# GCE A Level Examiners' Report

Art and Design

A Level

Summer 2026

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## Introduction

Our Principal examiners' report provides valuable feedback on the recent assessment series. It has been written by our Principal Examiners and Principal Moderators after the completion of marking and moderation, and details how candidates have performed in each component.

This report opens with a summary of candidates' performance, including the assessment objectives/skills/topics/themes being tested, and highlights the characteristics of successful performance and where performance could be improved. It then looks in detail at each unit, pinpointing aspects that proved challenging to some candidates and suggesting some reasons as to why that might be.[1]

The information found in this report provides valuable insight for practitioners to support their teaching and learning activity. We would also encourage practitioners to share this document – in its entirety or in part – with their learners to help with exam preparation, to understand how to avoid pitfalls and to add to their revision toolbox.

## Further support

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[1] ***Please note that 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.***

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## Executive Summary

Standards in the Personal Investigation remained high and were broadly comparable with 2025. Candidates demonstrated strong engagement with personal themes, contextual research and practical exploration, producing authentic and often ambitious investigations.

### Performance and Outcomes

- Candidate engagement was a notable strength, particularly where investigations were rooted in personal experiences and contemporary themes.
- Strong submissions combined primary research, effective experimentation and reflective annotation to demonstrate clear progression from initial ideas to well-resolved outcomes.
- Contextual understanding was generally strong, with candidates often making effective analytical connections between research and practical work.

### Key Trends and Comparison with 2025

- Overall standards remained broadly consistent with the previous series.
- The most significant change was the increased use of AI and digital technologies to generate ideas, imagery and developmental work, alongside continued growth in digital portfolios, particularly in Photography and Graphic Communication.
- Candidates who were given greater autonomy produced more original, sustained and ambitious outcomes.

### Key Areas for Improvement

- AO4 (Present) and refinement remained the weakest areas, with some final outcomes appearing underdeveloped due to insufficient testing, planning and exploration.
- Candidates should be encouraged to use artist and designer research as a stimulus for personal interpretation rather than replicating source material.
- Greater emphasis should be placed on observational drawing, primary research and evaluative annotation, ensuring critical reflection, originality and creative decision

The Externally Set Assignment (ESA) demonstrated strong candidate engagement, with many learners producing ambitious and personally meaningful responses to the starting points. Overall performance reflected secure understanding of the component and effective engagement with both practical and contextual research.

### Performance and Outcomes

- Candidates responded positively to the ESA, producing creative and sustained investigations rooted in individual interests and experiences.
- AO3 (Record) was a particular strength, supported by extensive sketchbook work, primary photography, observational research and gallery or exhibition visits.
- Contextual research was generally well selected and effectively applied, contributing to imaginative final outcomes that demonstrated technical confidence and personal engagement.

### Key Trends and Comparison with Previous Series

- Candidates increasingly demonstrated strong integration of primary research and contextual sources to inform practical decision-making.

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- The strongest submissions showed clear connections between research, experimentation and final outcomes, evidencing sustained development throughout the assignment.
- While overall standards remained strong, moderators observed that successful candidates relied less on imitation and more on developing individual responses inspired by artists, designers and craftspeople.

**Key Areas for Improvement**

- The final stages of development and the fifteen-hour timed period remain areas for improvement, with weaker outcomes often reflecting insufficient planning, refinement and time management.
- Centres should encourage more analytical annotation and critical reflection, moving beyond description to explain how decisions inform the development of ideas.
- Greater emphasis should be placed on observational drawing, purposeful experimentation and personal interpretation of contextual sources to strengthen originality, support creative independence and ensure outcomes fully realise the ambition evident in earlier developmental work.

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# ART AND DESIGN

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## COMPONENT 1: PERSONAL INVESTIGATION

### Overview of the Component

Overall standards of the component continued to be high, with moderators observing very good levels of engagement with contextual research, material exploration and reflective practice. The most frequently noted trend was the growing integration of digital technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI) alongside traditional processes, used to generate ideas and support making. Personal, contemporary and emotionally driven themes, particularly *mental health* and *identity*, remained dominant as starting points for candidates. At times, moderators noted that where investigations were more prescriptive, the development of ideas and production of outcomes were narrower in comparison to where greater levels of autonomy and creative agency were seen. In this series, moderators identified AO4 (Present), and refinement more broadly, as the weaker assessment objective, with development sometimes rushed, under-explored, or curtailed by ideas settling too early.

Compared with 2025, moderators agreed that standards were broadly similar. The clearest consistent shift was a marked increase in AI and digital technology use compared with 2025, particularly for generating ideas and imagery, alongside continued growth in digital submissions and portfolios, especially in Photography and Graphic Communication.

