



GCSE EXAMINERS' REPORTS

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

SUMMER 2018

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE

GCSE

Summer 2018

COMPONENT 1

Section A

The reading material was taken from a novel by Margaret Atwood and it seemed to engage the candidates well enough and most of them had plenty to say about it. There was some action in the narrative but the main focus of the passage was on two characters and the relationship between them. Atwood's rather sardonic humour was also much in evidence here.

Question 0.1

As usual, the opening question was only worth five marks but it simply required a list of things learned about Emma in the first few lines of the story. There were opportunities here for some inference but the marks could be picked up by a careful selection of surface material. For example, Emma was always falling in love. She also thought that falling in love was like skydiving. Most candidates picked up the detail that she would leap impulsively into relationships, although some used their own words and suggested that she took risks. She fell in love with "unsuitable" men who were usually married or awful. She was not interested in the kind, polite men her friends tried to find for her. She liked successful men she could look up to and these men tended to be self-obsessed. She could not spot this type of man but she was fearless, or perhaps even reckless, in her relationships.

There was a lot here and clear selection of evidence served the candidates well. Some responses were unselective, imprecise or unfocused but it was sensible to handle this question concisely and efficiently. It was pleasing to see that most candidates did exactly that.

Question 0.2

This question was only worth five marks and, although it invited some understanding of the effect of the writer's choice of language, the emphasis was also on the evidence used to create impressions of Emma and Robbie. Given the modest weighting of this question, and the pressure of time in an examination, we have to be realistic about how much range and depth we can reasonably expect and the sensible majority of candidates dealt with this question concisely and with minimum fuss.

The initial impression was that Emma was in love with Robbie, or at least thought she was. Robbie was notoriously grumpy. Emma mistook his grumpiness for shyness and the impression that she was not a great judge of character was reinforced. She thought that Robbie was more mature than he was and therefore difficult to understand but the impression was clear to most that the writer was suggesting that Emma did not really know him well. After a week together on the island Emma felt the need to be apart from him, although she felt she loved him as much as ever. She emerged as adventurous and lively but he usually stayed at home and sulked.

Some candidates saw that the characters were very different in a number of ways and as a couple they were not really well-matched, despite Emma convincing herself that she was in love with Robbie. The best answers got the overview and added a selection of details to clinch the argument. Most picked out the use of words such as "grumpy" and "adventurous" to establish the contrast between them.

Question 0.3

Understanding of the character of Emma was clearly essential to a good response to this question but the better answers kept the focus on the writer and the issue of 'how' she revealed Emma's personality. The bullet points in the question seemed to be helpful and pointed the candidates to the way the omniscient writer used Emma's actions and thoughts to show her character as well as the use of language.

For example, this section of the text began with Emma's brave, or perhaps foolhardy, decision to walk along the ridge to Wreck Island, even though it was clearly dangerous. The writer stated rather bluntly that "she couldn't explain why" which suggested that Emma was impulsive or reckless, doing dangerous things for no good reason. Emma explained to Robbie that she was motivated by "boredom" and used the idea that the walk was "a challenge" to persuade Robbie to join her. The use of the adjective "invincible" suggested her self-confidence but the writer also added that Emma was not "totally reckless" and did not mind having some "back-up." A number of candidates did not know the meaning of "invincible" but some thought it demonstrated Emma's naivety, which was a fair inference. She knew that Robbie did not want to go with her but she deliberately and rather cunningly manipulated him and the writer showed some of the complexities and contradictions in Emma's character. Some argued that her insistence that she would go anyway was part of the plan to get Robbie to accompany her but others took her at face value and saw this as typical of her headstrong character. However, she clearly did choose their equipment carefully and sensibly and this made her seem organised and not so foolhardy. Some argued that the writer was being ironic, showing Emma choosing unsuitable equipment for a dangerous enterprise. That was a perfectly valid view, although a few seemed to be suggesting that they should have been equipped as if climbing Everest.

The weaker responses were distracted with sentence length and made unconvincing assertions about the power of short, or long, sentences to achieve almost anything. The irony is that candidates who are comfortable enough selecting and commenting on relevant textual details are often hampered by 'spotting' devices in order to use subject terminology in their responses. It is worth reiterating to candidates that terminology is only required 'where appropriate' and should not be the starting point or focus of their responses.

Question 0.4

It was sensible to approach this question by 'tracking' the text as a way of grasping the structure of the writing. What started as an adventure, an exciting bit of fun, quickly developed into something far more serious and dramatic.

For example, the walk seemed to be straightforward enough at first as they found the ridge easily and the footing "wasn't bad". However, the signs of danger were also there as the water was "quickly" up to Emma's armpits and the writer pointed out that the ridge was narrow and dropped steeply on either side. As the walk progressed, Emma realised that the water was colder than it was when she went swimming and the current was stronger. The writer then revealed that Emma had not given much attention to these issues and had not thought about getting back. It all seemed rather badly planned and raised the possibility that they could be stranded.

