



GCSE EXAMINERS' REPORTS

**ENGLISH LANGUAGE
GCSE**

NOVEMBER 2018

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE

GCSE

November 2018

COMPONENT 1

Section A

The reading material was from John Steinbeck's novel 'East of Eden' and it focused on just two main characters, Samuel and Liza Hamilton, who emigrated from Ireland to California in the nineteenth century. There was limited action in the narrative but there was enough in the characters, and the relationship between them, to provoke an engaged response from most of the candidates.

It was made clear in the passage that the narrator was the grandchild of the Hamiltons, and may or may not have been the writer himself. This issue did not seem to trouble the candidates and it was not an issue in assessment.

Question 0.1

This question, worth five marks, focused on the opening paragraph of the passage and required the candidates to identify explicit and implicit ideas and information. The question asked for a list of what was learned about the Hamiltons in the specified lines and the candidates could simply locate facts or make inferences. The marks were available for a straightforward and clear selection of relevant points.

The opening paragraph provided the Hamilton family background and informed the reader that Samuel and Liza were both from the north of Ireland. The Hamiltons were a farming family and were described as 'neither rich nor poor'. They had deep roots on their farm, having lived there in the same house for hundreds of years. They were also described as 'intelligent and well-educated people' and, typically of people in Ireland, they were related to the great and the small. Of course, they were, or at least claimed to be, descended from the ancient kings.

A lot of the candidates located the relevant material with minimum fuss but a significant number did not line it up very well and the focus of their answers was uncertain. They often focused too narrowly on Samuel himself rather than 'the Hamiltons'.

It is also worth remembering that bullet points should be coherent in themselves and not relying on the examiner's knowledge of the passage.

Question 0.2

The candidates had plenty of opportunities to gain credit in this question and the wording was such that they could focus on the characters as individuals or as a couple in a married relationship. The best responses did some of both approaches.

There was a lot to say about Sam Hamilton and he was presented as a man of moral principle. He was described as 'totally honest' and the use of 'totally' emphasised his integrity. The impression was also created of a man who was attractive in both appearance and personality. He had 'good looks and charm'. Sam was a man of energy and invention and he had practical skills as a blacksmith and carpenter. However, he had no business acumen. He had no talent for making money, but he was 'a man of love' who may have secretly loved another girl. The text suggested that he may have left Ireland because he was heartbroken by this relationship or perhaps because it was 'too successful'. I did not see any responses which picked up the implication of that comment.

Liza was described as 'tiny' and 'hard and humourless'. The reader was also told that she was a woman who did not show her feelings. Although there were fewer details about Liza, it was clear that as a couple they were very different and perhaps ill-suited. Many candidates had got the impression that they were an odd match.

There was a temptation for some to spend too long on this question but it is better to have too much to say than too little in an examination. That said, the candidates needed to bear in mind that the question was only worth five marks.

Question 0.3

This question was in two parts but it allowed credit to be given for understanding of the character of Sam Hamilton as well as for understanding how the writer had shown his character. Too many candidates make the issue of 'how does the writer' too complicated and get lost in unconvincing assertions about the effects of sentence structure, punctuation and 'short syntax' (sic). The best way to tackle this type of question is to link comments to evidence and to embed any relevant terminology in an exploration of the text. It is not sensible to start with the effects of literary devices and, as I have said many times in earlier reports, trying to find devices should not be the focus of candidates' responses. The text and what happens in that text should be the centre of the reader's attention.

The writer presented the character of Sam Hamilton in a positive and almost reverential way, stressing his many and varied skills and qualities. The initial focus was on Sam in his working life and the writer showed Sam's practical skills by saying that he built his own house and used his 'clever hands' to invent a machine to bore for water. He was presented as a hardworking man who worked for others as a blacksmith and thresher. He clearly struggled to make a living from his own barren land and he was not one of the 'lucky' men. He came across as patient, uncomplaining and accepting of his lot in life.

Sam was also presented as a raconteur, a sociable man, who could entertain his customers and who earned a reputation as 'a comic genius' among his neighbours, who lacked his gift as a natural story teller. However, he had no head for business and was too understanding to press for payment for his services. He was a soft touch when it came to money, although some candidates tended to overstate Sam's altruism and generosity by claiming that he worked willingly for free or had no interest in making money.

The writer showed a very different side of Sam's character by telling the reader that he delivered his own children and knew what to do if things went wrong. He also delivered local children, and animals too, suggesting his range of skills and the sensitive side of his personality. The writer stressed that his hands were 'so good' and 'so gentle' that people came from miles around for his help with a birth. He was shown to be caring and could soothe a frightened child with his 'sweet' voice and 'the tenderness of his soul'. He was even shown to have a moral influence on those around him as the men did not curse in the blacksmith shop, instinctively feeling that it was not the place for such language.

