

**English Language**

General Certificate of Secondary Education **J355**

**OCR Report to Centres**

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**June 2012**

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This report on the examination provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers in their preparation of candidates for future examinations. It is intended to be constructive and informative and to promote better understanding of the specification content, of the operation of the scheme of assessment and of the application of assessment criteria.

Reports should be read in conjunction with the published question papers and mark schemes for the examination.

OCR will not enter into any discussion or correspondence in connection with this report.

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### English Language (J355)

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# A651 Extended Literary Text and Imaginative Writing

## Administrative Matters

The moderation processes adopted and developed by Centres for this Unit are almost all robust and efficient. The evidence of accuracy in the candidate rank order manifests this; as well as the relevant and helpful remarks on the cover sheet; and the detailed annotation and commentary on each script. It is clear that the wording of the assessment objectives and the band descriptors is becoming increasingly familiar and meaningful to those involved in teaching, marking and moderating.

There were very few instances of an erroneous rank order: and where there were, all the marks were within tolerance. Some candidates had been dealt with very generously, however Centres should note that work that conspicuously fails to fulfil any one of the descriptors is unlikely to be in the top (or even the top two) bands. For example, a Section A essay that fails to support what is said with relevant and apt quotation or reference to structure will have a significantly lower mark than one that gives that support however good it may be in other respects. Similarly, in the writing responses extreme length (which can lead to inaccuracy, breakdown of grammatical and syntactical control) can become self-penalizing. By the same token, extremely short answers (say of less than 400 words) are unlikely to do enough to satisfy more than the middle bands, even when presented with a very high degree of technical accuracy.

The cover sheets were generally accurate. Comments could, on occasion, be more than straight “lifts” from the relevant band descriptors in order to give a clearer insight into the candidate’s work and the reasons for the marks awarded. There were a number of instances of the incorrect presentation of the marks for the writing tasks. There should be **two** mark totals, one for each piece of writing. They should comprise **two** contributory marks: one out of 20 for AO4/1 and 2: and one out of 10 for AO4/3. The two totals should then be added and divided by two for the final mark. Too many students had their mark for each piece of writing represented by one mark out of 20: a serious potential handicap that moderators were vigilant in spotting and amending.

Centres are reminded that moderators expect to see some annotation on each page of each script, however concise that may be: and to see a summative comment at the end which relates to the comments on the cover sheet. All comments should be directed to the moderator: not to the student, however enthusiastic the teacher’s response to the work has been. It is especially helpful if there is a good deal of clarity on where and why the mark for AO4/3 has been given.

We are very grateful for the prompt response from almost all Centres to moderator emails and telephone calls for further detail and paperwork in the middle of a busy term and busy assessment period.

## Extended Literary Text

This was the final round of work on the first set of “live” tasks.

The absolute favourite has been and remains the task on disadvantaged characters in “Of Mice and Men”. Many candidates still took the character-by-character approach to this, accumulating examples of disadvantage on five or more of the characters. This is a solid and generally reliable methodology but one which doesn’t necessarily allow for a great deal of overview or comparison. It can also become a pedestrian plod through the narrative in the hands of less confident candidates. Better work took one or possibly two characters and gave an exhaustive analysis of the ways in which they are presented and supported that with comparisons and references to

other disadvantages and characters to support the main thrust of their argument. Better still were essays which took an entirely thematic approach from the outset. This work ranged across the text in a non-linear narrative way to support and press points about the nature of personal disadvantage and Steinbeck's perspective on it. They were notable for the penetrating analysis of the detailed effects of particular language choices. An explanation, for example, of why Curley first approaches Lennie "gingerly". Too many essays still sought to rely on random accounts of the social, cultural and historical context, which is **not** required in this Unit. Too many candidates give the impression that the Wall Street Crash, the Dust Bowl and the American Dream all occurred in California in the "twenties and thirties". Such digressions are not helpful in the fulfilment of the Unit's specific band criteria.

A pleasing number of Centres had chosen "Tsotsi". It had obviously been taught with great passion and vigour (as had the work on Zephaniah in the centre that chose this poet). This was communicated clearly in the work, which argued the case of sickness in the apartheid-ridden society of the novel with clarity and cogency. There was very little pedestrian or irrelevant work on this text.

There were fewer essays on Shakespeare (proportionally) than in previous submissions. All that there was, was on "Romeo and Juliet" and candidates maintained their enthusiasm for the text and the task on "victims of fate". However, this work in particular tended to reflect the greater maturity of the candidates who responded with a more objective and well balanced series of arguments than previously. The gist of responses is still much the same: "Yes, but...." which reflected a pleasing overview of the play, mostly supported by supportive detail.

The more popular poets remain Simon Armitage and Carol Ann Duffy and the poems chosen by candidates remain largely the same: school experiences in the latter and family matters in the former. Candidates showed an encouraging step forward in the confidence and clarity of their commentaries on these writers.

There was very little on Austen, Hardy or the non fiction texts.

