

GCSE (9–1)

Examiners' report

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

J351

For first teaching in 2015

J351/02 Autumn 2021 series

Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.



Reports for the November 2021 series will provide a broad commentary about candidate performance, with the aim for them to be useful future teaching tools. As an exception for this series, they will not contain any questions from the question paper nor examples of candidate responses.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

A full copy of the question paper and the mark scheme can be downloaded from OCR.

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Paper 2 series overview

J351/02 is one of two examined components for the GCSE (9-1) English Language examinations, first examined in June 2017. Each of the components follows a similar structure and tests the same assessment objectives although J351/02 assesses candidates' responses to fiction texts whereas J351/01 assesses their responses to non-fiction texts. The other difference is that in Question 2 of J351/01 candidates must locate and synthesise information from the two texts in J351/02 Question 2 tests AO2: language and structure.

Candidates should prepare for this examination by practising how to read unseen literary texts with confidence, understanding and, eventually, insight. They should learn how to select and interpret relevant details from texts and identify and explain features of language and structure. They must be able to recognise and compare similarities and contrasts between texts and evaluate their effect and impact on the reader. Candidates should aim to apply these skills to exactly what each question is asking in order to develop a relevant response.

Like Autumn 2020 this was a very unusual series due to the ongoing circumstances of Covid 19. There was no session in June 2021 when most candidates had accepted Teacher Assessed Grades. Candidates in this sitting, therefore, were either those who wanted to try to improve their TAG or who had missed the whole process which led up to them for one reason or another. This meant that the responses in this series were not representative of the full range of responses seen in previous summer series.

In this series candidates' work showed different levels of understanding of the demands of each question and the Assessment Objective(s) it is testing. In common with previous series all candidates were confident in dealing with the retrieval and interpretation of information tested in Question 1. Typical of all series, there was a wider range of outcomes on Questions 2 and 3 which test language and structure. Almost all candidates responded to these questions with something of relevance and interest which is testament to the efforts of both teachers and candidates in a particularly difficult year.

This component worked well in terms of differentiation, even though there were many candidates placed within a twenty-mark range. Candidates working in the range of Levels 1-3 of the mark scheme found the second reading passage more challenging than the first and found Question 3 more difficult than Question 2 as a result. Candidates continued to demonstrate confidence with Question 4 and again, it was plain that the teaching of the skills needed to meet these assessment objectives had been very successful.

We enjoyed reading some entertaining, dramatic and original essays in Section B.

<i>Candidates who did well on this paper generally did the following:</i>	<i>Candidates who did less well on this paper generally did the following:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organised their time efficiently to give themselves enough time to read and think about both unseen passages in detail. <p>In Questions 2 and 3:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Located and noted key language and structure points when reading through the passages. • Thoughtfully considered both the differences and similarities between the two passages. • Planned each response before starting to write. • Located the lines specified in each task so as to avoid irrelevance and maximise outcome. • Wrote about ALL of the set lines: and made their response fit the exact wording of the task. <p>In Question 4:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gave wide and multiple definitions of 'comfortable' in their responses. • Used the bullet points given in the question to good effect. • Understood the requirements of each AO: for example, used a series of comparative points rather than simply relying on one of them. • Understood that evaluation is not opinion and always has to be supported by reference to the texts. <p>In the writing tasks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Took time and care in planning their work and selecting the task that they felt most comfortable with. • Had a clear idea of the overall shape and structure of the finished piece. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did not read BOTH passages in sufficient detail. • Did not try to make common sense deductions about the context and purpose of the passages. • Did not read the passages consecutively and/or did not locate similarities and differences between them. • Found it difficult to locate and differentiate language and structure in each passage. • Simply assumed that Text 1 is positive and Text 2 is negative without seeing that there is good and bad, etc. in each of them. • Did not carefully consider the choice of writing task or their potential responses before selection the task.. • Either did not finish the writing task or wrote way too much (i.e. filling up all the pages of the answer booklet). • Did not pay much attention to precise and accurate expression.

Section overview

Section A: Reading

In Question 1 almost all the responses to (a) and (b) were correct. In (a) we allowed anything from 'magical' to 'opened up to me.....for the first time'. Candidates were not given the mark if they lifted the whole sentence, as this is too unselective.

In 1 (c) we allowed any sensible explanation of what the grass in the wind looked like. The task requires some inference, so that straight lifting would prevent candidates from getting the mark.

In Question 2 candidates had to understand the terms of the wording: 'differences between the village and shanties of Acre village and the setting of Wideacre Hall'. Some candidates looked at the differences between the village and the shanties without moving on to the Hall. Marks for structure were available for both contrasts and so some candidates missed marks here. Many candidates did not focus on the specified lines: 12-18 and wrote about the whole text, again this affected the marks available to them. A clear focus on the set lines and a response that considers all of those lines is what was needed.

