Animal Farm

1. Read the book!
Make sure you know the novel inside out. Whilst reading, highlight your favourite moments, any lines that you particularly like or anything that really stands out. By doing this you are interacting critically with the text, which will serve you well when you come to study the novel more closely.

2. Historical context is key!
Animal Farm is an allegory of historical events in Russia following the fall of the Tsar in 1917, the ascent to power of the Communist Party under the leadership of Lenin and the subsequent struggle for power between Stalin and Trotsky. If you don't know these names or events, then you need to brush up on the key facts about this historical period. Why not refer to the Contexts section in our guide? We outline all the key dates and events you need to know!

3. What's in a name?
The names of the characters in Animal Farm are expressive and give us an instant insight into the personality traits of each of them. The most obvious names to examine are:
a) Napoleon  
b) Snowball  
c) Squealer  
d) Boxer & Clover

What can you infer from these names? Are any of them ironic? What images are conjured up for you when you read them? You could draw a spider diagram for each of the characters, writing down all the connotations and ideas that their names evoke. To what extent do the characters live up to their names? To what extent do their names undermine or even mock them?

4. Quotations
Get some key quotations under your belt for themes, language and characters – sometimes you can find quotations that touch on all three. Check out our ‘Key quotations’ feature in the ‘Revise’ section of our online study guide to start you off! Remember: embed your quotations into the points in your essay for a more sophisticated answer.

5. Literary terms
Examiners will be impressed if you can identify literary techniques used by an author and then comment on how they are effective. Understanding the techniques used by Orwell and using the proper terms is a good way to boost your grade. For example, do you know what irony is? How about subversion and dystopia? Does Orwell use figurative language? Remember: always comment on the effect of Orwell’s techniques.

6. Fairytales and fables
Fairytales and fables are usually short, easy to read, and contain an element of the fantastical (e.g. talking animals, magic and imaginary lands). Remember: the subtitle of Animal Farm is ‘A Fairy Story’ – but, does this ‘fairy story’ description fit? How does the text differ from your view of a typical fairytale? What elements are fairy-tale-like?

Think about the simple language and the style of narration. A fable can be defined as a short story that has a moral message. What would the message of Animal Farm be, and how does it link to the themes of the text?

7. Understanding satire
Satire is a tricky concept to grasp, but it’s one that is central to this text. Satire is a form that often uses humour to ridicule and attack ideas, institutions or general occurrences of foolish behaviour. Animal Farm is seen as a satire on political power. How does translating or converting the events of Russian history into the story of a farm run by pigs ridicule political power and key historical figures? Look at the way in which Orwell plays on animal stereotypes and political allegory in this text.

8. Orwell’s language
Two things may strike you about this text: firstly, it is quite short; secondly, the language is rather simple. But don’t be fooled! Orwell uses clear, economical language to carefully guide his reader through the events. Why does he do this and how does he do this? Explore the use of fairytale phrasing, repetition of phrases and the use of descriptive language (rather than figurative language). Orwell does not hide his strong opinions about politics in this book – far from it – but he does it in such a subtle way that the reader is often unaware that they are being influenced by his points of view. Indeed, one of Orwell’s main concerns was how language and clever rhetoric could be used to manipulate people.

9. Quick check
How much do you really know about the novel? Try to answer these questions – if you don’t know the answers, maybe a bit more revision is needed!
a) What does the destruction of the windmill signify?  
b) Why is the theme of education central to the novel?

c) What does Manor Farm represent at the start of the book?  
d) How is Napoleon described?  
e) What does Benjamin finally decide to read to the other animals?  
f) What song is banned by the pigs? Why?

10. Further questions
It is important to practise for exams or assessments by writing extended written responses. Here are a few exam-style questions to get you started. For more, see our Progress Booster section in the print and online York Notes study guide:
a) Explore the way Orwell presents the relationship between Napoleon and Snowball. How does it alter as the story progresses?  
Write about: a) the methods Orwell chooses to present their relationship; b) what others think and say about them.  
b) How does Orwell explore the breakdown of the ideals of Animal Farm?  
Write about: a) the original reason for the Seven Commandments; b) how the lives of the animals change.  
c) How does Orwell present Snowball as a potential leader?  
Write about: a) how Snowball is contrasted with Napoleon; b) how and why his downfall occurs.