

GCSE

English

General Certificate of Secondary Education **J350**

OCR Report to Centres November 2015

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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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A640 – Speaking and Listening

General Comments

A small number of centres entered this session.

A large number of advisory visits were carried out last year and the majority of centres were very welcoming and pleased to receive advice and support.

Task setting

Centres are experienced in task setting to cover the requirements of the three different contexts. It was clear that some departments and individual teachers had put a great deal of thought into designing tasks, which would allow achievement across the ability range, and into providing opportunities for candidates to succeed.

Task setting is crucial in determining successful outcomes for this component, and centres are always advised to set tasks which allow the assessment criteria to be met, and are engaging and relevant for the candidates. However centres must be made aware of the fact that some tasks can be limiting. Giving candidates the freedom to choose, for example, the subject matter of a presentation for the Individual Extended Contribution, may lead to under-performance.

The majority of centres had addressed the requirements of the 'real-life context' through suitable tasks which moved 'beyond the classroom'. Most chose to do role plays for the Drama-focussed Activity to fulfil this requirement.

Record keeping

It is important that all the teachers preparing and assessing candidates adopt a common approach to filling in the record sheets and that good practice is enforced throughout a centre. Most forms were filled in helpfully, offering a good level of detail. There were very few transcription errors.

The Application of the Criteria

The starting point for this must be achievement as set against the performance criteria, fixing first on a band and then secondly the mark within the band range. Comments on achievement on candidates' records should make reference to the band descriptors and give a mark out of 40 for each separate context.

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 a borderline. This aspect of the application of the criteria is particularly important, where there is bunching of marks, to distinguish separate performances.

The final mark is based on a simple mathematical calculation; the three separate marks are totalled and divided by three. Centres are advised to check the final calculations carefully as odd mistakes were discovered by moderators.

Importantly no assumption should be made as to a link between bands and the level awarded.

Internal Standardisation Procedures

The majority of centres in this session had rigorous procedures in place to ensure internal standardisation of the marks. Good practice is to use cross moderation/marketing exercises

across groups, reorganisation of groups for assessment and department marking often using centre filmed material, together with using the filmed assessment evidence provided annually by OCR.

Centres are reminded that it is essential that all staff preparing and assessing candidates watch and discuss the filmed assessments. Signing the GCW351 form testifies to this having taken place. The internally set standard must be confirmed against OCR's Agreed Standard. This is done by assessing and comparing the marks awarded by OCR for the filmed assessments with the centre's marks, irrespective of centre size. The centre must then adjust its standard where necessary. Centre visits by an external moderator further confirm a centre's marking.

Administration

Despite building a session on administration into the Advisory Visit, and including administration instructions on the filmed footage, there is still some confusion about how this unit is moderated. Moderators reported a number of centres being late in sending all the relevant material.

To summarise, Instructions to Centres on Moderation are available on the OCR website, as are all relevant forms. Administration procedures are also outlined on the online filmed footage and in the accompanying commentary.

A642 Imaginative Writing

General Comments

As always it was a pleasure to read the folders submitted by centres. Candidates were usually well prepared for the assessment and most clearly enjoyed the topics and the tasks that were chosen.

The lengths of the responses to the tasks were generally appropriate. Most centres now understand that a shorter more focused piece is likely to be more successful than a long rambling piece. There were fewer examples of very short responses to the satellite task which, in previous sessions, have prevented students achieving a mark in Band 3 or above because there is not enough detailed development.

Although the board appreciates the time pressures of redoing work for November entry, it was disappointing to see much less detailed annotation in the body of each candidate's work. Annotation is very useful when it draws the moderator's attention to each candidate's strengths and weaknesses because it helps them to understand how the centres arrived at their final marks.

Centres must also give a clear breakdown on the front sheet of the marks awarded for each of the assessment objectives. In some centres the comments made on the front sheet were particularly helpful because they combined words and phrases from the mark scheme with more personalised comment.

When compiling their sample folders, almost all centres packaged their candidates' work more effectively in this session. To facilitate the moderation process it is always better to use a staple or treasury tag or staple to attach the front sheet to the two responses and their respective plans rather than putting each one in a folder or plastic pocket.

The Tasks

Media

1 Write the words of a broadcast in which you give advice to young people about their relationships with older people (e.g. parents, teachers or elderly neighbours).

This was attempted by fewer candidates in this session than in the summer. Those who did attempt it, however, adopted the voices of a range of participants quite effectively. It was particularly pleasing to see how well younger people were able to write insightfully from the perspective of a much older person.

