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Moderators' report

A LEVEL

GEOGRAPHY

OCR Level 3 Advanced GCE in Geography

H481

For first teaching in 2016

H481/04/05 Summer 2025 series

Version 1

ocr.org.uk/geography

Contents

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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 the 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 comment on the quality of centre assessment decisions against individual Learning Objectives. The 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 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.

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General overview

As in previous years, most candidates in 2025 chose to investigate aspects of the specification related to Changing Spaces: Making Places. Reports on coastal processes, landforms and management continue to make a significant contribution, while the number of reports submitted on carbon and water cycles remains relatively small. Moderators continue to see a few reports that are not effectively linked to the specification. Please read the section about avoiding malpractice at the end of this report.

Most centres continue to promote good practice: facilitating investigations that clearly focus on areas of personal interest to individual candidates and which have obviously been conducted independently. Candidates from a few centres are developing NEAs with a very limited range of titles that are based on residential fieldwork. In some cases, the range of titles is too limited and the centres are being contacted in order to remind them of regulations that require the development of independent investigations.

The standard of administration remains high. However, when problems do occur, as discussed below, the impact on the time spent during the moderation process can be significant. Centres are reminded to follow the guidance in the specification and that provided by OCR.

Candidates who did well generally:	Candidates who did less well generally:
• provided very clear aims in the introduction and justified their investigation • discussed a valid sampling framework that was justified • chose appropriate methods to represent their data, including representations of spatial data or other more sophisticated techniques • used a range of quantitative and qualitative methods to effectively analyse their data and linked back to wider theory • drew sensible, evidenced conclusions and demonstrated that they understood wider geographical theory • referenced literature sources throughout the report.	• had unclear aims and/or tried to achieve too much or focused on too large a geographical area • named a sampling strategy but did not provide any detail or justification • used only simple methods of data presentation • described maps and graphs without using any quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis • repeated key findings in the conclusion but links to wider geographical theory were absent • referenced literature sources in the introduction only.

As stated in the Moderators' report for Summer 2024, moderators also found the same this summer:

Administration

Centres are congratulated for their administration when marking and submitting the NEA. Administration requires:

- sufficient annotation to justify the marks that have been given
- submission of the completed proposal forms
- completion of the mark recording sheets (URS669)
- submission of declaration forms (GCW179) signed by teachers and candidates.

Most centres completed these tasks perfectly. In a few cases, moderation was hindered by insufficient annotation or delayed by the absence of one of the correct forms. It should be noted that moderation cannot take place unless the proposal form, mark recording sheets, and declaration forms (GCW179), duly signed, have been received by the moderator for every candidate in the sample.

To save any confusion, it is important to record the correct candidate number on each NEA, proposal form and mark recording sheets. When submitting work electronically, please make sure that the candidate numbers are recorded within the scanned/electronic documents and that these match the candidate number recorded in the file name.

The moderation process is delayed significantly where:

- candidate numbers are not recorded in the file name of electronic files
- incorrect candidate numbers have been used.

Interpretation of the marking criteria

Marking was, in many cases, closely in line with the published marking criteria and accurate – at least within the correct level – across all six sections. Where marking was inaccurate, generous application of the marking criteria was more common than severe application of the marking criteria. Generous marking was seen in all six sections of the marking criteria.

Misunderstanding of the marking criteria was most commonly seen in:

- Section 1. In order to give a mark in Level 3 there needs to be a justification for the investigation as well as clear evidence of **valid and individual** literature research.
- Section 2. In order to give a mark in Level 3 the sampling framework should be 'appropriate, coherent and justified'. The moderator expects to see details such as the 'frequency, range and location choice'.
- Section 3. In order to give a mark in Level 3 candidates need to have used an 'appropriate balance of simple and **more sophisticated** data representation methods'.
- Section 4. In order to access marks in the upper two levels of the marking criteria for this section, candidates must provide evidence that they can apply appropriate methods to analyse quantitative data (such as measures of central tendency, measures of dispersal, or statistical tests) and/or appropriate methods to analyse qualitative data (such as simple text analysis, coding or effective annotation of images).
- Section 6. In order to give a mark in Level 3 candidates need to have stated the sources and literature references clearly and accurately **throughout** the investigation.

Section 1: Planning, purpose and introduction

The section is tackled by most candidates with a degree of confidence. Many investigations sampled in 2025 were based on a research question or hypothesis that defined a suitable investigation at an appropriate scale. Those that were less well defined tended to be over ambitious or lacking in focus. The least successful investigations were those that had too many disparate research questions and, as such, the questions did not provide a holistic route through the enquiry.

