Of Mice and Men

1 Read the book!
If you haven’t already read the book in class, you should spend a few hours reading the novel for yourself. Whilst reading, highlight your favourite moments, any lines that you particularly like or anything that really stands out. Just doing this means that you are interacting critically with the text, which will serve you well when you come to study the text more closely.

2 Four key settings
There are four main settings in the novel, which can help you to contextualise the action/plot. They are:
- The pool
- The bunk house
- Crooks’s hut
- The barn

Draw a spider-diagram for each, noting what happens and why these are important settings.

3 Context of the novel
Think of the context like the backdrop to the novel: without understanding it, the novel will not make complete sense. Make sure you are familiar with:
- The Great Depression
- The American Dream

This will, in turn, give your answers more depth and will show maturity. But, make sure you apply the context to the novel, don’t just repeat what you know. How does the Depression shape the ranch hands and the life they lead? Understanding this may allow you to empathise with the characters more fully.

4 Dreams/The American Dream
The themes of Dreams and The American Dream are both central to your understanding of the novel, so make sure you know them inside out! The American Dream doubles up as good contextual knowledge, too!

5 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 guide to start you off! Remember: embed your quotations into the points in your essay for a more sophisticated answer.

6 Literary terms
Nothing is more impressive than being able to identify literary techniques used by an author and then comment on how they are effective. Grasping some of Steinbeck’s techniques and using the proper terms is a sure way to boost your grade! For example, do you know what a paradox is? How about metaphors and similes? Does Steinbeck use imagery? Does he foreshadow the ending? Always remember to comment on the effect of Steinbeck’s techniques.

7 Engage with the characters
Really knowing the characters, such as Lennie and George, will unlock the novel for you, and may even lead to you having your own independent ideas about them. The characters in Of Mice and Men are very memorable – why? What is it about the relationship between George and Lennie that is so striking? What would you have done in George’s shoes – was Slim right when he says ‘You hadn’t, George’?

8 Linking key themes with characters/events
Try linking the key themes with characters and events. For example, ask yourself which characters/events could be closely associated with the following themes:
- Loneliness
- Vulnerability
- Protest and racial prejudice
- Dreams and reality

The more you ‘map’ your ideas, the more likely you are to remember key points and moments about the text as well as developing your own interpretations. For example, did you know that the name of the town, Soledad, means ‘loneliness’ in Spanish? Small details like this would be a good way to make your essays stand out!

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!
- How many sections is the novel divided into?
- What happened at Weed that caused Lennie and George to leave? In which chapter do we learn about this?
- Why is Lennie in the barn when Curley’s wife comes in?
- How long has Curley been married to his wife?
- Who brought up Lennie and handed him over to George to care for?
- List the reasons for killing Candy’s dog, and then list the reasons for George killing Lennie. How similar are they?
- Write down a list of all the times we are told or it is hinted that George and Lennie’s dream will never come true. Write down all the other dreams people have in the novel, and decide if any of those have a chance of coming true.

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 Grade Booster section in the print and online York Notes study guide:
- Explore the ways in which Steinbeck presents dreams as an important theme in the novel. Consider:
  - the different dreams he presents;
  - how and why characters are unable to achieve them.
- How does Steinbeck present Curley as a character who is important to the novel as a whole?
- How do Steinbeck explore the theme of friendship in the novel?