

**Examiners' report**

**A LEVEL**

# **ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (EMC)**

**OCR Level 3 Advanced GCE in English  
Language and Literature (EMC)**

**H474**

For first teaching in 2015

**H474/03 Summer 2025 series**

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## Introduction

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

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. A selection of candidate responses is also provided. 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.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

A full copy of the question paper and the mark scheme can be downloaded from [Teach Cambridge](#).

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## Paper 3 series overview

The two tasks candidates undertake in this examination are designed to be complementary. In Section A, candidates demonstrate their understanding of narrative construction through analysis of their studied novel (Question 1 or Question 2). In Section B, they apply this understanding creatively by producing a narrative opening (Question 3(a)), followed by a reflective commentary (Question 3(b)) evaluating their language and structural choices. Question 3(b), in particular, functions as something of a bridge between Sections A and B, drawing together analytical, creative, reflective, and evaluative skills and in many cases, candidates rose impressively to this challenge in this session.

In Section A, candidates respond to a narrative-focused prompt based on their chosen novel. This year's questions encouraged candidates to approach narrative more as a purposeful process shaping reader response, rather than as a collection of discrete technical methods. Prompts asked candidates to explore how narratives help readers 'see things differently' (Question 1) or 'build up expectations' (Question 2), shifting the focus towards broader narrative outcomes. Stronger responses embraced this broader interpretive framing, conceptualising narrative as both a methodical and reader-focused process. This felt in keeping with the 'reading as a writer' ethos of the specification.

This approach allowed candidates to draw flexibly on characterisation, viewpoint, setting, genre conventions, and structural strategies. However, in some cases, the more interpretive framing led candidates into general commentary, with less successful responses struggling to clearly define the demands of the question. By contrast, stronger answers maintained a clear interpretive focus throughout, linking narrative methods consistently to shaping of reader understanding and experience.

As in previous series, *The Great Gatsby* remains by far the most popular text for Section A, followed by *Things Fall Apart* and *Jane Eyre*. Smaller numbers of candidates responded to *Atonement*, with very few answers on *The Namesake* or *The God of Small Things*.

In Section B, the narrative prompts offered candidates more open-ended opportunities for narrative shaping. This year's storylines – the threatening forest and the unexplained explosion – encouraged candidates to establish tension, mystery, and ambiguity, managing reader knowledge and perspective. Stronger responses showed a clear understanding of narrative construction as a deliberate act of shaping reader response, not simply descriptive writing.

In Question 3(b), the commentary continued to serve as an effective discriminator of achievement, distinguishing candidates who could explain and evaluate their language and structural choices in purposeful relation to narrative effect.

Overall, Paper 3 in this session offered candidates valuable opportunities to demonstrate their skills across narrative analysis, creative writing, and reflective commentary, with many candidates producing work of real sophistication and insight.

| Candidates who did well on Section A of this paper:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Candidates who did less well on Section A of this paper:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>engaged directly with the question's conceptual focus, clarifying key terms (e.g., 'seeing differently', 'building expectations') and signposted how their analysis addressed the task throughout the response</li> <li>selected relevant narrative material from across the novel to illustrate analysis</li> <li>linked narrative methods (AO1) consistently to meaning and reader effect (AO2)</li> <li>integrated contextual insights (AO3) where these deepened understanding</li> <li>wrote with clarity, using terminology purposefully to support a coherent argument (AO1).</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>struggled to define the conceptual focus of the question or address it directly</li> <li>wrote general narrative overviews without shaping analysis to the task</li> <li>identified methods without directly linking to meaning or reader effect</li> <li>referenced context in a disconnected or generalised way</li> <li>produced unfocused or overly descriptive responses lacking argument structure.</li> </ul> |

| Candidates who did well on Section B of this paper:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Candidates who did less well on Section B of this paper:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>engaged thoughtfully and faithfully with the prompt's narrative potential and reader focus</li> <li>crafted narrative openings that managed perspective, tension, and pacing</li> <li>used language and structure deliberately to shape reader response</li> <li>demonstrated awareness of narrative conventions in engaging the reader</li> <li>provided clear, reflective commentaries explaining narrative and linguistic choices.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>responded too literally or loosely to the prompts without clear narrative shaping</li> <li>relied on description or action without building narrative tension</li> <li>overused genre tropes without considering broader reader expectations</li> <li>lacked control over narrative structure and purpose</li> <li>produced descriptive, or very short, commentaries listing features rather than analysing effects.</li> </ul> |

## Section A overview

A full range of achievement was evident in responses to Section A, with many candidates producing well-structured, thoughtful analysis of their studied novel. This year's questions – exploring how narratives help readers 'see differently' or 'build expectations' – represented a natural development from previous series, encouraging candidates to engage more explicitly with narrative outcomes and the shaping of reader response. For many candidates it built meaningfully on the skills developed through previous, more method-based questions.

