

**Examiners' report**

**GCSE**

# **ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

**OCR Level 1/Level 2 GCSE (9-1) in  
English Language**

**J351**

For first teaching in 2015

**J351/02 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 2 series overview

The J351/02 GCSE (9 – 1) English Language Exploring effects and impact component assesses candidates' ability to:

- read and respond to 20th century fiction texts and
- write imaginatively and creatively.

Candidates should answer the questions in the order that they are given, as each question is designed to prepare students for the next question. This includes responding to the writing after the reading tasks have been completed: the topics of both writing tasks draw on themes and ideas explored in the reading section, as well as encourage candidates to demonstrate structure and language techniques and devices that they will have engaged with in their reading.

The short answer questions in Question 1 require focus on an early section of Text 1. Questions 2 and 3 draw candidates' attention to how the writers use language and structure to achieve effects. A short section of Text 1 is used for Question 2, and a longer section of Text 2 is used for Question 3. Question 4 uses both texts and requires the candidates to respond to a question in which they will demonstrate their ability to compare the writers' ideas and perspectives and how they are conveyed as well as evaluate the texts in light of a statement that could be applied to both of them. Candidates are encouraged to recast appropriate material from their responses to earlier questions in their Question 4 answers, candidates looking to secure marks in the higher levels, should also make sure that they read and refer to the full texts.

| Candidates who did well on this paper generally:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• read the extracts carefully and thoughtfully before starting their answers</li> <li>• read the questions carefully</li> <li>• paid careful attention to line references in Questions 1, 2 and 3</li> <li>• took an overview of the sections of text they were directed to, in Questions 2 and 3, noticing context, 'changes' and/or 'connections' as the text progressed</li> <li>• selected relevant textual evidence/ short quotations</li> <li>• analysed the effects of language and structure in Questions 2 and 3</li> <li>• referred to the complete texts in Question 4</li> <li>• planned and structured their responses to Questions 5/6 carefully for effect: there was a clear shape with a discernible beginning, middle and end</li> <li>• made effective use of sentence structures, punctuation and vocabulary in Question 5/6</li> <li>• wrote between 2 and 4 sides in Question 5/6.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• did not read the extracts properly</li> <li>• misread the questions</li> <li>• wrote about material from outside the specified lines in Questions 1, 2 and 3</li> <li>• focused on language and structure features in Questions 2 and 3 without considering how the writer used them to support meaning</li> <li>• made generic comments about the use of language and structure in Questions 2 and 3</li> <li>• asserted ideas without explanation or clear support from the text</li> <li>• made no clear comparisons in Question 4</li> <li>• limited their responses to Question 4 to the lines specified in Questions 1, 2 and 3</li> <li>• did not plan their responses to Question 5/6, so that writing became a sequence of events and often lacked a satisfactory ending</li> <li>• made errors in sentence structures and spelling in Question 5/6</li> <li>• kept changing tense in Questions 5/6, with no intended effect</li> <li>• wrote too much/too little in Question 5/6.</li> </ul> |

## Section A overview

J351 02 Exploring effects and impacts uses two unseen literary prose texts, one of which may be literary non-fiction. Both texts were published in the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century and they are linked thematically. As this qualification is not tiered, either or both texts may be slightly edited to make sure that they are both accessible for all candidates and challenging for the most able.

For summer 2025, Text 1 was an extract from Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* (published in 1995). Phulboni, having missed his last train home, falls onto the rail track and is nearly hit by an unexpected train. Text 2 is an extract from a short story *The Whirlpool Rapids* by Margaret Atwood (published in 1983). Emma takes a ride on rapids beneath the Niagara Falls with her friend Bill and has a dangerous experience when the raft is split in half by the power of the water.

### Question 1

Question 1 assesses AO1: candidates' ability to select and interpret information. It uses a very short section (in this case one paragraph) from early on in Text 1. It is designed to provide an accessible start to the examination by helping candidates to read closely a small section of one of their texts. All candidates should be able to achieve some marks in this section.

### Questions 2 and 3

Questions 2 and 3 assess AO2: candidates' ability to comment on and analyse how writers use language and structure to achieve effects and influence readers, using relevant subject terminology to support their views. Question 2 uses a short piece of text from Text 1 and Question 3 uses a longer piece of text from Text 2.