The drama was built up as the waves got bigger and, although she used the stick for support, Emma found it harder to keep her footing. Her muscles began to ache and the danger was emphasised by the fact that Emma had to concentrate on herself. She did not notice Robbie being swept off the ridge but she realised eventually that he was not where he should have been and that their "performance" had attracted an audience. The writer stated bluntly "the performance was Robbie drowning". Some tried to make a lot of "the performance" and gave all sorts of readings of its significance but not always persuasively. The walk was certainly a matter of life and death and it would have been difficult to argue that this part of the story was not dramatic, particularly as Emma witnessed Robbie's arm appear and then disappear beneath the water. The writer showed Emma's desperation as she shook her stick at the "spectators" and "yelled" for someone to do something. Emma felt helpless and knew that trying to help Robbie would simply result in both of them drowning. To make matters even worse, she understood that she had to keep walking or she would be at risk from the rising water.

The only boat available to rescue Robbie was described as "ancient" and the riskiness of the rescue was stressed by the writer when she claimed "nobody else would chance it". When Robbie was eventually fished out of the water, he went into shock. Given the wealth of textual material available here, this question was disappointingly handled by too many candidates, some of whom came up with only one or two pieces of evidence or lost focus on the question.

The writer used the carefully-constructed sequence of events to build excitement and drama and, although it can often be difficult to comment sensibly on structure, in this instance it was relatively straightforward to see how the action developed. The better candidates also selected and commented on some of the language choices and some noted that Emma herself had not been brought back to safety at this point.

Less successful responses went on a search for devices and, unfortunately, often made little reference to the text.

Question 0.5

I commented in a previous report that the concept of critical evaluation is not easy for most candidates and the subtleties of Atwood's characterisation and style were also challenging. This question required careful, focused thinking and the ability to range across a whole text. However, the better responses established a coherent stance and then explored how the characters of Emma and Robbie developed across the story with some comment on how the writer had shown those developments. It was hard to see what else they could have done.

Most candidates argued that the lively, adventurous Emma, who was independent and rather self-obsessed at the beginning of the story, had been changed by this experience. However, only some candidates picked up the hint at the end of the passage that these changes might have been short-lived.

At the end of the story Emma was left "shivering and worrying about Robbie" until someone remembered her. The brash, confident young woman who took on the walk to Wreck Island was a rather pitiful and deflated figure. She was not complimented for her bravery and was judged to be "a damn fool". She tried to defend herself rather aggressively and still showed some spirit and annoyance but her self-belief was clearly shaken and she admitted to herself that she was annoyed because her critics were right.

The bartender judged her as stubborn and wilful, and her earlier behaviour seemed to confirm that view, but she felt "terrible" about what had happened to Robbie. She was attentive and contrite as she sat at his bedside and she thought of Robbie as "a kind man whom she loved". She felt guilty and responsible for him almost dying. She made tea and cakes and she "grovelled". She still did not understand that events had made him feel older but she did "briefly" have second thoughts about marrying him. Robbie was initially presented as grumpy and a lot older than Emma, but not as mature as he thought he was. He only accompanied her on her adventures occasionally and more often he stayed at the house and sulked. He responded to the challenge of the walk but perhaps patronised Emma by thinking that she needed "someone to keep an eye on her".

After his brush with death, he was even more grumpy but he felt humiliated by his awareness that he was getting older. Nevertheless, he recovered and **they** went to the real world. The writer suggested at the end that the lessons of the incident were not permanent. Both characters received a shock to their systems but they "recovered".

There was some complexity here but it proved to be an interesting question and it really did invite the candidates to think and read carefully. A lot of them rose to that challenge, although some were running out of time and energy by this point in the examination. Some candidates did this question with impressive focus and economy but others wrote a lot and did not get very far at all. Sometimes less is more and that was often the case here. Clarity of thought was the key.

Section B

Question 1.1

Significant numbers tackled each of the titles and there was neither an obvious favourite nor a title that conspicuously failed to attract any interest. There were opportunities to write from personal experience and this year it was pleasing to note that far fewer candidates produced improbable and implausible narratives, which had little or nothing to do with the titles. There was more spontaneity in the writing this year and those whose writing had some authenticity and relevance to a title were often refreshing and engaging.

Some did struggle with the structure of their narratives and some were very contrived and unconvincing. There were still some responses which seemed to have little to do with any of the given titles and, as I said last year, the titles are not there simply to be ignored. However, most candidates responded well enough to the titles they had been given and several examiners commented on the improvement in narrative writing this year.

(a) Continue the following: It really wasn't the result I was looking for.

The problem some candidates had with this title was structural. It should have been quite straightforward to link this title to medical tests, driving tests, sporting events or examinations but too many seemed to find it really difficult to establish a convincing sense of direction and there was often an awkward transition from the opening of the story to what followed.

(b) Grandma.

This title worked really well. There were a few really strange interpretations of the title but most of these responses were disarmingly heartfelt and affectionate. Some were memories of deceased Grandmas but in many cases the lady was very much alive and kicking and often intent on living disgracefully. The responses were often anecdotal in approach and much of the writing was spontaneous and natural and thoroughly engaging.

- (c) Write about a time when you had to go shopping with a relative.