Stronger responses were characterised by secure knowledge of the text, careful selection of material, and purposeful analysis that linked narrative method to shaping reader understanding. These candidates were able to draw flexibly on characterisation, viewpoint, setting, and broader structural or generic features, framing these as strategies through which meaning and reader response are crafted. Particularly successful were genre-specific insights – for example, considering how Fitzgerald's use of fragmentation and limited perspective in *The Great Gatsby* creates uncertainty and irony characteristic of modernist fiction.

In contrast, less successful responses tended to approach the question in a more generalised way, identifying narrative features without clearly linking them to the outcome specified in the question. Many responses would have been strengthened by more explicit use of the second paragraph of each question. This section, which highlighted the role of suspense and the unexpected, provided a valuable steer towards the function of narrative in shaping reader response. Stronger responses tended to engage with this guidance directly, using it to frame the focus and structure of their argument.

There was encouraging evidence that centres are supporting candidates to use the open-book nature of the exam more effectively. Many candidates showed confidence in ranging across the novel, although material was not always selected or framed precisely enough to meet the question's demands.

The strongest responses established, from the outset, a clear interpretation of the question prompt – defining what 'seeing differently' or 'building expectations' might mean for a reader, either in general terms or in relation to the specific novel. Planning and purposeful selection of material are crucial in supporting this. Centres are encouraged to continue emphasising the importance of planning responses, defining the focus of the question explicitly in introductions, and maintaining that focus throughout.

Attempting to cover too wide a range of narrative features often resulted in descriptive responses. More successful candidates selected a manageable number of narrative strategies and explored these in detail, linking method consistently to meaning and reader effect. Centres might find it useful to support candidates in considering narrative as a crafted process designed to shape reader experience, rather than as a checklist of techniques to identify.

Ultimately, method identification should always be anchored to narrative outcome: how the writer guides, surprises, or reframes the reader's understanding. This principle remains central to the assessment of this component and the aims of the specification.

### A key message for approaching Section A questions:

Candidates should be encouraged to use all the material given in the question in shaping their response. The second paragraph of each question, which this year further clarified the question focus as the role of suspense and the unexpected respectively, proved a particularly helpful steer. Stronger responses used this section to frame their interpretation and shape their argument, while others appeared to overlook its potential as guidance. Centres are encouraged to focus on this in future preparation, ensuring candidates are fully aware that the second paragraph is designed as an accessible route into identifying key aspects of the task.

## Question 1

### Reading as a writer

#### 1 In what ways does the writer use narrative to help us see things differently?

You should range across the text to explore how features such as character, setting and viewpoint are used to provide a fresh or original view of events, the function of the unexpected in the novel as a whole, and the broader generic context. [32]

#### *Jane Eyre*

Candidates mostly responded confidently to this text, with stronger answers exploring how Brontë's narrative design challenges reader expectations and reframes understanding, particularly through Jane's evolving perspective.

- Brontë's use of first-person narration was frequently seen as central to shaping reader understanding, guiding us to 'see differently' through Jane's developing personal and moral outlook.
- The Bildungsroman structure enabled exploration of how Jane's progression from child to adult repositions her experiences in new lights – allowing both Jane and the reader to reflect differently on earlier episodes.
- Gothic elements – such as the mystery of Thornfield and the revelation of Bertha Mason – were well used as examples of narrative surprises that prompt both Jane and the reader to re-evaluate assumptions.
- Some stronger responses explored how Jane's encounters with parallel female figures (Bertha, Helen Burns, Blanche Ingram) help the reader reconsider their understanding of gender roles and independence.
- Less successful responses tended to offer a chronological overview of Jane's life, without linking narrative developments to shifts in reader understanding.

#### *The Great Gatsby*

Many candidates approached this confidently, with stronger responses considering how Fitzgerald constructs narrative to reshape perceptions of characters, events, and values.

- The use of Nick's first-person narration was often foregrounded, with candidates exploring how his retrospective and unreliable perspective encourages readers to question initial impressions of Gatsby and the 'American Dream'.
- The fragmented structure and delayed revelations (e.g., Gatsby's backstory) were used to exemplify how the novel continually reframes the reader's understanding.
- Some candidates explored how narrative shifts—from glamour to decay—invite the reader to see beneath surface appearances, especially regarding wealth and social status.
- Genre elements of the modernist novel were effectively discussed in some cases, showing how Fitzgerald unsettles reader expectations through ambiguity, uncertainty, and moral complexity.
- Less successful answers often described narrative events without linking shifts in understanding to narrative choices.

***Things Fall Apart***

Many candidates demonstrated clear understanding of Achebe's narrative approach, particularly its role in challenging Western perceptions of pre-colonial African society.