Please encourage candidates to link their proposed title to a specific key idea in the specification. A link to 'place' or 'carbon' is not sufficient. At the same time, candidates should be dissuaded from attempting to link their titles to three or four different key ideas at the proposal stage. Investigations that take this unfocused approach create issues for the candidate as the investigation lacks focus. Furthermore, it is difficult to credit such investigations as having a 'well defined research question' in the context section of the mark scheme. The most successful proposals are those where the candidates identify a single bullet point of content in the specification. This allows them to develop a coherent line of enquiry around a central theory, concept or process.

Key point – the use of literature

Reports should provide a concise locational and theoretical context to the investigation which is supported by a discussion of geographical literature.

The most successful reports base the discussion of the locational and theoretical context on a very limited number of articles, books or websites. The main findings of this literature are summarised and linked effectively to the candidates' own investigation. In this way, candidates are able to explain current thinking behind the geography that underpins their investigation. The more successful responses also use the literature to justify their enquiry.

On the other hand, the writing of the introduction is still problematic for some candidates. The context can be less successful when:

- the candidate has developed research questions or hypotheses that, when taken as a whole, do not naturally suggest a logical route through the enquiry that will resolve the issue raised in the title
- the justification of the investigation is absent
- the discussion of theory takes an 'everything I know about…' approach – not focusing on theory that is relevant to the specific investigation taken by the candidate
- candidates copy and paste passages from their literature research without adding any explanation and without making any explicit links to their proposed enquiry
- the 'literature' used is something akin to a revision website and the candidate does not show any progression in theoretical understanding from GCSE – this often seems to be the case in coastal investigations.

Candidates wanting to investigate space and place would be well advised to do some literature research into theories of perception. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place*, was first published in 1977 but its discussion of perception of space and place remain largely valid today. However, candidates should be firmly steered away from basing a place study on the Burgess' model. This model was developed in the 1920s to explain urban patterns created by mass migration into US cities. To apply this to UK cities is an example of anachorism (being out-of-place). As such, it is not useful in explaining current patterns or processes of counter-urbanisation or re-urbanisation in UK cities.

Most coastal investigations focus on beach profiles and/or the management of beaches. However, many beach profile/beach management projects do not move beyond a GCSE level discussion of longshore (littoral) drift. Attempts to explain cyclical beach profiles are simplistic and often confused. Discussion of theories such as littoral cells, sediment budgets, systems theory, equilibrium or feedback mechanisms (which would be appropriate at this level) are rare, but very welcome when seen.

Section 2: Data, information collection methods and sampling framework

This section of the report is differentiated by the marking criteria that describe the sampling strategy. Most candidates do a good job of describing data collection methods, but the depth and accuracy of the discussion of sampling strategies varies considerably.

The most successful projects find the correct balance when describing the methods of data collection:

- the methods are valid – the candidate has selected methods that will allow the collection of data that is pertinent to the investigation
- data is geolocated – which has the additional advantage of allowing spatial patterns to be represented in Section 3

- there is clear evidence that methodologies have been 'personalised'. For example, questionnaires or environmental quality surveys have been created or adapted to suit the research question, are much more appropriate for the Independent investigation.

By contrast, the less successful projects:

- take a less well organised approach – collecting small quantities of data across a range of methods – only some of which produce data that is relevant to the aims of the investigation
- neglect any spatial dimension
- do not provide evidence that methodologies have been 'personalised'.

Sampling strategies are less well-considered by many candidates. At a basic level, sampling strategies are simply named without further discussion. To be given a mark in Level 3, the sampling strategy is 'appropriate, coherent and **justified**'. This means that a full discussion of the strategy is needed at this level that includes:

- Sufficient detail to replicate the strategy. For example, how was random sampling achieved? Successful projects describe the creation of a grid, for example, and the use of random numbers to identify sample points across space.
- Discussion of sample size and the geolocation of sample sites.
- Consideration of timing and frequency. Was data collected once or more than once? If more than once, how often and why?
- Justification for the decisions that were made. This might include, for example, why the sample sites were selected, or why random sampling was used rather than systematic.

Misconception – stratified sampling

Stratified sampling is not well understood by most candidates. Many state that they have used this strategy when they have, in fact, used purposive sampling. Stratified sampling is a probability sampling technique. It should only be used when the population can be divided into discrete subgroups or strata, for example, demographic age groups. After the strata have been identified, and the proportions calculated, random or systematic sampling then needs to be used to sample a relevant percentage from each of the strata.

