

A LEVEL

Moderators' report

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (EMC)

H474

For first teaching in 2015

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Version 1

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Introduction

Our Moderators' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on centres' assessment of moderated work, based on what has been observed by our moderation team. These reports include a general commentary of accuracy of internal assessment judgements; identify good practice in relation to evidence collation and presentation and comments on the quality of centre assessment decisions against individual Learning Objectives. This report also highlights areas where requirements have been misinterpreted and provides guidance to centre assessors on requirements for accessing higher mark bands. Where appropriate, the report will also signpost to other sources of information that centre assessors will find helpful.

OCR completes moderation of centre-assessed work in order to quality assure the internal assessment judgements made by assessors within a centre. Where OCR cannot confirm the centre's marks, we may adjust them in order to align them to the national standard. Any adjustments to centre marks are detailed on the Moderation Adjustments report, which can be downloaded from Interchange when results are issued. Centres should also refer to their individual centre report provided after moderation has been completed. In combination, these centre-specific documents and this overall report should help to support centres' internal assessment and moderation practice for future series.

General overview

There was much effective and interesting writing produced for this third outing of the NEA component; thoughtful analytical work for Task 1 and creative and ambitious original writing for Task 2. Candidates mostly demonstrated a good understanding of the key requirement of Task 1 to explore the construction of meaning across the paired texts; and in Task 2 to produce original writing that is creative and evidences a sound knowledge of the conventions of specific non-fiction forms. As has been mentioned in this report in previous sessions, it is hoped that the NEA is seen as a space for students to apply the skills they have developed elsewhere in the course to texts and tasks for which they have a real commitment. There was some evidence in this session of greater student autonomy in text choices for Task 1; and in the production of original writing for Task 2 related to topics that really matter to them. Moderators are always delighted to see this. In Task 1 we would like to encourage students and centres to go further in developing the range of texts studied, and the pairings that result from these selections. The use of more unexpected, contemporary and challenging texts, or more oblique pairings, for Task 1, can sometimes feel a risk when compared to exploring that which is more predictable, but it is so often the case that when students are engaged in *making* meanings and connections across texts – as opposed to cataloguing those that have been already established - they gain a degree of ownership of the task, and start making discoveries that are fresh and original. Not only does this tend to be intrinsically more interesting to students, it also more readily allows them to access the higher levels of the assessment criteria where 'excellent and detailed explorations' are sought. Similarly, in Task 2 the production of challenging and contemporary non-fiction forms with which the students are familiar, on topics for which they have a personal commitment, can also lift levels of engagement and achievement significantly.

Task 1

The specification requirement that all candidates study a non-fiction text from the prescribed list alongside a free choice text was understood by the vast majority of candidates; as was the requirement that at least one of these texts be written post-2000. As in previous sessions many centres chose to teach the prescribed text to the whole cohort and pair this text with a variety of other texts, either from the prescribed list or from other fiction and non-fiction choices. This approach often works well, and it was clear in candidate responses how far this teaching goes beyond a consideration of thematic concerns in the studied text to a wide consideration of *ways of telling*. Many centres had creatively opened up the range of ways in which the 'core' text could be paired with a variety of other texts, creating exciting possibilities for the students. The responses that followed could then explore stylistic and structural links as well as thematic and sociological ones. This, of course, supports AO1 achievement as well as developing the scope of AO4, as more unexpected connections between texts begin to emerge, both thematic and stylistic. Some of the very interesting areas of study considered in this session were: how text structures highlight character traits and shape readers' view of protagonists, portray social injustice and the experience of loss; how writers use language, structure and form to shape reader responses to murderers and their crimes; the use of characterisation to portray oppressive regimes; how voice is used to represent surveillance, and representations of life in East and West Berlin through characters' stories and narratives; the use of time to present memories; ways in which interior lives are portrayed through speech and dialogue; the use of storytelling to present mental illness, duality, and violence; the use of flashbacks to explore subsequent psychotic episodes; the construction of authority and the expert voice in non-fiction texts; the use of time to explore childhood experience; the use of dialogue to present isolation, oppression, homelessness, sexuality and many more. These approaches sat alongside more obviously thematic questions on family relationships, power, growing up, social justice and more.

In many of these instances students' understanding can be seen to emerge through the act of comparison as one text begins to confer meaning on the other, and the discussion becomes fully integrated. Of the texts prescribed in the specification the most popular choices were *The Lost Continent*, *Hyperbole and a Half*, *Stasiland*, *Why Be Happy When You Could be Normal*, *Twelve Years a Slave* and *In Cold Blood*. All of these texts offer rich possibilities for study and an appropriate degree of challenge. This component does not seek to uphold a particular canon of texts considered worthy of study, but it is the case that all of the texts listed in the specification offer a linguistic and thematic richness that reward the attention students pay to them. In the choice of second text it is in students' interests if this text too offers such possibilities. There were some instances in this session where the second texts chosen did seem rather too straightforward for study at this level. These included texts that feature heavily on GCSE specifications which the students are likely to have encountered earlier in their school careers, and those written (or ghost-written) by/for celebrities. This is not to generally disparage auto/biographies of footballers and other celebrities, but to suggest the study of such might not offer the rewards some other choices might. The 2018 Moderators' Report listed some of the text choices that appeared in that session. Those were an interesting selection and could be used as a point of reference for centres. In this session some other new non-fiction choices included *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* by Katherine Boo, *Red Dust Road* by Jackie Kay, *H is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald, *Walking Home* by Simon Armitage, *Becoming* by Michelle Obama and *The New Faber Book of Love Poems*. Some rewarding choices of fiction included Anne Tyler's *Digging to America*, Dave Eggers' *Zeitoun* and *What is the What*, John Le Carre's *A Legacy of Spies*, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Philip Roth's *Nemesis*.