2 (a) Write a letter to the producer of the broadcast in which an older person comments on the advice that has been given.

Yet again candidates found the letter format very supportive and most were able to adopt a suitable tone. Candidates in future sessions should, however, avoid simply repeating the material from the core task as this does not achieve the sophisticated opportunities offered by this task to add an extra dimension to the original response.

2 (b) Write a podcast, dramatic monologue or case study giving an account of a challenging relationship with a person of a different age group.

No responses to this task were seen in this session.

2 (c) Write an article for a local newspaper reporting on a project which successfully brings together people from different age groups.

This was more popular in this session than in the summer. Candidates were clearly familiar with the newspaper article format and very few were distracted by making the text look like a newspaper, focussing much more sensibly on writing in an appropriate style.

Text Development

1 Choose one or two characters from a text you have read, heard or seen. Write a story about them in which they are searching for something or someone. Call your story "The Search".

It is good to see that centres are encouraging their candidates to use a much wider range of texts as a stimulus for this task. There is no disadvantage in submitting work based on the set texts and there were some interesting accounts of searches undertaken by George from *Of Mice and Men* and Romeo.

2 (a) Write a series of entries for a blog or diary in which one of the characters from your story records their thoughts and feelings about the search.

There were fewer candidates using this satellite task in this session. Those who did responded well to concerns expressed in previous reports by making sure that they wrote a few longer well-developed entries rather than a series of much shorter ones.

2 (b) Write a letter to a well-known actor in which you try to persuade them to play one of the characters in a film based on your story.

Supported once again by the letter format, most candidates were able to organise and develop their ideas clearly and appropriately. A few struggled, however, to develop sufficient interesting content for their letters beyond flattering the addressee and urging them in general terms to agree to take on the role. The best gave well developed reasons for approaching a particular actor based on their original story and on the actor's previous work.

2 (c) Write the words of a talk to your class about the importance of never giving up.

This was much more popular in this session than in the summer. Most candidates adopted some of the features of a talk so that their piece could not be mistaken for a newspaper article. A wide range of rhetorical features were used by many candidates and there were some mature and thoughtful arguments made.

Overall

The work of most candidates was well presented and mainly accurate but illegible work sometimes made moderation difficult. Although handwriting is not assessed, centres must ensure that candidates are not disadvantaged by poor handwriting. No special permission is required to use electronic aids to produce the final piece as long as spell-checks, thesauruses and the internet are disabled.

The quality of candidates' responses, and the advice they are being given by centres is steadily improving. Most are now engaging effectively with each task and producing appropriate responses. Spelling is generally accurate at all levels of ability and most students make some attempt to manipulate sentence structures for effect. Even the more able candidates, however, are not using punctuation between sentences with consistent accuracy. Paragraphing is another area that continues to cause concern: although many students have mastered the one word or one sentence paragraph, even the more able are less confident about organising and linking more straightforward paragraphs.

Overall it is clear that both centres and candidates enjoyed working on these tasks. All the work submitted showed real engagement and some imagination and the very best, as always, was amusing, engaging and sometimes genuinely powerful.

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 two reading texts for Section A: a website report on a 64-year-old American's record-winning swim and a leaflet from the Help the Aged charity.

The format of the answer booklet helped the majority of candidates to gauge an appropriate length for their answers. However, a minority of candidates tried unnecessarily to cram too many words into the spaces provided for Questions 1a – 1c. Some candidates wrote excessively for Question 2a.

There was some evidence in a minority of scripts that candidates had rushed their responses to the Reading questions and then spent an excessive amount of time on the Writing section. This led many of these candidates to write excessively long answers to their chosen Writing question, where quantity was prioritised over quality of response.

Individual Questions Section A – Reading

1(a) – 1(c) These easier questions provided a relatively gentle way in to the paper, though not all candidates scored all 6 marks. Some candidates, for example, found difficulty in identifying with sufficient clarity one or more facts in Question 1a.

1(d) Stronger responses demonstrated a clear focus on the task, clearly outlining both the difficulties Diana Nyad faced during her swim and also what she achieved from her swim. The best responses made a clear differentiation between the difficulties and achievements. Responses in the middle of the range tended to list points mechanically, without achieving a clear focus on the question.

Once again, less successful responses were often marked by the presence of one or more of the following:

- points made that were not relevant to the task
- points laboured or repeated
- significant lifting of material with only the occasional word changed in an unconvincing attempt at own words.

The very weakest answers lifted material indiscriminately and showed a misunderstanding of the task and/or text.