Most candidates who claim to have used stratified sampling have identified that their total population has different features and they make sure that some of the sample is selected to represent each of these features. For example, they might identify that their area of investigation includes three different housing estates, and they make sure that part of the sample comes from each estate. This method of sampling is a non-probability sampling technique and is commonly known as purposive sampling. It is used where the sample is selected based on specific characteristics that the researcher believes are most relevant to the study's objectives.

The methodology section is structured by some candidates using a table whereas others use extended writing. OCR has no preferred or recommended way to structure this section. However, candidates should be aware of the potential limitations of using a table as there is a tendency to:

- focus largely on description of the method and its limitations but pay minimal attention to explanation or justification
- copy and paste blocks of text from part of a table to another – making it difficult to see how 'personalised' approaches are taken

- sampling strategies are rarely discussed in sufficient detail within a methodology table. This issue is much less apparent when candidates use extended writing.

In projects that have a successful methodology, the ethical consideration is also specific to the method of investigation. By contrast, the less successful projects tend to provide very generic comments concerning the ethics of geographical investigations. This is something that could easily be addressed by future cohorts.

Assessment for learning – bipolar semantic surveys

Most candidates use bipolar semantic scales in a way that is inappropriate for this level. A bipolar scale is often used by KS3 and GCSE students as a research tool – to measure the quality of the environment. But bipolar scales are highly subjective and are not really designed to be used by a researcher at this level. An appropriate use of a bipolar scale at this level would be for the candidate to use it as part of an interview technique – to assess the perception of the environment among different groups of respondents. If the A Level candidate does not want to conduct interviews, but does want to assess the environmental quality, then they should use an Environmental Quality Index. This has the advantage of being less subjective, so less prone to confirmation bias. It also provides quantifiable results – if the candidate has devised suitable marking criteria.

Section 3: Data presentation techniques

The quality of data presentation varies considerably across centres. Data presentation is an area of strength within the NEA for many centres. However, for other centres, the selection, variety and accuracy of data presentation can be limited. Furthermore, this sometimes leads to generous marking.

The Level 3 marking criteria describes 'the range of data presentation techniques is appropriate and well selected' and that 'there is an appropriate balance of simple and more sophisticated data representation techniques'. When considering these two statements in the marking criteria it means that successful candidates:

- use a range of data presentation techniques – from simple dot maps and bar graphs to complex maps with layered data or located proportional symbols
- select methods that are appropriate to show the patterns and trends in the data. At a simple level this means selecting bar charts for discrete data and line graphs for continuous data – something that some candidates get wrong. For the most successful candidates, this means selecting the technique that shows the trends or patterns in the data most effectively – and this may involve considering the level of sophistication. For example, a candidate who has conducted traffic or footfall surveys at ten locations could present this as a bar chart. Alternatively, they could locate the bars on a map or draw an isoline map – which would be more appropriate because these techniques show spatial patterns. It would also be more sophisticated than a simple bar chart, because it would show two things: magnitude and location. However, if they have also recorded direction of movement, they could select a map that uses proportional arrows – which would be more sophisticated still because it would allow an analysis of spatial patterns or movement.

The second bullet point in Level 3 also states that the candidate shows 'good knowledge and understanding of the relevant techniques for representing results clearly'. This means that graphs need to have axes that are labelled and that units of measurement are included. Maps need to have scale lines and north arrows. If proportional symbols have been added, these need to have a key and a scale. These elements are often missing, especially where a candidate has used a computer programme to create a map or graph. Many candidates also shrink a map or graph to fit on a page – sometime so severely that the labels or units of measurement on the axes cannot be read. This means that results have not been represented clearly.

Misconception – use of GIS to draw proportional circles

It seems that GIS packages are frequently used to generate proportional circles. However, the technique rarely seems to be appropriate for the data that is being mapped. The use of proportional circles is effective when the data has a very great range. If the range in the data is small, as is often the case, then the circles are all similar in size and the map is very difficult to interpret. Where geolocated data has been collected that has a small range between the maximum and minimum figures, a located bar graph would be the appropriate technique to select – as this technique provides better visual differentiation between the values than located proportional circles.

