and *The New Yorker*. In 2000, Boo won a Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for her series about the treatment and conditions of the mentally disabled in the Washington area.
In 2012, Boo wrote her first book, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. After marrying the Indian academic Sunil Khilnani in 2004, Boo began frequently travelling to India, where she spent much of 2007 to 2011 in the Mumbai slum of Annawadi. She undertook hundreds of interviews and researched endless public records to create her text. She spent days wandering around, visiting houses and watching the life and drama unfold around her. Her work of narrative literary non-fiction won the National Book Award and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize and has been adapted into a play. For the last decade, she has spent her time with her husband in New York City, India and London, but she still remains in contact with the residents of Annawadi.

**Genre**

**LITERARY NON-FICTION**

*Behind the Beautiful Forevers* is a work of literary non-fiction, combining storytelling with factual reporting. Boo’s writing takes an ethnographic approach that is combined with vivid, personal descriptions and characters whom we can become attached to. As a journalist, Boo’s narrative is highly empirical, including careful documentation and reportage in an unbiased way. She spent much time researching and reading public records and official documents from the Mumbai police and visiting hospitals, morgues and courts of law. Yet by writing in such detail about specific individuals and the moments in their lives, Boo immerses us in the story in a way that feels like fiction. In doing so, Boo’s social commentary works towards changing the discourse of poverty and social welfare in India.

**Writer’s toolbox**

**Ethnography** is the scientific description of peoples and cultures with their customs, habits and mutual differences.

**Empirical evidence** is evidence that is based on experience or observation.

**Learning activities**

1. a. Research statistics about Mumbai’s population and the number of people in full-time work. Statistics could include:
   - birth rate
   - infant mortality
   - fertility rate
   - literacy (male and female)
   - life expectancy (male and female)
   - education levels (male and female)
   - employment rate (including types of employment)
   - access to doctors/medicine
   - average income.

   b. What impact do you think these statistics have on the lives of people living in and around the city?
2. Consider what it might have been like to be Katherine Boo, visiting Annawadi for the first time.
   a. Complete a mindmap writing down what she would see, hear and smell.

   ![Mindmap Diagram]

   b. Write a short imaginative piece in first person narrative voice expressing Boo's wonderment and shock at what she finds upon initially entering Annawadi.

3. Katherine Boo is a non-Indian, a white American journalist who used translators and interpreters to hear the stories of the people she wrote about. What are the implications of this in *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*?

4. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* is classified as literary non-fiction. Which parts of Boo’s story do you think are ‘literary’ and which are ‘non-fiction’? Give evidence to support your answer.

5. The story begins with a prologue whereby Boo introduces us to the world of Annawadi.
   a. What do we learn from this prologue?
   b. What do you think is the purpose of the prologue?

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**READING THE TEXT**

**Story**

*Behind the Beautiful Forevers* details the lives of the people living in Annawadi, a slum located alongside Mumbai’s international airport terminal. With great attention to detail, Katherine Boo creates her narrative around the lives of the slum’s inhabitants — the struggling urban poor trying to exist in a globalising India. Abdul Husain, the story’s main protagonist, is a boy who runs a profitable business scavenging, sorting and reselling recyclable materials. Zehrunisa, Abdul’s mother, is the backbone of their family of nine children, supporting them as her husband, Karam, is sick with tuberculosis.

Other characters include the spiteful, jealous one-legged Fatima, their neighbour, who is frequently raging war against Abdul’s family over a crumbling wall that separates their two homes. There is also Asha, a poorly paid kindergarten teacher and Shiv Sena representative, who is also a corrupt local politician, striving to be the next slumlord. Her daughter, Manju, hopes to be the first female college graduate in Annawadi.
The crux of the narrative focuses on the personal animosity between Fatima and the Husains, and culminates when the Husains undertake renovations to their home — a calamitous decision that brings ruination to their family. In order to build the kitchen bench, the Husains take all of the family possessions outside and onto the street, including a large cupboard and a colour television. This act incites jealousy from Fatima who complains about the construction of the shared brick wall — built and paid for by the Husains. Fatima becomes vocal, and a fight ensues, with empty threats coming from the Husains.

In retaliation, Fatima goes to the local police to put in a complaint against Zehrunisa, claiming she violently attacked her. Upon her return, the fight escalates, and in an unfortunate moment of rage, Fatima sets herself on fire to punish her neighbours. However, the fire becomes uncontrollable, and she is badly burned, causing her to be hospitalised in the burns ward at Cooper Hospital. She survives, but only just, and in hospital she alters her accusation, lying to defame Abdul, his sister Kehshan and father Karam. While they are held in custody, Fatima dies, and Zehrunisa is faced with extortionate bribes to police, schools and government officials. Suffering under the global recession, religious and economic problems erupt in the slum. Yet, by the end of the narrative, the Husains, by a stroke of luck, are found innocent at their trial and are able to return to their home in Annawadi.

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Did you know?

Shiv Sena is a far-right, conservative, regional political party in India. Established in the 1960s in the western state of Maharashtra (of which Mumbai is the capital), the party has come to advocate for a widespread Hindu nationalist agenda. Shiv Sena accuses migrants of taking local jobs, and attempts to rid Mumbai of Indians from the poorer states of northern India. The party has a history of instigating violence, particularly towards Muslims, and has been known to undertake ‘moral policing’, protesting against western culture by terrorising, beating, threatening and humiliating people.

Women hold up knives given to them at a function organised by Shiv Sena. The knives were distributed to women for self defence and include a miniature image of the founder of Shiv Sena, Bal Thackeray.