

**GCSE**

**English**

General Certificate of Secondary Education **J350**

**OCR Report to Centres November 2014**

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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.

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## General Certificate of Secondary Education

### English (J350)

#### OCR REPORT TO CENTRES

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## A642 Imaginative Writing

### General Comments:

It was clear that Centres had prepared their candidates carefully for the controlled assessment tasks in this session. Moderators reported enjoying reading many well written and engaged responses to the tasks in both the Media section and the Text Development section of this unit. It was also pleasing that Centres now understand that the tasks submitted in the November session should be the tasks from the summer session in the same calendar year rather than the tasks for the following summer. Overall it is clear that both Centres and candidates had enjoyed working on these tasks. All the work showed real engagement and some imagination and the very best, as always, was a genuine pleasure to read.

### Comments on Individual Questions:

#### Section A - Media

*Write a feature article about a famous person explaining why you have such strong views about this person.*

This task proved engaging for candidates and many were able to express strong opinions in an effective style. It was encouraging to see centres encouraging candidates to make their own choice of a famous person rather than making them all do the same person. This clearly encouraged individual and personal responses to the task.

*Imagine that you have read the article and disagree with what was said about the famous person. Write a formal letter to the editor expressing your own views.*

Candidates performed well in this task, supported by the clear sense of form and audience required by the task. It was good to see that most candidates were well able to adopt a diametrically opposed point of view of the character from the one they had been expressing in their response to the main task.

#### Section B – Text Development

*Choose a character from a text you have read, heard or seen. Write a story about this character which takes place before the events in the text.*

It was a pleasant surprise for moderators that candidates did not base their responses to this task on *Of Mice and Men* in this session. Centres used a wider range of texts to stimulate their candidates' imagination with many using films such as *The Hunger Games* to elicit fresh and engaged pieces of writing. In many cases candidates were encouraged to pursue a particular personal interest which may, of course, be easier to manage when dealing with someone who is retaking the examination in the autumn. It is useful but not essential to have a brief indication of what text the response is based on but Centres should be reminded that these responses are judged as self-standing pieces and that reading and understanding of the original text is not rewarded.

*Write a monologue in prose or poetry in which one of your characters expresses his or her thoughts about what happened.*

There was a narrower range of choices of satellite tasks made in this session. The monologue was the task of choice in section B and was usually completed very effectively. The most successful pieces reflected on the events in the main story from a different point of view. Some, however, simply repeated the events of the main story, adding some reflective comments along the way. This was not penalised but sometimes led to pieces that were not fully engaged (or engaging) which may not have been the case if the monologue were written for a different character.

## A680 Information and Ideas (Foundation Tier)

### General Comments

The question paper proved to be accessible and of an appropriate level of demand for the tier. Most candidates were able to engage with the reading material for Section A: about the achievements of pilot Amy Johnson (in Text A) and an article about the achievement and determination of Jessica Ennis in the 2012 Olympics (in Text B). The two optional Writing tasks proved to be equally popular.

In most cases, candidates appeared to have followed the advice regarding time allocation; few responses showed evidence of running out of time. However, some candidates hurried through the Reading questions and spent an excessive amount of time on the Writing question which led in some cases to rambling, unshaped Section B answers.

### Individual Questions Section A – Reading

1(a) – 1(c) As in previous sessions, these easier questions provided a relatively gentle way in to the paper, though not all candidates scored all 6 marks. In particular, the 1(c) question on ‘physical effects’ of the solo flight on Amy Johnson was found challenging by a number of candidates.

1(d) Strong responses demonstrated a clear focus on the task and were able to show evidence of expressing points in their own words – ‘as far as possible’, as the question demands. These candidates showed a secure understanding of the text across a number of valid points.

=Candidates achieved higher marks when they addressed both elements of the question and made a clear distinction between Amy Johnson’s achievements and people’s attitudes towards her. In general, less successful answers tended to write about views generally and often introduced views of their own. Some candidates misinterpreted the requirements of the question and commented on the effects of particular words.

### Question 2

Most candidates took note of the relative weightings of Q2(a) and Q2(b) – 6 and 14 marks respectively. A minority of candidates wrote at excessive length for Q2(a), the stronger answers tended to be more focused and less repetitive.

2(a) Stronger responses commented on the precise effect of presentational features. Less successful responses identified features without comment or made generic comments about headings, photographs and captions that could be true of any newspaper article, or indeed, of any media text. Some candidates made general terms that headings ‘make you want to read on’ and that the photograph was related to the topic of the article (and that it was big and colourful).

2(b) Successful responses contained clear evidence of the ability to choose and analyse relevant detail, commenting on both the information given and specific words and phrases. It should be noted that the quality of analytical comment is a discriminator in this question. Stronger responses explored the words used to celebrate Jessica Ennis’s achievements and determination. She gave a ‘dazzling performance’, was a ‘show-stopper’, was ‘roared on’ by the crowd and ‘exploded’ to the finishing line etc.