This title was very specific and those who chose it were usually in no doubt about where the title was taking them. The best responses were lively and amusing but some were rather too straightforward in recounting a trip around the shops where little or nothing of any interest happened.

- (d) Write a story which ends: ...and I felt so sorry for myself.

I have commented many times that organising a narrative to meet a fixed conclusion is not easy at all and it requires thought and planning. Some just seem to set off with no clear sense of where they are going and merely hope for the best. Few totally ignored the ending but often it was an uncomfortable landing.

I am well aware that there is no easy answer to the problem of technical inaccuracy but most candidates do need to take more care with the basics of spelling, punctuation and grammar. Too many struggle to reach a decent level of clarity and fluency in their writing and weakness in technical accuracy undermines a lot of responses. The weighting on this aspect of writing makes it very important indeed.

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COMPONENT 2

Section A

The reading material for this examination was a newspaper article dealing with a volcano erupting in Iceland that quickly became a tourist attraction and a first-hand account of the Krakatoa volcano eruption in 1883. The texts both gave vivid accounts of the incidents and the questions provided opportunities to explore the different ways in which the writers dealt with their experiences.

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 when the volcano last erupted. In the article it gave the date as 1823, although as the article dealt with the recent eruption, those candidates who quoted from the text that the eruption occurred "two Saturdays ago" were also rewarded. The second part of the question demonstrated the importance of reading the question carefully: it asked, 'How close did Tom Robbins get to the crater of Eyjakull?'. Some candidates seemed not to notice the word 'close' and instead responded by writing that he used a snowmobile to get to the crater. The final part of the question asked, 'How wide is the crater of Katla?'. This should have presented few difficulties as the relevant part of the text read, "Beneath Katla's five-mile-wide crater sits 250 square miles of packed ice..." However, there were too many candidates who chose '250 square miles', serving as a reminder that even these simple opening questions need a little care.

Question 1.2

If the opening questions served to familiarise candidates with the substance of the text, this second question invited them to consider how the writer had tried to make his account of the erupting volcano exciting and dramatic. There should have been no doubt that the account was dramatic, as Robbins wrote about not just his own experience of going very close to the volcano's crater and seeing for himself the sights and sounds of the eruptions, but also including other incidents that occurred as a result of the volcano's activity. Perhaps the element of excitement present in the article came mostly from Robbins' acknowledgement that whilst witnessing a spectacular natural event, there was always an element of danger associated with volcanic eruptions that could not be ignored.

He begins his article with an anecdote about a local farmer who is suddenly warned of the danger of the volcano by a succession of mobile phone calls in the middle of the night, the sky turning red and the air having a heavy smell of sulphur. His reaction to his wife: "We're leaving, right now" gives an immediacy to the sense of danger present and makes for a dramatic and exciting opening to the article. Robbins then moves into an account of his own experience of visiting the volcano, part of a group of tourists taken close to the crater by snowmobile. He captures the sense of anticipation as he gets close to the "still-exploding

volcano” as he sees the plume of smoke rising from the crater. Then, getting closer still, he writes about the drama of seeing the crater “spewing fire” into the evening sky. The tone in this part of the article is one of awe at seeing such a spectacular sight; he uses verbs and adjectives such as “mesmerising” and “thrilling” as they arrive within 500 metres of the crater, where the ice has turned black from the volcanic ash. Having seen TV pictures of eruptions, he has to stop to remind himself this is real life, as he watches as the lava explodes “up 100 metres into the air, then comes crashing to earth”. The images he paints are both exciting and dramatic, made more so by the “breathtaking wilderness” of his surroundings. Watching the forces of nature at work in such a dramatic way, Robbins comments that it is “an unimaginable privilege” to witness such events.

He reflects that whilst being spellbound by such sights and sounds, danger is never far away and he gives a dramatic example of tourists having to be helicoptered to safety when a new crack in the volcano opened up. He writes of the shock felt by those taken to safety but also of locals’ fears of an even worse possibility: that Eyjakull’s eruption might lead to another larger and more dangerous eruption of a nearby volcano that could “wipe out farms, roads and bridges” and cause disruption to aviation routes. He goes on to say that in being whisked away from the crater by helicopter, he sees a spectacular “river of molten lava”, a “waterfall of molten lava” and the still-erupting volcano giving “the best fireworks display on earth”. He concludes the article by again reflecting that the drama and excitement of the occasion seemed “like a strange dream” but is reminded of the reality of it all by seeing a black chunk of lava in the middle of the table – a souvenir of his unforgettable day. Included in the article were two photographs, one showing the exploding lava in the volcano’s crater, with a helicopter flying low over the area, and the other showing a small settlement of houses overshadowed by the huge ash cloud from the volcano. They complemented perfectly the vivid description given by Robbins.