The NEA offers a good opportunity to encourage wider reading by students, particularly of newly published texts. Literary prize long/shortlists can be a rich resource in this regard too - the Baille Gifford prize for non-fiction, and the Booker for fiction being full of possibilities. The OCR A Level English Literature *Comparative and contextual study* component and NEA guidance also offers a wide list of stimulating texts for study at this level, from which students could draw.

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. Comments on the Assessment Objectives for Task 1 below relate to observations from this session, but centres might also find the parallel sections in previous Moderators' Reports helpful.

AO1 is where candidates are rewarded for the close-reading and analysis of their chosen texts. It is anticipated that a good range of literary and linguistic terminology will be applied to textual study in Task 1 and an increasing confidence and accuracy in this application was commented on by moderators. Students should be focusing on how choices of language are being used to construct meaning, and be approaching this in a similar way to that of the non-fiction texts in Paper 1, and the poetry and drama texts in Paper 2. AO1 goes hand-in-hand with AO2 so the most effective AO1 will move seamlessly from identification and exemplification of a language device to a consideration of how this encodes meaning. As mentioned in previous sessions there is not a great deal of value in identifying word classes or sentence moods, unless some very specific effect is being ascribed. One feature that did occur this year was for some candidates to consider the work of language theorists, particularly in the area of language and gender but also in discourse analysis, and apply this to represented speech in the texts studied. This is not really worthwhile given that the theories apply to the study of real speech in real contexts.

AO2 is where candidates will explore how meanings are constructed through their exploration of literary and linguistic effects. This specification foregrounds integrated literary and linguistic study but, as was mentioned in previous reports, 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. The focus here might well be on how meanings are shaped by narrative choices, by choices of form, structure and genre and the contexts of reader reception. A key consideration is always likely to be on how non-fiction texts create meanings in comparison to literary texts; the impact of genre on the ways in which characters are imaginatively conceived as compared to the experiences of real people in non-fiction texts.

AO3 is where candidates explore the contexts in which texts are produced and received. The most effective responses to AO3 make contextual factors a fully integrated aspect of the discussion of meanings and effects, and central to AO4 comparison. Many students focus on an exploration of social issues in Task 1 – unsurprising given that several of the most popular prescribed texts for this component foreground these areas – and contemporary political issues of social justice. Again in this session issues of mental health, sexuality, homelessness, poverty, gender inequality, formative experiences of childhood, criminality, and slavery were all explored. The contexts of genre are also significant, and many students reflected thoughtfully on the impact of genre on the construction and reception of texts.

AO4 is where candidates are rewarded for a sustained and integrated comparison of their chosen texts. As previously mentioned, the texts studied can be seemingly quite different in topic, theme, form and tone but still generate interesting comparative discussion. This is especially the case where the task focus is explicitly related to the way's meanings are constructed, as opposed to more general thematic links. Some students will be more secure commenting on one text first and then becoming comparative in their discussion of the second and others will be confident to fully integrate throughout. AO4 considers the exploration of connections across texts and these 'connections' can also relate to differences in treatments as well as similarities, most particularly when considering the writers' use of techniques across the paired texts. Several such examples of points of connection were cited in the Task 1 section above and others listed in the AO4 section of previous reports.

Task 2: Original non-fiction writing.

Task 2 requires candidates to produce a piece of original writing in a non-fiction form of approximately 1000 – 1200 words. The original writing should be preceded by a 150-word introduction that reveals an understanding of the non-fiction form chosen and reflects on some of the literary and linguistic techniques utilised. The majority of candidates understood both the requirement to produce an introduction, and its function as 'introduction' rather than commentary or evaluation. The best introductions in this session foregrounded a clear understanding of the writer at work and were consistently reflective, fitting much literary and linguistic comment into a very small number of words. Others did focus on some intentions for the writing, but lacked a clear sense of what constituted the non-fiction form chosen, and who the audience would be, often referring to 'my audience' but not further identifying. Similarly, referring to their text rather generically as 'an article' was limiting in terms of how language was to be crafted for its purpose. Referencing the specific style models studied in the introduction can be an effective way of foregrounding choices of form, structure and language, and even if a style model isn't referenced in the introduction the use of such is important in the drafting process of the original writing. It can be useful for candidates to cite very specific style models studied for the

component – not just Travel Writing in general but the particular kinds of writing about travel that appear on a specific blog site, for example. The original writing that follows then becomes, in part, an exercise in shaping language to reflect particular conventions and meet the expectations of a defined audience.