Section 4: Data analysis and explanation

This section of the report requires candidates to identify and interpret patterns, trends and correlations in the data. The marking criteria make it clear that there are two elements to consider:

- Analysis – the identification of patterns, trends and correlations. There are some methods of analysis that can be used to bring clarity to the evidence seen in both quantitative and qualitative data. Some of these are explored below.
- Explanation of the evidence. This step requires the candidate to apply their wider geographical understanding to the specific data collected in their enquiry in order to explain it. Those candidates achieving in the upper two levels of the marking criteria use the interpretation to link their analysis to their research aims. In the most successful cases, candidates use their understanding of their literature research to offer explanations about the evidence that they can see in their own project.

For the less successful candidates, analysis will mean describing the evidence using extended writing. For more successful candidates, this stage of the investigation will mean selecting appropriate method(s) of analysis that allow them to systematically and accurately describe patterns, trends and correlations. For the analysis of quantitative data this may mean calculating means, modes, standard deviation or Interquartile range to summarise the key evidence seen in quantitative data. Investigations of coastal processes could use Zingg analysis – a relatively easy but very effective technique that is rarely seen in NEAs. Some candidates who investigate patterns over space/place use Nearest Neighbour analysis very effectively – although, again, this is seldom seen. For qualitative data, analysis may mean the coding of an interview or the use of annotation to identify significant features of an image. It should be noted that annotation requires two steps to be effective:

- identification of the significant feature(s) of the image
- a concise interpretation of that feature.

The use of extended writing beneath an image, that does not identify the significant feature(s) is not as effective as annotation – and the use of the levels in the marking criteria should reflect this.

Quantitative analysis may also mean applying an appropriate statistical test such Spearman's Rank, Chi Square or Mann Whitney. Candidates probably need greater confidence in their numeracy before they begin the NEA so that they know which methods are valid with which data. Examples were seen where there was insufficient data to conduct a test. Spearman's Rank needs at least ten pairs of data to make the test valid. Knowing this, a candidate can justify that they need at least ten sample points on their transect when they are discussing the sampling framework.

Assessment for learning – use of statistical tests

Where statistical tests were used, evidential steps in the process were often missed by a significant number of candidates. For example, tests were started without stating a hypothesis or null hypothesis. Frequently, the result of a test was stated, without presenting the data or providing any evidence of calculation. Some candidates relegated their statistical tests to an appendix. Please encourage candidates to put this important evidence in the main body of the report.

Section 5: Conclusions and investigation evaluation

The conclusions are often tackled successfully by candidates. A successful response will:

- select key evidence to substantiate the conclusions
- provide a concise summary for each research question
- provide an overall conclusion to the investigation
- relate findings to wider geographical theory – in the best cases, the candidates refer back to key literature used in the introduction.

Having said that, many candidates still present a conclusion to each sub-question without reaching a final overall conclusion. Furthermore, many candidates reach very firm conclusions – this would seem to be undermined by the evaluation that follows where a candidate finds several limitations in the accuracy or validity of the investigation. Some candidates write an evaluation before the conclusion. This may help the candidate come to a more pragmatic overall conclusion. It would be nice to see candidates using qualitative expressions such as 'tentative' or 'partial' when coming to conclusions.

Most candidates realise the importance of the evaluation and many write at great length. However, many do not structure this section – with a result that this section often lacks conciseness or clarity. Most candidates focus on the limitations of the data collection methods rather than considering the overall effectiveness of the investigation. A successful candidate will:

- evaluate the knowledge and understanding they have gained – discussing how their investigation has clarified their wider understanding of a geographical theory, concept or process
- evaluate the validity and reliability of the investigation as a whole – moving away from a focus on methods to consider the validity of the research questions, and the reliability of the sampling strategies and methods of analysis, for example
- evaluate whether the ethical dimension of the investigation was handled well – considering, for example, the problem of confirmation bias when selecting a research question or when selecting particular methods of data presentation.

Key point – features absent from the evaluation

An evaluation of the knowledge and understanding gained is often absent, as is an evaluation of the ethical dimension.

Section 6: Overall quality and communication of written work

Many candidates produce reports that are presented very well – they are almost always well-structured and usually logical. However, generous marking is sometimes seen by moderators in respect to the presentation requirements:

- a significant number of reports do not have accurate references – but are still given marks in the upper part of Level 3

- an even greater number of reports are not concise – but are still given marks in the upper part of Level 3

Key point – referencing throughout the report

Candidates should provide a reference every time they refer to a piece of geographical literature (for example, in the introduction, analysis or conclusion section) and whenever they lift a secondary source (such as a map or graph in the data presentation or analysis section) and paste it into their report. The source of this secondary data is often missed by candidates.

