Course Report 2018

Subject	English
Level	Advanced Higher

This report provides information on the performance of candidates. Teachers, lecturers and assessors may find it useful when preparing candidates for future assessment. The report is intended to be constructive and informative and to promote better understanding. It would be helpful to read this report in conjunction with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

The statistics used in this report have been compiled before the completion of any Post Results Services.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Summary of the course assessment

All components performed in line with expectations and grade boundaries were set as intended.

Component 1: question paper (Literary Study)

The Literary Study question paper performed in line with expectations. Feedback from the marking team, and from teachers and lecturers, suggests that the question paper was fair in terms of course coverage and overall level of demand. Candidates could choose from a wide range of questions.

The convention of requiring candidates to answer on three poems; two novels (or three short stories); two pieces of non-fiction or two plays, is now well established in this question paper. Questions usually asked candidates to 'Discuss …' but terms such as 'Analyse …' and 'Compare …' were also used. Some questions asked candidates to what extent they agreed with a given statement relating to literary texts.

The following table, based on the reported choices of candidates in 2018, shows the relative popularity of the Literary Study questions (figures rounded to the nearest whole number).

Part A: Poetry	% of candidates	Part B: Prose fiction	% of candidates	Part C: Prose non-fiction	% of candidates	Part D: Drama	% of candidates
A 1	9	B 8	<1	C 15	0	D 22	2
A 2	4	B 9	7	C 16	0	D 23	<1
A 3	<1	B 10	1	C 17	0	D 24	4
A 4	13	B 11	10	C 18	0	D 25	15
A 5	1	B 12	2	C 19	0	D 26	3
A 6	1	B 13	<1	C 20	<1	D 27	14
A 7	6	B 14	2	C 21	<1	D 28	4

The five most popular questions were:

♦ 'Poetry has always had the ability to respond to significant events, public or private.' Discuss the effectiveness of the poetic response to "significant events" in **three** poems. (A1)
♦ Discuss the poetic exploration of the complexities of love in **three** poems. (A4)
♦ Discuss to what extent the main characters in **two** novels are shaped by their acceptance or rejection of society and its conventions. (B11)
♦ 'Tragic characters are those who recognise the conflicts within themselves, but are powerless to resolve them.'
To what extent do you agree? In your response you should refer to two plays. (D25)
♦ Compare the dramatic presentation of a socially significant theme or themes (status of women; social responsibility; the impact of political or religious beliefs; racial tension . . .) in **two** plays. (D27)

Component 2: question paper (Textual Analysis)

The Textual Analysis question paper performed in line with expectations. Feedback from the marking team, and from teacher and lecturers, suggested that the question paper was fair in terms of the overall level of demand. As in previous years, poetry and prose fiction were the most popular options for candidates.

The following table, based on the reported choices of candidates in 2018, shows the relative popularity of the Textual Analysis questions (figures rounded to the nearest whole number).

Genre	% of candidates
Poetry	41
Prose Fiction	41
Prose Non-fiction	13
Drama	6

Component 3: portfolio–writing

The portfolio–writing performed in line with expectations.

Candidates can submit work in the following genres: Reflective, Fiction, Poetry, Drama, Persuasive, Argumentative and Informative. They must submit two different genres from this list.

The following table, based on the reported choices of candidates in 2018, shows the relative popularity of the genres submitted by candidates (figures rounded to the nearest whole number).

Genre	% of total pieces submitted
Reflective	20
Fiction	33
Poetry	12
Drama	6
Persuasive	22
Argumentative	5
Informative	2

Component 4: project–dissertation

The project–dissertation performed in line with expectations.

The following table, based on the reported choices of candidates in 2018, shows the relative popularity of the types of dissertation submitted by candidates (figures rounded to the nearest whole number).

Drama	Poetry	Prose fiction	Mixed genres/other
7%	6%	84%	3%

As in previous years, Prose fiction texts were by far the most popular subjects for study in the project–dissertation. 68% of all dissertation topics involved the study of two novels by two different authors.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas in which candidates performed well

Component 1: question paper (Literary Study)

Candidates generally responded competently to all parts of this question paper and there were many examples of perceptive and skilfully constructed responses. A number of candidates successfully incorporated references to secondary sources in their answers.

