

A LEVEL

Examiners' report

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (EMC)

H474

For first teaching in 2015

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Endorsed component

Version 1

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Introduction

The non examined assessment (NEA) is a compulsory component of A Level English Language and Literature (EMC). It is worth 40 marks and counts as 20% of the total A Level.

The non examined component comprises two pieces of work. For Task 1, Analytical and comparative writing, candidates write an essay of 1500–2000 words on a non-fiction text chosen from a list of 12 non-fiction set texts and a second free choice text. One of the texts must have been published after 2000. For Task 2, candidates produce a piece of original non-fiction writing of 1000-1200 words including a 150-word introduction. Quotations, footnotes and bibliography are not included in the word count.

Guidance on preparation and marking of the non examined assessment is included in the specification, including the marking criteria. Marking should be positive, rewarding achievement rather than penalising failure or omissions. The awarding of marks must be directly related to the marking criteria. Teachers should use their professional judgement to select the best-fit level descriptor that describes the candidate's work. Teachers should use the full range of marks available to them and award all the marks in any level for which work fully meets that descriptor. Teachers should bear in mind the weighting of the assessment objectives, place the response within a level and award the appropriate mark. If a candidate does not address one of the assessment objectives targeted in the assessment they cannot achieve all of the marks in the given level.

Centres are responsible for internal standardisation of assessments.

General overview

Moderators were keen to report that this session of the non-exam assessment (NEA) generated some excellent analytical and creative work from candidates. There was lots enthusiasm on display, both for the non-fiction texts studied and in the original writing. The majority of candidates understood that the key priorities in this component are to explore connections across texts for Task 1 and to show creative flair in Task 2. Where candidates had been given freedom of choice in the selection of texts and tasks for their NEA moderators reported a clear sense of enthusiasm and ownership evident in the work. So often it is the case that such factors impact positively on levels of achievement. Where more of the text and topic choice has been determined by the centre, or there was a narrower range of approaches across a cohort, then the outcomes can feel more predictable.

Task 1

The specification requires all candidates to study a non-fiction text from the prescribed list in the specification (alongside a free choice text) and all submitted work fulfilled this requirement. Approaches as to how this particular text is chosen, and studied, varied from centre to centre. Some centres favour a whole-cohort choice and then have candidates link that with another text chosen from a range of different fiction and non-fiction options. There is much to be said for the shared enjoyment and sense of discovery that can be achieved through whole-class study of a text. This approach seems to work particularly well when teaching foregrounds from the start ways in which the text might be linked. The way this is handled by some centres is really impressive with a whole range of different foci for comparison being developed, both thematic and stylistic. What is really exciting to see in work of this kind is the ways in which 'meaning' in both texts starts to become clear by the act of comparison; candidates demonstrating awareness of how exploration of one text starts to confer meaning on the other. In work of this kind comparison becomes entirely integrated and discussion of one text becomes a function of how the other is responded to. With this approach candidates tend to score highly for AO4, with AO2 naturally following that.

Anna Funder's *Stasiland* continues to be a popular text paired with a variety of dystopian novels. In this session Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* again featured regularly as the free choice text and this is a pairing that worked well for several candidates. Work from one centre on this combination, and on *Stasiland* with Dave Egger's *The Circle*, focused interestingly on the creation of dystopian visions through the build-up of everyday detail, what one candidate called 'dystopias of banality'. With this combination, and with many others, moderators reported a willingness of candidates to engage closely with form, particularly the impact of non-fictional versus fictional representation on reader-response. Several candidates explored their own response as readers, and as young people, to Funder's presentation of the traumas and anguish of the lives of Miriam Weber and Frau Sigrid Paul and to Kathy in *Never Let Me Go*, and Mae Holland in *The Circle*.

Other centres favoured an approach where candidates were given the freedom to select both texts; some choosing to compare two non-fiction texts from the prescribed list, and others selecting the second free choice text from a wide selection of text types. It is worth remembering the range of text types that are possible for exploration in Task 1 and it could be that in future sessions centres seek to develop this range. Fiction proves the most popular choice of second text, literary and popular, contemporary and canonical, and this again gave rise to interesting discussions on how we engage differently with texts we consider to be 'true'.

Some responses to more unusual text types featured in this session, for example: comedy scripts by Peter Kay, Rik Mayall and Steve Coogan's *I, Partridge*; memoirs by Joan Didion and Hilary Mantel's *Giving Up the Ghost*; poetry including Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* and Kate Tempest's *Let Them Eat Chaos*; journalism/travel writing including Jeffrey Taylor's *Facing the Congo*; biographies such as Russell Brand's *My Booky Wook* and Janice Galloway's *This is Not About Me*; plays including Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and Gillian Slovo's *The Riots*. There were of course many novels studied, including some that are only recently published, which is a really positive development. These included Caitlin Moran's *How To Build a Girl* and Emily Fridlund's *History of Wolves*. Other interesting choices included Allain de Botton's *Essays in Love*, Andrea Levy's *The Long Song*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Philip Roth's *Nemesis*. These texts were in turn paired with *Stuart: A Life Backwards*, *Why Be Normal*, *The Lost Continent* and *Hyperbole and a Half*.