Again, in this session some introductions remained rather vague and focused too heavily on the content being developed. In the 2018 Moderators' Report it was mentioned that in these cases the introduction can feel like something of an afterthought, even if positioned before the original writing. If a version of the introduction was written at the point when research of topic and style models was complete – as a reference point for the requirements of the piece, it could be re-visited and honed after drafting the piece and specific examples drawn from it.

The production of original creative writing is something that most students approach with enthusiasm and are able to demonstrate good levels of achievement. This was undoubtedly the case in much of the work seen by moderators in this session. This is an A Level that foregrounds the importance of original writing by candidates, in both the NEA and in Paper 3, and it is not uncommon for moderators to reference outstanding work that exceeds the levels anticipated in the highest levels of the assessment criteria. This is an opportunity for students to explore topics that are important to them; to write in forms which are challenging and contemporary; to be ambitious and risk-taking in the creation of sophisticated and authentic voices, and to produce a text of which they feel proud. Moderators are certainly not looking for text perfection to uphold marks, even at Level 6, but they are looking to see levels of achievement commensurate with, and emerging from, A Level study. Even if the text produced has some flaws it should represent a quality of work that the candidate manifestly couldn't have achieved earlier in their school career.

A clear sense of the conventions of the non-fiction form being produced is a precursor to successful text production, and research and immersion in a range of different style models is the ideal preparation for this element. This is not to say that the original writing is an exercise merely in replication of that which already exists, but it is the case that the most effectively creative work also tends to be the most crafted. The best work will be innovative, original and controlled all at the same time. Students can and will break rules but knowing what the 'rules' are in the first place, and why they're breaking them, is part of their development in becoming effective writers.

A wide range of text types were produced in this session, often with high levels of success. Candidates often drew on personal, lived experience and produced various types of life writing, such as sections from autobiographies, memoirs and letters to their future/past selves. These can be very powerful and this year there were several successful autobiographical portraits created of family members such as parents, grandparents, and siblings. With successful autobiographical writing a characteristic seems to be the projection outwards to the experience of an imagined reader, as well as detailing lived experience. Sometimes candidates will draw on discoveries made in the study of texts for Task 1. One candidate studied Simon Armitage's *Walking Home* for Task 1 and produced a stunning account of a family expedition to climb Tryfan in Snowdonia, drawing expertly on Armitage's use of humour and reflections on landscape, as well as producing something poignant and highly original. Another, drawing explicitly on Jeanette Winterson's portrait of her mother in *Why Be Happy When You Can be Normal*, produced a fabulous eulogy for a grandmother that delighted in her eccentricities while reflecting sensitively on the changed perception of these from embarrassment to pride as the writer had grown up.

There were lots of texts produced this year that reflected candidates' concerns for social justice with articles on the impacts of stop and search; reductions in NHS funding; knife crime; rough sleeping; social media influence on girls; young people and mental health; internet pornography and many more. These were often successful pieces, particularly so when persuasive in purpose and characterised by an authentic and informed voice. The best of these texts were very well researched and candidates then mediated that researched information to create something personal and discrete.

Many candidates produced texts that used humour effectively, including parodies and satires. Sometimes work of this kind drew its inspiration from Bill Bryson's *The Lost Continent*. While emulating a Bryson style can be effective, the creation of spoof travelogues can also be rather limited and tend toward the arch and cynical rather than the comically illuminating. One candidate did show that it can be done although and produced a lovely piece on the 'Ryanair Experience', which was gently comic, familiar and rendered in the authentic voice of an 18-year-old student. Travel Writing can be problematic if it relies too much on unmediated holiday experience, but when creating a sense of freshness and excitement about place, can work well. Sometimes a judicious use of humour can work well in these text types too. One candidate produced an excellent piece on a 'Dream Holiday' which was very well-written, subtle and poignant, and in places funny. Details such as 'wading through the oil slick of other people's sunscreen' on the surface of the sea were effective in puncturing the idealised notion of the holiday as described in the brochure.

Satiric writing was popular again this year and can work well especially when the candidate is dealing with issues about which they feel strongly, and the effects created are purposeful and subtle. There were some very good political satires produced with some memorable examples of Craig Brown-style spoofs of Boris Johnson in full-on apology mode, and of course, Donald Trump being, well, Donald Trump.

Candidates are advised to avoid too narrowly informative writing tasks. Reviews of films and biographies of well-known people rarely raise themselves above the researched material on which they are based. One candidate chose to produce some scientific writing, which although interesting, rather lacked the sense of purpose and audience that would have lifted it. Had this content been directed at, say, a website that seeks to explain science to adults who missed out on scientific education at school, the candidate would have had to make decisions about choices of language, form and structure likely to give the piece a life of its own.

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