This type of 'how' question will be a familiar one, as it invited candidates to explore the craft of the writer. Examiners' reports over the years have repeatedly suggested the most effective way of tackling this type of question is by moving methodically through the text, selecting salient details and commenting, where appropriate, about the impact of the detail. In this question, good responses focused on the situation faced by Haf Jonsson and his immediate decision to take his family away from the potentially dangerous situation, they explored the details of Robbins' first-hand account as he got closer to the crater and commented on the way he gave details of other potentially dangerous outcomes arising from the erupting volcano. In tracking the key details that made the article both dramatic and exciting, good responses also looked at the language used by the writer, commented on how his overwhelming sense of awe was communicated and in some cases why he begins and concludes his article in the way that he does. Disappointingly, too many candidates still regard this type of question as one in which simply 'feature spotting' will earn high marks. This approach leads to candidates desperately trying to find the 'feature' they are seeking and careful exploration of the text is often a casualty. In answer to the question, instead of focusing on key aspects of the content that make the article exciting and dramatic, too many candidates stated that the excitement and drama came from long sentences, or short sentences, or 'relatively short sentences' or even, 'simple complex sentences'. Some candidates were convinced that the writer's use of commas, dashes, length of paragraphs and alliteration made for a dramatic piece of writing but all too frequently in these cases, close reading of the text was limited. Some tried to find individual words to home in on but where this was done with little or no explanation of context, it was often unclear to markers how an isolated detail or word added to the impact of the writing. Weaker responses simply noted a series of words used by the writer with little or no explanation of what their impact on the reader might be or how they reflected the drama of a situation. That said, there were many good and very good responses in which candidates probed the text sensitively, linking details and comments successfully, but in almost every case, these responses showed good

skills of tracking through the text methodically and highlighting and commenting on those details that were most relevant in responding to the question.

Question 1.3

The third question focused on the 'Krakatoa' text by Pieter Sandrick and was in three parts. Each part of the question required some fairly straightforward selection of detail and/or simple inference and presented few difficulties to careful readers. However, as with Question 1.1, it was important to read the question. For example, the first part of the question simply required candidates to state on which day of the week the Krakatoa volcano erupted. The second paragraph gave the required information: "It began on the Sunday afternoon..." but a number of candidates gave the date of the eruption rather than the day, for which there was no reward. The other parts of the question posed no real difficulty: how far was the town of Anjer from the volcano, and how did the writer survive when the tsunami hit the coast. Most candidates selected the correct details and having read the text to answer these questions should have prepared them to tackle the following question.

Question 1.4

This question now asked candidates to consider the Krakatoa text in greater detail. They were given a statement: "Pieter Sandrick gets across his feelings of increasing terror really well" and asked how far they agreed with the statement. In order to offer a view and evaluate the text, it was sensible to track through the text, commenting where appropriate. Most candidates recognised that through his account Sandrick was indeed able to capture his feelings of horror and fright in his desperate attempt to survive as the eruption of the volcano and its devastating after-effects took hold. Better candidates often commented on the content of the opening paragraph, explaining how it set the scene for the detailed account that followed and expressed the writer's sadness as he reflected on the destruction of his town and his wonder that he "escaped at all" when so many lives were lost.

The following paragraph then gave a very detailed account of the way the eruption of Krakatoa began to affect the town he lived in. Where candidates tracked those details carefully, it was also possible to recognise the sense of increasing terror felt by the writer. Sandrick recalls first of all the noise of the eruption growing louder, to the point where it "became deafening" and at the same time the smoke from the eruption developed into a "thick darkness" such that, for Sandrick, it became impossible to see even "my hand before my eyes". There were many details that good candidates began to explore, understanding that such events would cause panic for the people and many made use of Sandrick's comment: "I covered panic-stricken" to illustrate his feelings of terror at this point. He goes on to talk about the vibration from the eruptions being "most terrifying", believing the shocks would bring the houses down around him. He says it was a "dreadful night" where there was little sleep for anyone in the town and then describes how, as morning came, the town began to be showered in ashes, followed by "large pieces of volcanic rock" falling from the sky. By this stage the sun had been blocked out by the ash and smoke and he writes about the sky having a "dark, depressing look". Good candidates made effective use of these details in their comments about his increasing fears and terror, although some chose only to use one or two details before moving on to the final two paragraphs.

The penultimate paragraph dealt with the "huge wall of water" that broke upon the coast, eventually sweeping through the town and destroying everything in its path. Sandrick recalls how "everything was engulfed" and as he tried to escape he realised he was in "a race for life". Good candidates commented about how the account reflected Sandrick's feeling of helplessness, his inability to warn others and his desperate attempt to survive by clinging to a tree that had escaped being swept away. He writes about being "breathless and exhausted" and many candidates noted how this effectively captured his feelings.

He recounts the destruction he saw in the town, using the image of “a giant hand” sweeping away the town and giving details of what he witnessed: “Many dead bodies, fallen trees and wrecked houses” and concludes with how he continues to be haunted by what he saw. Although markers saw weak responses where candidates had stabbed at just a few textual details or gave only brief and limited responses, many candidates were able to respond to the question in detail and by tracking and selecting the important details or comments made by the writer, were able to make sensible evaluations based on a good range of evidence.

