

GCSE

English Language

General Certificate of Secondary Education **J355**

OCR Report to Centres November 2016

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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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A651 Extended Literary Text and Imaginative Writing

General Comments

There was a very, very small entry for the November 2016 submission due to the change of rules for resitting examinations. As a result, there was very little variety to be seen in the texts studied and the subsequent assessments submitted. Apart from two centres, who submitted work on the poetry of Wilfred Owen, all the other centres submitted work on 'Of Mice and Men'.

Tasks, Texts and Responses

The central band four-six descriptor is "understands and demonstrates how meaning is conveyed". In band three and above this is developed to include "evaluating (commenting on/ making judgements about) language and structure as appropriate" (in ways that are relevant to task and text). Such an approach would certainly be beneficial to all candidates, irrespective of their aspirations or their choice of task and text, in so far that they can write about language and structure throughout the piece: rather than focusing exclusively on the former. Long narrative recapitulations should be avoided: they will not gain a great deal of credit. Neither will responses that insist on including passages on the alleged social, historical and cultural context of the work, which is not asked for and not tested in this Unit (see below).

SECTION A – Extended Literary Text

THEMED TASKS

There were no responses to the themed tasks.

PROSE OR LITERARY NON-FICTION

John Steinbeck "Of Mice and Men"

This was the most popular question by far and there were some very good responses. Even the less impressive were still very solid and workmanlike. The best responses were able to see and demonstrate the ways in which Steinbeck makes the characters' reactions to the dream of "livin off the fatta the lan" so revealing. The candidates tended to adopt a character by character approach and this worked well at all levels. The more successful answers integrated the American Dream to George and Lennie's dream and also integrated Candy and Crooks into the answer very well. Less successful responses tended to catalogue the characters and then comment on how "livin off the fatta the lan" applied to them.

To repeat yet again what has been said in successive Reports to Centres: references to Social/Cultural/Historical context are not sought here and are not required. They do not necessarily detract from the merits of a response but they rarely do little to enhance it. This is especially true of received, often generic comments, which tend to become clichés.

There were no responses to :

Athol Fugard "Tsotsi"

Jane Austen "Pride and Prejudice".

Bill Bryson or Kate Adie

Hardy short stories

William Shakespeare: "Romeo and Juliet".

William Shakespeare : “Julius Caesar”

POETRY: SELECTED POEMS

Wilfred Owen:

Two centres chose to write about Wilfred Owen’s poetry and there were some very thoughtful individual responses. It was pleasing to see that the candidates hadn’t attempted to analyse too many poems and therefore those poems that were selected were analysed in depth.

There were no responses to:

Benjamin Zephaniah
Simon Armitage

SECTION B – IMAGINATIVE WRITING

Personal and Imaginative Writing/Prose Fiction

The majority of candidates chose to write about ‘Unforeseen Consequences’ This proved to be a very accessible task and candidates appeared to have enjoyed the theme. It was pleasing to see that most, if not all, tried very hard to create a sense of tension, as the title might imply, and as a result there were some excellent responses. The satellite task was a diary entry or a series of diary entries which also proved popular.

It was, however, surprising to see, the brevity of a number of pieces for the satellite task. Both the main task and the satellite task have equal weighting with regards to marks and in a number of instances it was disappointing to see a cursory attempt at the satellite task after a valiant effort at the main task.

Centres and teachers are to be congratulated on steering candidates in directions that often displayed compassion, sympathy and awe in convincing and authentic detail.

Good tests of the merit of a candidate’s writing are often:

- The degree of control there has been in shaping and developing the chosen (raw) material of the piece: is this greater or lesser than the sum of its parts? How completely integrated are its different (and quite possibly disparate) elements?
- The range and appropriateness of the vocabulary: is it apt, precise, well separated and lacking repetition?

Finally, the centres and candidates who did submit work for this session are again to be congratulated on the enthusiasm which characterised much of the work that was read.

Administrative Matters

As it was such a small entry there were very few centres who were late in submitting samples of work.

However, it was disappointing to find a bigger discrepancy in the presentation of the work for this submission as opposed to the work submitted for June 2016. There was a paucity of annotation on scripts to show exactly where and how marks had been awarded than there had been in the summer.

The recording of marks for the writing tasks, ie the separate marks for the different AOs for each piece, was not carried out as well for this session as in previous sessions. Marks were not broken down and centres often just offered a total for the moderator to make a judgement on. It is important that centres are diligent when it comes to the administration of controlled assessments. For such a small entry of centres there has been a startling increase in the number of clerical errors made by centres, suggesting that submissions had been done in a rush. OCR asks for your co-operation in eliminating this, in the interest of all candidates.

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 had been adequately prepared for the examination, though a higher proportion of candidates this session wrote at excessive length for Section B Writing. These candidates would have been better advised to plan their answers, write less and spend more time crafting and proof-reading their material.

The spaces in the answer booklet provided for responses were usually sufficient for candidates. Those who needed to use the additional pages provided at the back of the booklet tended to continue their responses to Question 2(a).