- Stronger responses discussed Achebe's use of a third-person narrator rooted within Igbo culture, which helps readers 'see differently' by presenting indigenous perspectives without colonial filters.
- The novel's structure—moving from Okonkwo's rise to his fall—was explored as a narrative arc designed to expose the fragility of imposed power structures and individual agency.
- Candidates also referred to narrative episodes that initially seem culturally alien (e.g., rituals, proverbs) but gradually reposition reader understanding through contextual framing.
- Some responses noted how the arrival of the colonisers shifts the narrative tone, prompting a reconsideration of change and disruption as the centre of the novel's tragedy.
- Less successful responses tended to focus too much on thematic content or produced lots of contextual information insufficiently linked to Achebe's narrative strategies and shifts in reader perception.

***Atonement***

While fewer candidates tackled *Atonement*, many who did produced thoughtful responses exploring how McEwan uses narrative complexity to revise reader understanding.

- The metafictional revelation that Briony is the author of the text was widely recognised as a narrative shift that forces the reader to re-evaluate earlier events and character motivations.
- Candidates discussed the novel's layered narrative structure, showing how fragmented timelines and multiple perspectives encourage shifting interpretations of truth and responsibility.
- Stronger answers explored how McEwan withholds and reveals key information strategically, guiding the reader to reconsider Briony's reliability and the nature of storytelling itself.
- Some insightful responses considered how the historical settings (1930s England, wartime France) are constructed through Briony's lens, prompting the reader to reflect on how history itself can be rewritten.
- Less successful responses summarised the plot or focused heavily on Briony's character without fully linking narrative method to the idea of 'seeing differently'.



## Question 2

### 2 In what ways does the writer use narrative to build up the reader's expectations?

You should range across the text to explore how features such as character, setting and viewpoint are used to heighten our expectations in the novel, the function of suspense in the novel as a whole, and the broader generic context.

[32]

#### ***Jane Eyre***

Many candidates wrote effectively on how Brontë builds reader expectations through narrative shaping.

- The first-person narration was often discussed, with Jane's reflective voice guiding the reader to anticipate future revelations (e.g. the secret at Thornfield).
- Candidates explored the chronological Bildungsroman structure, showing how Jane's steady progression invites expectations of personal resolution and independence.
- The use of Gothic motifs (red-room, mysterious laughter, fire) was highlighted as a technique to generate suspense and prepare the reader for plot revelations.
- Some stronger responses noted how Brontë withholds key information—such as Bertha Mason's existence—using narrative delay to heighten reader expectation.
- Less successful responses tended to list Gothic features without clearly connecting these to the construction of narrative suspense or delayed revelation.

#### ***The Great Gatsby***

Many candidates handled this question well, recognising how Fitzgerald's narrative technique shapes reader expectations and suspense.

- Nick's retrospective narration was frequently discussed as establishing a tone of mystery around Gatsby from the outset, prompting the reader to anticipate uncovering his true identity.
- Candidates analysed the gradual revelation of Gatsby's past and his elusive persona as examples of narrative delay shaping reader curiosity.
- Some explored how Fitzgerald builds narrative expectation through setting and motif—the parties, the green light—suggesting romantic fulfilment or success, only to subvert these.
- Modernist genre features were referenced, showing how Fitzgerald resists neat resolution, maintaining uncertainty and reader tension throughout.
- Less successful responses narrated plot events without clearly relating these to the building or management of reader expectation. In some instances, it seemed that material prepared for previous examination questions – particularly on the use of symbols and motifs – was delivered without sufficient shaping to this year's question.

## Exemplar 1

|   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
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| 2 | <p>In 'The Great Gatsby' by F. Scott Fitzgerald, the writer utilises narrative to create a microcosm of 1920s society for the reader to explore. The establishment of settings and characters along with narrative perspective begin to create an expectation of the novel. The manipulation of Freytag's <del>narrative</del> <del>pers</del> pyramid to fit the plot further built up the <del>new</del> readers' expectations. The climax in chapter seven before the denouement reflects an unexpected ending, highlighting the futility of the American Dream and leading to the philosophical reflection from Nick.</p> <p>One way Fitzgerald builds up reader's expectations is through the intradiegetic <del>of Nick</del> narrator of Nick. By using Nick as a narrator, Fitzgerald can further enhance a tone of ambiguity throughout the novel, <del>establishing tensions through</del> narrative gaps. As Nick is related to Daisy, Yale friends with Tom, a romance with Jordan and neighbours with Gatsby, it makes him the perfect narrator due to his close connections in the plot. Arguably, the reader and Nick create a close rapport as we find out information alongside him. His retrospective perspective gives him 'hindsight' however and he becomes more unreliable as time goes. For example, in chapter two when Nick is at Tom and Myrtle's apartment he gets drunk which excuses a very large gap in the narrative: 'Then I was lying half asleep</p> |
|---|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

in the cold lower level of Pennsylvania station'. This creates a sense of ambiguity over Nick as a narrator, building on readers perspective of his as unreliable. ~~The text choice of 'loins' is~~ ~~entry~~ In the 1920s, alcohol had been banned in an attempt to raise the moral of the population called the 'lost generation'. Nick's overindulgence in alcohol illuminates the fact he may not be a reliable character as he ignores laws.