Relevance is the central key to success in all this work: candidates who are able to stay on task, show an original and consistent approach to it and to the text and, above all, support what they say with textual evidence are likely to be the more successful.

### **Personal and Imaginative Writing**

The variety of approaches to all the topics broadened and deepened in this session. There were fewer long and rambling responses and more that were crisply concise and well-integrated to the core task and choices of satellite task. Confidently sustained non-literal approaches worked well in more cases and the synthesis of a literal backbone (for example a recognizable journey) which then had a non literal superstructure grafted on to it was a pleasure to read.

The very best work will be characterized by the word "flair". This work will be unforced, very engaging, filled with unobtrusive but delightful linguistic devices and, in many cases, ironic and amusing.

The word "control" appears frequently in the band descriptors. What precedes this is the choice of topic the candidate has made. It is crucial that this is something candidates know and care about, whatever that may be. The issue then is to develop the topic with clarity, integrity and relevance. Then the material will be controlled to the degree suggested by the band descriptors. We do want to see and reward work that is original, thoughtful and ambitious. If all that means that the piece is not fully controlled we will make allowances for that. Better this than an overly cautious and rather pedestrian approach to the writing, especially that which goes on at excessive length.

Choice of vocabulary, too, is very important in assessing and rewarding the writing tasks. The key here is to match the word as sensitively and subtly to the mood, intention, situation, and personality as possible, **not** *vice versa*, when there appears to have been a checklist of “impressive” vocabulary taken into the assessment session for mandatory use. Shades and subtlety of meaning will be rewarded for this particular bullet point.

The critical distinction between Bands 4 & 5 lies in the candidate’s ability to choose a task that plays to their writing strengths and relevant experience; is structured with a beginning, middle and an end; and is reasonably secure in its punctuation, spelling and sentence structure. Work that clearly fails to do this is less likely to be in Band 4.

Most pleasing of all, perhaps, was the growing evidence that candidates are using the generous time allowed for these assessments to further ponder their intentions; to revise, readjust and refocus their work and possibly to change their minds about priorities and interpretations. This increase in confidence and independence can only be a significantly enhancing factor in what is produced.

Finally, Centres are again reminded that length in both reading and writing will not be taken as an indication of quality. Candidates can achieve very high marks within a very few pages: many thousands of words may produce mediocrity: but of course not necessarily so. Irrelevance should be very rare, given that candidates contextualise tasks in ways that make them specific to their “take” on the texts and areas of particular interest.

## A643/A652 Speaking and Listening

### General Comments

The entry for both units was large with many centres choosing to use Speaking and Listening to satisfy the terminal rule. With few changes made from the legacy specification, the majority of centres seemed comfortable with the requirements of this unit.

The Training and Guidance DVD was issued to all centres in September 2011. It is a requirement that all teachers preparing candidates for Speaking and Listening watch and discuss the assessments on the DVD, and the accompanying commentary, to ensure appropriate standardisation has taken place in each centre. The Head of English is now required to sign a declaration that this requirement has been fulfilled on Form GCW330 – the record of internal standardisation. This year's DVD, while offering a complete range of tasks across all three contexts, focused on two particular areas where centres may appreciate more guidance: the Real-life Context, and task setting for the Drama-focused Activity. It also included a section on the administrative procedures of the moderation process, which many centres may find useful. Please note that future Speaking and Listening footage will be accessible online only.

### Task setting

Centres had covered a wide and interesting range of tasks across all three contexts. It was clear that some teachers had put a great deal of thought into designing tasks that would allow performance in the higher bands, while also offering opportunities to less confident students through careful choice of subject matter, role and purpose. Where generic tasks had been set across whole centres or classes, there were fewer opportunities for candidates to achieve their potential, particularly in the lower bands. Centres are advised that task setting is crucial to successful outcomes in Speaking and Listening, and that differentiating the tasks set to match student ability is strongly advisable. The subject matter of a talk, for example, in the individual extended contribution, is a differentiator in terms of awarding marks, as Band 1 clearly states that the talk must tackle 'complex subject matter'. A talk on 'football' is unlikely to fulfil the descriptor for Band 1, however a talk questioning or justifying footballers' salaries would be far more appropriate to stretch more able candidates.

Many centres have embraced the requirements of the "real-life context in and beyond the classroom" with enthusiasm, using the extensive advice on the Training and Guidance DVD sent to centres in September 2011. This is not an extra to the basic three contexts, but must be included as an aspect of any one of them, at the discretion of a centre and as appropriate to the situation. Often a simple adaptation to an existing task is sufficient – a prepared talk presented as a charity representative, or a group discussion in role as the school council, are two examples. However, many centres, or sometimes one or two classes within a centre, have still not fully addressed this requirement. The "real-life context" is more than just subject matter which has to extend beyond the classroom: it is a matter of purpose and audience. Centres with successful tasks for this requirement often linked it to the drama-focused context or role play of some form: mock interviews, reality shows and government think-tanks, for example. Where centres adapted tasks for the individual extended contribution, candidates adopted a role 'beyond the classroom', or the 'audience' became a real-life context, such as government representatives, or groups of teachers/parents. For the group activity, the students were often asked to consider issues as members of a specified committee or body to give their discussion a real-life purpose. Some centres were able to give their candidates an actual "real-life context", often linked to careers interviews with outside visitors. These were often, but not exclusively, centres with a small entry, and there is, of course, no requirement to bring in outside visitors to satisfy this requirement. A number of centres still set tasks for real-life context which were not valid, for example, general discussions on attitudes to war, various social and moral issues, or a