### Question 4

Question 4 assesses:

AO3: comparing writers' ideas and perspectives, as well as how these are conveyed, across two or more texts and

AO4: evaluating texts critically and supporting this with appropriate textual references.

Question 4 requires candidates to read and refer to both texts.

### OCR support



A delivery guide for teaching called [Approaching unseen 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century literary texts](#) is available on Teach Cambridge.

## Question 1 (a)

Question 1 is about **Text 1**, *The Calcutta Chromosome* by Amitav Ghosh.

**1** Look at lines 1–4.

**(a)** Give **three** phrases from these lines that show Phulboni's actions when he is on the rail track.

1 .....

.....

2 .....

.....

3 .....

.....

**[3]**

Examiners accepted the following responses for 1 mark each, where the text in bold was an essential part of the answer and the bracketed sections were allowed 'excess':

- (He) **paused** (in relief) **to catch his breath**
- **holding himself up** (with stiffened arms)
- (his hands) **clutching the rails**
- (He) **placed both hands on the rail**

In addition, examiners accepted:

- minor slips in copying
- Two actions offered as one answer on a line for **1 mark**, i.e.

1) He paused, in relief, to catch his breath, holding himself up with stiffened arms

2) holding himself up with stiffened arms, his hands clutching the rails

Most candidates secured the full 3 marks here. A minority offered 'paused' without 'to catch his breath' which did not score a mark, as it did not represent the full action. Just occasionally candidates offered answers that weren't quotations or came from outside the specified lines.

## Question 1 (b)

(b) Explain **why** the rail is shaking.

.....  
 ..... [1]

Correct answers straightforwardly identified that the cause was a train. Nearly all candidates received a mark here.

## Question 2

Question 2 is about **Text 1**, *The Calcutta Chromosome* by Amitav Ghosh.

2 Look at lines 5–13.

How does Amitav Ghosh use language and structure to show Phulboni working out what is happening?

You should use relevant subject terminology to support your answer.

[6]

### OCR support



A teaching guide about writing about language and structure for Questions 2 and 3 can be found on Teach Cambridge using the following link:

[GCSE English Language J351 - Language and structure guide](#)

Very often the section of Text 1 used for Question 2 follows very closely on from the section of text used for Question 1, as it did this session. This sequencing is intended to assist candidates on their reading journey through Text 1. There are 6 marks for this question, and candidates are given just one page in their answer booklet to write their response on. This reflects the expected length of their response.

Good responses picked up on how Phulboni's reactions to the evidence that a train is coming change over the course of the two paragraphs, starting with initial shock and disbelief and ending with the realisation that he can't ignore the clear evidence of his senses. They demonstrated effectively how Ghosh used language and structure to show this. Many candidates commented meaningfully on 'stunned' in the opening clause and how the following colon introduces us to the reason why. Many also selected the rhetorical questions as evidence of his utter bafflement and the employment of his senses of touch and hearing to confirm what seemed unbelievable. Some good language analysis was demonstrated in such words and phrases as 'shaking', 'vibrations', 'steadily stronger', 'unmistakeable rumble' and 'thundering'.

Candidates should be discouraged from repeating the language of their quotation in their responses and should always try to offer meanings in their own words. For example, a response such as "Phulboni was stunned" means he was shocked' is a 'clear explanation' (Level 3) in Question 2. Obviously candidates who penetrate the language rather more and analyse it in context (some saw it as a boxing image, where Phulboni is reacting as if he has 'taken a knock out blow' and extended this idea) will start to secure higher levels.

## Exemplar 1

Ghosh starts the passage with a short, simple clause - 'Phulboni was stunned'. This shows his confusion and what is happening by giving no extra information, as Phulboni doesn't know himself yet. As we move through the passage, the description gets more and more vivid, so the reader gains more knowledge about the situation as Phulboni does, with examples being the ~~sibilant~~ sibilance of 'steadily strasse' mirroring the noise that the rail is making, or the metaphor of 'thundering toward him'. By comparing the train to a storm cloud, Ghosh shows the reader both how scary it is for Phulboni and the danger that the train presents, since storms can be very dangerous. This metaphor is extended from the earlier use of the verb 'rumble', which is a less strong verb, but also describes the noise clouds make before a storm. The contrast of these two verbs shows how the train becomes a progressively greater threat the closer it gets, which mirrors Phulboni's fear as he figures out what it is.