Furthermore, Fitzgerald builds his ~~character~~ reader's expectations through his use of settings. In the novel, different settings contrast (East and West Egg) and others symbolise other ideas in the novel. One setting in particular that does this is 'a valley of ashes'. The valley is used to represent the lower classes ~~in the novel~~ and is highly associated with characters like George and Myrtle. As a liminal space, the valley represents the futility of the American Dream, allowing Fitzgerald to critique 1920s society and rigidity of social class. The indefinite article 'A' implies there may be multiple locations like the valley that represents working class life. This emphasises the universality of America's futile aspirations. Furthermore the negative connotations of 'ashes' alludes to ideas of death and fire. Additionally the noun 'ashes' could link to how only higher classes can

afford burials and lower class people are more likely to become cremated. Settings in the novel build the readers expectations as when all the characters associated with the valley end up killed it feels as though this was inevitable. Furthermore, the old money of East Egg just retreat into their money, further emphasising class difference.

Another way the narrative is used to build the readers expectations is in the delayed reveal of ~~the~~ the eponymous Gatsby. With Nick as an intradiegetic narrator, Gatsby himself is not introduced until ~~2~~ chapter three at the party. However, suspense is created before this reveal through the rumours created by other characters, especially at the party when Nick and Jordan are searching for him. For example 'they thought he killed a man' and 'he was a German spy'. These rumours build an expectation of Gatsby that is untrue. The ambiguity of the pronoun 'they' shows that the rumour doesn't have a particular origin and has just been spread. Furthermore, since these are significant actions, especially in post WW1 America, it reflects on the superficiality of society as they can happily ignore these allegations for the sake of a party. These rumours overall build an image of Gatsby that creates an expectation for the reader that Gatsby himself may not fit.



Another way the writer builds up readers expectations is through the pathetic fallacy leading to the climax in Chapter seven of The Plaza Hotel. The conductor of the train states 'Hot!... Hot!... Hot!...' This tricolon of exclamationatives is effective as it foreshadows the explosive climax of Tom and Gatsby's argument. The high-frequency lexical choice of 'Hot' emphasises the effect the weather is universally having, mirroring the anger felt by the men. By using pathetic fallacy, Fitzgerald builds up the reader's expectations for the climax of Freytag's pyramid and the turning point of the novel. It is extremely effective in foreshadowing events.

~~Another way Fitz~~

Additionally, Fitzgerald builds up readers expectations through the use of motifs. For example, the motif of the green light, symbolising the American dream and the motif of cars, foreshadowing Myrtle's death, a woman longing for the American Dream.

Firstly, the green light as a motif appears throughout the novel, emphasising how the American dream ideology is important to the novel. At the end of the novel it states 'Gatsby believed in

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|   |           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
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| 2 | continued | <p>the green light'. The colour symbolism of 'green' which could be alluded to money, emphasises the important value of having wealth to reach the American Dream. It is clearly aligned with Gatsby in this quote which is significant as his hamartia was his desire for Daisy and the American dream. The green light builds the reader's expectations throughout the novel as the desire for the American dream proves fatal for many characters. Furthermore, this links to the motif of cars foreshadowing the violent death of Myrtle. There are multiple references to cars throughout with car crashes included. The death of Myrtle in chapter seven is violent and described graphically with 'her left breast swinging open like a flap. This shows how even in death, Myrtle is oversexualised. The simile like a flap is graphic and disrespectful, linking to the disrespect of lower classes. The motif of cars in the novel arguably foreshadowed a possible violent event, building the expectations of readers. The clear theme of the utility of the American dream and Fitzgerald's critique also could be seen as foreshadowing a negative ending for the lower class characters.</p> |
|---|-----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

This response to Question 2 demonstrates clear and well-developed critical analysis of Fitzgerald's narrative methods in *The Great Gatsby*. From the outset, the candidate identifies key narrative techniques — narrative perspective, Freytag's Pyramid, and narrative gaps — establishing a focused and organised approach.

AO2 is addressed securely. The candidate explores Nick's role as an intradiegetic narrator with clear understanding, commenting on Fitzgerald's use of ambiguity and narrative gaps to shape reader expectation. The example of Nick's drunkenness in Chapter Two is apt, demonstrating how structural gaps contribute to narrative unreliability. Analysis remains connected to the shaping of meaning, including the novel's thematic concerns with illusion and the American Dream.

AO1 is consistently secure. Relevant concepts and methods from literary and linguistic study are applied accurately, with terms like 'narrative perspective', 'Freytag's Pyramid' and 'denouement' supporting analysis. Expression is clear and controlled, with terminology used effectively throughout.