The writer's language consistently emphasised Sam's skill, patience and virtue and the tone indicated respect, affection and admiration. Even Sam's failings in business matters were presented as a virtue and evidence of his kindness and sensitivity to others.

There was plenty to explore in this part of the question and not many failed to see that Sam Hamilton was presented as a wholly admirable character.

Question 0.4

This question turned the focus to the other major character in the passage and the candidates were asked to analyse the rather withering presentation of Liza Hamilton.

This was a relatively short passage of text but it was packed with detail about the character and significant credit was given to those who showed a grasp of the character and used the text effectively to support their comments.

The writer immediately employed the contrast with Sam in this section of the text and ironically referred to Liza as 'a different kettle of Irish'. She was presented as a formidable and rather intimidating woman. The passage had established earlier that she was physically small, and 'disapproving' when it came to whisky, and here the immediate focus was on the description of her head, which was described as 'small and round'. However, this apparently straightforward descriptive detail was followed by the sharply critical and unflattering comment that her head held 'small, fixed convictions'. In contrast with the warm and generous Sam, Liza was immediately nailed as narrow-minded, a woman of unbending and fixed opinions who was 'set on her course' and would not change for 'the angels of God'. Liza was a woman of firm moral principles but that was not presented favourably as her morality was harsh and hostile to pleasure. The writer claimed that she 'beat the brains out of nearly everything that was pleasant to do' and the violence of the language was clearly intended to influence the reader's perception of the character.

Liza was described as a 'good, plain cook' but the word 'plain' suggested rather grudging appreciation of her culinary skills. She was house-proud but the parenthetical suggestion that it was always 'her house' and the use of the adverb 'fiercely' did not suggest that her cleanliness was a particularly endearing quality.

She was certainly presented as strong and resilient and even childbirth did not 'hold her back very much'. However, her 'finely developed' sense of sin focused on idleness and card playing and her disapproval extended to dancing, singing and even laughter. Her antagonism to anything that was fun or might have encouraged having a good time placed her clearly in a familiar tradition of puritanical self-righteousness. She was a killjoy and she took it upon herself to protect Samuel from sin, whether he wanted to be protected or not. He was described as 'wide open to the devil' because he was 'a laughing man' and the writer's sarcasm was evident in the wry comment that 'this was a shame'.

The writer suggested that her severe appearance matched and reflected her personality and the savage presentation continued with the suggestion that she had 'no spark' of humour. Even her occasional 'sharp blade' of wit suggested that it was cutting and perhaps hurtful. Perhaps the most damning detail of all was the fact that she frightened her own grandchildren, including the writer/narrator, because she had no weaknesses. She seemed inhuman in her strength and this was a good example of where the choice of content clearly was being used to influence the reader.

The writer acknowledged her courage as she ‘suffered bravely and uncomplainingly’ but also suggested that even this was a feature or consequence of her stern religion.

The writer used carefully-chosen detail and some very significant language choices to present Liza’s character and the verbs and adjectives were particularly effective in influencing the reader. The tone was sharply ironic and any praise or appreciation was limited and grudging.

Overall, this question was not handled as well as Question 0.3 and a lot of candidates did not really get the measure of Liza. Some went too far in condemning her as ‘evil’ and ‘the devil’ while others completely misread the character and argued that her ‘convictions’ suggested a criminal past and accused her of gambling and other vices.

Question 0.5

This type of question requires the ability to range across a whole text and establish an overview of the text and a coherent stance. It is the ability to construct and support a convincing argument that is required here.

It would have been very difficult to argue convincingly that life was easy for the immigrants and most candidates were at least able to identify some examples of hardship in the lives of the early settlers in California.

For example, the writer made it clear farming was very tough. Sam Hamilton was full of energy and invention but he struggled to make much money. Some candidates argued, quite convincingly, that Sam could have been more successful and his business failings were self-inflicted. However, the good land was all taken by the time the Hamiltons arrived in California. Those people may have had an easier time of it, but latecomers such as Sam and Liza were forced by circumstance to scrape a living on the ‘barren hills’. The description of the area above the Salinas valley illustrated that life was hard. The land Sam Hamilton and others like him tried to farm was described by the writer as ‘harsh’ and ‘dry’. The topsoil was described as ‘a thin crust’ where even grass struggled to grow. The cattle were thin because they ran around searching for water and the abundance of land made no real difference. Without water, even ten thousand acres were worthless.

