

Examiners' report

GCSE

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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

J351

For first teaching in 2015

J351/01 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 1 series overview

This series' exam paper was all about the power of reading. It was encouraging to see how well candidates responded to the ideas raised by the two texts and how enthusiastically they took the idea forward in their own writing. The letter advising a headteacher how to encourage reading was by far the more popular writing task and showed that candidates are well aware of how important reading is.

Centres are to be congratulated on the preparation they have done with their candidates. Almost all candidates used their time well in the exam and understood what they needed to do to gain marks in each question. There was clear evidence in the response to every question that messages from previous exam reports had been used to inform the teaching of the candidates for this exam.

Although advice about Question 2 has been taken on board to some degree, there are still more problems with the way that candidates approach this question than with any other. Several exemplars will be offered in this report to clarify some of the more successful approaches that could be taken.

There is still some work to be done with candidates who word process their work. All typewritten work should be accompanied by a cover sheet to indicate any help given, e.g., whether or not the spell-check was turned off. Please ensure that the work is double-spaced and that these candidates complete the reading section first. There was some evidence of cutting and pasting material from one question to another: while re-using material from Questions 2 and 3 in Question 4 is acceptable, it should be freshly typed.

Overall, candidates engaged successfully with this paper and examiners enjoyed reading their thoughtful responses. Candidates' understanding of the nuances of Question 4 and their effective writing in Section B were especially impressive.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
- answered the reading questions first - quoted specific evidence - developed explanations of each quotation - identified comparisons clearly and concisely - used coherent paragraphs - punctuated accurately within the sentence - used an appropriate register.	- answered the writing question first - quoted at length without precise selection - made general comments about quotations - merged several comparisons into one - divided written work randomly - used comma splices rather than full stops - misjudged the tone of their writing.

Section A overview

Each question in the reading section addresses a different assessment objective or, in first two questions, different aspects of the same assessment objective. Question 1 is focused on the selection and interpretation of evidence and Question 2 is focused on the synthesis of information from different texts. Question 3 is about the analysis of language and structure and Question 4 is about comparison of two texts and the information that they explain and the ideas that they explore.

Centres have prepared candidates well for the different demands of each question. It is clear that the advice given in previous exam reports has been used to guide the way students respond to each text. There is still a great difference, however, in approaches to Question 2, and this report provides several exemplars to illustrate what is expected.

The two texts worked well. Candidates across the range of attainment showed a clear understanding of Douglass's situation in Text 1 and were impressed by the way he overcame obstacles to his learning to read. Text 2 included accessible material about the ways that Kakutani's parents treated her, and her experiences in recess of retreating to the library to escape the bullies.

There was material in both texts to challenge the more able. It was impressive to see how well they were able to understand the less obvious ways that Kakutani was helped to read in Text 2 and the sophisticated appreciation candidates had for more abstract ideas in each text. In Text 1, for example, the contrasts Douglass drew in paragraph between his desire for reading and Mr. Auld's dread of it. Text 2 also moved from Kakutani's concrete experiences at home and school to a consideration of reading's important role in an 'increasingly polarised and tribal world'.

OCR support



There is useful guidance on how to approach the reading section of this examination in this training video which is available via this link on [Teach Cambridge](#).

Question 1 (a) and (b)

Question 1 is about **Text 1**, *Narrative of the Life of An American Slave* by Frederick Douglass.

1 Look at lines 1–9.

(a) Give **two** phrases that describe what Mrs. Auld taught Frederick Douglass.

1

.....

2

.....

[2]

(b) Give **one** phrase which describes what Mr. Auld did when he found out.

.....

..... [1]

These first two questions are a simple test of candidates' ability to select relevant evidence from the text. Almost all candidates were able to list the following as things that Mrs Auld taught Frederick: 'the ABC' and 'to spell', and that Mr Auld 'forbade Mrs Auld to instruct me further'. There were some, however, who quoted too much material from the text and risked not being given the mark. Centres should encourage candidates to be more selective about what they quote.

Question 1 (c)

(c) Explain **one** way Mr. Auld thinks learning to read would harm Frederick Douglass.

.....

..... [1]

This question requires the candidates to make an interpretation of the text. The key word in the question was 'harm' and candidates interpreted this in different ways; some referred to the harm done to Douglass who would become 'discontented and unhappy' while others referred to how the reading would 'harm Douglass as a slave by rendering him unmanageable'. Candidates sometimes offered a two-part response to this 1 mark question: as the first response only may be rewarded, candidates who offered the correct response as the second part of a two-part response were not given a mark.