Question 2

The majority of candidates took note of the relative weightings of Q2(a) and Q2(b) – 6 and 14 marks respectively. This enabled them to write answers of an appropriate length.

2(a) Stronger responses commented on the precise effect of such features as the logo with the sun symbolising a happier future for the elderly if people made donations to the charity. The effectiveness of the two photographs in appealing to the emotions of readers was also noted. Candidates noted the gloominess of the black and white photograph of the old woman seated by the window which physically separated her from the rest of the world going about its business. The picture of the locket with its fading photographs hinted at the happier past the old woman had enjoyed, contrasting it with her current loneliness. Candidates also noted the emotive use of language ('Jean has known nothing but loneliness') and direct appeal to the reader ('Please give £12 to show her you care.').

The least successful responses (in a minority) merely identified features without comment or made generic comments about headings, photographs and logos that could be true of many media texts.

2(b) The most successful responses contained clear evidence of the ability to select and analyse relevant detail, commenting on both the information given and the effects of specific words and phrases. It should be noted, as always, that quality of analytical comment is a discriminator in this question.

The strongest responses commented on the cumulative effect of the detail used in conveying Jean's life in a small flat on her own, deserted by her neighbours and unable to cope with basic things such as getting on the bus or doing her shopping. These responses tended to make the point that the plight of Jean was being used to illustrate a much wider problem ('More than a million older people in the UK are acutely isolated').

Most responses at least attempted to explore the effects of words in helping to shape the reader's response to this leaflet, and the more successful responses showed a sound understanding of the text's purpose. The strongest responses looked closely at the effects of emotive language ('feeling lonely and forgotten', 'frail and isolated', 'suffer in silence') and direct appeals to the reader's sympathy or, as some argued, guilt ('with the generosity of supporters like you'). A few candidates wondered whether Jean actually existed.

Generally, there was less evidence this session of feature-spotting, where candidates list without comment examples of alliteration, metaphor and the rule of three.

The weakest responses simply described the content of the passage, showing considerable uncertainty about the requirements of the question.

Section B – Writing Questions 3 and 4

It is worth pointing out to centres preparing their learners for the June 2016 exam that length of answer alone rarely secures high reward. There 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) for their response to their chosen question in Section B. There should certainly be no need to use the additional pages of the answer booklet. Many candidates would have benefited from more practice at developing the quality of their writing. Those candidates who score highly recognise, among other things, the importance of planning, paragraphing and checking their work.

As ever, stronger responses showed a clear control of generally relevant material, and offered an engaging opening, clear development of ideas and an effective ending. Both vocabulary and sentence structures were varied for effect. The weakest responses tended to produce rambling material or material lacking coherence to the degree that it had to be re-read, sometimes several times, before the meaning was sufficiently clear.

Common and recurring problems with punctuation were the same ones listed in previous reports: confusion between upper and lower case letters and a failure to mark sentence divisions. More noticeable this session were difficulties candidates had marking apostrophes of both omission and possession.

Question 3

Predictably enough for an assessment aimed largely at 16-year-olds there was some sense that old age was thought to begin in one's early twenties.

The strongest responses presented convincing arguments about ways in which young people could benefit from the experience of, usually, their parents and grandparents who had lived

through more challenging times (it was generally argued) than younger people. Older people could, for example, help with the adult world of getting a job, getting a mortgage and managing money. Many candidates argued that older people also had a lot to learn from younger people, not least in accessing the internet or using a smartphone or tablet. The older people had, after all, it was sometimes lamented, been brought up watching small television sets with only a couple of channels showing programmes in only black and white. A minority of candidates pointed out that not all older people were suitable role models, citing excessive consumption of cigarettes and alcohol.

Question 4

The strongest responses remembered the audience, purpose and format of writing specified in the question, and crafted their responses accordingly. This meant that there was a clear sense of a speech given in the formal context of a classroom. Most candidates spoke knowledgeably and eloquently about the dire effects of unhealthy diets and inadequate exercise, giving suitable examples to support their arguments. There was much effective use of rhetorical devices that captured a tone appropriate both to audience and purpose.

There were, however, two examples of writing that sometimes detracted from the effectiveness of arguments. The use of spurious statistics (often relating to 'surveys' actually conducted by the candidate, or so it was claimed) did not always help to advance a convincing case. The use of somewhat contrived linguistic flourishes occasionally led to faltering notes in the writing.

A680 Information and Ideas (Higher Tier)

General Comments:

The majority of candidates had been prepared rigorously for this re-take session and even more were prepared to give it their best to improve the grades they had been awarded in the summer session. The vast majority of the work fell into a range of 35-45 marks out of the total of 80, straddling the C/D borderline and representing work in Bands 3, 4 & 5. A smaller but still significant number of candidates produced much higher order work and there was much to commend and enjoy in strong A grade papers.