The strongest and most consistent feature of the Personal Investigation was genuine personal engagement, with candidates who explored individual, contemporary themes rooted in their own experiences producing authentic and sustained work. Moderators noted that this was often underpinned by strong primary research (photography, gallery visits, lived experience), confident experimentation across traditional and digital media, and effective use of sketchbooks and annotation to evidence development. Contextual understanding was strong, with increasingly analytical use of artist references, and many candidates showed clear progression from research through experimentation to ambitious, well-resolved outcomes.

However, on too many occasions, moderators noted that creative making too closely resembled the work of chosen artists and craftspeople which were presented as research, rather than using them as a springboard for personal responses. This was at times, compounded by underdeveloped or hurried final outcomes, reflecting insufficient planning and refinement. A noticeable decline in observational drawing in favour of photographic sources was also observed within the component.

### Recommendations and Future Considerations for Centres

- Encourage candidates to use artist research and references as a stimulus for personal interpretation and response, to strengthen original ideas and creative making.
- Build in dedicated time for the penultimate phase of development, including thumbnails, small-scale testing and compositional planning, to ensure final outcomes fully reflect the ambition shown in earlier phases of the investigation.
- Provide further opportunities for candidates to engage with more purposeful, evaluative annotation that reflect on successes, challenges and identify next steps.

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- Prioritise first-hand observational drawing and primary research over an over-reliance on secondary or photographic sources.
- Reinforce the purpose and value of Learner Statements and extended writing, ensuring they are completed thoughtfully and, that candidates' own critical thinking and development remain clearly evident.

**Comments on individual questions/sections**

Candidates approached AO1 (Develop) with confidence, selecting personal themes and undertaking relevant contextual research into artists, designers and craftspeople, often supported by gallery and exhibition visits that helped to inform the direction of their investigations. The strongest work made clear, purposeful links between research and practical outcomes, demonstrating genuine understanding of how sources could shape ideas. However, a recurring shortcoming was where research was too broad which often resulted in generic or superficial connections. To improve, candidates might be encouraged to integrate contextual sources more meaningfully into early development, acknowledge image sources consistently, and prioritise depth of analysis over breadth of reference.

The exploration of materials (AO2, Explore) was frequently a strength, with many candidates confidently exploring a wide range of materials, techniques and processes, and some successfully combining approaches across disciplines to produce individual, dynamic responses. Where candidates had the autonomy to pursue their own lines of enquiry, exploration tended to be purposeful and led to the genuine refinement of ideas. Equally, moderators observed that exploration was often more limited where activities were overly prescriptive and directed which subsequently resulted in narrow, predictable outcomes. Where this was the case, candidates often moved between materials without revisiting or refining techniques in sufficient depth.

Recording (AO3) was widely reported as a particular strength, with many candidates making effective use of sketchbooks, annotation, primary research and their own photography to document the development of their ideas in a purposeful and reflective manner. The strongest submissions showed sustained, thoughtful recording that clearly informed decision-making as investigations developed. Where this was less successful, annotation tended to be descriptive rather than evaluative, reflective entries were missing, and Learner Statements were sometimes rushed or underused as a tool for deeper reflection.

Moderators observed that many candidates produced personal, resolved outcomes that reflected sustained development and a clear connection between investigation, experimentation and final realisation when addressing AO4 (Present). The most successful submissions demonstrated a confident personal style, with many candidates achieving particularly sophisticated presentation through digital or physical sketchbook formats and, in the strongest cases, multiple considered outcomes.

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*An example of personal, resolved outcomes that reflect a sustained and developed investigation.*

Where AO4 was less successful, final pieces at times, lacked ambition or imaginative presentation, appeared underdeveloped in relation to the experimentation that preceded them, or failed to consider audience or scale.

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## COMPONENT 2: EXTERNALLY SET ASSIGNMENT

### Overview of the Component

Moderators observed a broad and often ambitious range of responses to the Externally Set Assignment starting points. Assessment objectives were generally covered consistently, though the strongest submissions were distinguished by greater depth of thought, experimentation and resolution. Despite being a more concise unit than the Personal Investigation, the Externally Set Assignment was approached by many candidates with enthusiasm and a strong level of personal engagement.

Moderators noted that candidates produced meaningful, ambitious and sustained bodies of work rooted in individual interests and experiences as they addressed the component. A key strength was AO3 (Record) where moderators observed a strong use of sketchbooks, extensive primary photography and first-hand research from exhibition and gallery visits to support the development of ideas. Contextual research was also well selected and purposefully applied, helping to inform practical decision-making, while final outcomes were on the whole, ambitious and imaginative, with many examples of sustained investigation and technical skill.