Question 2

Question 2 is about **Text 1**, *Narrative of the Life of An American Slave* by Frederick Douglass and **Text 2**, *Ex Libris* by Michiko Kakutani.

2 Both writers describe their thoughts and feelings about reading.

What are the similarities between their thoughts and feelings?

Draw on evidence from **both** texts to support your answer.

[6]

There are two skills tested by this question: the ability to synthesise information and ideas from two texts by identifying similarities between them; and the ability to draw on evidence from the texts to demonstrate these similarities. At this point in their journey through the examination it is important to focus the candidates' minds on the links between the two texts. They will draw on the material used for this question when they go on to explore some of the differences in their response to Question 4.

Candidates were able to identify several significant similarities between the writers' thoughts and feelings about reading. For example, both writers saw reading as a way to 'escape' challenging circumstances, and both saw it as a way to gain knowledge that would help them in life. They were also both determined to read whatever obstacles to reading were put in their path. This last point was sometimes presented as the fact that they both had to overcome obstacles to reading but this did not refer to their thoughts and feelings, as required by the question, and could not be rewarded.

The more successful candidates began each part of their response with a clear statement of one similarity between the two texts. Less successful candidates sometimes offered two similarities in one, e.g., they had a desire to read and were determined to do it. This made it much more difficult for the candidates as they could not find evidence from both texts that supported both points at once. They also missed an opportunity to explore each similarity separately and gain more marks.

On the other hand, some less successful candidates wrote three paragraphs but based each one on the same idea expressed in different words, e.g., they wanted to read, they had a passion for reading, they desired to read. These ideas were insufficiently differentiated to be rewarded. The more successful candidates were able to start each paragraph with a clear, succinct topic sentence which clearly explained a similarity between the texts.

There is a tension in this question between quantity and quality. The best advice remains that candidates should attempt to find three clear similarities that help them to answer the question. It is not enough, however, to list three similarities and offer a quotation without explanation from each text. The question asks candidates to 'draw' on the evidence which means that they should use the evidence as the basis for an explanation of how each text is similar. The best explanations often contain an embedded quotation or a paraphrase of the text.

It is clear that most centres have paid careful attention to previous Examiners' Reports and have prepared their candidates well for this question. As there still remain a variety of approaches, some of which are less successful than others, it will be helpful to provide a set of exemplars which illustrate approaches to this question which are different but equally successful.

Exemplar 1

Both ~~texts~~ writers depict reading as a means of liberation. To show this, text 1 says "I understood that reading was the pathway from slavery to ~~freedom~~ freedom", and text 2 says "books were... an escape". Therefore both writers show how they believe reading allows one to be free from confinement ^{whether} ~~either~~ literally or metaphorical. Also, both writers illustrate a ~~sort of~~ desperation for reading. In text 1, this is seen by the phrase "I set out at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read" and text 2 says "I was hungry for words". Therefore both texts show how the writers had ~~a~~ a strong desire to read. Finally, both texts demonstrate how the writers view reading as a means to information. In text 1 this is shown by the ^{phrase} ~~line~~ "valuable bread of knowledge", and in text 2 this is shown by "they can give us an all-access pass to knowledge". So both writers feel that reading is incredibly beneficial to learn ^{new} ~~new~~ things.

The candidate takes the approach recommended in previous Examiners' Reports. The clear identification of three clear similarities with a brief explanation of each one shows 'a secure ability to synthesise appropriate ideas and evidence from both texts' (Level 3). The comments about how the writers see reading as a way of being 'free from confinement' fulfils the Level 3 criteria of 'perceptive understanding of conceptual ideas'. (6 marks)

Exemplar 2

Both texts show similarities between their thoughts and feelings as they both show someone loving doing something but ^{are} not sure why they love it so much. In text 1 Douglass said about his bravery and resilience to keep learning to read and he loved to do this, we see this when he says "against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn." The verbs "desire" and "determination" shows the reader how badly he wanted to read and how passionate he was to learn. Similarly in text 2 Kakutani says about how she'd loved reading since she was very young but also didn't know why, we see this when she says "I binge read books about black histories and dystopian futures, I was not even aware of why" The word 'binge' shows the love she had for books and the urge to read them all the time, also she says "I was an only child accustomed to spending lots of time alone" showing the reader she might've read books as she had no one to talk to.