Equally there was a smaller number of entrants who may have been better placed in the Foundation Tier or in Functional Skills English, where there is a clearer framework for what is required.

Very few candidates achieve less than Band 5 in their writing but many more do so in reading because those skills are less well developed.

The paper worked well and was very comparable in the level of challenge and outcome to both the papers set in November 2014 and June 2015. Phoebe Doyle's polemic on the ills of School PE struck a chord with many and Alan Carr was a well-known personality to the vast majority.

Comments on Individual Questions:

Question 1

Many candidates could improve their performance on all the reading questions and especially this one.

Is the focus on competitive sports killing PE for those who aren't "good enough"?

Outline concisely the key points of Phoebe Doyle's objections to the PE teaching she experienced in School.

Strong responses to this focused, as the task requests, on Phoebe Doyle's experiences of School: not her subsequent engagement with fitness and exercise.

There was much to say and the best answers did so with concision and effective use of own words. Remember that the skills looked for here are those of selection and reorganisation: if the candidate's vocabulary subsumes the language of the passage that is fine. Synonym recall is not being tested. Answers saw that in addition to the physical discomfort, the humiliating treatment of the weak by the strong, the consequent deceit and fabrication and the sheer dread of failure there were bigger issues. There was no theory offered; the emphasis on team games and competition was very divisive; this led to elitism and elitist attitudes in which the minority were favoured, and so on.

Middle range answers saw the former, rather more personal points but fewer of the latter, bigger ones. They often added on irrelevant material about Phoebe Doyle's adult exercise habits and her aspirations for her daughter. Sometimes there was a range of points but put into a far bigger word count than the original. Both irrelevance, excess and verbosity count against a bare count of the points and may restrict a response to a lower band than concision and sparseness may have qualified it for.

Weaker answers struggled to select appropriate elements of the passage and failed to re-organise them suitably. Some simply lifted or copied chunks of the passage, the weakest ones using the first person narrative voice, an obvious give-away. Other candidates still confuse the skills required for this task with those required for questions 2 & 3. Such responses gain very few marks, if any.

Answers that had been planned before the commencement of the response were invariably the more successful.

Question 2

How does Phoebe Doyle try to persuade us of involving all children in PE?

There were two broad avenues to explore here: firstly what is implied in the way she structures and composes the diatribe against her experience of School PE (basically that it was competitive and therefore divisive and therefore a failure) and the brave new world she has discovered of the benefits of personal training, exercise and fitness which is not team orientated and therefore non-competitive and therefore (she argues) a success. And therefore they should be the constituent parts of a reformed School PE curriculum.

The first, therefore, required candidates to go back over the material they had covered in Q1 and look at HOW it is expressed: and then go on to do the same with the latter. Examiners had to make the assumption that in the first case “involving all children in PE” was implied by the candidate where it was not openly stated: which was a frequent experience.

Many candidates worked well on aspects of the presentation: picking up the specious moral relativity implied by ‘aren’t “good enough”?’ was the first stop, followed by a consideration of the structural support given by the juxtaposition of the sub-headings. There was much to say about the first photograph, which was universally linked with one or more aspect/s of the text denoting exclusion, humiliation etc. The last photograph was also popular prompting analysis of contrast and support for PD’s conclusion. It was a shame that fewer candidates did not take a more constructively critical view of the age of the participants and link that back to the latter stages of the argument.

There was much for all candidates to investigate in the text: it is freighted down with emotive language, both positive and negative. The “hated/dreaded/rubbish/was rubbish” all invited attention. The use of the word “regime” was analysed by stronger candidates who scored heavily when they saw this was a summative account of PD’s view of School PE. The repetition of “useless” now in a new context with the violence of “slapped” was a popular choice for comment as was “take zero credit”.

Many more candidates tried to do something with the colloquialisms in the first section than (for example) the self-conscious deprecation of her running abilities in the same vein at the top of page 3. Neither were the lapses into self-indulgent sentimentality as she tries to make a general argument from the particularities of her daughter’s “loves/skips/scoots” much considered. One wonders how the Doyle regime would react if the child were a secret smoker playing full back for the hockey team.

In fact the passage is less formal throughout than some candidates expected or wanted it to be.