There was evidence of candidates gaining full marks across a range of the poetry, prose fiction and drama questions.

Some markers found a wider range of literature evident in this year's scripts compared to previous years, while others commented that there was a greater number of responses based on William Shakespeare, Shamus Heaney, Tennessee Williams and Sylvia Plath. Popular poets also included John Donne, Robert Browning and W B Yeats. For prose fiction common authors and texts included Jane Austen, Margaret Atwood (*The Handmaid's Tale*), Kazuo Ishiguro (*Never Let Me Go*), Charlotte Bronte (*Jane Eyre*), F Scott Fitzgerald (*The Great Gatsby, Tender is the Night*), Alasdair Gray (*Lanark, Poor Things*), Vladimir Nabokov, Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein*), Thomas Hardy (*Tess . . ., The Mayor . . .), Muriel* Spark (*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, The Driver's Seat*), Oscar Wilde (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*). In the drama section, whilst the majority of responses dealt with plays by William Shakespeare and Tennessee Williams, Henrik Ibsen (*A Doll's House, Hedda Gabler*) and Oscar Wilde (*An Ideal Husband, The Importance of Being Earnest*) were also common. In addition to the popular questions listed above, the following questions were also answered well: A2; A7; B9; B13; D26; D28.

Component 2: question paper (Textual Analysis)

Markers found that most candidates engaged with the texts in a very positive way. This question paper was judged to be accessible but also appropriately challenging.

Answers on poetry tended to be better than in 2017. Markers felt that the specific requirements of the poetry question (to analyse the creation of the poetic voice and the significance of the final seven lines) were helpful to candidates and allowed them to comment on the shift of perspective and the change in tone apparent in the poem.

The best answers to all four questions showed genuine insight. Most answers were constructed in essay form but there was an increase in the number of extended-bullet point type responses evident this year.

Component 3: portfolio–writing

Markers commented favourably on the wide range of genres and topics submitted in folios this year. Reflective and fiction pieces were very popular as in previous years.

There was evidence that many candidates had been inspired by the *#metoo* movement to write thoughtful pieces on feminism and the place of women in society.

The best work submitted in the discursive genres was of a very high standard and it was encouraging to see some excellent pieces on topics as varied as the Brazilian footballer, Garrincha, and the plight of minority languages. The best work across all genres showed clear evidence of thoughtful shaping and editing, and it was obvious that candidates who had been explicitly taught how to write were using a variety of technical devices to develop and enrich their work. There were also some excellent pieces written in Scots.

Component 4: project–dissertation

Markers reported that the performance of candidates had been satisfactory overall and that most candidates had clearly been engaged by, and had enjoyed studying, their chosen texts and topics.

Dystopian fiction remains as popular as ever and some markers noted a significant rise in the choice of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, perhaps reflecting the popularity of the recent Netflix adaptation of the novel. Some candidates produced good work on contemporary Scottish texts, including *His Bloody Project* by Graeme Macrae Burnet. Other popular authors included William Shakespeare, George Orwell, Joseph Conrad, The Brontës, Irvine Welsh, Alice Walker, Arthur Miller, F Scott Fitzgerald, Margaret Atwood, Sylvia Plath, Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, Mrs Gaskell, John Fowles, Chuck Palahniuk, Brett Easton Ellis and Cormac McCarthy.

A very high number of dissertations continue to be based on the comparative study of the treatment of a particular theme in two novels. Markers also noted a slight increase in the number of dissertations based on a single, substantial text.