AO3 is handled with a clear and relevant understanding of contextual factors, particularly in references to 1920s society and the American Dream, which are integrated into the response as part of its discussion of narrative method and meaning.

Overall, the response is analytical, coherent and well-organised, maintaining a clear focus on narrative methods and their effects. Although the analysis of narrative gaps is less developed than the discussion of narrative perspective, the response meets the criteria for a mid-Level 5.

### ***Things Fall Apart***

Responses demonstrated understanding of Achebe's subtle narrative approach to shaping reader expectation, although some found it challenging to apply.

- Candidates discussed how Achebe's third-person narration, rooted within Igbo culture, initially establishes expectations of a heroic narrative centred on Okonkwo's rise.
- Stronger responses noted how the calm, ritualistic early chapters invite the reader to expect stability, making later disruption more impactful.
- Achebe's use of foreshadowing (e.g. Okonkwo's exile, the arrival of missionaries) was recognised as building narrative tension and a sense of inevitable change.
- Some candidates referenced the novel's symmetrical structure (rise, fall, tragic ending) as shaping reader expectation through its cyclical design.
- Less successful responses sometimes lapsed into character study without linking narrative methods to the gradual building of reader anticipation or concern.

***Atonement***

Although less frequently studied, *Atonement* prompted some thoughtful interpretations of how McEwan manipulates reader expectation.

- Candidates explored how Briony's child perspective and limited understanding in Part One shape initial misinterpretations, encouraging the reader to expect romantic or moral resolution.
- McEwan's use of narrative fragmentation—dividing the novel into distinct parts with shifts in time and viewpoint—was discussed as deliberately unsettling reader assumptions and delaying key information.
- Strong responses analysed how the metafictional revelation reframes the reader's expectations of truth and narrative closure.
- Some candidates reflected on the war sections as misleading the reader towards the idea of redemption, only for this to be denied.
- Less successful responses tended to focus heavily on plot details or character motivation, without fully analysing how narrative choices control and manage reader anticipation.



## Section B overview

Section B allows candidates to demonstrate their creative and reflective skills, with examiners noting much to admire in both the narrative openings and accompanying commentaries. Many candidates showed impressive control and imagination, particularly within the constraints of the examination setting. This year's prompts—a mysterious forest and an unexplained explosion—perhaps offered broader narrative possibilities than the more character - or conflict-focused scenarios of previous years. Stronger responses engaged thoughtfully with the narrative potential of these scenarios, using perspective, detail, and careful management of reader knowledge to establish tone, suspense, and intrigue.

In general, centres are supporting candidates well in understanding that the task requires the opening of a narrative, rather than a complete story. Many candidates demonstrated a growing awareness of how openings establish narrative direction and tone, drawing on techniques from their novel study and wider reading. While most candidates engaged positively with the prompts, examiners did note that some responses treated the prompts more loosely, using them as general inspiration rather than building their narrative directly around the given scenario. In some cases, candidates noted in their commentary that they had chosen to develop just one prompt element into a broader narrative. Centres are encouraged to continue emphasising that the storyline prompts are not intended as creative suggestions but as integral to the task. Responses are most successful when the prompt elements are meaningfully embedded within the narrative opening itself.

As a general guideline, candidates should aim to reference at least three of the five storyline bullet points in a way that contributes to the development of their narrative opening. Where prompt elements are only briefly mentioned, or not used at all, this can affect how examiners apply the mark scheme, potentially limiting the response to Level 2 for both Question 3(a) and 3(b). Centres will wish to support candidates in finding creative ways to use the prompts without feeling constrained by them. An example of how one candidate did this very successfully appears later in this report.

Commentaries remain a key discriminator in this section. The most effective responses combined reflective insight with focused analysis, clearly explaining how specific linguistic and structural choices shaped reader response. These candidates treated the commentary as an opportunity for genuine reflection on their writing, rather than a checklist of narrative features. By contrast, less successful commentaries tended to be descriptive or overly feature-led, often reflecting a pre-planned approach that limited creative flexibility in the narrative itself.

While many candidates rose confidently to the challenge of Section B, centres might focus further on helping candidates balance creativity with purposeful planning, ensuring that both the narrative and the commentary engage directly and coherently with the storyline prompts.

### A key message for approaching Section B Question 3 (a):

Centres should encourage candidates to view the storyline prompts as an integral part of the assessment, not simply as a creative springboard. Candidates should aim to work with the prompts, embedding at least three of the five/six bullet points in a purposeful and convincing way. Where prompt elements are underused, or not used at all, examiners are required to apply rubric guidance, which may limit marks to Level 2 for both parts of the task. Supporting candidates in treating the prompts as a creative framework, rather than a restriction, will help them approach both the narrative opening and commentary with greater confidence and focus.

## Question 3 (a)

### Writing as a reader

3

(a) Choose **one** of the storylines opposite to develop as the **opening** of a narrative.