Overview of a text is a feature of a Level 6 ('sophisticated') response. The candidate in Exemplar 1 demonstrates overview through identifying the change in Phulboni's reactions to the approaching train, from 'confusion' to 'fear' and supporting this very effectively through analysis of structural and language devices. Skilled analysis is particularly shown in the candidate's response to the extended metaphor of a 'storm'.

## Question 3

Question 3 is about **Text 2**, *The Whirlpool Rapids* by Margaret Atwood.

**3** Look at lines 14–30.

Explore how Margaret Atwood uses language and structure to describe what happened to Emma.

Support your ideas by using relevant subject terminology.

**[12]**

Question 3 assesses the same AO2 skills as Question 2 but uses a lengthier section of Text 2. Whereas in Question 2, candidates are only expected to show a 'snapshot' of their skills, here in Question 3, we expect more developed responses.

Strong responses took an overview of this extract and considered how each paragraph describes a stage in Emma's experience and 'what happened' to her: the first paragraph describes the actual incident with the raft; the second paragraph shows her as very much a passive victim of the rapids, and the third paragraph sees Emma beginning to take control of her situation and fighting back. Some good language work was done on the simile 'like the beak of a bird closing', and words and phrases such as 'buckled', 'snapping', 'jumbling', 'struck', 'flipped', 'tumbled and boiled', 'bursting', 'bruised and scraped'. Many candidates considered how the tricolon of 'Her head rose up, she gasped air and was sucked under' conveyed the speed of what happened and the control (or lack of it) that Emma had over the situation. Just a few perceptive candidates picked up on and understood the second perspective (Emma's reflections after the event) that punctuated an otherwise chronological narrative. This and an overview of the extract were often discriminators in the higher levels.

Common misreadings included Emma getting trapped inside the 'beak' (the text tells us she was 'shot backwards') and that the text 'leaves us in suspense because don't know whether Emma will survive' (we **do** know Emma survives). Candidates are less likely to make errors such as these if they read the extract from beginning to end carefully first rather than just scanning for examples of devices to write about - sometimes in complete isolation from their context.

## Exemplar 2

Atwood constantly moves from the ~~past~~ ~~into the past~~ accident into the here after the accident. This is clear in the repetition of "later" and the mention of "afterwards". Clearly, Emma had to piece together what happened ~~after~~ to her, after the accident was over. Therefore, Atwood creates a sense that it was complete chaos for Emma and she ~~was~~ was oblivious to what ~~was~~ was happening to her, and out of control.

Atwood uses personification in "the water dumbled and hulked" and Emma fought it "to". This portrays ~~the sea~~ Emma as in a battle against ~~water and nature~~ this fierce attacker but is the water. Therefore, Atwood, illustrates the brutal treatment that Emma received, but also that she tried to fight it. Atwood places "sucked under" at the end of a paragraph to add impact and allow for the reader to process but this might be the end for Emma. However, at the end of the ~~first paragraph~~ ~~the~~ consecutive paragraph, Atwood reassures us of "she found she could keep her head above water and actually swim". Therefore, Atwood creates an emotional journey in which we, as the reader, are worried for Emma, but then ~~we are~~ we are relieved but she ~~clearly~~ clearly makes it out alive.

Exemplar 2 shows an excerpt from the end of a response to Question 3; it received a Level 6 mark. Particularly of merit here are the following:- 1) The candidate has understood that there are two perspectives (Emma's at the time of the incident and later) and has an appreciation of the impact of this device on the writing, 2) In the last 8/9 lines of this extract the candidate demonstrates overview, recognising movement between the second and the third paragraphs and, consequently, the 'emotional journey' that Atwood has taken us on through Emma's experience.