The passage also conveyed a clear sense of the self-reliance needed by these isolated ranchers. People had to be practical and determined and possess a variety of skills. Sam had to build his own house and barn and earn a living by working with his ‘clever’ hands and physical strength. There were usually no doctors to deliver the children who arrived as ‘regularly as the years’ and were perhaps a mixed blessing for people struggling to get by. One candidate pointed out the danger to women of childbirth in such a situation.

There was also a sense of the narrow horizons and isolation in this life. Sam Hamilton became the local fountain of knowledge about the world outside the confines of the valley. It was perhaps self-inflicted in the case of the Hamiltons but there was little sense of these people having fun in their lives. They seemed to live to work and their pleasures were simple.

There was no doubt that these people had a tough life but some candidates also grasped that they were not really presented by the writer as victims. Life was certainly hard but there was a sense of tenacity and resilience in these people and the reader was more likely to admire them than pity them. The writer painted a picture of friendship and togetherness as the men gathered at the forge to talk and drink whisky while Sam repaired their tools. As well as friendship, there was mutual assistance as Sam delivered children and animals alike.

Some candidates focused too exclusively on the Hamiltons in this question but it was true that Steinbeck used the experience of Sam and Liza to illustrate the wider experience of immigrants to California in the nineteenth century.

Section B

Question 1.1

As usual, there were four options in this section and the candidates were instructed to produce a narrative of about 450-600 words. Most candidates try their best to produce a narrative which has some detail and substance but some are too brief and thin to develop convincingly and often they provide limited evidence on which to base a fair assessment. There is nothing to be gained from writing endlessly and aimlessly but the examiners do need enough evidence to inform their judgement.

Narrative writing in the context of an examination is really the art of the miniaturist but there is time and space to develop setting and characterisation.

- (a) Write a story which begins: I can clearly remember that family gathering.

This type of question, which provides an opening for a narrative, is intended to be helpful and to give the candidates a starting point and a sense of direction for their writing. However, there is often an awkward transition from the given opening to the rest of the narrative and there are frequent problems with structure and chronology which could be avoided if the candidates just took a few moments to plan their writing.

This specific opening allowed the candidates to focus on one of a variety of family occasions and reminisce about events which could have been amusing or dramatic.

There were some lively responses but a lot were largely uneventful or drifted into action which had little to do with the idea of a family gathering.

- (b) The Race.

This type of title is relatively open to interpretation but the expectation was clearly that some kind of race would feature significantly in the narrative. Some 'races' were quite imaginative in approach but some were merely fanciful and unconvincing.

There were some obvious approaches here and the writer usually appeared as a competitor. Ironically, those who could not resist the chance to win an Olympic gold medal were often less successful than those who won the egg and spoon race in primary school. The latter usually had authenticity and charm and allowed some development of character and exploration of feelings. Convincing details and observation are engaging.

- (c) Write about a time when you felt let down by a friend.

This was a narrative based on personal experience and it had a clear and specific focus. I suspect that few people have been fortunate enough to have never experienced a sense of being let down by someone who was, or seemed to be, a friend. The advantage of this type of narrative is that it should have the coherence and authenticity of real experience. Some of the narratives were uneasily constructed but most were relevant.

- (d) Write a story which ends: ...and I realised that some things are more important than money.

Constructing a narrative which is tailored to a given conclusion can be difficult and it requires careful planning and clear thinking if a 'crash landing' is to be avoided. Those who chose this option had mixed fortunes and a lot of them struggled for overall coherence and direction.

Many candidates struggled with basic accuracy in written expression. I regret to say that problems in spelling, punctuation and sentence construction are still very much in evidence and, as I have mentioned in previous reports, the ability to control tenses is a real issue for some. Too often it is the lack of technical control and accuracy which undermines the writing as a whole. There is no easy solution to this issue but, if possible, candidates should try to spend a few minutes checking for errors in their narrative writing at the end of the exam.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

GCSE

November 2018

COMPONENT 2

Section A

The reading material for this examination was a recent newspaper article about tightrope artist, Nik Wallenda, attempting to cross Niagara Falls on a tightrope and a first-hand account of the day that Charles Blondin attempted the very first crossing of the Niagara Falls on a tightrope in 1862. The texts both gave vivid accounts of the attempts and the questions provided opportunities to explore the different ways in which the writers reported these attempts.