This candidate takes a different approach and writes a detailed explanation of one similarity. They cannot be given full marks because the question asks candidates to write about similarities in the plural. Nonetheless, the response shows an ability to make connections between the texts and shows awareness of the writer's thoughts and feelings about reading. Candidates should be advised to write about at least two similarities. The candidate attempts to use subject terminology to describe the words 'desire' and 'determination' as 'verbs'. They are, in fact, abstract nouns but, even if the candidate had labelled them correctly, it would be of no value for this task as candidates are not being asked to use subject terminology in this question. The use of those words embedded in an explanation, however, is much closer to what this task requires. (4 marks)

Exemplar 3

Both writers describe reading as very ~~valuable to them~~ ~~precious~~ valuable to them.

In Frederick Douglass', 'Life of an American slave', Douglass went against his master's desires who told him that 'It would make him disconnected and unhappy' and continued to learn how to read from the 'little white boys'. This shows the reader how valuable reading was to Douglass as he would take the risk of being brutally punished just learn reading.

Similarly, Kekutani describes as a child all the places she used to read as a child ~~at~~ such as 'the cardboard refrigerator carton' and 'the school library during recess'. This shows the reader how valuable reading is to Kekutani as she would even spend her breaks reading.

In this response the candidate takes a similar approach as the previous candidate. The mark given is slightly lower, however, as the similarity the candidate identifies is less clear. It is clear that the examples given from each text show how 'valuable' reading is to each writer but the word 'valuable' is so broad that a more precise connection between the texts is not established. The risks that Douglass takes are not clearly similar to Kakutani's reading anywhere and everywhere. The candidate does show an awareness of the connections between the ideas of the texts but does not fulfil the criteria of making connections between the evidence in the texts. (3 marks)

Question 3

Question 3 is about **Text 2**, *Ex Libris* by Michiko Kakutani.

3 Look at lines 12–27.

Explore how Michiko Kakutani uses language and structure to describe the ways books affect people.

Support your ideas by using relevant subject terminology.

[12]

This question has a much narrower focus than Question 4. It tests candidates' ability to describe features of language and structure accurately, and their ability to explain clearly the effects of these features on the reader. Question 4 takes a broader approach and includes reference to other aspects of presentation including the content of the text. Anecdotes, for example, are an appropriate topic of discussion in response to Question 4 but are not relevant in themselves in a response to Question 3. The language and structure of an anecdote could, however, be relevant.

The lines selected from Text 2 offer a wide range of features of language and structure for candidates to explore. Centres have clearly prepared their candidates well for this question, and almost all are able to identify significant details and make meaningful comments about them.

A small number of candidates referred to material from outside the specified lines. Their mark is not reduced for this but the material they have selected cannot contribute to their final mark. The exam board considers that this material may give them an unfair advantage over other students because there may be significant features of language and structure to which candidates who have restricted themselves to the specified lines do not have access. This should not be a problem in future sessions as, from 2026, the specified lines will be printed in the exam paper as part of the question.

A chronological approach to the extract proved helpful to many candidates. In the first paragraph from the specified lines there are several significant features that could be discussed. The repetition of the verb 'read' was often commented on as an indicator of the 'addictive' effect of reading, as was the asyndetic list 'cereal boxes, appliance manuals, supermarket circulars'.

Many candidates commented on the metaphorical use of 'hungry for words' as suggesting that Kakutani's love for reading made it feel like a necessity. More perceptive comments linked this short concluding sentence to the paragraph's focus on eating as a way of concluding an extended metaphor. Less successful candidates often identified this as 'simple sentence' or, more often, as a 'short' sentence without making it clear why the writer used a simple sentence at this point in the text. In general, candidates may be well advised to avoid discussion of sentence structure unless they are able to relate the sentence to those that follow or precede it, or able to comment on the reason for a sequence of clauses within a sentence.

The effect of the verb 'leap' was a popular focus for discussion. Candidates wrote about the anxiety that reading might cause young readers if the characters were so realistic and often picked out the words 'havoc' and 'destruction' as words that reflected this anxiety. Not many candidates were able to show understanding of what these two words meant, or that they were abstract nouns.