“talk to the class” on work experience. It is important that centres realise that the real-life context is not simply about real life subjects, but concerned with role, purpose and audience. Most of these tasks, with a minor alteration in terms of purpose or audience could have been adapted to fulfil the requirement properly.

Attention is drawn, for further support and guidance to fulfil the demands of the “real-life context”, to the Training and Guidance DVD issued to centres in September 2011, which carefully explains whether each activity featured can be deemed real-life context or not. There is also a guidance document on the OCR website, and the Controlled Assessment Consultancy is always available to centres who would like to seek further advice on individual tasks. Through the consultancy, a centre’s tasks may be validated.

There was evidence that centres are setting much more suitable tasks for the drama-focused activity and there were much firmer links to the assessment criteria for this context. Where tasks were based on drama or other literary texts, many centres had given candidates much more freedom to explore and adapt language in the creation of their roles: a reality TV show based on literary characters, for example. Performing a scene verbatim from a play, usually a Shakespeare play, without any adaptation, does not allow candidates the opportunity to meet the marking criteria, and the vast majority of centres had avoided this approach.

A small minority of centres adopted a heavily literary approach to Speaking and Listening – at times basing all three tasks on the same literary text. This is problematic in terms of the real-life context, as a situation based on literary characters and scenarios is unlikely to truly represent a 'real-life context', but it is also very limiting in terms of offering candidates a chance to explore language usage. It is advisable that the tasks set offer candidates a range of opportunities to extend their skills across different contexts and in different styles.

Some centres linked Speaking and Listening activities with work for A652 Section B: Spoken Language. Tasks set included exploring the language of an interviewer, and there were a few really imaginative tasks linked to TV chefs which the candidates had clearly enjoyed. It is hoped that as centres get used to the new specification, more will take the opportunity of using Speaking and Listening to help prepare candidates for their Controlled Assessment task on Spoken Language.

## **Record keeping**

A key part of the process is record keeping. Centres are advised to maintain on-going records for all candidates, perhaps making use of a centrally held data base of marks for candidates, with written comments. These procedures, good practice in centres, help to prevent problems arising from staff absences or changes of staff, for example. It also helps in the selection of the final three activities to be used to form the basis for assessment. The OCR Controlled Assessment form covers all the necessary elements required by the external moderator.

Centres must remember that candidates’ record sheets form a vital piece of evidence in the moderation process. If there is a lack of detail in the description of activities, or when comments on performance have been “lifted” directly from the band descriptors with little or no linkage to individual candidate achievement, then it is extremely difficult to carry out the moderation of a centre. Where an Individual Extended Contribution is simply described as 'a talk to the class' it is not possible to assess whether the complexity of the topic was sufficient to justify the mark awarded.

It is also important that all the staff within a centre adopt a common approach to filling in the assessment forms and that good practice is shared. The comments on the forms should aim to explain the marks awarded to the moderator, not offer feedback to candidates on their performances. There was often great variation in terms of teacher comments within centres,

some extremely detailed, helpful and personal to candidates, whereas others were brief and impersonal.

It is a centre's responsibility to ensure that moderators are supplied with a comprehensive set of records, with all sections completed and marks/arithmetic checked to eliminate mathematical or transcription errors. A number of transcription errors were found and CW Amend forms sent to centres, largely because the arithmetical process of adding the three marks and dividing them by three had not been applied correctly.

Thankfully the majority of centres provided all the necessary information, with well-presented records, often word-processed, and it was only a minority of centres that had to be reminded of their responsibilities.

### **The Application of the Criteria**

The starting point for this must be achievement as set against the performance criteria, fixing first on the band and then secondly the mark within the band range. Comments on achievement on candidates' assessment forms should make reference to the band descriptors and give a mark out of 40 for each separate context. The final mark is based on a mathematical calculation; the three separate marks are totalled and divided by three. Centres are advised to check the final calculation carefully, as mistakes were discovered by moderators. Importantly, no assumptions should be made as to a link between bands/marks and grades.

Good practice in awarding marks balances strengths and weaknesses, not just rewarding strengths. An explanation is given, for example, as to why a candidate failed to achieve the next band, when on borderlines. This aspect of the application of the criteria is particularly important, where there is bunching of marks, to distinguish separate performances.