Question 1.1

This first question followed a now-familiar pattern of three one-mark questions that asked candidates to identify particular details from one of the texts, in this case the newspaper article. These were straightforward 'search and find' questions, but as with previous exam papers, it was important to read the question carefully. The first part of the question simply asked candidates how far above the water Nik Wallenda was when he made his tightrope walk. This information – 60 metres – was in the very first sentence of the article and provided little difficulty to most candidates. However, it was important for candidates to ensure their answers made sense: those who simply copied out "60 metres below" gained no reward. Similarly, the second part of the question only required candidates to name one thing that made it difficult for spectators in Canada to see Wallenda making his crossing. This information was contained in the sixth paragraph and many simply quoted the appropriate sentence: 'The distance and the heavy mist made it difficult for those watching in Canada to see exactly when Wallenda set foot onto the wire...', although some candidates lost the focus of the question and wrote about how the winds that Wallenda battled with made it difficult for them to see him. The final part of the question, asking for the name of one of the spectators, caused few problems, particularly as three were mentioned by name: William Clements, Muriel Marsh and Bert Dandy. One or two examiners mentioned that candidates had given the name of the reporter rather than that of the named spectators, but most candidates navigated the text successfully and gained the full three marks for the question.

Question 1.2

Whilst the opening questions allowed candidates to get some sense of the content of the text, this second question invited them to consider how the writer had tried to show that the attempt by Wallenda to cross Niagara Falls on a tightrope was both astonishing and dramatic. Well-prepared candidates heeded the advice given in examiner reports over a number of years about the most effective way of dealing with this type of question: track the text methodically, focus the response mainly on content and language but where appropriate, recognise and comment on the way the structure and tone adds impact. The least effective method of tackling this question is for candidates to write a response in which 'feature-spotting' dominates; candidates who spend valuable time on a wild search for alliteration, personification, dashes, the mystical power of a comma or full stop to astonish or convey drama are rarely successful and they often miss the most relevant parts of the text.

In the Jacob Burnett article, the opening sentence captures neatly the drama of the occasion as he comments that Wallenda, on a tightrope high above Niagara Falls had a view that no other living human could have had, and he then goes on to describe the ‘churning waters’ and Wallenda being ‘enveloped in mist’ amid the noise of the ‘thundering falls’. This arresting opening is then developed to describe the circumstances Wallenda faced as he made his way, ‘One careful step at a time’ along the tightrope. If this feat alone is astonishing to report on, that Wallenda had to ‘battle winds and near-blinding spray’ gives the account added drama.

Good candidates combined relevant selection of detail with appropriate comment on how the details captured the drama of the occasion and the sense of seeing history being made. These better responses moved methodically through the text, ensuring good coverage of key details but recognising the impact of particular words and phrases. Where such details were given a context, they gained good reward and showed good understanding of how the account captured the occasion effectively. There were lots of details that rewarded candidates’ focus, such as the writer’s description of Wallenda as he ‘slowly, painstakingly, proceeded step-by-step’ across the falls, that re-paid attention to both detail and the language. Other candidates focused on and then added comments about specific details that were astonishing: that a crossing had not been attempted for more than a hundred years; that an expectant crowd of over 125,000 people gathered to watch the spectacle, some waiting for more than 12 hours; that Wallenda could dare to kneel down on the wire and then wave to the crowd. Others gave some focus to the manner of his crossing, exploring his decision to change his tactics and ignore, ‘the first rule of tightrope-walking’ because of the conditions, which again added to the drama of the occasion.

Some candidates explored the impact of the writer using phrases such as ‘historic performance’ or the way the account used the repetition of ‘history/historic’ in the text to emphasise the unique event being witnessed. Others looked at how the spectators reacted, from the eight-year-old jumping with excitement, to those adults who had arrived early and talked about the event as ‘fantastic’, describing Wallenda as being ‘brave and very clever’ and being there for this ‘once-in-a-lifetime event’, all helping to capture the admiration as well as astonishment of those onlookers.

Where candidates adopted this methodical approach there was always plenty to select and write about but still too many adopted the ‘feature-spotting’ route, desperately searching for the next ‘feature’, but with little to say that was really telling about the impact any of the ‘features’ made. One candidate even homed in on the dash in the words ‘near-blinding’ and suggested, “The dash between near-blinding creates impact on the readers because there’s a word missing, that’s why the dash is there, to slow the readers down”. I suggested as recently as the Summer 2018 report that in employing this approach, “careful exploration of the text is often a casualty”, and so it proved to be again. Other responses where candidates gained only modest marks were those that were brief and lacking in specific detail. The opening lines of the article were worth exploring for content, language and tone but it was also important for candidates to move through the text and get coverage of the whole article; those who limited themselves to an exploration of just two or three lines of the text struggled to move into the higher mark bands. Sometimes candidates saw words or phrases they recognised as being important but struggled to give them a context or comment and this limited the impact of the details selected. Because only about fifteen minutes can be committed to a 10 mark question, effective selection and comment is key to success and the best responses accumulated high marks by exploring lots of details, adding comments or analysis where appropriate, and by ensuring good coverage of the whole text. There was a lot to comment on and candidates who worked hard at including plenty of textual evidence were able to gain high marks.