At times, moderators commented on the missed opportunities within the final phases of development, with the fifteen-hour timed period often exposing weaker planning and refinement with final pieces sometimes falling short of the ambition shown in earlier developmental work, with insufficient compositional planning or time management. Moderators also noted that on occasion, outcomes too closely resembled the work of artists/craftspeople that had been researched and explored, rather than being used to inspire and fuel making and ideas to develop a personal response. Where candidates were less successful, annotation and critical reflection were descriptive rather than analytical, and the Learner Statement was not always used effectively to support the development of ideas.

Recommendations and Future Considerations for Centres

- Promote personal, analytical responses to contextual sources, encouraging candidates to take inspiration from, and respond in an artist's style rather than produce imitations.
- Encourage candidates to move beyond descriptive annotation towards more analytical critical reflection, questioning why decisions were made and how they inform the development of ideas, rather than simply describing what was done.
- Strengthen the role of observational drawing and first-hand recording alongside photographic sources to support authentic development of ideas.
- Provide opportunities and dedicated time for sustained, purposeful experimentation with materials, techniques and processes, to encourage exploration to genuinely shape and refine the development of ideas rather than appearing as a single, ‘tokenistic’ gesture.
- Create further opportunities for candidates to engage with structured planning for the fifteen-hour timed period, with clear compositional and time-management strategies built into preparation during the penultimate phases of the assignment.

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**AO1 (Develop)** was considered to be a strength across centres, with candidates frequently producing confident and thorough contextual research, often supported by exhibition and gallery visits and clear connections made between sources and personal ideas.








*An example of relevant, purposeful artist research which has fuelled creative making, encouraging the candidate to stage their own photoshoot to use as a reference point for painting.*

However, moderators observed that on some occasions, candidates relied on too many contexts without depth, resulting in limited critical analysis and in less successful responses, work that imitated rather than interpreted their chosen artists.

Across **AO2 (Explore),** many candidates experimented confidently with a broad range of materials, techniques and processes, including a growing use of digital media, with the strongest submissions showing purposeful refinement of ideas. Conversely, many moderators observed that at times, the exploration of materials appeared ‘tokenistic’ across the Externally Set Assignment rather than a genuine exploration. It was noted by several moderators, as the weakest of the four objectives.

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Moderators noted that **AO3 (Record)** was a genuine strength, with many candidates effectively recording the development of their ideas through sketchbooks, annotation and primary source material. Photography featured particularly strongly as a recording tool, capturing observations, architecture, landscape and experimental imagery, and was frequently praised for supporting thoughtful, informed and personal responses. Where this could be strengthened, moderators observed that some candidates ran out of time to record ideas fully before planning their outcome, and end-of-assignment evaluations were not always thoroughly engaged with or fully embedded within the recording process.

**AO4 (Present)** was frequently a strength, with candidates producing ambitious, imaginative and often technically accomplished final outcomes, particularly through 3D and installation-based work, making good use of the 15-hour timed period. Where this fell short, moderators sometimes noted that outcomes did not always link clearly back to the preparatory work in sketchbooks, and final compositional and presentational choices could have been more thoroughly considered and resolved.

**Component 2: starting points and trends**

Candidates responded to a wide range of questions from the Externally Set Assignment, with some clear favourites emerging across centres. Moderators observed that *Disorder* was the most consistently popular starting point, frequently prompting candidates to explore mental health, anxiety and personal wellbeing, often with mature and reflective outcomes. *Portals*, *Sanctuary*, *Focus* and *Threads* were also widely selected, with *Sanctuary* commonly used to explore themes of wellness and personal topics. It was noted that *Portals* sometimes led to less successful, fantasy-driven responses which didn't always allow candidates the opportunity to fully explore their ideas from primary sourced references and subsequently, develop their lines of enquiry.

Moderators commented positively that candidates typically began with mind-mapping and their investigations with artist research before developing personal, experience-led responses, with strong use of primary photography, exhibition visits and digital media supporting the recording and development of ideas. Where candidates focused on one starting point from the outset, rather than spreading across several, work tended to be more coherent, personal and well resolved.

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## Supporting you

### Useful contacts and links

Our friendly subject team is on hand to support you between 8.30am and 5.00pm, Monday to Friday.
Tel: 029 2240 4304
Email: artanddesign@eduqas.co.uk
Qualification webpage: https://www.eduqas.co.uk/qualifications/art-and-design-asa-level/ -tab_keydocuments

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WJEC
245 Western Avenue
Cardiff  CF5 2YX
Tel No 029 2026 5000
Fax 029 2057 5994
E-mail: exams@wjec.co.uk
website: www.wjec.co.uk

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