Such responses saw, first of all, the critical nature of the writer's physical perspective: she is looking down at the buildings from a height. Looking to the right she looks *down* (both literally and metaphorically) at the village: at first attractive: the whitewashed cottages, small but sweet, then a triplet, tricolon, list, asyndetic list, etc. indicating the prominent features: the centrality of Christian worship, the place of recreation and finally the chestnut tree, symbol of natural growth and re-birth which 'dominates the heart' of the village. 'Heart', therefore, again has both the literal sense of 'biggest thing there was' and metaphorical: it marked the traditions the village embodied. Such was the lifestyle of the servants who attended the Lords and Ladies of the Hall. Then there were the mean dwellings of the labouring classes, again enduring a feudal lifestyle scratching a living from the 'common land' in their 'crumpled boxes, shanties and hovels'. Another 'rule of three' but a much less attractive one. So, there was already plenty to say about structure in terms of these contrasts. The tone of the speaker's voice has been carefully modulated to reflect condescending tolerance and then outright disapproval and contempt. And, finally, swooning infatuation.

She then looks across 'to the west' and in one truncated sentence "But...." provides the setting of the Hall. The trees now become a pathetic fallacy: they are 'proud' (with the literal sense, of course, of 'standing up') almost to attention to salute the Hall, and by implication its owners. The climactic image was seen by all candidates who got this far: 'yellow pearl on green velvet'. More successful candidates speculated with interest on the colours and their combination most seeing the continuing metaphor of man (in this case one man and his daughter) imposing their opulence on the surrounding land and its inhabitants. The contrasts therefore are not only of images of power, subservience and outright poverty, but more subtly of tone and attitude: this achieved through the rising cadences of the sentence ending in 'Wideacre Hall'.

Question 3 was more challenging because most candidates had found greater difficulty with the text. Again, it was critical not to waste time writing about lines 1-5 and to focus on the specified lines 6-19. The task was straightforward: what was unusual about the house? The outline response that most candidates gave was that:

- Its external appearance was different from the external appearance of the other houses: it 'stood out' because it was 'respectably clean'.
- Its external appearance belied what was revealed behind the apparently palpable 'green door/ brass knocker/bright... curtains/pots of geraniums': all reassuring symbols of conventionality. It was a 'proper' house.

- And then the contrast of the interior. Many candidates responded to the exotic nature of the imagery which challenged conventional respectability. First the barrage of exotic sense experiences; the unusual aromas and their unusual combination supported with use of syndetic listing. Candidates recognised that the 'rich rugs and wall hung tapestries' ('jewel like') are far more reminiscent of the 'Arabian Nights' than 'Crook Street, quite near the canal'. We are ready for the simile 'Aladdin's cave' well before we get there. The mystic Eastern flavour is reinforced and emphasised by the reference to 'Sphinx-like'. More successful candidates noted that the flowers and their pots represented the colours of royal livery: 'crimson, purple, gold'. It all looks breath-taking, but what is the reality here? The final contrast of the 'cosy drawing room' with the 'great sweeping staircase' promising further unstated exotica brings us down to earth with bathos.

Question 4 asked 'In both texts characters feel comfortable in their surroundings.' How far do you agree? We cannot emphasise too strongly that this is not an invitation for candidates to begin their response 'I agree' (or disagree) with this statement and to provide personal unsupported opinion. The point of the task is to use well supported comparative judgements (evaluation) to provide a balanced response. Here there were reasons for both comfort and discomfort which needed to be paired and lead to a personal concluding judgement.

Candidates covered some, or all, of the following:

- Both texts stress the magical quality the characters experience: 'magical page in a picture book'; 'magically transported to some Aladdin's cave' and much more, especially in Text 2. The consensus was that this was certainly comfortable in Text 1 but was more debatably so in Text 2.
- While Beatrice and Fanny are clearly mistresses of all they survey and are, in their own ways, very comfortable with that, the reader of Text 2 is invited to see the house on Crook Street through Effie's far less accustomed eyes: comfortable with the reassuring respectability of the outside and in the 'cosy drawing room' perhaps, but much less so in the rest of the interior.
- Beatrice is plainly uncomfortable with the 'crumpled boxes/shanties/hovels' which are, for her, a blot on the landscape; Effie perhaps slightly less so with the 'shabby gentility/rags/derelict/toothy mouths'.
- Consideration of the respective signs of wealth and richness: we assume that Beatrice is very comfortable with the 'yellow pearl on green velvet' as well as the 'green sweet slopes': there is another direct connection then to the 'tapestries in jewel colours' and the flamboyant, regally coloured flowers in their vases which perhaps again split Fanny as comfortable and Effie as arguably less so.
- Colour imagery is very prominent in both texts: green is the key word denoting the lushness of the countryside in Text 1 but is the strikingly reassuring colour of the door in Text 2.
- More able candidates went on to compare the tangible solid reality of the south downs with the impression that in Text 2 all is not as it seems, leading to further discomfort on Effie's part. Some of the adjoining houses resemble 'the false fronts of a theatre backdrop': wholly artificial. Alecto appears to have 'boneless weight'; the cats are 'Sphinx-like' and so on.
- The narrative voice in Text 1 is first person and third person in Text 2 but each in its own way insists that the reader see the sights through the character's lens, hence the self-satisfied, comfortable complacency of Beatrice's tones and the uncomfortable hesitancy of Effie, at least at times.
- Names and labels are important, too. 'Acre' the village is a reduction of 'Wideacre' the home and estate of the Lords of the Manor to which it is tied. 'Crook Street' invites suspicion (and hence discomfort) while 'Alecto' was the name of one of the classical furies for anyone who knew that (one candidate did!)