Young Adult fiction is perfectly acceptable for this component and there were some effective responses on works such as *The Book Thief*, *Noughts and Crosses*, *13 Minutes* by Sarah Pinborough, and Louise O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours* (in this case, paired with *Stasiland*). All of these texts offer a degree of challenge and when explored comparatively with a prescribed text can form very successful studies. It is a requirement of the specification that this is 'whole text' study and it is important that candidates range widely over their chosen texts rather than focussing too narrowly on extracts. Task titles that focus on the construction and shaping of meaning and the impact of genre and other contextual factors are likely to be the most productive areas for analysis. Students with this kind of focus are most likely to meet the requirements of the four Assessment Objectives assessed in this component.

AO1

As mentioned in the Examiner Report last year it is important in this Language and Literature component that candidates use a good range of literary and linguistic terminology in their responses to texts, especially if they are being given marks in Levels 5 and 6. The second strand of AO1 relating to the clarity of written expression is a given at this level, but centres are reminded that work credited marks in the higher levels should contain a wide range of critical terminology. Many candidates have acquired a formal analytical register by this stage of the course and produce detailed and insightful work. Even though in this component candidates are responding to whole texts there should be evidence of close-reading and stylistic analysis, and at some points there should be discussion of each text of the kind candidates are familiar with in their work for Component 2. Most candidates correctly label aspects of language use but sometimes do little with that. Identification of word classes, for its own sake, is unlikely to make discussion of a writer's intentions and achievements more revealing. General descriptive comments, such as identifying that the text is 'set out in chapters' or that it uses a lot of 'long paragraphs' is unlikely to characterise work at Levels 5 and 6.

AO2

The best work integrates literary and linguistic analysis in order to explore how meanings are constructed. That being said the type of text being explored in Task 1 will partly determine whether a linguistic or literary approach is the best fit, and candidates should feel that they can foreground one approach over the other. For example if the prescribed non-fiction text is being compared with a collection of poetry, then moving from a linguistically focused analysis to one that explores poetic effects and devices would be appropriate. Students often struggle to consider the impact of a writer's choices of form and structure, and in much of the work there is scope for a greater focus on how meanings are shaped by narrative methods and by contrasting genre differences. The contrasts in narrative voice in say, a non-fiction text and that used in a novel, is a really important aspect in exploring the impact of genre on the ways in which characters are imaginatively conceived as compared to the experiences of real people.

AO3

Students explored a wide range of contextual factors in their studies for Task 1. The most effective responses to AO3 are where contextual factors are entirely embedded and knowledge about them is the driver of AO4 comparison. Many of the text pairings explored contemporary social and political concerns and there was some very sensitive handling of these issues, even where the situations being explored are far removed from the candidate's own experience. In this session we saw explorations of homelessness, bereavement, experiences of criminality, totalitarianism, adoption, mental health issues, childhood experience, gender inequality, religious extremism, 'faction' and the non-fiction novel, amongst many others. The context of genre is obviously an important area to explore and candidates are well advised to consider closely the impact of this on the construction and reception of the text.

AO4

AO4 is at the heart of Task 1 and is the most heavily weighted Assessment Objective. Ways in which success in Task 1 depends upon sustained comparison has been mentioned above. Tasks need to be constructed so that an integrated discussion of the texts naturally follows. Some candidates discuss the two texts simultaneously throughout, while others explore one text and then the other in the light of the discoveries made. Both of these approaches can be very effective as an exploration of how texts connect. This kind of integrated approach will certainly be a feature of work assessed as having achieved Level 4 and above for AO4. Work at Levels 1 to 3 is more likely to list shared features, but this too can represent engagement and positive achievement. Where candidates achieve much less highly in this task they tend to write two responses in parallel with a nod to comparison really only evident in the use of words such as 'however', 'moreover' and 'by contrast'. Some candidates tend to see 'comparison' as synonymous with 'similarity' and it is important to understand that really effective comparative work can be as much about difference as it is similarity. This is obviously the case when considering the writers' use of techniques to deliver the shared ideas being explored. The list of such features that appeared in this report for 2017 is worth reprising here: the treatment of time and structure, flashbacks, chiasmic structure, parody, humour/satire, interview material used differently, narrative voices, irony, symbolism, the power of storytelling, individual idiolects, gendered voices, change in language use over time, pathos, writers as characters within the text, the use of verbatim accounts, jargon, journalistic devices, objective and/or subjective interpretations, rhetorical devices, the use of the expert voice, the use of first person perspectives etc.

Task 2

Task 2 involves candidates producing their own non-fiction original writing and preceding this with a short introduction that shows how their writing reveals understanding of their chosen genre, and some of the linguistic techniques used. The production of original creative writing is something that candidates really enjoy and the enthusiasm, knowledge and range of experiences shared in the work this series was impressive. Moderators mentioned on several occasions how authentic much of the work was, with a clear knowledge of genre conventions demonstrated. This A Level course has the study of non-fiction texts, and the development of creative writing skills, as central, with candidates studying a wide range of non-fiction texts for Component 1 and practising their writing skills for Component 3. This task really can be seen as a synoptic assessment of that prior study. It is also an opportunity for candidates to explore topics and forms that are important to them.