Candidates should be encouraged to draw examples from the whole extract. Many stopped their exploration after the second paragraph and did not take advantage of the rich material available for discussion from the last two paragraphs. This also meant they missed the sense of progression from the child alone in her bedroom to the world as a whole in the last paragraph. Discussion of paragraphs per se, however, should be discouraged as candidates find it hard to articulate the effect they create.

Question 4

Question 4 is about **Text 1**, *Narrative of the Life of An American Slave* by Frederick Douglass and **Text 2**, *Ex Libris* by Michiko Kakutani.

4 'Both texts show the surprising ways that other people helped the writers to read.'

How far do you agree with this statement?

In your answer you should:

- discuss what we learn about how people helped the writers
- explain how far you agree that the help the people gave was surprising
- compare the ways the texts present the surprising ways that other people helped the writers to read.

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

[18]

The responses to this question should build on the work candidates have already done on Questions 2 and 3. It builds on the similarities identified in Question 2 by exploring the differences between the texts and builds on Question 3 by considering not only language and structure but other aspects of presentation such as the selection of material.

The focus of this question shifts from the effect of reading on the writers to the effects on the writers of the other people mentioned in the texts. How other people helped the writers to read in Text 1 was clear to almost all candidates, but many found it more difficult to find similar examples in Text 2 of the writer being helped to read. This was sometimes because they interpreted the question as being about the writer being helped to learn how to read which is not what the second text is about. More often it was because the help given in Text 2 is less obvious and more indirect or unintentional than in Text 1.

There is no directly supportive figure in Text 2 like Mrs. Auld who kindly helped Douglass to read. Some candidates were able to connect her to Kakutani's father who helped unintentionally when he built a playhouse for Kakutani which she adapted as a safe place to read. They were also able to make connections between Mr. Auld and Kakutani's mother: Mr. Auld's ban on Douglass being taught to read indirectly encouraged him to want to do so all the more; her mother's ban on reading at the table also helped indirectly as Kakutani was forced to read a wider and less conventional range of texts such as 'cereal boxes, appliance manuals, supermarket circulars'. The other people who helped were the young boys in Text 1 who taught Douglass to read and the bullies in Text 2 who drove Kakutani into the library where she had access to a wide range of reading material.

Candidates were generally able to evaluate a level of surprise for each example of help given in Text 1. Most drew on their knowledge of slavery to explain why they found the help surprising, but others commented on the youth and poverty of Douglass's helpers. The examples of surprising help in Text 2 were more challenging for some candidates but provided more successful candidates with an opportunity to tease out some of the nuances of the help given.

Centres have prepared candidates well for this question and most were able to offer some level of critical thinking about what they have read in these texts. Candidates should be reminded to explain at least one explicit similarity between the texts for Level 2, consider differences to move into Level 3 and use words like 'more' and 'less' for comparison at Level 4. At Levels 5 and 6 candidates must make detailed connections between the texts, comparing not only specific details of the content of the texts but also the ways in which these details are presented, e.g., 'bread of knowledge' and 'hungry for words'.

Section B overview

The writing tasks in Section B are functional tasks with a clear form, audience and purpose. The topics chosen reflect the ideas raised by the two texts in Section A. It is wiser, therefore, for candidates to complete the reading section before they attempt a response to the writing tasks. It was clear from some of the typewritten work submitted that this was not always the case.

Candidates responded well to both tasks but the letter to the headteacher was more popular. In terms of layout, all that is required is an appropriate salutation and a valediction, but some candidates still include an address. This does not affect the mark given but is not the best use of the candidate's time, especially if they are inventing an imaginary address. They should, of course, never use their own personal address, and do not even need to add a name to the valediction.

It was pleasing to see that candidates who did choose the speech had been well prepared by their centres to meet the requirements of the form. More successful candidates used deictic features and other references to the context of the speech to locate themselves precisely.

There was also more sense of the audience in most responses. At Level 3 this may simply include the use of the second person pronoun but at Level 4 there should be some reference to a specific audience and the circumstances they find themselves in. Evidence for a 'secure understanding of the audience' (Level 5) would be demonstrated by a series of specific references to the life and experiences of the specified audience, e.g., young people in a school and their teachers or parents, and clubs or hobbies they may enjoy.