Question 1.5

This question, asking for the ability to select and synthesise materials from the two texts, invited candidates to explain in their own words what happened as a result of the volcanoes erupting in Anjer and in Iceland. It was possible to gain reward by simply noting some of the environmental effects of the volcanoes erupting. It was sensible for candidates to be text-specific in answering this question but weaker responses struggled to separate the details in the two texts. For example, candidates who responded by saying that in both texts there were lots of deaths and houses swept away gained no reward. Nor was there reward for those who believed that in Iceland there were ‘flash floods’ or that ‘farms, roads and bridges’ were wiped out. Those who had read the texts with some care were able to see that in Iceland, for example, the erupting volcano had attracted tourists visiting, that some tourists had been taken to safety when a new crack had opened up. It had led to Haf Jonnson leaving his home for a short while, and the eruption of Eyjakull had led to anxiety by the locals about a more dangerous volcano nearby. In Sandrick’s account of the Krakatoa eruption, it resulted in a huge tidal wave that swamped and destroyed the town, leaving many dead and few escaping with their lives. In some cases, candidates simply ignored the question and gave more general information about volcanoes, writing with little reference to either text. Some wrote about just one of the texts, limiting their response to just a single mark; similarly where there was only relevant detail from one text, it restricted the response to one mark. However, many were able to select relevant details from each of the texts and this was a good opportunity to gain full marks.

Question 1.6

I wrote in the November 2017 report that a question asking candidates to compare across the two texts has always been viewed as presenting a significant challenge. That said, the two bullet points in the question gave a clear pointer to what was required and good candidates shaped their responses accordingly. In this question, candidates were asked to compare what the two writers could see and hear of the erupting volcanoes and then to compare how they got their experiences across to their readers.

There were candidates who ignored the bullet points entirely and as a result struggled to gain many marks. Others took only passing notice of the details demanded by the question and, for example, chose to write about what Sandrick saw and heard of the tsunami rather than the erupting volcano. However, where candidates read both the question and each text carefully, it was possible to accumulate good marks quite quickly. In Robbins’ text, for example, he saw the “plume of smoke” and then saw the crater “spewing fire”. In contrast, Sandrick sees the volcano “covered in smoke” and the town in “thick darkness”. Whilst Robbins hears and sees the lava exploding high into the air and crashing back to earth, describing this as a series of “low booms”, Sandrick becomes deafened by the explosions and sees the “red fiery glare” in the sky above the volcano. In the morning he sees the town become covered in a shower of ashes and then volcanic rock, while Robbins writes about seeing from his helicopter, “the river of molten rock”, the “waterfall of molten lava” and calling the eruptions he sees, “the best fireworks on earth”.

In looking at how the writers get their experiences across to their readers, most candidates saw that whilst for Robbins, the experience was a positive one, for Sandrick it was truly shocking and horrible. How they could explain this was a discriminator: Robbins is able to write about how he felt “mesmerised” by what he saw, describing it as an “unimaginable privilege” and using figurative language to capture the beauty of the situation, whilst for Sandrick, his horror at what happened is captured as he describes exactly how he behaves and feels as the disaster unfolds around him. Candidates were aware that Sandrick’s use of imagery helped to create the picture of mayhem and unstoppable destruction and many commented on the impact of expressions such as the “huge wall of water” or the sweeping away of the town as if by “a giant hand”. Others saw that in Robbins’ article, he tried to balance the thrilling experience with the recognition that danger was never very far away and some candidates explored the way in which Robbins tried to capture the sense that he found the experience to be almost unreal – he refers to it as being “like a strange dream”.

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 allowed opportunities for a range of information to be included in the first task or arguments to be developed in the second task. Those who responded with only brief pieces often struggled to develop specific detail or arguments.

Question 2.1

For this task, candidates were asked to write an article about a place that would be a good day out for all the family. It was suggested that candidates chose a place they knew well and where there was plenty to do for everyone. What was required here was a clear view of the purpose of the writing: to give some informed detail about a place or particular attraction, along with a sense of the intended audience, in this case, different family members. In some responses, helpful details about location or something about the history of the attraction were included and good responses combined these sorts of details with recommendations about what to do or see on arrival and in some cases gave information about such things as parking difficulties or the necessity of booking ahead of a visit. A small number of candidates chose to interpret the task as a kind of advertisement which involved them in the company or theme park they were promoting, rather than an article for a travel magazine, and at times these pieces drifted into more of a ‘hard sell’ promotion. Other candidates interpreted the ‘day out’ rather more liberally than was perhaps intended: markers were taken on day visits to South Africa, Kenya, Japan as well as a range of European destinations, and whilst some made it clear these were places for a day out when away from England, others turned the ‘day out’ into full-blown holiday fortnights with details of hotels and country-wide excursions. The most convincing pieces often focused on a range of specific details, giving for example, a named recommendation for a particular restaurant that served the best seafood in town, rather than a more general statement about there being lots of restaurants serving high quality foods. The good responses often gave a level of specific detail about particular attractions that would be appreciated by the intended readers, whilst weaker responses tended to write in much more general terms, telling readers that there were lots of things to do but with only vague or limited details of the actual attractions that could be enjoyed such as good shopping facilities, museums or leisure centres. Many chose to write about popular theme parks or seaside resorts, whilst others chose local attractions but whatever the subject of the writing happened to be, better responses were always aware the article should show that the attraction was a place to be enjoyed by different members of the family. Those who wrote just about the hair-raising rides in Alton Towers or at Blackpool Pleasure Beach, without considering what younger children or older members of the family might find interesting to do limited the impact of their work. Where candidates took the advice to write a piece that was 300-400 words, it allowed the articles to

range quite widely, and be both informative and engaging; the best pieces made examiners want to actually visit the attraction.