However often we try and guide candidates away from it there is still far too widespread a habit of seeking to answer both reading questions by device spotting. The more ludicrous examples of this were on the second passage but even here there were allegations not just of unidentified metaphor and oxymoron but asyndeton and even polysyndeton when reference to “listing” would have served the purpose equally well. All I can repeat is that this brings candidates very little if

any reward. It also elongates answers significantly precluding time, which might have been better spent on a thorough reading of the second passage.

Question 3

How does Alan Carr present his childhood memories in a thoughtful and amusing way?

A clear distinction picked up by all examiners was the difference in the quality of answers where the passage had been thoroughly read and pondered and where the attention paid it had been negligible or perfunctory. Candidates who are in too much of a hurry with this task throw marks away.

Nor was it necessarily an advantage to have been familiar with either Graham or Alan Carr, as this sometimes invited candidates down a path of irrelevance when commenting, for example, about the latter's TV presenting skills.

More problematically too many otherwise capable candidates failed to follow the steer in the question: "thoughtful" (aka serious) and "amusing" (aka funny). On the other hand this structure provided a very fruitful way into the task for those who saw and went with it. They talked very capably, for example about the juxtaposition of resentment and sarcasm, which produces a sardonic tone and overview throughout.

On the serious note some very perceptive candidates talked about Carr senior with some sympathy, a Dad who didn't deserve this mauling for simply trying to support his recalcitrant, cynical son. The strongest candidates also went to town in analysing not just the sarcasm used but also its shades and the way the structure of the piece reinforces its effects. For example the repetition of "arthritis" which crosses a paragraph division and ends in an abruptly ironic rhetorical question "prevention, anyone?" was rightly seen as a crux in the passage's structure and an example of AC being unfair to his father, or, at any rate, thoughtfully serious as well as very witty.

Some candidates found difficulty in finding anything that actually amused them and were forced into assertion and speculation about what that might have been. Others tended to ignore thoughtful and go for allegedly comic examples from the piece.

There was a plethora of device spotting in this question, some of it ridiculous, most very limiting to the candidate's mark.

Remarking on the repetition of "tree" in the first paragraph is perfectly acceptable, so long as the effects are noted. However, the bald statement that "spectacle wearer" and "puppy fat" are "ironic" hilarious *per se* could not be credited. Ascribing "29 minutes, 38 seconds" to a "use of statistics" is device spotting at its least productive. The whole point of the "nutritious in-flight meal" was missed and written down as a simile or a metaphor without explanation.

There is still far too much reliance from a few candidates in spotting personal pronouns and attempting to make too much of them.

Question 4

Write an entry for a personal diary or blog where you explore your thoughts about the expectations others have of you.

This was a very popular choice of writing topic: both versions of the genre are ones candidates are very familiar with and confident in. There were some fascinating accounts of the pressures parents and friends unwittingly put on individuals and accounts of prodigious sporting ability and the massive amount of training imposed on young people to develop this were breath-taking.

Many candidates wrote about the agonies of parental expectation with regard academic results, careers and university entrance in a sympathetic and tolerant way “I know they only want the best for me, but....”.

Some accounts were more personal and often ended with a resounding declaration of personal integrity and independence, no matter what.

Candidates always benefit from planning their work whichever topic they choose: this has many benefits, especially to the shape and structure of the essay; its concision, sharpness of expression and focus on the task and continuity.

Question 5

“There’s no point if there’s no challenge.”

Write your views on this statement

The task was developed in a wide variety of styles and genres. Some candidates chose exemplification as a means of agreeing with the prompt, giving accounts of herculean efforts in mountain climbing, jungle trekking and a host of different sporting activities. Some, closer to home, wrote movingly of struggles to stop families from falling apart or working at reconciliation when they had done so. Others gave harrowing accounts of looking after dying grandparents or other close family members.

A different tack was to start with a robust “I disagree” or “the statement is rubbish” and then go on to explore/explain the reasons for that leading, in the case of abler candidates to a philosophical approach and resolution. Weaker candidates often started taking one point of view but changing their minds as they thought more about it, or, in the case of the weaker ones, struggled for things to say, and ran out of consistent ideas.

Some candidates simply sat on the fence and gave a “yes/well no” style response.

Some candidates at the top end were able to demonstrate maturity, sophistication and flair in their work and gave examiners much pleasure in what they produced. At the bottom end of the range in this tier there is very rarely a shortage of ideas or things to say: rather severe weaknesses in the ways of saying them. Too many candidates (even if that is a small number) are very slapdash about handwriting and give examiners real problems in deciphering what they are trying to express. The basic rules of grammar and syntax are sometimes ignored. A frequent example in this session was wildly variant tense disagreements.

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