## Assessment for learning



Candidates should read the complete extracts for Questions 2 and 3 carefully before starting their responses. This reduces the likelihood of misreadings and helps candidates to write about language and structure in context. Higher level candidates may be encouraged to read the whole of Text 2 before starting Question 3, as an understanding of the extract in context of the whole of the text could be clear evidence of an overview (Level 6 'sophisticated appreciation').

## Question 4

Question 4 is about **Text 1**, *The Calcutta Chromosome* and **Text 2**, *The Whirlpool Rapids*.

**4** 'Both texts powerfully present characters in danger.'

How far do you agree with this statement?

In your answer you should:

- discuss what makes the incidents dangerous
- explain how the characters respond to the danger
- compare how the writers present dangerous incidents.

Support your response with quotations from **Text 1** and **Text 2**.

**[18]**

The first three questions on this examination prepare candidates for Question 4, which is worth the same number of marks as Questions 2 and 3 put together. For this reason, candidates should stop at this point and think carefully about how they will frame their response before they start writing. They might also consider any relevant material they have written in their responses to Questions 1, 2 and 3 and how it may be recast appropriately to address the question here.

That said, it is also important for candidates to be aware that Question 4 rewards most highly a response to the whole text. The mark scheme makes this clear by referring to 'evaluative comments' in AO4 for Levels 2 to 4 and 'evaluation' in Levels 5 and 6. 'Evaluative comments' are judgements in relation to smaller sections of the text; 'evaluation' requires overview. This means that a careful reread of whole texts is important before thinking out and planning the response.

Candidates who don't consider whole texts will struggle to achieve the higher levels in AO4. This became apparent this year, particularly with Text 2. In the first two paragraphs of Text 2, there are 'clues' to the reader that should mean when the accident happens, we are not taken by surprise. Such clues include the image of a 'giant throat swallowing', the 'dutiful thrilled' and 'less thrilled' noises of the passengers (who are clearly feeling rather worried), Emma's actions in 'clutching Bill's arm', the 'unnatural blue' sky as well as the insertion of some retrospective narrative ('There was a lot of talk later about why the tenth run should have failed so badly'). Candidates who didn't read the first two paragraphs (or didn't read them properly) quite often ran into misreading, asserting such things as 'A comparison between the two texts is that Phulboni is worried right from the beginning about an impending danger whereas Emma is taken by surprise'.

AO3 was usually done reasonably well. Some candidates, following the bullet points in order, put their comparisons at the end. This is an acceptable, and often successful, approach for candidates for whom this is a challenging question. More successful candidates planned their responses, knowing how to integrate their comparisons within the body of their writing and using the bullets as mere prompts to remind them of things to consider. One concerning practice that was seen occasionally for AO3 was the use of 'comparing' words and phrases, for example 'similarly' and 'by contrast' when moving between texts, but then nothing was actually compared. This was not a helpful approach: points of comparison need to be tangible if they are to be credited in an assessment of AO3.

As ever, less successful candidates tended to illustrate the statement 'Both texts powerfully present characters experiencing danger', but many others found ways to challenge this statement in intelligent and meaningful ways, for example, some candidates decided that Phulboni was in no real danger at all since all he had to do was remove himself from the track, which he did very quickly. Some quite challenging ideas were teased out in AO4 – and with articulacy. Many candidates thoroughly explored how much control each character had in their dangerous situation, how effectively the writers conveyed such emotions as horror, fear, confusion as reactions to danger, and how both the rapids and the train were brought to life as terrifying oppressive forces; there was also some speculation about which was the worse way to die, which made for 'interesting' reading, too!

## Section B overview

Questions 5 and 6 assess:

AO5: Communicate clearly, effectively and imaginatively, selecting and adapting tone, style and register for different forms, purposes and audiences.

Organise information and ideas, using structural and grammatical features to support coherence and cohesion of texts.

AO6: Use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.

Candidates are offered a choice of writing tasks. They choose either Question 5 or Question 6.

The writing tasks are designed to build on what candidates have read in Section A of the examination. It is unwise to advise candidates to do the writing task first because candidates may be able to use what they have read to inspire the content and style of their own writing.

### Question 5\*

**5\*** *A Near Miss.*

Use this as the title for a story about when something almost went badly wrong.

In your writing you should:

- choose a clear viewpoint
- describe the setting
- explore how your character feels about the experience.