Write your narrative, making your own choices about the story's starting point and linguistic techniques.

You are writing the opening to a **narrative**, and can use any one of the bullet points as the beginning of your story.

You are not expected to write the full story.

You should write approximately 500 words.

[18]

Either

#### Storyline 1

- The moment Casey entered it was as if the forest knew.
- Something dropped without a sound on the path behind Casey. Casey was shut in.
- 'Your kind cut us down! You make us bleed!' Where did that voice come from?
- It came from the curtain of leaves.
- Now there was no doubt the trees themselves were speaking: 'You will never leave this forest again!'

Or

#### Storyline 2

- There was a huge explosion; it was as if the house had vanished.
- But why had the accident happened? Was it an accident?
- Who lived there?
- Were there any victims?
- Why did no-one try to prevent the disaster?
- Might it have been better to begin this story in another way?

## Storyline 1

This was the more popular of the two sets of prompts, with many candidates engaging readily with its atmospheric potential. Most followed a broadly linear structure, often working methodically through the prompt sequence. While this approach ensured clear narrative coherence, it sometimes led to rather straightforward storytelling, with limited attention to narrative shaping. Stronger responses sought to build intrigue more deliberately, often by developing Casey's backstory or introducing alternative perspectives—such as future narrators, reporters, or Casey reflecting retrospectively.

The environmental undertones of the storyline encouraged a range of creative interpretations. Many candidates framed the forest as either a wronged victim or a malevolent avenger, linking Casey's fate to ecological destruction. These responses often adopted a solemn, even mythic tone, positioning Casey as a sacrificial victim of humanity's wider failings. There was much impassioned writing on environmental despoilation, although in some instances this led to over-reliance on horror tropes, with the forest depicted as actively predatory and violence meted out on Casey described in sometimes forensic detail. Centres might remind candidates that subtlety and implication often prove more effective than graphic description, particularly in this assessment context.

There was some variety in narrative voice and structure, with a few candidates employing retrospective narration or fragmentary viewpoints to add interest and tension. Less successful responses tended to overuse dialogue or attempted visual effects more suited to film—such as extended chase sequences or literal interpretations of surreal elements (for example, microscopic people living inside the trees). A small number of responses adopted a surreal or abstract tone, while others engaged seriously with environmental themes. Fewer candidates explored the possible comic potential of the prompts.

Most candidates engaged reasonably closely with the storyline prompts, although some located their opening outside the given narrative sequence. Where responses diverged too far from the implied arc, narrative coherence and task relevance tended to suffer.

Overall, Storyline 1 proved a productive stimulus, encouraging descriptive skill and atmospheric writing. Centres might usefully focus further on helping candidates shape narrative openings more purposefully, moving beyond simply recounting the prompt sequence.

## Storyline 2

While a little less popular than Storyline 1, this prompt nonetheless generated a wide range of narrative responses. As with the forest scenario, many candidates followed a linear structure, moving methodically through the prompt sequence. While this approach ensured clear narrative progression, it sometimes resulted in fairly straightforward storytelling, with limited narrative shaping for effect. Stronger responses used the scenario as a framework for a more deliberately crafted narrative arc, often through the use of flashbacks to provide backstory or by exploring alternative perspectives on the explosion itself.

Some candidates imaginatively positioned the explosion as the outcome of revenge or long-standing conflict, with a few striking responses presenting the perpetrator as an onlooker within the crowd, observing the destruction of the house they had targeted. This created an effective sense of unease and narrative irony. A notable feature of stronger responses was the use of the final prompt—'Might it have been better to start the story in another way?' - as a structural cue, prompting retrospective narration, shifts in perspective, or reflective framing devices. In these cases, candidates demonstrated greater control over the narrative shape and encouraging the reader to reinterpret earlier details.

Some candidates engaged thoughtfully with the ambiguity of the phrase 'it was as if the house had disappeared,' using this to explore ideas of unreliable narration, confusion, or trauma. A small number experimented with first-person narrators whose perceptions of the event were unreliable or distorted, drawing on concepts explored in relation to the novel studied for Section A. Others used the repeated question prompts to suggest a narrator struggling to process the explosion, using the commentary-style final prompt as the moment where reflection and narrative reordering began.

A proportion of candidates linked the explosion to wider global events, situating their narratives in war zones or disaster-stricken regions. These responses demonstrated an awareness of contemporary issues, with themes of environmental destruction, conflict, and displacement often foregrounded. In several cases, the narrator (and Casey from Storyline 1) was depicted as traumatised or experiencing mental health struggles in the aftermath of events—showing candidates' sensitivity in exploring psychological effects alongside physical ones.

Less successful responses tended to treat the explosion simply as a dramatic event to be described, focusing on visual spectacle or action without considering how the narrative might be structured for suspense or reflection. Occasionally, responses were dominated by action sequences or relied on graphic description without clear narrative purpose.