Some candidates did not fully understand the requirements of the question and therefore did not explore aspects of language used in the article. A few responses simply described the content of the passage.

## **Section B – Writing Questions 3 and 4**

The following extract from the June 2014 Report still holds true:

‘Once again, it is worth pointing out that length of answer alone rarely secures high reward. There simply is no need for candidates to write more than one-and-a-half to two sides of writing (using average size of handwriting as a guide). Some candidates perhaps feel the need to write until the very end of the examination – but they would be better advised to spend five minutes or so checking their work for basic errors. There should be no need to use supplementary pages, which are very rarely an indicator of strong performance.

Stronger responses showed a clear control of the material, and offered an engaging opening, clear development of ideas and an effective ending. Careful consideration was given to choices of vocabulary and sentence structures, and the readers’ need for clarity and accuracy was acknowledged.

By contrast, less successful responses conveyed little evidence of crafting material for a reader. There was a lack of control of material and straightforward development of ideas; sometimes responses had a perfunctory conclusion. Generally, the greater the length of responses, the more rambling and repetitive they tended to become..’

The most common punctuation error was the use of full stops; there were some instances of paragraphs containing only one full stop at the end. Some answers contained evidence of accurate use of upper and lower case letters and proper nouns beginning with a capital letter.

### **Question 3**

Candidates wrote engagingly about those close to them and also about more public figures. Among the former, parents and grandparents predominated; among the latter, footballers.

### **Question 4**

Some candidates revealed some uncertainty about what constitutes a letter, and wrote instead articles or the text for a speech to their class. Most answers were against the idea of shorter summer breaks, arguing that pupils, teachers and caretakers deserved a break after a gruelling academic year of worksheets, homeworks, controlled assessments, mock exams and interventions.

## A680 Information and Ideas (Higher Tier)

### General Comments:

This November session saw relatively low candidate numbers but produced some very secure scripts with strong performance in the Section B Writing and improved performance in Section A Reading. It was evident that candidates had worked hard to improve their understanding of the approach to each of the three reading questions and responses were often full and purposeful.

Candidates found the subject matter of the paper familiar and accessible at all levels of the ability range. There was particularly strong personal response to the quite hard-hitting content of the John Healey piece and candidates wrote thoughtfully and with some maturity here, often taking material from this text into their writing responses to Question 4 and using it to good effect. Rubric error was minimal, with very few candidates writing on the wrong text or attempting to cover both writing tasks. Virtually all candidates completed the paper and, for the first time in the life of this paper, Higher tier had a smaller entry than Foundation tier, demonstrating that centres are supporting their candidates effectively by making sound judgements on tier entry.

Examiners were pleased to note improved legibility of scripts and it was evident that candidates were thinking not only about 'presentation' in the texts but also about how they should present their own answers to the examiner. It is a small but important point, now that scripts are read on a screen, that answers need to be very clearly numbered and the examiner needs to be given clear direction to any additional material appearing in the answer booklet after a response appears to have ended. A page reference is often very helpful, e.g. 'Question 2 continues on page 7'.

### Comments on Individual Questions:

#### Question No. 1

Answers to this question were generally of a sensible length, although a few candidates do drift into lengthy personal comment more appropriate to Question 2. The best responses showed some precision in selection of key points and understood the difference between what the Homeless World Cup is, in itself and what it has achieved, in terms of successful outcomes. Weaker candidates drifted into general comment about the history of the event and its organisation. More successful candidates focused purposefully on its achievements in terms of raising the profile of the issue of homelessness and transforming individual lives. Candidates did need to distinguish between the various outcomes. It was not enough to simply state that the Homeless World Cup 'got them off the streets'. There were a variety of separate points to be made about, for example, improving fitness, establishing a sense of responsibility, developing pride and self-esteem.

One slight misunderstanding crept in as candidates believed that the initiative provided homes for the participants, rather than the more subtle idea that they encouraged a better sense of direction towards that final goal and enabled access to other, more conventional, services. This was a minor error but it does indicate the importance of close reading. Nevertheless, most candidates did demonstrate clear understanding of the text and examiners reported a good range of points, although delivery of these points was sometimes flawed. There was a pronounced tendency to lift phrases from the text this session, with some candidates offering lengthy quotation. Use of 'own words' remains an area that would benefit from improvement.