Question 2.2

The second task was to write a letter to a newspaper in response to a suggestion that reduced-price bus fares for young people should be scrapped to save money, but that free travel for over 65s should continue. Establishing the correct audience for the letter was a little problematic for some, particularly where some candidates seemed to think the newspaper editor would be the person deciding whether to press ahead with the suggested changes. As this was a formal letter, some awareness of format was helpful as was some clarity about what was being suggested. Candidates who began their response with, "I've heard about the suggestion of scrapping young people to save money for bus fares" clearly had a struggle ahead of them in shaping an appropriate response. Others took the view that all fares for young people were about to be scrapped and were thus a cause for celebration and approval. Those who read the task details carefully then needed to consider how they should respond, whether to support or oppose the suggestions and to consider each of the two suggestions in turn. Most opposed the scrapping of subsidised fares for young people, although some supported the suggestion. Either viewpoint was perfectly valid and better responses were able to structure their views using a range of different arguments in support or opposition. Some who opposed the suggestion, for example, argued that the move would put a strain on already-stretched family finances, giving examples of how much extra money would need to be spent. Others argued that it was simply unfair to put the burden on to young people who had the least money or who had to rely on public transport to get to school, college or part-time work. In some cases candidates warned of the dire consequences of such a move, suggesting it would lead to a range of health problems or increased drug-taking as a result of despair; even homelessness was given as a consequence of raised bus fares, because young people would be unable to afford to get to work and would therefore lose their job.

There was mostly general support for the over 65s retaining their free bus pass, with candidates often explaining that many in this age group were unable to walk very far, or with failing eyesight, struggled to drive and therefore need all the help they could get. Others, however, felt that with a lifetime of paid work and a government pension, it was only fair that they should make a fair contribution in order to keep the buses moving.

The best pieces organised their responses into paragraphs, each of which raised a particular point and then developed it in sufficient detail to make a convincing argument before moving on to their next point in a subsequent paragraph. These good responses also maintained a formal tone, were aware of their intended reader and often used personal examples or anecdotes to give weight to their arguments.

I reported that in the November 2017 examinations many candidates were rewarded in a higher band for content and organisation than they were for technical accuracy. That situation was repeated in this series, with some simple, entirely avoidable errors being made, for example with many candidates spelling 'fares' (given in the task details) as 'fairs', and making basic errors in punctuation and sentence construction. As indicated in the Component 1 report, these weaknesses unfortunately continue to undermine too many responses.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

GCSE

Summer 2018

COMPONENT 3

Main Messages

As expected, there were fewer problems with the administration than in the first year of the new monitoring system. Most centres took care to ensure that the monitoring sample, comprising the correct number of presentations at each grade, arrived on time and in an easily accessible format. This made the external standardising process much more straightforward for monitors and was greatly appreciated.

All monitors reported favourably on examples of high quality work seen in centres where candidates had been encouraged to view the Spoken Language endorsement as a positive and beneficial experience. There was a clear sense that teachers were more familiar with the specification requirements and in many cases had acted on advice from WJEC Eduqas on how to give candidates every chance to succeed.

There were, however, still some serious concerns with the approaches adopted by some centres where assessment of one or more grades was not secure.

Even in those centres where assessment was more accurate, monitors felt that candidates were not always adequately prepared and there were several key factors which affected chances of success. It is clear that there are important issues which all centres should bear in mind when preparing candidates for this compulsory component:

- **effective task-setting and teacher guidance**
- **the make-up of the audience and responses to questions**
- **accurate application of the assessment criteria**
- **effective administration of the monitoring sample**

Task setting and teacher guidance

As repeatedly emphasised, this aspect of the component is vitally important. All monitors expressed concern at the relatively high number of candidates of all abilities who were disadvantaged by poor tasks which did not allow them to meet the criteria for the higher grades. It is strongly advised that centres review their approaches to task-setting and take necessary steps to make this aspect of the GCSE course a more positive, stimulating and valuable experience for their candidates. This would not necessitate drastic changes as most tasks need only a change of emphasis to make them more effective. There will be an appendix* to this report on the EDUQAS website giving further practical guidance on task-setting.