### **Internal Standardisation Procedures**

Good practice is to use cross moderation of groups, joint marking exercises, reorganisation of groups for assessment and department Inset training using filmed evidence, provided by OCR. Centres are reminded that it is essential that all staff assessing Speaking and Listening watch and discuss the DVD issued to centres on an annual basis. Although the majority of centres had clearly done this, where there was no understanding of the demands of the real-life context, it was clear that some staff had not seen the DVD. It is advised that the DVD is accessible to all staff throughout the year to confirm standards and offer advice. In smaller centres, with a single teacher working in isolation, it was gratifying to see that the DVD was being used to bring all marks into line with the agreed OCR standard in the vast majority of cases.

The majority of centres had secure and often very rigorous procedures in place, including a day devoted to Speaking and Listening, but again worryingly, a minority of centres had to be reminded of their responsibilities. Centres must have procedures in place to ensure that internal marking is standardised and that a reliable rank order of marks is sent to the moderator. Importantly, the internally set standard is judged against the agreed OCR Standard, by the use of filmed assessments from OCR. Internal standards are confirmed by visits to centres. Some centres are failing to judge their own standards against those on the OCR DVD. Where centres had used the DVD to train staff, it was apparent in their task setting, understanding of the real-life context and in their justifications of the marks awarded.

### **Administration**

The administration of this unit, once again, could have been smoother. It is essential that centres familiarise themselves with the deadlines and procedures pertinent to this unit. There was some confusion between the sample required for A652 Section B Spoken Language, and A652 Section A Speaking and Listening, or between moderation of A643 and A652/A where centres

had candidates entered for both specifications. OCR intends to streamline the administration of A643 and both sections of A652 next year by ensuring that centres are given a single moderator to cover all components across A643 and A652.

However, even with a single moderator, centres must be aware that the moderation procedures for Speaking and Listening differ from those for the other Controlled Assessments – these procedures are outlined in the Administration section of the DVD and on the accompanying commentary. They are also sent to all centres and a checklist for teachers is provided. All the necessary forms and the instructions can be downloaded from the OCR website. Time was wasted and the moderation process protracted, by moderators having to chase centres for samples and forms when for Speaking and Listening the centre should select their own sample of seven candidates per teaching group covering the range of marks in each class.

As centres increasingly move to systems where non-specialist examination officers are the point of reference and dispatchers of moderation material, it is vital for the smooth running of the process that instructions regarding procedures are read, understood and carried out by all relevant parties.

However grateful acknowledgement is made to those who got it right and enabled moderators to meet their deadlines.

## **Conclusion**

As centres become more familiar with and confident in applying the new performance criteria and in task setting to meet the new requirements, this unit will develop into a real success, with opportunities for candidates to achieve.

Once again attention is strongly drawn to OCR's Training and Guidance materials for this unit available to centres each September. These will build up to provide vital support for all teachers, in assessment and task setting. This September centres will be able to access the filmed assessments on-line and download the accompanying commentary.

The Speaking and Listening unit has always been a real strength for candidates and this is a testimony to the hard work and dedication of the teachers involved in preparing candidates. Many thanks for the continuing commitment in preparing and assessing the candidates.

## A652b Spoken Language Study

### General Comments

Despite some confusion over where paperwork should be sent, moderators reported excellent standards of administration of this component. In most cases there was very clear evidence of effective internal standardisation and the degree of consistency of marking within centres was impressive.

The vast majority of centres had applied the marking criteria accurately and thorough and detailed teacher comments on candidates work and on the CAF indicated precisely how the marking criteria had been applied. Centres are to be commended on their diligence in this. In cases where marking was found to be generous, this was usually at the top end of the ability range where some candidates did not "make subtle and discriminating comments on the detail of the texts/data. The contextualisation of tasks was in most cases effective and enabled candidates to meet the assessment objectives. Many candidates compared two or more texts as part of their study; centres should note that comparison is not a requirement of this component. In some cases the comparative aspect enabled candidates to analyse patterns of language across texts but in others, candidates seem to be trying to cover too much material and as a result responses tended to be superficial. Centres should consider carefully whether introducing a comparative element to the task will help or hinder their particular students.

The phrasing of the task was important in supporting the candidate to meet criteria. In some cases candidates had been given the task as set by OCR and in others candidates were directed to focus on particular aspects of the text. Again centres are advised to consider carefully how to contextualise the task for their particular candidates. An overly broad task can invite candidates to talk in generalities and not attend to the detail of the text, on the other hand, too much guidance can restrict candidates' responses and limit their achievement. Centres are reminded of the availability of the Controlled Assessment Consultancy Service which provides guidance on task setting and on contextualisation.

The standard of work presented was generally high, one moderator commented "It was clear that the candidates I saw had been taught well, and in terms of my own experience of coursework moderation spanning what seems like an eternity, the work comprised amongst the best I have seen." This is a clear reflection of the careful planning and hard work of teachers delivering the specification.