## Question No. 2

This is traditionally the most extensively prepared question on the paper and often the most misunderstood. Examiners reported that candidates are approaching this task with a checklist of devices to identify. We see the mnemonics written in the margin and sometimes find the candidates reporting that some of the devices they were looking for were *not* in the text. Clearly students will be taught that statistics add validity and creative use of language adds emphasis but in the examination response candidates should be using this knowledge to show understanding of the given extract and certainly here there should have been focus on persuasive language (e.g. 'remarkable', 'unique', 'more effective than', 'there is no doubting'). There were plenty of examples that could have been used but too many answers stayed with the pictures and the headings, in some cases making such comment the bulk of the answer. Comments on subheadings and paragraph divisions remain an area for improvement as many candidates inform the examiners that these headings will help the reader 'choose the bits they want to skip'. Some comment on the images was sound, looking at the way the three pictures illustrate progression from the bleak isolation of the streets, through training and on to a team celebration. The higher scoring responses offered insightful comment on the emotive nature of the 'before and after' stories of the named individuals, the clinching neatness of the last paragraph and, the most striking language feature, the extended football metaphor that demonstrated the progress from the 'bench' to the 'goal'.

## Question No.3

Text B is usually the more challenging piece but examiners are regularly reporting that many candidates perform more successfully on this task than they do on question 2, once they are freed from the straightjacket of the formulaic 'presentation' approach and begin to think more thoughtfully about use of language. This was a complex text offering many opportunities for insightful comment. The majority of candidates wrote well on the imagery that emphasised physical discomfort and the filth of the location with many moving on into the areas of difficulty, exploring the dehumanising nature of the experience and the psychological impact of boredom and loneliness. The best answers explored the repetition of 'nothing' and the monochrome imagery ('blackness', 'black hole', 'darkness', 'night'). There were also some sharp observations about Healey's animal companions, or 'anti-pets' as described by one candidate.

Comment on tone was sometimes less precise and success here often does depend on the range of vocabulary the candidates have at their disposal. There was the ubiquitous 'negative' tone but some spoke of 'depressing' language and better answers identified tones of self-disgust, despair, even desperation in the final rhetorical question coupled with a very direct, even matter-of-fact approach to the subject matter. The extract did contain a measure of humour in the 'good' bottle of wine and the 'pantomime' with Tommy's possessions and this proved difficult for candidates primed to say that humour creates a 'light-hearted' mood. Here the grim humour was much darker, again illustrating the need for a flexible approach and the danger of generic comment.

Formulaic device spotting was evident in responses to question 3.

## Question No. 4

This was the more popular of the two options, with candidates proving very confident in handling the 'speech to the class' format. A strong sense of audience and the ability to create an effective 'voice' often lifted responses into the higher bands. It is worth reminding candidates that the 'speech' format, although it may be less formal, does benefit from some planning, to just the same extent as tasks requiring letters or articles and there is a danger that speeches offering loose association of thoughts will lose direction, become repetitive or self-contradict.

The majority of answers took the view that indeed there was injustice in the world and they were rather harsh on children of wealthy parents, embracing the need for a level playing field at the start of life and equality of opportunity for all. A smaller but significant number argued, often quite narrowly, that the poor ought to work harder but this was balanced in many cases by candidates who wrote very movingly about their own struggles to get by on 'so little'.

Successful speeches did employ persuasive language and rhetorical devices to gain support from the imaginary audience. It should be noted that not all 'persuasive' writing tasks intend to get the audience to 'take action' or 'make a donation'. Understanding of writing to generate thought and influence opinion should be encouraged. The very best answers gave thoughtful consideration to all the implications of the prompt, often adopting a global view and acknowledging the dangers of oversimplifying the issues. The more balanced and complex a candidate's thinking might be, then the more considered and complex the writing becomes.

### **Question No. 5**

This was a less frequent choice but was often very successful with some highly engaging, often very amusing accounts of peer support during various sporting events, outdoor expeditions and theatrical performances. To sound one cautionary note, it is often a feature of the free-format option that candidates will get thoroughly caught up in their narratives and they can lose sight of the prompt. There was an expectation that 'support' would be a central aspect of the response yet sadly it sometimes appeared only implicitly or towards the end of a tale as an afterthought. It is a feature of the band descriptors for Section B Writing that there should be a measure of understanding of the task, just as there is in Section A.

Structure and organisational skills are significant discriminators in both writing tasks and it is clear that retelling a personal experience does provide a chronological sequence which gives the writing shape and sometimes some dialogue to add variety and interest. Examiners genuinely do appreciate the writing from personal experience that candidates give in Section B. This session we read compelling and moving accounts of candidates dealing with loss and loneliness, illness and disability. Writing grounded in deeply felt personal concerns is often crafted strongly and an authentic voice emerges as the words are made to matter.

Not surprisingly, appreciation of the support given to candidates through GCSE resits was a popular choice of topic and examiners always wish that it was possible to direct some of these fulsome tributes back to the people mentioned. Please accept this report as evidence that your efforts did not go unacknowledged.

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