These tasks build on the general principles built up by completing the activities in the ‘Excellent essay writing’ resource. Based on Brian Friel’s play Making History, it helps you to understand how to write the first few paragraphs of an essay which meets the assessment criteria.

**Task**

The following opening shows how an excellent argument can be set up. You need to make clear what your interpretation is, whilst also showing an awareness that others may argue an alternative interpretation. Your argument should then continue reinforcing your critical position, whilst also acknowledging that this isn’t the only perspective on the play.

- What is the overarching concept or proposition in this opening?
- On what logical basis are the ideas sequenced? Refer to the table in the ‘Excellent essay writing’ resource, and think about how this clearly argues using a number of strategies from the outset.
- How would you use connectives to continue to glue together a coherent and powerful argument?
- I would suggest the next stage of the essay would consist of a very detailed look at the language of the play’s conclusion in the context of the structure/form of the whole play.
- The conclusion should broaden out, for example, to consider the play as part of a pattern of Friel’s writing, as a piece of philosophical discourse and/or as a piece of theatre with something to say to a contemporary audience.
Re-read the last few pages of the play, from O’Neill’s line “And Mabel?” to the end. To what extent do you agree that this is an effective ending to the play?

This question undoubtedly follows a gradual crescendo of dramatic intensity throughout this act, charting the gradual fall of O’Neill as his status diminishes. Although Harry’s assessment of what O’Neill has become (“a pitiable, bitter bastard”) is true, we cannot but sympathise with a man whose spirit is crushed. Despite his indulgent self-pitying as he lashes out at Harry, suspecting he “isn’t at all displeased to see Hugh O’Neill humiliated by this anonymous back-street wine-vendor,” O’Neill by this stage in the play is reaching a critical point in the animated dialogue with Lombard, the smooth-talking, politically-astute re-maker of history, with the force and power of eloquence on his side.

The denouement of the play consists of a prising apart of two opposing sets of values. O’Neill’s, is a private and deep-seated quest for the truth towards the end of a life and an identity characterised by complication and contradiction. The other, Lombard’s, consists of remaking history by attending to what the people want, “offering them Hugh O’Neill as a national hero.” It could be argued that the ending reverberates with several more layers of complexity and complication, and is not completely effective because Friel poses many more questions than he answers. There is an irony in the sense that in the play, it is Lombard’s narrative, using the tone and diction of epic poetry, which is the dominant final note which ends the play, and yet in writing the play, and in creating such polarised versions of the place of one man in history, Friel is himself engaging in the debate. Any feelings that we are left with an unjust finality in the eyes of the audience as the curtain falls are understandable. But it is the idea that the play is a powerful comment on the ongoing process of how history is made and then remade which makes this ending so effective. Lombard’s narrative is not the end, nor is it permanent, since Friel himself has presented O’Neill in a much more complex and fascinating light, considering both his private life and his public role. Mabel’s talk of “the overall thing” is very perceptive; what is most effective about this ending is that we can take in two things at once. The striking contrasts between two characters as they move further apart physically and emotionally create a theatrical counterpoint, but, in addition, there is the contrast between the image of O’Neill we are left with at a specific point in time, and the potential for language to retell and re-evaluate.