Overall, Storyline 2 encouraged thoughtful engagement with narrative perspective, structure, and reader positioning. Centres may wish to focus further on developing candidates' understanding of how reflective narration and non-linear structuring can enhance narrative openings, supporting more purposeful crafting of narrative shape and tone.

## Exemplar 2

|   |   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
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| 3 | a | <p>Things do not simply disappear without a trace. Everything can be found eventually. Things disappear <del>at</del> sometimes: keys, pens, hairbrushes. <del>But they</del> They can always be found. Mothers have the unique gift of finding lost items. Never has a mother needed to search relentlessly in order to find something. It seems so cruel, that once a mother is lost, everything follows behind her.</p> <p>I never had a spare key. It seemed unnecessary, an extra item to loose. I never needed a spare key, my mother could always find the original which I had foresaken. <del>In a pen</del> In the pocket of my favourite pair of jeans, hanging from the lock of the backdoor, tossed between terracotta potted plants on the windowsill. Lost, sure, but always found. Always by her. When <del>we</del> I lost her, it was as if the house had vanished. Suddenly, <del>when the door was</del> I had to find the key myself. The search is always brutal, a constant reminder of what</p> |
|---|---|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

|    |    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|----|----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| PA | PA | I have lost. How I long to feel the cool metal chill my finger tips, to hear the incessant <del>playing</del> jingling as the keys resist their chain, to smell her sweet perfume, to feel the comfort of her smile.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|    |    | Where were any victims? The house suffered. Ivy crept up the exposed brick like a predator, dust matted over the furniture. I could hardly leave, paranoid that I would never be able to return. Paranoid that my key would remain on <sup>the</sup> coffee table, triumphant, and I would be outside, alone. She was victim most of all. Despite how it felt, she hadn't truly vanished, not with intent. A sudden accident, a disaster. There was no huge explosion, only a single spark. A flicker, spread like wildfire. Rapid, all-consuming. Then I was alone. No mother, no keys. |
|    |    | Everything can be found eventually. Or, so we like to believe. It's not true. With no mother, there are no keys. With no keys, it is as if the house has vanished.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

This narrative opening, written in response to Storyline 2, is original and mature in its handling of the prompt material. Rather than presenting the explosion and vanishing house literally, the candidate reimagines both as metaphorical—the loss of the mother becomes the central ‘disaster,’ with the house’s disappearance representing emotional, rather than physical, absence. This is an ingenious and creative interpretation of the storyline arc: the prompt, ‘*as if the house had vanished*’, is used figuratively yet remains integral to the narrative’s imagery and shaping.

The candidate draws on the reflective tone implied by the later prompts to structure the entire piece as a retrospective meditation. The narrator’s grief becomes the lens through which every aspect of the storyline is reinterpreted. Subtly, the repeated interrogative from the prompts—‘*Were there any victims?*’—is repurposed to frame the house itself, and by extension the narrator, as victims of this personal catastrophe.

Symbolism is handled with restraint. The repeated references to lost keys directly engage with the prompts’ thematic concern with disappearance and recovery. The keys operate as both literal objects and as symbols of security, connection, and belonging. The cyclical return to this image shapes the narrative effectively, drawing the prompts’ narrative arc into the structure itself.

The explosion, although never depicted directly, is alluded to through metaphor: the mother’s departure is “a single spark...then wildfire,” relating to the prompt’s catastrophic event while reworking it as emotional rather than physical devastation. In doing so, the candidate addresses the scenario’s requirement for a moment of transformation or rupture yet does so obliquely and imaginatively.

Stylistically, the narrative demonstrates a high degree of control. The narrator’s reflective voice is sustained consistently creating a convincing and sustained interior tone. Imagery such as the ivy described as a “predator” evokes the idea of decay and loss, extending the metaphor of the house as a vanishing refuge.

The subtlety and creativity of the piece and its controlled and evocative style led to a mark securely in Level 6.



## Question 3 (b)

**(b)** Write a commentary on the narrative opening you have produced in 3(a).

Explain the narrative and linguistic choices you have made in response to the storyline prompts.

You should write approximately 250 words.

**[14]**

As in previous sessions, Question 3(b) responses demonstrated a wide range of achievement. Some candidates produced sharply reflective, analytically purposeful commentaries, while others treated the task more as an afterthought. Examiners noted a growing understanding among many candidates that the commentary is not simply a checklist of features, but an opportunity to reflect thoughtfully on how narrative choices shape reader response. The narrative opening and commentary should be seen as working in tandem, each informing the other. Some examiners noted that reading Question 3(b) before Question 3(a) was often helpful, as the commentary frequently illuminated the writer's intentions and supported a more holistic assessment of the narrative.