### The Language of a Public Figure:

#### Barack Obama

Many centres completing this task opted for a comparative approach, looking at Obama's speech in a very formal context, for example, his inauguration speech, and in a less formal context, for example, the Letterman interview. The strongest responses showed clear and sophisticated understanding of the purpose, context and audience of the text and therefore how language choices were made in order to have a particular effect. For example, candidates recognised that the speech was written in advance, some identifying that it was not Obama himself who wrote it, "one clever device used to make it appear spontaneous is the scripting of references to recent events – for example 'earlier this evening'". Candidates used their analysis to demonstrate a perceptive understanding of the purposes of the speaker, "he uses a section to thank everyone but he thanks his opposition and vice president before his family. Structuring it in this way shows he is aware of his priorities and he knows his first duty should be to the American people."

Candidates explored the detail of the imagery, "...uses powerful imagery to communicate his ideas, such as the words 'block by block... calloused hand by calloused hand' This creates an image of something concrete built by the people working together to achieve a common goal" and also identified how his choice of references "as Lincoln said" put this moment on a par with other defining moments in American history. In his inaugural address, the images chosen are on an epic scale "gathering clouds and raging storms", "We will harness the sun and the winds and the soil" which emphasise the momentous nature of the event.

Some of the most successful responses which focused on one speech paid attention to how the speech was structured in order to build to a particular conclusion. Less successful responses tended to list features that had been identified and make a very brief comment on them.

### **Eddie Izzard**

This was a challenging task, but one with which candidates clearly engaged. In a few cases candidates were distracted by Izzard's manner of dress but most were able to produce sensitive analysis of how humour was created and how the comedian engaged with his audience. Candidates commented on how word play was used, "Catholicism, we believed in the teachings of Cathol and everything he stood for" to create a kind of alternative reality, and used incongruous images, "fifth wife into outer space, sixth wife on the rotissomat, seventh wife made out of jam" to make the major characters from history ridiculous.

### **Jeremy Paxman**

Candidates found much material to comment on here and the most sensitive responses considered Paxman's purpose in holding to account his interviewees, on behalf of the viewer, and how this influenced his language choices. Candidates discussed the way his questioning techniques affected the audience's view of the interviewee, for example, the use of very closed questions to demonstrate to the viewer that the subject's evasion. Some candidates gave detailed analysis of the power dynamics within the interview but on occasions weak candidates lapsed into giving a blow by blow account of who said what and there was only a very brief comment on the impact of the language.

### **Michael Parkinson**

Some excellent responses to this task was seen where candidates demonstrated a clear understanding of the context and purpose of the interview and analysed the different stages and how Parkinson supports and encourages his interviewees, with the most successful interviews being those in which he has to say the least. Candidates analysed how his greeting and introductory questions were positive and supportive and encouraged the interviewee to feel comfortable in sharing more personal information in some cases, and in others, fed the interviewee and enabled him or her to talk at some length, particularly in the case of comedians. Some candidates focused too much on the interviewee(s) and gave little consideration to Parkinson himself.

### **A Study of the Language of Sport on TV and/or Radio**

Some interesting responses were seen to this task, and often audio commentary broadcasts provided the best material for candidates. While it was pleasing that so many candidates here had devised their own task, it is important that candidates are guided so as to avoid arguing a false premise.

### **A study of the presentation of food and cookery on TV and/or Radio**

Many candidates considered the way that the presentation of food and cookery has changed over time by looking at, for example, Fanny Cradock and Jamie Oliver. In a few cases candidates were distracted by and spent too much time talking about the presenters manner of dress, the set, and so forth without tying it in any way to language. Many candidates, though, produced excellent responses in which they engaged with the detail of the text and presented some sensitive analysis. Candidates analysed the way, for example, Jamie Oliver softened imperatives “So you can just peel them” and used quite tentative language “It becomes sort of like beefy” and “You could have that; you could just have that as a crostini and eat it” to give the viewer a sense of control and choice, and used ‘non-culinary’ verbs such as “bash” and “lob” to demonstrate a relaxed approach to food in order to make it seem more accessible to the viewer. Some contrasted this to Fanny Cradock’s much stronger use of imperatives, “you have to go on beating”, “you use it like this”, “If there’s any little peaks showing, take the knife to it. If there’s a little air bubble, smooth it off with a knife”, which positioned her very much as the expert teacher.

### **A study of the use of Slang in a particular group of people**

Centres who responded to these tasks clearly engaged students with a range of different types of slang and candidates commented on a range of different social groups spanning a considerable time period, some referring back as far as the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Some made interesting observations about how slang changes over time and how this might be seen as a loss. Where candidates took a ‘survey’ approach they sometimes became entangled in the complexities of the relationships between dialect, accents, sub-languages and anti-languages, and there was little detailed consideration of texts and data. Centres should consider how they can provide a clear focus for candidates’ responses, perhaps by providing a particular text for analysis. This might provide candidates with the opportunity to capture and analyse the language they speak, or the language of a particular group which they have observed.