- Finally, the passages refer to sense experience: Text 1 offers not only some comforting and discomfiting sights but also the 'smell of the new grass'; the taste of the 'mouth-watering buds'; the touch of the 'moist soft parkland'. By comparison Effie is 'immediately struck' by the 'scent' of a great pot pourri of aromas. Comforting or not? Candidates rarely took exactly the same views.

Option overview

The writing section consisted of two accessible tasks both of which gave all the candidates plenty to write about. 'I had been magically transported' was taken both literally and imaginatively. In the former category were narratives and descriptions usually involving air travel to exotic, almost always hot and very interesting climes. Personal experience of being and living in other cultures was often deliberately and successfully adapted to create intriguing and convincing work. Some of the non-literal responses on this topic were less successful because it was often derived from copying or at least attempting to emulate other media, which was rarely successful. Magical transportation to other worlds which bore uncanny resemblances to popular films or animated computer games often struggled to convince, especially in their closure. Some did work well when they were original and still based on personal imagined, or re-imagined experience.

'Describe a place where you have felt comfortable' was the option with which many candidates played safe, offering clear and mostly affectionate, nostalgic, evocative description. As in previous years, many candidates went into the re-creation of childhood memories and experiences. This was very pleasing with most candidates finding suitable topics to work on. Secret childhood places, often involving grandparents or large extended families were popular as were holiday destinations of all sorts. Other successful topics included the football field, bedrooms and one candidate wrote about the comforts of their centre library.

Essays often included memories of playing childhood games, going on expeditions, sometimes in secret and occasionally the experience of release and comfort when burdens of several kinds had been lifted.

For both tasks, the best work had a clear and convincing narrative line, very appropriate tone and register: an engaging narrative voice; and powerfully evocative imagery (which avoided ludicrous hyperbole).

Many candidates used a popular genre: ghost stories, horror stories and so on as a basis to enshrine personal experience, especially in Question 5. Centres should note that while all three bullets on the level descriptors are the key platforms for judgement, the one which might most often be improved is the third, which refers to levels of coherence and cohesion. The most striking differential again in this series was between work that was well shaped and convincingly developed and that which was partial or incomplete.

While we realise that some candidates struggle with spelling, especially when they are using ambitious vocabulary, misspelling can sometimes betray a lack of understanding or nuance of the chosen words. Additionally, candidates should choose one tense and stick to it: too many candidates in this session weakened the impact of their work because they slipped from one tense to another.

Themes in candidate responses

The most commonly chosen and successfully developed themes were the effects of growing up and the way perspectives change in that time, the shock of new or unexpected events, the benefits of close friendship and family support (or the reverse of these) and the importance of taking responsibility for one's own actions.

Comments on responses by question type

Multiple choice questions


N/A

Level of response questions

N/a

Other

N/A

	Common Misconceptions	<p>As listed above:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need for brevity and concision in Question 1. • The essential criterion of reading the questions carefully and knowing what each requires. • The failure to write about all of both passages. • The nature and requirements of both AO3 and AO4 in Question 4. • The need to come to judgement in Question 4 and the ways in which that can be achieved. • Failure to be selective in the choice of writing topic. • Putting quantity as a higher priority than quality.
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Key teaching and learning points – comments on improving performance

- Thorough reading skills need to be ingrained and practised incrementally and regularly on a wide variety of texts, both fiction and non-fiction.
- Writing skills need to be practised regularly and kept up to speed.
- Confident strategies for maximising the time available in the exam is critical, similarly, time spent considering the precise point of the tasks is never time wasted.
- The essential need for candidates to attempt to answer all the questions: to not do so usually has a significant impact on the overall mark
- In this paper candidates are advised and encouraged to evaluate and validate their own thoughts and experiences as the platform to develop written responses, rather than genres that are outside their scope of experience or received experiences they have only at second hand.

Guidance on using this paper as a mock

We strongly recommend the use of this paper as a mock exam, although it is more suited to Year 11 than Year 10. The passages are accessible and are both very rich in detail. The mark scheme is equally marker friendly and should allow for clear differentiation of outcomes at all levels of achievement.

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