**[40]**

As ever, Question 5 was the more popular writing choice. Many candidates had written a useful plan, which helped them to put together crafted pieces of writing. They used such techniques as setting, flashback, change of narratorial perspectives, hooking, surprise endings and many others. Candidates across the range were often aware of how paragraphing and sentence lengths can be used to good effect. There were also some lovely images and language choices, usually in describing landscapes.

Weaknesses often lay in an inability to maintain tense appropriately (especially if candidates had started ambitiously in present tense); some loss of control of sentence structures when writing descriptively, and sentence punctuation.

Of course, the best stories were ones that came from the candidates' real, or easily imagined, experience. They wrote about such things as accidents narrowly avoided, friends who nearly led them astray, plans that nearly backfired and sporting events. The least successful responses were clearly derivative, based on film or video game genres. A small number of responses were a retelling of one of the texts from Section A. Such responses could not secure more than a very low level in AO5; if there was copied material from the texts, this impacted AO6 also.

## Exemplar 3

mother's trunk. The harmonious hymns of the forest danced lightly through the sunlit air, each creature contributing its own unique and jovial sound to the pleasant rhythm: the sweet song of the blackbird, the charming chirp of the robin, the dampend shuffle of the solitary squirrel.

Glistening as the sunlight glanced off their dewy surfaces, idyllic tulips rose from the mossy overgrowth, the intricate perfection of their petals & sprawling petals, the forest green leaves uncurling from the precious stem reminded me of the sheer serenity of this planet we inhabit.

This extract from a response to Question 5 is a good example of secure Level 5 writing. Its strengths lie in its ambition and attempts to create impact, but the images are not convincing enough for Level 6. For example, while devices such as alliteration can have a pleasing ring, such things as 'The sweet song of the blackbird, the charming chirp of the robin, the dampend [sic] shuffle of the solitary squirrel' do not help us to envisage or hear a realistic woodland setting.

## Question 6\*

**6\*** Write about a time when you had an unexpected adventure.

In your writing you should describe:

- what the adventure was
- what made it unexpected
- how you responded to the situation.

**[40]**

Question 6 invites a first-person narrative and possibly an autobiographical response. Mostly this is how candidates did approach the task. Some, though, assumed a persona to write what was clearly quite engaging fiction.

Many candidates wrote well about experiences they had on holiday, taking part in a Duke of Edinburgh expedition, or simply an occurrence that turned into a literal or metaphorical 'adventure'. As with Question 5, best responses were very focused on the actual task where a key word here was 'unexpected'. Less successful responses often offered a sequence of unrelated and not-so-convincing events and/or did not end satisfactorily.

Strengths and weaknesses in candidates' writing were similar to those outlined in the Question 5 commentary above.

## Summer 2026: Amended question paper layout for GCSE English Language

As part of our accessibility principles, we're making improvements to the question paper layout for GCSE English Language (J351). These changes apply to live assessments taking place from the **June 2026** series onwards.

### **Component 01: Communicating information and ideas (Paper 1) and Component 02: Exploring effects and impact (Paper 2)**

To provide clarity and better guidance for students on what they should answer in their exams, we're making the following changes:

- For Paper 1, Section A, the relevant section of the extract text will be printed alongside questions 1 and 3, indicating candidates must consult named lines of the extract.
- For Paper 2, Section A, the relevant section of the extract text will be printed alongside questions 1–3, indicating candidates must consult named lines of the extract.
- Clearer and more consistent presentation to reduce cognitive burden for candidates.
- Accessible fonts will be used.
- The front cover of the extract booklets will include summary details such as genre, author's name, and publication date.
- For both papers in Section B, we are adding more planning space to support and encourage students to think about their work.

We are **not** changing the structure of the papers. There are the same number of questions on each paper with the same number of marks and the same assessment objectives (AOs) allocated to each. There's **no change** to how students are expected to answer the questions in the exam.

**Please note:** These changes affect students taking exams in **summer 2026** and onwards. Students resitting exams in November 2025 will not see any changes to the GCSE English Language exam papers.

The latest information is available on the [OCR website](#) and on the [Sample assessment materials section on Teach Cambridge](#).

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