Question 1.3

The third question focused on the 'Blondin' text by George Banks. Like the first question, this was in three parts, each requiring some fairly straightforward selection of detail and/or simple inference. It should have presented few difficulties to careful readers.

The first part of the question simply required candidates to give a detail from the text that suggested Niagara Falls is a very impressive place. Most recognised that Banks' opening paragraph contained a number of relevant details. Many noted that it was 'a stupendous and awe-inspiring place', whilst others focused on it being described as 'one of the grandest objects of nature...'. Some wrote about its physical features, that it was '1100 feet across' or that Banks described it being 'at the dizzy height of 160 feet'. The importance of keeping a focus on what was being asked for was illustrated when some candidates responded to the question by writing about the people who came to visit or that Blondin found walking across the falls easy. The second part of the question, asking candidates for the number of spectators present at the event caused few problems, although some unfortunately wrote down the wrong figure. Some put the figure as 2500, whilst others, presumably remembering Burnett's article, wrote 125,000. The final part of the question asked how long Blondin's whole performance lasted, and whilst this, again, was just a matter of careful reading to select the correct detail from the final paragraph: 'about an hour', there were candidates who offered 'twenty minutes', a time mentioned in the penultimate paragraph and others who stabbed at any time but the correct one. Most candidates gained the three marks available without difficulty but there were others who lost a mark or even two because they took too little care to be precise.

Question 1.4

This question now asked candidates to consider the Blondin text in greater detail. They were given a statement: "In this extract, George Banks presents Blondin in a very positive way" and asked how far they agreed with the statement. In considering the statement, candidates needed to select appropriate evidence to support their views and on the whole, most found there was compelling evidence to suggest Banks did present Blondin in a positive light. Some tried to suggest Banks was being negative, at times implying he was a show-off, but that was to ignore the way Banks reported the way the crowds reacted to him, or to take little note of the way he described what Blondin did as 'miraculous antics', although some did suggest that the word 'antics' was to suggest a rather foolhardy way of behaving. Most took the view that Banks admired Blondin and his account of the day captured pretty clearly the admiration he felt. For example, he begins by explaining the feat was 'the first time that any human being had dared to cross the terrible Niagara' and many took this to be a sign that he felt positive towards Blondin implying that he was brave to undertake such a challenge. He goes on to write about the crowd and the way they were 'eager' and 'expectant' whilst waiting for Blondin to appear. When he did appear, Banks writes about how the 'air rang with shouts and encouragement of the heartiest kind.' Whilst it is probably true that Banks' account recognises Blondin's bravery to consider such a dangerous undertaking, he also tells his readers about the skill Blondin possesses. He tells us that Blondin 'stepped nimbly upon the rope' and then proceeds to give details of the 'miraculous antics' he performs whilst on the rope. He writes of the way Blondin 'seated himself complacently' on the rope, then lay full length before performing a 'back somersault'. Banks reports how he was 'greeted with loud cheers' by the audience. He continues by giving details of a further, amazing 'antic', in which he carried a 'picture-taking apparatus' on to the rope with him, then proceeded to dispense with his balance pole so that he could take a picture of the crowds on the shore. Banks captures these amazing feats, describing how 'people held their breath', astonished at what they were seeing, and telling readers that some in the audience actually fainted at what they were seeing. Banks makes clear Blondin's showmanship and confidence upon the rope and tells his readers that 'he was enthusiastically received on his arrival' by the crowd, including those who were, 'eagerly pressing forward to shake him by the hand.'

In tracking through the text, candidates had plenty of material to select and comment upon. Some tried to complicate the task by suggesting he was both positive and critical, and whilst the quality of the response was ultimately about how the evidence was used and commented upon, those who started from the view that he was positive and then went about finding the evidence, probably gave themselves an easier route to a higher mark. Weaker readers often suffered because the range of their exploration was limited and brief responses rarely had sufficient coverage of the whole text to merit high marks.

