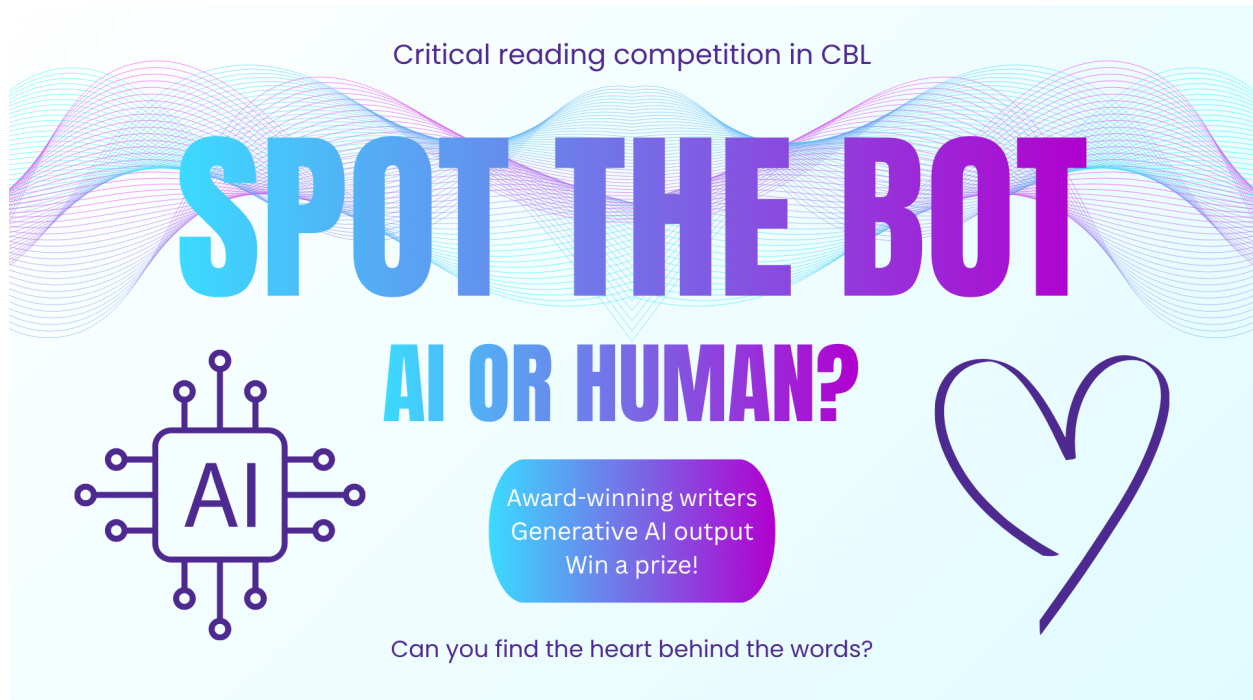


Critical reading competition

2026



Overview

This critical reading competition requires you to decide which version of the same event or situation was written by a human and which was created by generative AI. After identifying “the heart behind the words”, you then need to justify your decision. Critical thinking lies not just in spotting the differences but in explaining why they matter. For transparency, Microsoft Copilot was used to generate each AI extract, in line with the College’s AI guidance.

Sample A: Fiction

Each piece of short fiction explores the brutal reality of life in colonial Australia.

Extract 1 - AI OR HUMAN?

The land is raw and ungentle, a place that seems to resent every footstep. Thomas Greene, sentenced to seven years for stealing bread, labors under the white glare of the sun. His hands bleed, salt stinging each split, while guards watch without interest.

Beside him, Sarah Liddell endures fourteen years for forgery, her eyes fixed on distant hills she will never reach. She carries her daughter Eliza, born in chains, a small life already claimed by exile. Jack Doyle, transported for armed robbery and condemned to life, works until his body shakes, knowing there is no end to count.

Food is scarce, water foul, sleep thin and restless. The wind cuts through bone, carrying the empty sound of a world left behind. Nights bring no comfort, only the weight of distance and forgotten names.

Each morning returns the same labor, the same silence, the same slow erosion of hope. In this harsh colony, survival is not living, only enduring a sentence that seeps into the soul, leaving nothing untouched. The land does not soften, and neither do the men who command them. Punishment falls quickly, a reminder that pain is the only language spoken here. Even the child learns it.

Extract 2: AI OR HUMAN?

A man stands in a slab hut, rain beating on the roof, the leaks dropping into metal pots and buckets.

Patrick Conlon; 15, Derry. Theft of turnips. 25 years

In the corner lies a woman, stilled by grief, her face turned to the wall, the damp making little ringlets of her hair. In her arms she cradles a sack, its coarse rope twined between her fingers.

Kathleen Smith; 13, London. Theft of three candles. 20 years.

The man pulls on his boots, slips the rope from his wife's hand and gently lifts the sack from her arms. He places it against his shoulder and walks out into the rain.