In order to reduce the word count, and improve conciseness, the following advice is offered:

- Use the proposal form to steer candidates away from a title that compares two places. They are doubling the workload – and risk confirmation bias.
- Advise candidates to structure a word count for each section of the report that adds up to no more than 4,000 words – and do this before they begin to write.
- Advise candidates to use, on average, no more than three pieces of literature to support the discussion of theory in the introduction. Keep the literature review down to 300 words. It should not be presented as an essay in its own right. It should be focused on the theory that is being tested and relate directly to the investigation.
- Suggest that candidates have two or three research questions (rather than more) and use these to structure the analysis and conclusions sections.
- Advise candidates to focus on discussing and justifying the sampling rather than describing too much detail of data collection methods.
- Arrange the analysis section around the research questions rather than around individual forms of data processing.

Common misconceptions

One misconception noted by moderators among a few centres is that cartographical techniques that have been copied and pasted from secondary sources can be credited within the data presentation section – they cannot. It may be relevant for a candidate to copy and paste a map from another source. If they do so, they must:

- clearly state the source of this extract. Note that the accurate referencing of secondary sources, including any such map extract, may be credited in the conclusion and presentation requirements of the mark scheme
- interpret the patterns that are shown on the map as they relate to the aims of their investigation. If this interpretation is done well, it may be credited in the analysis and interpretation section of the mark scheme.

Avoiding potential malpractice

Centres are reminded that geographical investigations must be effectively and clearly linked to the content of the specification. When reviewing the candidate proposal forms, teachers 'should ensure that the proposed investigation can suitably access the specification and mark scheme requirements and give general guidance on the methodology that the learner plans to use' (page 55 in the A Level Geography H481 specification). The appropriate box on the proposal form should be used by the candidate to make an explicit link between the proposed investigation and a specific section of the A Level Geography specification.

Sand dune succession is not explicitly part of the specification content and, for this reason, NEAs based on sand dune succession are not appropriate and should not be selected by candidates. The proposal form should be used to firmly steer any candidate away from this topic and towards something that is explicitly linked to the specification. An investigation of the water cycle or carbon cycle that is located in a sand dune would have a relevant link to the specification – but an ecological study of succession does not.

In 2025, moderators also saw a handful of ecological investigations. These were sometimes tenuously linked to topic 3.4, Future of Food. However, the methodology was an ecological experiment rather than a geographical investigation with no link to geographical theory and any spatial dimension was absent. This meant that certain areas of the marking criteria were inaccessible to the candidates, in particular, criteria in Sections 1, 4 and 5 that refer to geographical theory. These candidates were also unable to access criteria in Section 2 that refer to digital, geolocated data and to location choice in the sampling framework.

A few centres submitted reports where titles were much too similar to one another. For example, multiple candidates comparing levels of deprivation in two locations of a small town or coastal investigations that compared the coastal processes in managed and unmanaged sections of the same beach. The similarity of the titles, aims and research questions suggests that titles may be selected by candidates from a list provided by the centre or by a third-party provider. Centres, and third-party providers, are reminded that 'teachers must not provide learners with a choice of titles or tasks from which learners then choose' (page 55 of the A Level Geography H481 specification).

The apparent use of a template to structure either the methodology section or, indeed, to structure the whole report is becoming an increasing concern. For example, it seems that some candidates are given a template so that every report uses exactly the same structure of headings and sub-headings, for example, Section 1 is subdivided in the same way in all reports: 1.1 Aims, 1.2 Justification, 1.3 Background. Centres, and third-party providers, are reminded that 'teachers must not provide templates and model answers for the work of specific learners' (page 55 of the A Level Geography H481 specification).

It should be stressed that cases such as those discussed above are still few and far between – most centres provide ample evidence that candidates work completely independently. However, where these issues are seen, moderators report what they have seen to the compliance team at OCR – who then investigate suspected maladministration of the component by the centre.

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You can also contact our Subject Advisor team at geography@ocr.org.uk for further advice on this report and support with future marking.

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- see examples of student work with commentary and feedback from OCR moderators
- have the opportunity to practise marking and compare your judgements with those of OCR moderators
- receive instant feedback and guidance on your marking and standardisation skills
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Access the courses **anytime, anywhere and at your own pace**. You can also revisit the courses as many times as you need.

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The subject-specific courses are tailored for each qualification that has non-exam assessment (NEA) units, except for AS Level and Entry Level. They cover the following topics:

- the structure and content of the NEA units
- the assessment objectives and marking criteria for the NEA units
- examples of student work with commentary and feedback for the NEA units
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