Most candidates were able to use a wide range of sentence structures but very few could punctuate accurately within the sentence. Vocabulary was a key discriminator with the more successful candidates using ambitious and precise word choices to convey their ideas and less successful candidates using more straightforward everyday vocabulary. Spelling varied across the range of attainment and was not always a good indicator of the level of success of a piece of writing.

Paragraphs continue to challenge even the higher attaining candidates. Centres would be well advised to prepare their candidates to organise their paragraphs around one main idea which they introduce with a clear topic sentence. Guidance on how to use a range of discourse markers at the start of each paragraph would also help improve the performance of candidates. Very few fulfilled the Level 4 criteria of writing responses with a 'well-managed overall structure'.

It was good to see a range of rhetorical devices used in both the letter and the speech. Much of this use of literary devices was clearly inspired by the texts in the reading section. This is further evidence of the benefit of answering the reading questions first; identifying the methods the writers use in these texts helps to remind the candidates of ways they can make their own writing more effective.

OCR support



There is useful guidance on how to approach the writing section of this examination in this training video which is available via this link on [Teach Cambridge](#).

Question 5*

5* Write a letter to a headteacher advising them how to encourage their students to read.

You should:

- explain why some students do not spend time reading
- describe the benefits of reading for students
- advise the headteacher how to encourage students to read.

[40]

This was the more popular of the two writing tasks. The form, audience and purpose were clearly familiar to candidates; letters were usually laid out correctly and the headteacher addressed directly.

More successful candidates showed a secure understanding of their audience by sympathising with the pressures faced by the headteacher and often used the possibility of improved exam results as a key argument to support their argument for a renewed focus on reading.

The candidates also had a good understanding of the benefits of reading. These ranged from the calming, therapeutic effect of reading to improved life chances due to increased knowledge and wider vocabulary. The main cause of the decline in reading was almost unanimously identified as the smartphone, but many others put the blame on the pressures of homework and the endless revision for final examinations.

Most candidates wrote from their own point of view as a young student at the school, but others adopted a persona: some were harassed librarians, concerned parents, or successful publishers. Whether the persona was real, or adopted for the sake of the task, this allowed candidates to include relevant anecdotes. These were, however, sometimes so lengthy as to distort the structure of the response. Such anecdotes work better when they are concisely but effectively explained.

There were many suggestions of ways to encourage reading: inspiring assemblies by the headteacher, improved facilities in the library, popular books available for loan, and reading competitions with tempting prizes.

More successful candidates were able to use a persuasive style that was both formal and friendly. Some, however, lapsed into a more colloquial style unsuitable for a letter to a headteacher while others adopted a threatening tone that was unlikely to achieve their purpose of advising their reader to follow their suggestions.

Question 6*

- 6*** Write a speech persuading young people to take part in an activity that brings together people from different backgrounds.

You should:

- describe the activity you want to do
- explain how this activity will bring together people from different backgrounds
- persuade other students to help you organise this activity.

[40]

This task was less popular than Question 5 but was still attempted by a significant number of candidates. It clearly drew on the way that Douglass's desire to read led to a relationship with a group of young white boys whereas Kakutani's relationships with the white children in her school was more difficult and left her feeling like an outsider.

Candidates who chose this task often had strong feelings about their idea of bringing people together and expressed them forcefully. Many shared personal experiences of being made to feel like an outsider, or of being welcomed despite differences in social background. Others appealed to logic by quoting (presumably invented) facts and statistics to illustrate the damaging effects of disunity and the benefits of bringing people from different backgrounds together.

Some of the activities designed to bring people together were generic but others clearly drew on a personal connection with the activity and were illustrated by interesting anecdotes. One candidate, for example, described how their love for music enabled them to cope with being left out when they first arrived in the United Kingdom and eventually helped them to build a diverse social circle around them.

Other suggestions for a suitable activity included a Pride march, a cultural festival, a food market, and, most popular of all, a football match. More successful candidates went into detail about the reason why such an activity might be helpful and even went so far as to set out in detail what the event would include, where and when it would be held and how the audience could sign up straight after the speech.

Although this task addressed a less familiar topic than the letter about reading, it was enthusiastically embraced by a significant number of candidates and elicited a much more passionate and engaging response from those who chose it.

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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Which courses are available?

We recommend all teachers complete the module on Online courses – NEA for their subject. These courses provide subject-specific information about course content; how to prepare for planning, marking and submitting; and support with understanding the marking criteria.

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

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

We are also developing courses for some of the examined units, which will be available soon.

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