In the sack, their son.

William Conlon; freeborn. 2 years and 5 months. Deceased.

'Not too far,' the woman says to the wall. And so he digs at the edge of the bush, every strike of his pick a curse at this godforsaken land of flies and heat and flood. And the natives camped along the river, sharpening their spears on rocks, awaiting their chance.

By morning he has dug a hole, thigh deep, full of water.

Merciful Christ, must he drown as well?

His wife will think of a new angel in heaven, a bright star in the night sky, but the man knows the sack is coming apart and this land of stones has already taken their son.

Sample B: Nonfiction

Each nonfiction piece involves a journalist examining the impact of the Black Saturday bushfires (2009) on the Victorian town of Marysville.

Extract 1 - AI OR HUMAN?

Nearly two weeks after Black Saturday, I drove from Alexandra to the Marysville golf course, just outside the town, to meet with Bruce Ackerman, who, because his house was intact, had been allowed to stay in Marysville, alongside the Army, the police, and emergency-services crews. As I waited in the parking lot, I walked over to a semi-trailer that looked as if it had been detonated from within. The exhaust stacks drooped outward, and thick rivulets of melted aluminum lay congealed in the gutter beneath. When I tapped one with my foot, it clanged loudly. Ackerman arrived, and we sat on the porch of the clubhouse. In front of us, many trees were burned, but the links were still green. A tiny bird with a long tail and a glowing blue face hopped about on the grass.

For eight days after the fire, Ackerman told me, he had helped the police as they searched for bodies in collapsed houses. During a fire, he explained, people usually take shelter in the bathroom: "And who would know where the bathroom is? The plumber." Thirty-nine people in Marysville lost their lives; Ackerman's neighbors Liz Fiske and her son were among the dead.

Not until six weeks after Black Saturday was Marysville reopened for residents, and a few days later Ackerman took me on a tour of the town, which was still closed to the public. Wire fencing had been erected along most streets, cordoning off the destroyed buildings. We drove along the river to a waterfall, which, like many things in Marysville, had once been invisible through thick foliage but could now be seen from hundreds of yards away. We stopped at Ackerman's house, a large, rustic two-story home, incongruously intact and attractive amid the devastation. Trees that must have been fully alight stood no more than twenty feet from the house. Ackerman's front yard was green and inviting, but a big tin shed at the foot of the lawn was splayed everywhere, as if another tin shed had been dropped on it from a great height. Farther down the hill, the Army had created a car yard, neatly lining up nearly a hundred skeletal cars and buses.

While we drove around the town, Ackerman's phone rang constantly. It sometimes seemed that there was little in the town that he wasn't doing. He had helped reinstate water service, refilling the depleted reservoir. He was head of a committee to establish a temporary village nearby to house residents who were rebuilding their homes. That morning, he had dug a grave.

Extract 2 - AI OR HUMAN?

The road into Marysville narrows as it climbs, the forest closing in on either side. On this late summer morning, the silence feels wrong. The green that once defined these hills is interrupted by wide stretches of grey and black. Trees stand stripped and skeletal, their leaves long gone. Weeks have passed since Black Saturday, yet the town still looks as if it has been halted mid-erasure.

At the edge of what was once the main street, I meet Alan, a lifelong resident. He stands where his house used to be, his boots pressing into ash and shards of glass. "You learn the shape of a place over decades," he says, scanning the open space. "Then in a few hours, it's gone."

On February 7, 2009, temperatures pushed beyond 45 degrees across Victoria, and violent winds tore through the region. When the fire reached Marysville, it travelled with terrifying speed. Alan recalls the moment the sky shifted colour, when daylight dulled into a harsh orange haze. "It sounded like a freight train," he says. "Not like a fire. Like something alive, coming straight at you."

He and his wife escaped in their car, driving through a storm of embers that struck the windscreen. Others were not as fortunate. In the days that followed, officials confirmed that 34 people died in Marysville. Across Victoria, 173 lives were lost, making it the deadliest bushfire disaster in the nation's history.

We walk through what used to be the town centre. The bakery has vanished, leaving only a concrete outline and twisted fragments of metal. The primary school stands blackened and hollow. Nearby, a playground frame remains upright, its paint blistered and peeling. Alan stops near the former football ground. "Friday nights, this place was full," he says. "You could hear the crowd from down the road. Now it's just empty."

There are small signs of movement amid the destruction. Survey markings cut across the ground. Temporary fences divide cleared areas. A few volunteers sift through debris in the distance. There are plans to rebuild Marysville, supported by state promises and community effort. Still, it will not be the same place its residents remember. The absence is too visible, too quiet.

As we prepare to leave, Alan takes one last look at the stretch of land where his home once stood. "You don't replace a town," he says. His voice is steady, but subdued. "You start again. And you carry what you can."