Individual Questions

Section A – Reading

1(a) – 1(c) The most effective responses to these questions were those which employed short phrases. Verbatim copying of whole sentences is not a useful strategy for ‘short-answer’ questions such as these.

1(d) As ever for this question, stronger responses demonstrated a clear focus on the task and demonstrated the ability to express points in their own words. These candidates made a wide range of relevant points which together showed a secure understanding of the text and task.

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 made at excessive length
- points repeated
- points lifted verbatim from the extract
- analysis of the use of language (which is not required for this question).

Use of own words is a discriminator in this question, that is, own words ‘as far as possible’, as the question makes clear. Some middle-ranking candidates altered only the occasional word. This approach led to a very mechanical approach with an over-reliance on lifting (albeit not verbatim lifting), as candidates worked through the passage rather than addressing the question in a focused way.

The least successful responses lifted material indiscriminately and showed a considerable misunderstanding of the task and/or text.

Question 2

Most candidates took note of the relative weightings of Q2(a) and Q2(b) – 6 and 14 marks respectively.

2(a) Stronger responses commented on the pun in the main heading, the striking nature of the photographs and the dramatic impact of specific words (e.g. ‘Festive misery’, ‘thousands hit by rail chaos’, ‘snow hell’, ‘thousands stranded’). Once again this session, less successful responses merely identified presentational features without commenting on specific effects or

they made generic comments about headings, photographs and captions that could be true of any newspaper article, or indeed, of any media text.

2(b) Successful responses contained clear evidence of the ability to select and analyse relevant detail, commenting both on the information given and on specific words and phrases. Stronger responses explored the effects of the use of metaphorical language and hyperbole: passengers were 'fuming' and 'plunged into chaos'; they faced 'hours of hell' and 'battled' to get home 'to their loved ones'. There were comments on the 'dangerously' large crowd in confined spaces and the need for police to control the 'jostling' passengers. Some candidates highlighted the words and phrases that depict the railway system as barely able to cope: platforms were 'blocked'; trains were 'stuck'; 'pain was heaped on' passengers; 'major disruption...piled further disruption'. However, many responses did not address aspects of language used in the article. Weaker responses simply described the content of the passage, with the weakest simply lifting material.

Section B – Writing Questions 3 and 4

There were many engaging responses from candidates at the top end. Their answers had evidence of planning and crafting material for an audience. These answers were characterised by confident openings, careful organisation and effective endings. Those candidates who wrote at length, barely pausing for breath, produced rambling responses which struggled to engage the reader's interest. The more some candidates wrote, the more errors they made.

In the strongest responses, careful thought had been given to choices of vocabulary and sentence structures, and the need for clarity and accuracy was acknowledged.

For Question 3, the strongest responses produced interesting accounts of travel plans that went wrong, together with some consideration of what candidates had learned from the experience. Many responses painted frightening pictures of feckless parents forgetting to set the alarm clock and/or forgetting passports or pitching up at the airport on the wrong day.

For Question 4, many responses argued for or against the proposition in the task that 'the mobile phone was the worst invention of the twentieth century'. Some attempted balanced arguments but few did so convincingly, as they simply set out reasons for and against without establishing a clear personal line of argument. Many candidates struggled to find a register that was appropriate for a letter to the editor.

A680 Information and Ideas (Higher Tier)

General Comments:

Although there will be a further re-take session of this paper in summer 2017 this was essentially the swansong of the examined unit of the now legacy syllabuses English and English Language J350 and J355.

The paper was well received with no adverse comment from any of the centres whose candidates took it. There was a conscious attempt to move the subject material on to something that was attractive and relevant to the candidates but was also of some of importance to them and their peers. Responses clearly showed that this approach was popular and respected.

The paper spread the levels of achievement out very broadly, perhaps more so than for other November sittings.

Some candidates are still being entered inappropriately for the Higher Tier qualification and would have plainly been better off in the Foundation Tier. They were very few in number however and there were relatively very few marks below 30 in all 680 + of them. These responses are characterised by very limited reading skills: a complete lack of concision and detail in Q1 and very limited assertive/descriptive responses to Qs 2 & 3.

The bulk of candidates were attempting to move a summertime D or E up to a C or better and the script evidence suggests that many will have been successful in doing so. This was not only because of the efforts to do better on writing but palpable improvements in reading skills, at least in some of them. There was less evidence of device spotting and listing in the reading than previously, always a promising sign, although too many candidates appear to want to rely on pre-digested lists of said rhetorical devices to deploy in their writing.

There was some very strong, readable, entertaining and/or authoritative work at the top end of the spectrum of achievement and these candidates will be pleased with their grades, which they certainly deserve. As I suggest above both sets of topics were set with social awareness and responsibility in mind and the strongest candidates engaged them with a compelling articulation and maturity of approach.

Comments on Individual Questions:

Question No 1.

The passage 'Paws for Progress' was read with interest, compassion and enthusiasm. Candidates were not short of things to say about it but were, on occasion, unable to make sufficient differentiation between precept and example.