Stronger commentaries approached the task as a connected, reflective analysis of narrative construction. These candidates often had a clear 'bigger picture' in mind, considering how techniques combined to establish perspective, mood, or narrative direction. Rather than listing isolated linguistic devices, they reflected on how structural choices or symbols developed across the opening, or how the beginning and ending of their piece contrasted or aligned in shaping reader expectations. These responses integrated literary and linguistic terminology effectively, but more importantly, paired this with specific examples and purposeful consideration of effect. Candidates who understood that first-person or third-person narration is not inherently meaningful, but gains significance through narrative positioning, wrote with more nuance and insight.

Less successful commentaries were typically descriptive, with candidates identifying a series of techniques – sometimes drawn from poetry rather than narrative prose – and ascribing broad, generalised effects. Repeated references to sibilance, assonance, or caesura were often misplaced, with phonological devices offered where more appropriate narrative methods could have been explored. Many candidates overclaimed effects for punctuation, suggesting that commas, colons, or dashes alone controlled pace or tension.

A number of responses were brief and underdeveloped, sometimes written as bullet points, or no more than a third of a side of A4. Candidates are reminded that 14 marks are available for the commentary (against 18 for the narrative), so they should allocate sufficient time to complete this task. Short, rushed responses will inevitably struggle to evidence the critical analysis required for higher-level achievement.

In some cases, commentaries were driven by pre-planned feature lists, which led to awkward narratives in Question 3(a) and superficial analysis in Question 3(b). Candidates need to understand that the commentary should emerge from their narrative decisions, not pre-empt them.

The most effective approach, as evidenced in this session, was for candidates to treat the commentary as a genuine reflective exercise: analysing how their linguistic and structural choices worked together to shape meaning and reader response, rather than simply identifying techniques in isolation.

## Exemplar 3

|    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 3b | <p>I have chosen to write storyline 1 and for my writing, I chose to use an omniscient third-person narrative voice to allow for more detail in the story and gain the readers trust as a narrator as I am not involved in the story. If I was to write from Casey's perspective, the narration may have been skewed due to the torment she is enduring.</p> <p>Throughout the whole piece, I have personified the forest. Their <del>broken</del> branches are 'fingers' warning to hurt Casey, the 'leaves' are alive 'screaming' and 'smiling' at her and their sap is <del>the</del> 'tears' falling to the floor after they are cut down. In this way, I have increased the tension for the reader as they are presented with a physical battle between the forest and Casey. <del>and the victory and</del> The vitality and human-like qualities of the <del>or</del> forest emphasise its power and allows the reader to clearly see their anger <del>from</del> at the concept of deforestation.</p> <p>To increase this tension between Casey and the forest I created a lexical field of torture through my language. For example, 'cacophony', 'hissing', 'tormenting', and 'unpleasant' all enhance the pain that is being inflicted on Casey by the forest, perhaps making readers sympathise with her.</p> |
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|  |  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|--|--|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  |  | <p>I have also analysed sentence structure in my piece to increase suspense about the events. For example the ellipsis in 'she thought she heard something...' intentionally doesn't address what Casey thought she heard to increase this mystery of the forest. I also wrote that 'Casey was trapped.' This <del>paradox</del> parataxis mimics the sudden realisation that she must have felt when she became aware there was no way out, helping the reader to follow along with these dramatic events in line with how they played out for Casey.</p> |
|  |  | <p>I also made use of sound as when Casey 'boots slipped softly' the silence mirrors the quiet environment that was evident initially. However when she is being tormented by the 'thick white fogs' the cacophony of sounds creates an unpleasant tone when read aloud mirroring the uncomfortable tone of the forest's chants.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|  |  | <p>In conclusion, I use a range of features such as personification, similes, lexical choices and structure to <del>create a tone</del> increase tension for readers and create a clear image of the horrors within the forest.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

This commentary offers a thoughtful reflection on the candidate's creative decisions. The explanation of the choice of third-person narration is clear and purposeful, showing awareness of how perspective shapes tone and reader engagement. The candidate's focus on personification is effective: specific examples are cited, and the commentary demonstrates a clear understanding of how these choices help present the forest as a threatening, active force within the narrative.

The candidate also identifies a deliberate use of a 'lexical field of torture', with some effective word choices supporting the creation of tension and reader sympathy for Casey. Structural decisions are briefly but appropriately discussed, with references to ellipsis and short sentences as methods for building suspense.

Overall, this is a clear commentary, with the candidate reflecting directly on the crafting of their narrative and showing a developing understanding of how language and structure shape reader response.

This commentary meets the Level 2 criteria for both AO1 and AO2. Expression is generally clear and controlled (AO1), with appropriate if sometimes straightforward use of analytical vocabulary. There is a developing but evident focus on how meanings are shaped, with some specific examples used to support analysis (AO2). Reflection is purposeful and structured, and while less technically sophisticated than higher-level responses, this commentary remains a genuine and coherent evaluation of narrative craft.

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