Question 1.5

This question, requiring candidates to show the ability to select and synthesise materials from the two texts, asked how the spectators reacted to Blondin and Wallenda. Some candidates began their responses with a general overview of how both sets of spectators responded, some simply using the word 'positive' to describe them, whilst others went a little further, explaining that in both cases spectators were excited or amazed or full of admiration at what they were seeing. This approach offered an effective opening but it was then appropriate to look at each text in turn to give some specific details about spectators' reactions.

Those who confined their response to 'both' sets of spectators could only be rewarded if they talked about the way they cheered the performers. Some candidates muddled up what one set of spectators did or said, or wrote about 'both passages...' and then went on to mention something which was only true of one of them. Better candidates separated out the details from each text, noting that in the Banks text, the spectators were particularly vocal, shouting encouragement and congratulating him at the end of his feat by shaking his hand and going up to him to talk to him.

In Burnett's article, the writer made it clear that people reacted to Wallenda's attempt to walk across the tightrope by arriving early, with all the equipment such as chairs and food that would be needed for a long day. Individuals reacted by calling him 'very brave and very clever', by barely being able to contain their excitement as they jumped up and down, or by reacting to the event by calling it, 'history in the making'. The marks for this question covered every mark from 1 to 4, along with candidates who either mis-read the question, lost the focus of the question or muddled up details to such an extent that they gained no marks. In reality, close reading of the question and a little care across the two texts usually meant candidates could gain full marks fairly easily.

Question 1.6

This final question in the reading section required candidates to use both texts, taking relevant details from each, comparing first, what each of the tightrope walkers did when they made their crossings of Niagara Falls, and then secondly, comparing how each of the writers tried to convey the dangers the men faced. The bullet points provided the clear areas of focus for the response, although some candidates struggled to keep a focus on the question and sometimes drifted into a response that had little to do with what was asked for. Where candidates had found difficulty in managing their time in the examination, this question often proved to be a casualty, with some very brief or incomplete responses. In some cases, candidates tackled only part of the question, which inevitably limited their mark. Others however, showed a clear understanding of what was required and produced detailed and focused responses that were often succinct and accumulated marks quickly and effectively.

Most good responses were able to note that Blondin began by stepping ‘nimble’ on to the tightrope and having walked towards the centre of the rope, sat down on it and looked around at the scene. He then began the ‘miraculous antics’ as Banks described them, first ‘lying at full length’ along the rope and then turning ‘a back somersault’. He later made another tightrope walk, on this occasion carrying a camera with him and taking a picture of those watching him on the shore. In Wallenda’s crossing of Niagara Falls, candidates often noted that his journey was less flamboyant: he made his way more slowly and deliberately along the rope, Burnett telling us that he made his way, ‘slowly, painstakingly, step by step.’ However, he too had something of the showman in him, as he gave an interview to a television company, whilst in the middle of his walk. At one point, he knelt down on the wire and waved to the crowd. As he completed his walk, he ran the last few steps and punched the air in celebration.

Most candidates were able to select some appropriate details but weaker candidates often limited their responses to just a detail or two, whereas strong responses made a more thorough job of selecting and using a wider range of detail. When it came to looking at how the writers conveyed the dangers of crossing Niagara Falls, good candidates were able to focus on both the details in the text and the way in which the writers used language to emphasise the dangers the men faced. Banks wrote about the tightrope being at the ‘dizzy height of 160 feet’, emphasising the crossing was to be made on a ‘fragile’ rope, and describing Blondin’s attempt as the first time anyone ‘had dared to cross the terrible Niagara’. Following this, he explained that if Blondin were to miss his footing, he would be sure ‘to meet with certain death’. Most candidates were able to gain some reward for this final detail, but too few explored the whole of the opening paragraph sufficiently thoroughly. Some candidates were able to make something of the way the spectators reacted to Blondin’s dice with death, particularly when people ‘held their breath’ and several became so overcome that they fainted. In contrast, Burnett describes how the weather increased Wallenda’s vulnerability, as he ‘battled winds’ during the crossing, and goes on to write about the ‘near-blinding spray’ and the ‘rising mist’ that made conditions even more dangerous. Many selected details such as the ‘churning waters’ or the ‘raging waters’ as evidence of the dangerous nature of the river, should Wallenda be unfortunate enough to fall, while others noted how he changed his approach, ‘ignoring the first rule of tightrope-walking’, which suggested he employed a more dangerous tactic. These were details that offered good opportunities for accumulating marks, but many examiners reported candidates often covered too little ground to gain high marks, and in some cases, struggled to comment on more than a detail or two. As in other areas of the reading section, the best responses were often those where it was clear that a methodical approach had been taken, with sufficient focus given to each part of the question.