## A680/01 Information and Ideas (Foundation Tier)

### General Comments

The question paper proved to be accessible and of an appropriate level of demand for the tier. Candidates were clearly engaged with the reading material for Section A: the return of the otter to urban waterways (Text A) and attitudes towards magpies (Text B). The two Writing tasks proved to be equally popular across the candidature, though within some centres one question was more popular than the other.

The majority of candidates had obviously been well prepared for the format of the question and answer booklet. The spaces provided for answers reflect the relative weightings of questions. Additional sheets were occasionally used for either Question 2(a) or for one of the Writing tasks. It should be noted, however, that recourse to extra sheets should not be necessary. Please see comments on individual questions below.

In most cases, candidates appeared to have followed the advice contained in the *A680 Guidance Notes* which can be found on the OCR website: namely that 10 minutes should be spent on reading the two texts; 60 minutes on answering Questions 1 and 2; 50 minutes on their chosen Writing task.

### Individual Questions

#### Section A – Reading

The overwhelming majority of candidates used the correct text in responding to Questions 1 and 2. However, some candidates used material for Question 2(b) when answering Question 2(a), and vice versa. In Questions 1 and 2 candidates are assessed on their reading ability only, so the inclusion of their own views about the topic, however sincerely felt, cannot be rewarded.

#### Question 1

1(a) – 1(c). Many candidates had been well prepared for the style of questions and produced concise answers in the spaces provided. In practice, the best answers were as short as they needed to be in order to answer the question correctly. The answer for 1(a) (ii) required just one word: 'recluse'. Candidates should be discouraged from trying to cram too many words into the space provided in the hope that they chance upon a correct answer. Whilst selective copying is acceptable for these questions, verbatim copying of an excessive amount of text is not.

1(d). Examiners saw the full range of responses to this question. Successful responses focused clearly on the question topic ('outline what you learn about British otters since the 1950s') and produced a wide range of relevant points largely in their own words – 'as far as possible', as the question says. Less successful responses were less selective and reproduced points that were not made relevant to the question (for example, about canals being graveyards for shopping trolleys). At the bottom end of the range, there was little attempt to tailor the material to the specific demands of the question and points were sometimes copied indiscriminately from the passage, with perhaps the odd word changed. The following relevant advice is taken from the *A680 Guidance Notes*:

'Since this is a WHAT? question, candidates are not expected to use quotations or comment on a writer's use of language. Lengthy introductions and conclusions are not required, and points should be made once only, as there is no credit for repeated points. Candidates should not give their views on the topic.'

## Question 2

Most candidates took note of the relative weightings of Questions 2(a) and 2(b) – 6 and 14 marks respectively. However, for some centres the number of candidates using extra answer sheets (usually for Question 2(a)) was significantly above average. These candidates run the risk of under-performing in Question 2(b), for which there are more than double the marks for 2(a). There is no need for candidates to be exhaustive when answering either 2(a) or 2(b). For these HOW? questions they should select details carefully and comment on them concisely.

2(a). Successful responses identified right from the start specific features and commented on particular effects they create for a reader. For example, many were struck by the heading 'Magpies on Trial', commenting on the somewhat amusing notion that we could make 'human' judgements about wild birds.

Less successful responses made generic comments about the heading, sub-headings, captions and photographs without focusing on specific details from the text in question: eg 'the heading was easy to read because it was in bold font and made you want to read on', 'the colourful picture makes it stand out' etc. Many answers that ran to a second page contained this type of generalisation that could be true of many media texts. In such cases an excessive amount of writing led to relatively little reward.

2(b). Successful responses contained clear evidence of an ability to analyse relevant detail, commenting on specific ways in which information and language used in the article persuaded readers that magpies are 'Not Guilty!' Some candidates who did not read the question with sufficient care picked information and/or language points from the text that conveyed the magpie in a more guilty light.

When exploring the language used in the text, it is more profitable to link brief quotations to detailed comment on effects. Quotations on their own or accompanied by assertions such as 'This is emotive' do not constitute analysis. Candidates using the antonyms 'negative' and 'positive' should be encouraged to offer more precise detail about what it is they find negative or positive.

The quality of analytical comment is a discriminator for this question, and candidates would benefit from regular practice at articulating how and why particular words are effective in media texts they encounter during and outside lessons.

## Section B – Writing

### Questions 3 and 4

Examiners saw a full range of performance for the Writing tasks. It was pleasing to see many candidates take the time and effort to plan their answers. Very often these candidates were able to structure their writing more effectively, from a focused and engaging opening right through to a well-considered ending with much evidence of development in between. These candidates often had more interesting things to say because they had taken the time to reflect before writing. As a consequence, their writing was often very engaging, with the sense that material was being consciously shaped for a reader. By contrast, in less successful responses there was writing that became rambling, lost focus or became repetitive.

It should be emphasised that the quality of writing is being assessed, and not quantity. Regular practice at past questions should help to drive home this message. There should be no need for candidates to use continuation sheets for their Writing answer. Indeed, some of the more successful candidates used one of the three pages provided for the Section B answer for effective planning.