One of the points which all scored on was that the scheme is a success: what is wanted is one reference to support that, not the lifting of a paragraph or more of text. Stronger responses differentiated very effectively between the qualifications the inmates worked towards on the one hand and the personal benefits they acquired on the other.

Some answers got this distinction but then tended to blur it with repetition.

As always there were responses that were limited because the passage had been read too quickly or superficially (this is, after all, a higher tier examination) and some where it was clear that the latter parts of the passage had not been read at all.

Concision, eschewal of repetition and excess are of the essence in getting answers to this task into the higher bands. Candidates who ignore this and simply lift at great length or give side after side of description should not expect to attain a higher band mark. Above all, this is a test of close reading, which should have been completed fully and in detail before the task is broached.

Question No 2.

There was much to say and, indeed, much was said, about the title “How dogs are teaching young offenders new tricks”. And the picture of the dog, which almost all responses claimed ‘was smiling’.

The former is a good illustration of the danger of semi understood device spotting. The point to make is that the title attracts attention because it is a reversal of our expectations and a literal impossibility. Whether it is an oxymoron, juxtaposition, a metaphor, a pun, a play on words or one of the many labels it attracted is of less significance.

Many answers showed a detailed response to the picture. There was no reward for knowing or guessing the breed of the dog or saying that green is the colour of nature but there were good marks to be gained from talking about the greater prominence given to the dog than the handler; its lolling tongue and the restrained use of the harness by the inmate.

There were many opportunities to talk about the effects of language choices for those who wished to take them. The atmosphere evoked in the opening paragraph may or may not be a pathetic fallacy as some candidates claimed but it certainly builds up an effectively misleading picture culminating in the short sharp shock of ‘out jumps a dog’. And straightaway the writer throws the gearstick forward to build a contrastingly positive, hopeful picture. There was much to say about the voices we hear: ‘mature and positive attitudes’/ ‘any illusion this is a miracle cure’ on the one hand and, on the other ‘he was a bit snappy’/ he’s a great dog’ and so on.

And the impact, finally, of the short paragraph: ‘But she has been heartened’.

Almost all candidates talk about language if only in describing/paraphrasing/copying what they have read. Many fewer take on structure at all. A shame with this passage, where the beginning and the end are in such marked and qualified contra-distinction.

Question No. 3

This split candidates quite arrestingly. Some who had found the first passage difficult were much more at home here and produced clearly shaped and engaged responses. Others who had fared well with dog re-homing were challenged by what they read and were asked to do.

Where candidates had read sufficient to understand the point of the article and the rudiments of the way it works: an angry polemic against the perceived injustice of a system of sentencing where ‘one size fits all’, then good answers followed. These were characterised by a capacity to start at the end with this informing sense of the piece and then link back to what precedes it to show how the tone of suppressed anger is developed.

Responses that hadn’t seen the central message struggled to make much of the personal anecdotes and statistical references that build up to it.

The best answers, and there were a good many, picked up and analysed the ways in which the tone works. The opening suggests anger, as does the portrait of the inmate both public and private. The references to the Royal Society Report intensify and suppress this emotion and it emerges far more strongly in the bitterly ironic remarks about government policy.

It was another powerful passage, which seemed to prompt candidates into a relevant mindset for the writing.

Question 4.

The tasks split the candidates roughly 50/50.

Most of the takers for caring avoided the obvious potential pitfall of over sentimentality and they went for an essentially 'do as you would be done by' approach. Many included detailed accounts of harrowing personal experiences with family relatives or close friends with an eschewal of attention seeking and, instead, a modest account of what they had learned.

Other candidates turned the topic into a third party narrative usually with some relevance attached, at least at the conclusion.

The weakest work was either where candidates simply lacked the mechanical skills to write with the level of accuracy and organisation that this tier requires or, given those, simply trotted out 'one I wrote earlier' with scant if any acknowledgement of the set title.

Question No. 5

The danger here was to simply rant in general terms without considering that there were (at least) two diametrically opposed points of view to this.

Weaker responses took 'freedom' to simply list complaints about school or college, or, in some cases of extreme dissatisfaction, of both. They became repetitive and shapeless by the end and were given a hastily tacked on conclusion suggesting, unconvincingly, that it had all been about freedom throughout.

Better responses saw that freedom was about a lot more than petty rules and regulations and when and what you could eat and when you could and couldn't use the toilets. They were, for example, concerned with and mostly grateful for the freedom of expression students were allowed and, indeed, encouraged to exercise in the classroom and outside it. And that smart students could customise and individualise the strictest dress code/ uniform if they wished to do so. Some only started to see positives half way through the writing process which left an unbalanced and not fully organised impression of the work.

Some of the strongest essays moved away from school/ college altogether and simply took 'school and college students' (as they were perfectly entitled to do) as a particular sub group of the population and gave an internationalist comparative account of freedoms in different countries and cultures.

In both tasks, work that was carefully planned and thought through prior to the writing process, so that the latter could be given complete attention, were the more successful.

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