Section B

The two writing tasks in this examination seemed to engage candidates who had plenty to say about the two topics. The examination paper asked them to write “about 300-400 words for each task” which gave candidates tackling the first task, about their plans and ambitions, ample opportunity to expand upon the topic in some detail, and in responding to the second task, a letter to a magazine, there was scope for candidates to shape their arguments as well as offering supporting examples as compelling evidence.

Question 2.1

For this task, candidates were asked to write what they would say when asked to give a talk to people in their class about their ambitions and what they hoped to achieve in the next 10 years. Many examiners reported that candidates engaged very positively with the opportunity to look ahead, set out their goals for their future or, in some responses, reflect on what had led them to think about their plans in the first place. Responses ranged from those who had set themselves along a very clear path, knowing exactly what they wanted to do and how they would mark their achievements, to others who told their audience how their plans had already been affected by previous school experiences; many regretted not working hard enough in the previous year and failing to gain the grades that would have ensured a particular course could have been followed. Some explored the whole notion of ambition in wider-ranging, rather more philosophical responses, and whilst some were determined to eschew materialism and follow a path of helping others or achieving justice for those wronged, there were still plenty who saw themselves in big detached houses with their silver Mercedes cars parked on the drive, having built their own businesses with world-wide clients. The responses were varied and engaging, often heart-warming in their honesty and sometimes showing a maturity of thought and an awareness of the challenges that faced them. There was no set formula for what marked out the best responses, but it is fair to say that these tended to combine a sense of their intended audience along with shape and direction in the content. Often these candidates were able to weave in telling details, offer anecdotes or include relevant background details that helped clarify points or explanations. Less successful responses were often too brief and lacking in detail. In some cases they drifted into a rather bald list-like approach where sentences often began with 'Also..' or 'Then...' but lacked the detail or reflection seen in more confident responses. That said, there was much to enjoy in the responses to this task and it seemed to be one where candidates genuinely wanted to tell examiners about themselves and about their hopes, expectations and sometimes their anxieties about the next phase in their lives.

Question 2.2

The second task was to write a letter to a magazine in response to what had been written in an article about the influence that celebrities and sports stars have on young people, particularly when they behave badly.

As this was a formal letter, some awareness of format was helpful, although some candidates ignored this entirely. The most effective approach for candidates was to first decide whether they wanted to agree or disagree with the views expressed in the article. A few confessed to being undecided and tried to shape a response that began by agreeing that celebrities had a negative influence but then switched their view and decided that in fact many had shown themselves to be good role models; it was an approach that made it hard to establish a clear overall viewpoint and although there were some exceptions, in most cases this was not the most useful approach.

A more effective approach was where candidates decided to offer a clear viewpoint and then construct a series of arguments in support of their stated view. Whether they agreed or disagreed with the article, it was the quality of the arguments and the way their response was shaped that determined the mark gained for content and organisation. The exam paper included the invitation to spend a little time planning and where this was taken advantage of, it meant that perhaps three or four clear arguments could be marshalled, which in turn then allowed candidates to organise and shape their content in advance of beginning to write their letter.

Good responses frequently offered a brief opening explanation about the issue in question and why it had been felt necessary to write to the magazine. As they moved into the body of the letter, these more assured responses used each paragraph to argue a specific point, adding examples and detail to support their assertions. For example, those who felt celebrities and sport stars were being maligned and were actually a force for good often began by explaining that such people had frequently had to overcome personal hardships or difficult family backgrounds, and knowing about such circumstances gave a message to young people about resilience and mental toughness. The best responses then gave an example or two of individuals about whom this could be said. Often these paragraphs included both detail and development of the argument in a neat, coherent way. They then linked their argument to another specific point that became the focus of the following paragraph, perhaps, for example, writing about the skills or talent that celebrities or sports stars were able to demonstrate and the hard work that was involved in becoming such a well-known figure. In some cases, they would then move on in a further paragraph to give details of the positive things such celebrities and stars had done, citing specific examples of charity work, or generous donations they had made.

Those who had agreed with the sentiments expressed in the article often built their arguments around celebrities whose behaviour was outrageous or who were involved with drugs or heavy alcohol use. Again, in assured responses, candidates often supported their case with specific examples: here, rappers often came in for particular criticism because it was felt that their lyrics were unpleasant or incited violence or hatred. Others argued that sports stars and celebrities were frequently too materialistic or wasted money that could have been put to better use. In some cases, candidates argued strongly that it was the fault of the magazine itself for printing negative stories about celebrities, and examiners also saw examples where the letters were written from the perspective of an outraged parent who was seeing his children copying the selfish and anti-social behaviour being reported in the magazine.