In brief, the following issues with task-setting caused problems for candidates in delivering their presentations and for the teachers assessing their performance:

- Many candidates had apparently **selected their own topics without sufficient guidance** on its suitability, even though the specification requirements mention the expectation that teachers and candidates will discuss these aspects in advance. This meant that even confident candidates often spoke on straightforward topics, which did not have sufficient challenge to meet Merit criteria, let alone Distinction.
- In centres where candidates aiming at higher grades had quite rightly been advised to select more challenging topics, there was still a **lack of shape or purpose in their task**.
- Without clear guidance on how to develop and organise their ideas, **many candidates' presentations were very short**, less than a minute long in some cases, making it very difficult to demonstrate the Distinction criteria of sophisticated content, vocabulary and strategies to engage the audience.
- **Others were much too long** and candidates had not been advised on how to select the most stimulating and relevant material or organise it effectively so as to engage their listeners' interest.
- In some centres, **all candidates talked on the same topic**, making it almost impossible to engage the audience with new ideas and approaches or to stimulate challenging questions. It also made assessment more problematic when all were reproducing the same material.
- **Literary topics are perfectly appropriate** but, as with other topics, if the candidate was simply describing what happens in a particular scene or chapter, explaining line-by-line what a poem means or, even worse, reading notes downloaded from a study guide website, they were unlikely to demonstrate command of challenging material or strategies to engage.
- **Some candidates were invariably hampered by their over reliance on PowerPoint slides**. Some had clearly worked hard on preparation for what they described as their 'PowerPoint presentations' but had perhaps inevitably channelled most of their efforts into their slides rather than their own delivery and ways to engage their audience.
- **Paired and group activities** might help support extremely shy candidates but had few advantages for others. In the vast majority of cases, the candidates tended to relax and take less responsibility for the content and delivery of the material. Many simply read from shared scripts, making very brief and inconsequential contributions to the actual presentation, sometimes with no response to questions.
- **Too many candidates read their presentations with their heads down** and some had clearly not practised their delivery. Even allowing for nerves, there was the sense that some were not fully familiar with the material they were reading.
- **Some tasks are not necessarily appropriate for more ambitious candidates**. Unfortunately, Room 101 remains popular in many centres, but monitors felt strongly that it hinders candidates and should really be restricted to those aiming at Pass grade. In the worst examples, candidates selected three trivial topics to which they devoted only a few sentences.

Response to questions and audience make-up

It was discouraging to note that some centres had still not taken fully on board **the need for all candidates to respond to questions in order to achieve even a Pass grade**. There were examples of whole centres where there was no Q and A section meaning that candidates should have been assessed as Not Classified, irrespective of the quality of their presentation. This may seem harsh but when a competency model is used for assessment, candidates must meet **all** the criteria before being awarded a grade. It is therefore essential that teachers ensure all candidates are given this opportunity.

In some centres, the Q and A section was almost an after-thought or add-on to the main presentation. There were even cases where it was recorded separately at a later date which wasn't helpful for the candidates involved.

The quality of questions was also important. If candidates gave a presentation which fulfilled Merit criteria, it was essential they were asked some challenging questions allowing them to respond with appropriate formality and detail. This was even more important for Distinction candidates who needed to give perceptive responses which developed their ideas. There were unfortunately too many instances when candidates were let down by the quality of the questions asked.

Some strategies worth avoiding include:

- Asking closed questions to which candidates can only answer briefly.
- Personal questions which tend to elicit less formal, more straightforward or anecdotal responses:
 - e.g. *What made you choose this topic? How long have you been involved in this hobby? Which is your favourite...?*
- Advising candidates to prepare their own questions to which they read rehearsed answers. Candidates tend to respond briefly and rarely demonstrate perceptive development.
- Allowing the question session to become so informal that it almost turns into a chat with the teacher. There were occasions when the teachers, with the best of intentions, tried to encourage candidates to expand but actually started to dominate the discussion, leaving the candidates nodding or answering with 'yes' or 'no'.

It was heartening to see that some centres had clearly worked with candidates on **questioning techniques** which paid dividends. There were impressive examples of fellow students listening carefully in order to ask challenging questions so that the responsibility did not rest solely with the teacher.

Monitors felt that some candidates were disadvantaged by giving their presentations to a single teacher, often sitting down. In order to engage and demonstrate a sophisticated repertoire of strategies to engage the audience, Distinction candidates would be better served standing up and presenting their ideas to an audience, even if only a few of their peers.

As outlined in the original advice to centres, **the make-up of the audience can be flexible** and, while some candidates might perform best with a single, sympathetic listener, more confident candidates should ideally be given the chance to demonstrate their presentation skills to engage a wider audience.

Accurate assessment

Most centres seemed to have adapted quickly to the competency model assessing their candidates accurately by adhering closely to the grade criteria. They had revisited the established standardising materials to ensure their judgements were in line with agreed standards.

Sadly, however, there were still centres where assessment was not accurate with the main reasons being:

Candidates were often awarded Distinction grades when they had not fulfilled all the criteria, especially the need for *sophistication* in ideas and vocabulary. In many there was also not the *effective organisation* of the material to meet audience needs or a *clear purpose* which candidates could convincingly '*achieve*'. In many cases, Distinctions were not appropriate as candidates had not given *perceptive*, developed responses.

The case was similar with many candidates awarded Merit grades when their ideas lacked sufficient *challenge*, *clear organisation* and a defined *purpose*.

A very small number of candidates were awarded Pass grades when they had not given any kind of presentation, even in the loosest terms. This is a very wide grade, however, and the vast majority of candidates met all the criteria except those who did not answer any questions and should have been entered as Not Classified.