Candidates should be encouraged to spend time checking their spelling and punctuation and to take care with their handwriting. Common errors included not marking sentence divisions, confusion over *its* and *it's*, homophone errors (*there/their/they're* and *to/too*), writing one word instead of two (*infact, aswell, alot, incase, eachother*) and writing two words instead of one (*some one, no where, country side, your self, any thing, neighbour hood*). A surprising number of candidates used capitals erratically: for example, they did not feature at the beginning of names but did appear randomly in the middle of words. Past and current clichés included 'he was not in a happy place', 'elephant in the room', and the still ubiquitous 'she is there for you'.

**Question 3** asked candidates to write an article for the local newspaper describing what they like and dislike about the area where they live. Stronger responses provided detailed and engaging descriptions of the areas and clear explanation of their likes and dislikes. Less effective answers listed likes and dislikes mechanically, with little sense of the audience and format indicated in the question. Occasionally, there was the jarring use of made-up statistics: '86% of my friends say they will definitely move out of this town but 67% of people my parents' age say they never will' and a somewhat alarming 'there has been a 65% increase in the death rate in my area over the last two years'. For most candidates, the 'positives' outweighed the 'negatives', and really informative answers offered precise details about what was positive or negative. The 'likes' that examiners encountered in answers included green fields, parks, good community spirit and cultural diversity. The dislikes included noisy neighbours or streets, graffiti, fortnightly bin collections and lack of amenities for young people.

**Question 4** asked candidates to consider the merits of being with friends and of being alone sometimes. Most candidates offered a balanced approach to the question and many regretted that it was difficult to get the balance right. Some drew on recent experience, in particular, the need to revise away from the distraction of friends. In stronger responses candidates wrote engagingly and candidly about themselves, their personalities and their relationships. They gave convincing portrayals of themselves both as part of the crowd and also as individuals with 'alone time'. Less convincing answers listed details about particular friends (such as hair and eye colour) and what to do during alone time (watch DVDs, play Xbox and go on Facebook). Candidates should avoid colloquialisms such as 'stuff' and 'Me and my mates'. This particular question did not specify an audience or format. However, it should be remembered that the examiner is a very real 'audience'.

## A680/02 Information and Ideas (Higher Tier)

*This report may be usefully read alongside the Teacher Guide for A680, which can be found on the OCR website.*

Candidates responded well to this paper and, fresh from their own school leaving celebrations, found the subject matter engaging. Both the reading texts and the questions proved accessible. The majority of candidates appeared to be well-prepared for the demands of the individual tasks and most completed the paper. Instances of rubric error and omitted questions were few.

There was evidence from the scripts that candidates were using their time more effectively than in previous sessions, with much fuller responses to the reading texts in Section A, accompanied by briefer but more tightly organised responses to the writing tasks in Section B. Examiners noted improved focus on the wording of individual questions and a correspondingly better understanding of how to meet the demands of the tasks. Achievement on this paper is very closely linked to a clear understanding of purpose.

It would appear that centres are making good judgements in their entry policy and there were fewer candidates wrongly entered for Higher Tier this year. Centres looking to support their students in this component should consider that the more structured approach to reading texts offered at Foundation Tier can prove beneficial for weaker candidates.

### Question 1

Performance on this task continues to be somewhat uneven. Most candidates showed understanding of the content of the passage but there was less assurance around the demands of the task. There is a need to deliver a wide range of points, concisely, in a well-organised response. Candidates should show understanding through selection and synthesis. Examiners reported very unbalanced responses which either achieved a wide range through writing at excessive length or delivered a very small number of points, sometimes in just one or two sentences.

It is worth noting that the question did direct candidates to select material, not to summarise the entire article. The best answers kept firm focus on how the adults feel about these celebrations. Weaker answers lapsed into excess detail about the nature of the celebrations. Some candidates, although fewer in number than in previous sessions, drifted into a style of language commentary more appropriate to Question 2. Centres should ensure that all candidates are aware that this type of critical comment has no place in Question 1.

Candidates are directed to use their own words 'as far as possible' here. Examiners did report instances where such was the determination to avoid **all** words the writer had used, candidates began to lose clarity. There is no need to replace, for example, '11-year-old school children' with 'pre-pubescent scholars' or to describe a helicopter as a 'rotary flying device'. Examiners do acknowledge that inevitably some of the words from the text will be used, but what candidates must avoid is quotation and mere 'lifting' of lines from the text, as this does not show understanding.

### Question 2

The question directed candidates to consider **how** features of presentation and use of language had supported the writer's point of view. The most successful answers here offered well-supported analysis of a wide range of points. Responses considered the writer's use of pictures and headings to emphasise the idea of over-indulgence and commented on his use of facts and figures, exaggerated anecdote and expert opinion. Examiners were pleased to see some

insightful exploration of the more subtle suggestions that these celebrations had grown out of unhealthy changes in society. They pointed to the writer's suggestion of guilt-induced, compensatory parenting, the 'Americanisation' of contemporary society, and pressure on children to grow up too quickly. Comment was frequently offered on the use of language that described children as 'precious' and worthy of having their 'whims and wishes... honoured'. Surprisingly few candidates made use of what was quite an accessible point of structure; the article begins with what the writer sees as an outrageous request and ends with that request denied, to his apparent satisfaction.