There seemed to be no shortage of views about the topic and many argued their case with some feeling and passion. Where examiners saw weaker responses, it was often a lack of development of the arguments that limited the piece. Some responses were particularly brief and were self-penalising and there were some that were clearly unfinished at the end of the examination. However, many responded with a clear line of argument and showed a good awareness of their intended audience. As with the first writing task, examiners often found the content to be well-focused on the task and often arguments were presented quite powerfully.

As in the June 2018 examinations, many candidates sitting this examination were rewarded in a higher band for communication and organisation than they were for technical accuracy. Basic errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar and sentence construction all contributed to lower marks in VSSSP and for some candidates, this will have contributed to the difference between them gaining the grade they wanted and the grade they actually achieved.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

GCSE

November 2018

COMPONENT 3

The November entry was relatively small as the majority of candidates carried forward their Spoken Language grade from the summer series. However, any centre entering candidates for the endorsement for the first time were required to submit a sample of their assessed presentations for monitoring, as in the summer.

Monitors were able to report having enjoyed some interesting and engaging presentations from candidates who, along with the advantage of a little more maturity and confidence, had been carefully guided on how best to prepare for this component.

In the main, candidates awarded a **Pass grade** had been accurately assessed but there was some evidence of generosity in awarding the higher grades. Not all centres had correctly applied the standards, as exemplified by the twelve exemplar presentations, and **Merit and Distinction grades** had been awarded to candidates who had not met all the criteria. Most of these candidates seemed to have selected their own topics without sufficient guidance on how to ensure there were opportunities to meet the requirements for the higher grades.

Teachers assessing candidates should remind themselves of the agreed standards by revisiting the exemplar presentations. It is also important to keep firmly in mind that the competency model of assessment means **candidates must meet all the criteria for a grade before it can be awarded**.

As in the summer series, the main reasons candidates did not meet Merit and Distinction criteria were:

- the subjects chosen by the candidates were not challenging or sophisticated enough
- this lack of challenging content often affected the quality of the language used, meaning there was not an appropriate range or sophisticated repertoire of vocabulary
- Even in cases where the content was more challenging, the task often lacked a clearly defined purpose which led to a relatively straightforward and descriptive approach. As one of the criteria for both Merit and Distinction grades is to 'achieve the purpose' of the talk, it is important that centres keep this in mind when advising candidates on how to structure their presentations; for Merit grade, candidates have to organise their material 'clearly' in order to 'meet the audience needs' and 'effective' organisation to engage listeners' interest is required for a Distinction. **There are clear and practical suggestions on how to shape tasks and include a clear purpose on the Eduqas website.**
- Candidates often read with their heads lowered from written scripts or from PowerPoint slides meaning that they did not meet the audience needs or demonstrate strategies to engage. While they are allowed to make use of notes and visual aides and are not expected to be polished orators, some awareness of basic presentation skills is needed, especially for a Distinction. **There is some straightforward advice on how to help candidates present their material more effectively on the Eduqas website.**

- The most impressive part of some candidates' presentations was the question and answer section, when their enthusiasm and knowledge were evident in their developed and informed responses. This was not always the case, unfortunately, and some centres had awarded higher grades to candidates who gave only straightforward answers, often because the questions posed were limiting, unlikely to elicit perceptive or developed responses. **The Eduqas website also offers some additional guidance on how to ensure that candidates are given the opportunity to meet the requirements for this strand of the assessment criteria.**

As experienced teachers themselves, monitors recognise that centres have to give priority to the weighted exam components in preparing candidates for the November resit when time is very limited. However, in most centres, the number of candidates entered is very small, often only one or two, and teachers should give some specific, focused advice on key aspects of the presentation, especially subject matter, organisation of material and basic presentation skills, as well as ensuring that there is the opportunity to respond to some challenging feedback on their presentations.

Although the candidates in November are a little older, and even more self-assured in some cases, they may still need guidance on how to fulfil their potential.

Summary of advice:

- The topic and purpose of the presentation should be agreed between the teacher and candidate beforehand
- Teachers should advise candidates on subject matter and shaping their material.
- Some brief guidance on presentation skills is helpful to the majority of candidates.
- In order to meet all the criteria for Merit or Distinction, candidates must be given the opportunity to respond to some thoughtful and probing questions.
- Teachers assessing candidates' presentation must ensure that candidates have met all the criteria before awarding a grade.



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