Problems arose when centres awarded 'higher' Pass grade candidates Merits to distinguish them from 'lower' Passes. This kind of ranking is not applicable in a competency model; candidates should only be awarded a higher grade if they have met all the criteria for that grade, not simply to put some distance between them and other candidates.

Monitors were surprised to note several instances of teachers announcing the grade awarded before the candidate had even begun speaking. The candidate's grade should be assessed on their performance on the day, irrespective of whether it is filmed, and not based on any pre-judgement.

Some centres had chosen to assess their candidates in Year 9, perhaps to save time in the two-year GCSE course. If centres decide on this option, they must accept that candidates have to be judged by the same assessment criteria and are unlikely to exhibit the confidence of Year 11 students.

Some centres had clearly not used the standardising materials to refresh their understanding of agreed standards and instead seemed to have devised their own internal standards. This, of course, is not acceptable and all candidates must be judged by the standards set in the twelve exemplar presentations available to all centres on the [secure website](#).

In some centres there was little evidence of internal moderation which is obviously vital to ensure fair and even application of the criteria, especially in very large centres. The specification requires that all teachers involved in the assessment of candidates' presentations must watch and discuss the standardising materials and it is the responsibility of the Head of Department or teacher in charge of Spoken Language to ensure that this takes place each year.

Preparation of the monitoring sample

Most centres took great care with the submission of their candidates' work but there were difficulties with a minority which created problems for monitors:

- Some USB sticks and discs were not clearly labelled with the centre number and some centres did not include any identification making it very difficult for monitors to identify the centre.
- It was often difficult to tell who was speaking as presentations were not clearly identified with the candidate's name and number. Some were listed as a single folder, containing all the presentations one after the other, making it very difficult to find individual candidates' work without trawling through the whole sample.
- It is important that centres comply with the requirements to send 10 of each grade in centres with entries over 30, which is the majority. We understand that candidates identified as specific grades chosen for filming may perform differently on the day and therefore the advice from WJEC Eduqas has always been that centres should record more than the minimum number at each grade. It is each centre's responsibility to ensure that they fully exemplify standards set for their candidates.
- Some devices arrived broken or with files corrupted and some USBs had been lost via torn envelopes in the post, which further delayed the monitoring process.
- It was very difficult to hear what the candidates were saying in some samples. As teachers themselves, monitors realise that schools can be noisy places, but it does defeat the object of this exercise if the candidate is too far from the microphone or is drowned out by ambient noise.

It would make the monitoring process much smoother and would be greatly appreciated if all centres could please ensure that:

- The sample arrives on time and has been carefully packaged to avoid loss or damage
- The devices or discs are clearly labelled on the outside with the centre's name and number. Some centres tagged small devices while others included compliment slips with the centre's address, both of which were considerate and helpful.
- Where applicable, ten examples of each grade are included and arranged into three separate folders or discs, clearly labelled PASS, MERIT, DISTINCTION.
- Each candidate's presentation is saved as a separate file under his or her name, number and grade.
- Candidates briefly announce their names and numbers at the start of their presentations.
- Centres check that all presentations are clearly audible and not corrupted before sending.
- Recordings are accessible to monitors and popular platforms such as Windows Media Player are used. If centres wish to encrypt their candidates' work, it would help if it was made as easy as possible to receive the password rather than delaying the process further.

Finally, monitors would like to extend their thanks and congratulations to the many centres who had worked hard and encouraged their candidates to make the most of this endorsement to their reading and writing studies, recognising the value of Spoken Language and presentation skills. To end with the words of one monitor, a very experienced English teacher, commenting on how enjoyable she finds the role, especially when seeing work from centres where Spoken Language is valued and given status by teachers:

'I was often very impressed with the effort put into this non-exam component. I do hope that centres do not decide to 'get it over and done with' in Year 9; pupils mature so much in the following two years and the presentation can be so relevant and helpful for the examinations as well as life after school.'

*The appendix giving further guidance on task-setting, including examples of successful and less helpful tasks, will be available in the Autumn Term.

Spoken Language: Summary of Advice

- Task-setting is too important to leave to the learners. Teachers and candidates should discuss the topic and its suitability.
- Candidates aiming beyond Pass grade need to choose challenging material and to have a clear purpose.
- Teachers should advise candidates on how to organise and edit their material and give guidance on effective delivery strategies.
- Candidates should be dissuaded from relying too heavily on using PowerPoint
- Pair and group work should not be viewed as an easier option and needs careful consideration to allow candidates to achieve their full potential.
- Room 101 and some other tasks used in the legacy Speaking and Listening requirements are less appropriate for Spoken Language.
- All candidates must respond to questions to achieve a grade.
- Merit and Distinction candidates must respond to more challenging questions in order to meet the relative criteria.
- Closed or personal questions tend to lead the candidates into straightforward, informal responses.
- Rehearsed answers are not advised for candidates aiming above Pass grades.
- Audience make-up can be flexible within the centre.
- Candidates must fulfil all criteria before being awarded a grade.
- Teachers must view and discuss the standardising materials before assessing their candidates' work.
- The final sample should range across more than one teaching group where the number of candidates in the cohort allows this.



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