Weaker responses tended to confine attention to the picture and the headings and achieved little more than description of content. Alongside this, some answers were little more than a list of devices 'usually' found in media texts with brief definition of what a feature, such as a rhetorical question, 'usually' does. Comment must be securely linked to the effects achieved in the given text if it is to earn credit. Centres should prepare candidates to deliver critical comment on how ideas are communicated, not to critique the ideas themselves, or to offer their own opinions on the subject matter, in this case the suitability of these celebrations.

### Question 3

Candidates clearly enjoyed this text and found the antics of Charlene and Velma a source of much amusement. Examiners reported that this was frequently the best of the three reading responses. The question asked for comment on use of language and, as with Question 2 the focus was on **how** the writer's choices convey his attitude. Most candidates picked up the writer's mocking tone and his technique of eliciting disapproval by quite lengthy description of absurd excess, undermined by both the age of the child ('This is her 13<sup>th</sup> birthday'), and the small numbers of participants, ('Thirteen, that's nearly a grand a head') delivered in a short, punchy sentence. The writer's mimicry of spoilt children's voices, 'I want a unicorn and I want it now' drew useful comment, often linked to the reference to *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. The very few candidates not familiar with this work still made the perfectly valid point that these parties were being compared to something fictional, not of the real world. The contrasts between the natural and the unnatural were usefully explored, considering the petting of the 'de-skunked skunk' alongside the children's wish to run around the garden. Sympathy for 'poor Jasper' was much in evidence, alongside strong appreciation of the scathing description of his mother.

Some candidates did take at face value the opening line 'It looks brilliant now' and concluded that the writer was in fact jealous of these children and their parties. Although this initial false start was often corrected as candidates worked through the article, this does highlight the need to plan the Question 3 response and to read the whole of Text B before starting to write. Candidates exploring the writer's attitude in more depth commented on his apparent ambivalence, finding these celebrations both repelling and fascinating. This article was, of course, a review of a TV programme, a fact which many candidates noted in their answer, showing some insight into why these 'blissfully unselfaware' characters made such compelling viewing.

## SECTION B WRITING

### Question 4

This proved to be the slightly more popular choice, with candidates finding the familiar format and subject matter very accessible. Candidates of all abilities had plenty to say and some made effective use of the texts they had just read. This is entirely acceptable and where candidates chose to use material on proms and parties, it blended well with other ideas offered.

Candidates were expected to show awareness of their audience on this task and examiners would suggest that this is best done through thoughtful language choice. There is no expectation that candidates will write their own stage directions ('pause for effect', 'look around and point'). Candidates that adopt this approach are likely to lose the fluency of their response. The best responses were well-organised and showed evidence of careful planning. A variety of rhetorical devices were employed, the most popular being the direct question to the audience. It is worth urging a little restraint here. Responses that do little more than constantly batter the audience are not demonstrating a variety of skills.

Most chose to take up a point of view and persuade their audience, others adopted a more reflective approach. The majority of candidates communicated concerns about the pressures faced by children, not just in terms of appearance or fashion but also responsibilities to act as carers for other family members. Some suggested that a little pressure to mature was not a bad thing and that the wish to behave like a twenty-something was the most childish trait of all and best left behind.

As is often the case when marking writing, examiners were left with an impression of strong and sensible opinions held by thoughtful young people. They seemed to look back on their own early years with fondness, expressing concern for the new pressures faced by younger siblings.

### **Question 5**

Examiners warmly appreciated the imaginative, entertaining and effectively delivered narratives that candidates of all abilities offered. Although content involving weddings and family birthdays was largely predictable, most candidates attempted either a thoughtful twist or an engaging personal touch (the embarrassing uncle or the fight between the bridesmaids). A number of candidates said they enjoyed the Royal Wedding more than they expected, including one who had camped in the Mall the night before and gave a most vivid account. The strongest responses tended to offer some reflection on the significance of their experience.

It is becoming clear that candidates who chose a relatively straightforward topic, which they then enliven with good writing skills do achieve more than candidates who over-reach and attempt to deliver a complete short story. As with Question 4 careful planning and a clear sense of direction is a crucial discriminator. Less successful responses were those that lacked balance, with lengthy build-up to the event followed by a perfunctory, 'Everything was alright in the end.' Responses that start with the candidate having breakfast seldom end well, or in the time allowed.

**OCR (Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations)**  
**1 Hills Road**  
**Cambridge**  
**CB1 2EU**

**OCR Customer Contact Centre**

**14 – 19 Qualifications (General)**

Telephone: 01223 553998

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