The most successful work understood that, as explored elsewhere in this A Level, to be a writer you need first to be a reader. A clear sense of the conventions of the non-fiction form being produced is a precursor to successful text production. Discovering and exploring a range of different style models is excellent preparation for this element, just as it is for preparing for the Component 1 examination. Such analysis doesn't need to lead to a too-dogged replication of style models, and is not antithetical to AO5 creativity. The best work will be innovative and at times highly original. Students can and will break rules but knowing what the 'rules' are in the first place, and why they're breaking them, is likely to lead to much more convincing pieces of work.

The introduction to Task 2 proved to be a challenge to some candidates in this session. Moderators noted that there was a variety of approaches taken, and a tendency does seem to be appearing for candidates to view the introduction as a 'commentary' space; that is, to produce a mini essay that lists features applied and their reasons for using them. In this sense they are doing something very similar to the commentary in Component 3 Section B. If this approach is taken it is difficult to cover much ground in the 150 words allocated for this and it is unlikely they will be able to do much of what is potentially more fruitful territory; the identification of a form, audience and purpose for their writing and, importantly, a consideration of the decisions made in the shaping of material to create meaning. Some introductions, as was the case in the previous series, remain rather vague and focused on content and themes in their own writing. In these cases the introduction can feel like something of an afterthought, even if positioned in the text before the original writing. It might be interesting if candidates wrote a draft of their introduction after researching the topic and form but before writing the piece, and then revisited it as evaluation later in the process.

Many different non-fiction forms were produced for Task 2 this series, in both written and spoken mode. The most popular forms were memoirs, travel writing, blogs, journalistic pieces, satires and speeches. In all cases the key to production of successful original writing is having a clear sense of form, audience and purpose. Many candidates chose to explore their own life experiences in their writing and self-writing can be very satisfying to produce, and engaging and sometimes moving to read. It is important for candidates to have a clear sense of where the writing would appear, and who would read it, otherwise real experience can feel somewhat unmediated. A holiday experience, even if unusual, exotic or unexpected, doesn't qualify as travel writing unless it is very knowingly shaped with some sense of the experience being universalised, and the narrator as proxy traveller. There was much successful writing in the form of memoirs, not only from those candidates who might be considered to have unusual life events to report. One candidate wrote a chapter for a memoir about her mother which involved interviewing her, during the course of which they discussed issues never previously addressed between them. The work that went into shaping this material was fastidious and the outcome was stunning. The maturity, subtlety and restraint in the portrait were really impressive. More generally with autobiographical writing the key seems to be to project outwards to the experience of an imagined

reader, as well as detailing lived experience. Crafting of this form is critical and the sense of the experience being revisited and mediated in the light of subsequent life experience, crucial.

Again this year some of the blogs produced were rather shapeless. It is important that if a candidate chooses this form they have passion and expertise in an area that others would genuinely like to share. Focussing on the work of a particular admired blogger and producing something 'in the style of' can be an effective strategy. Satirical writing was popular too, perhaps particularly from those who had studied Bill Bryson for Task 1, or those recalling Jonathan Swift from Component 1. This kind of writing can prove challenging for candidates: what in Bill Bryson's hands (just) avoids mockery can feel a little arch as written by the rest of us. The best satirical writing is subtle, even if, like Swift the outcomes are coruscating. Comedic effects in satirical writing need some care and perhaps the rule is that less is more. Some of the best writing seen in this exam series made the reader work, questioning the tone and what the text is doing. Having the reader arrive themselves at the purpose of the satire is usually much more effective than laying it out for them explicitly.

Administration

All NEA folders require completed candidate cover sheets (CCS/H474) with task titles and summative comments given in full and attached to the folders. It is helpful if centres indicate on the cover sheets which of the texts are post-2000. Moderators again spent a lot of time sorting out folders that hadn't followed the basic administration requirements. Missing candidate numbers is a particular bugbear and, in the absence of a candidate/mark summary sheet can be really problematic. Candidate names and numbers should be filled in accurately. The final marks credited by the centre should be indicated clearly on front cover sheets and these should match the final marks credited by the centre within the folder, separated clearly for each task as well as match the marks submitted through Interchange. Summative comments should be completed on the front cover sheet explaining how the assessment objectives have been achieved within the folder. Marginal annotations alongside each task are important as is evidence on the CCS form and in the work itself of internal moderation having been carried out.

Treasury tags are the preferred means of attaching a folder together; loose sheets, (especially without candidate names or numbers), should not be sent to the moderator. Please also avoid sending any draft material, or photocopied examples of text extracts studied.

All NEA folders should abide by the suggested word count threshold. The total word limit for the NEA folder is 3200 words maximum: 1500-2000 words for Task 1, excluding quotations, (and footnotes and bibliography if used); 1000-1200 words for Task 2, (including a 150-word introduction). Centres are reminded about the requirement to use the Text and Task Approval Service for review and approval (or possibly amendment and re-submission if needed) of all text and task proposals for each exam series.

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