Areas which candidates found demanding

Component 1: question paper (Literary Study)

Markers noted that some candidates:

♦ made an inappropriate choice of question (more suitable questions were almost always available for their chosen texts)
♦ displayed only limited planning of their response
♦ offered only limited analysis and evaluation and concentrated too much on a retelling of the plot in prose fiction and drama responses
♦ found questions A2 and A4 problematic if insufficient attention was paid to the 'human condition' and to the 'complexities of love'
♦ did not make sufficient reference to 'language and stagecraft' in response to question D26, focussing instead on plot and character

Component 2: question paper (Textual Analysis)

Markers noted that some candidates:

♦ did not take account of the specific requirements of a question and wrote a general analysis of the poem/extract instead

- commented on race/immigration issues in the prose fiction rather than the ways in which the writer presents the character's experiences
- misinterpreted the nature of some of the relationships described/alluded to in the prose non-fiction passage
- were overly reliant on a simple series of quotes plus comments in their responses
- did not display an appropriate evaluative stance in their responses
- paraphrased rather than analysed

Component 3: portfolio–writing

Markers noted that some candidates:

- submitted poems which lacked any indication of poetic techniques or a poetic 'sensibility'
- confused the different requirements of the argumentative and persuasive genres
- did not display knowledge of appropriate genre features (for example those pertaining to the short story) in their own writing
- did not proofread or edit their work effectively
- submitted reflective pieces which were just accounts of experience

Component 4: project–dissertation

Markers noted that some candidates:

- overly relied on socio-historic commentary rather than the literary analysis required
- chose topics which were too large in scope
- created tasks/topics which were poorly worded and therefore limiting
- made unsupported assertions rather than providing analysis and appropriate evidence
- offered formulaic approaches based on close reading techniques from lower levels
- chose texts which limited their ability to offer the depth of literary analysis required at this level

Section 3: advice for the preparation of future candidates

Component 1: question paper (Literary Study)

For this question paper teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates are:

♦ offered an experience of literary study of sufficient depth and breadth to allow reasonable choice in the context of an unseen examination

♦ thoroughly prepared in the art of critical essay writing

♦ given ample practice in making effective use of the time available (1 hours 30 minutes)

♦ provided with strategies for addressing the terms of the question and for appropriate planning of their responses

♦ equipped with a precise and extensive critical vocabulary

♦ reminded that 'analysis' need not always be 'inserted' (often inappropriately) in the form of extensive quotation that is then subjected to micro-analytical comment on individual words and phrase

♦ shown how valid analysis may well reside (often by implication) in a permeating thread of relevant critical comment that informs an emerging argument

Component 2: question paper (Textual Analysis)

For this question paper, teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates:

♦ develop close and essential familiarity with the conventions of a range of literary genres through guided reading

♦ acquire the critical apparatus necessary for the analysis and evaluation of sophisticated and complex texts through focused teaching and extensive practice

♦ are prepared to analyse more than just word choice and imagery when discussing poetry

Component 3: portfolio–writing

For the portfolio–writing it is recommended that:

♦ candidates enrich their own experience by reading extensively in the work of other writers (including their peers) to familiarise themselves with genre conventions and the range of approaches that might be taken in their own writing

♦ skills for the portfolio–writing could be taught alongside the skills for the textual analysis question paper

♦ the submission of groups of unrelated (or loosely related) poems should be avoided

Component 4: project–dissertation
For the project–dissertation teachers and lecturers should ensure:

♦ sophisticated and complex texts of appropriate substance and quality are selected
♦ groupings of disparate texts are avoided
♦ specific and manageable topics are constructed
♦ the analytical thrust of each study is incorporated into the wording of the title
♦ length is within the limits set by SQA
♦ footnotes and bibliographies are provided
♦ dissertations are free from plagiarism
♦ candidates are acquainted with **all** of the mandatory requirements, and advice provided by SQA, including material available on the *Understanding Standards* website
♦ dissertations on media or language are not submitted — dissertations must be on an aspect, or aspects, of literature

The importance of the topic to be pursued in the project–dissertation cannot be overstated. In specifying topics, candidates and centres should be aware that they are effectively selecting and defining their own individual instruments of assessment. Therefore, it is emphasised that vague, generalised and unfocused topics are unlikely to enable candidates to demonstrate attainment of the standards against which their dissertations are assessed. Advice and guidance on dissertation titles can be found in the Course Support Notes. Further material illustrating the wording of topics will be published on the Understanding Standards website later in session 2018/19. Teachers and lecturers will also be able to access this through the Advanced Higher English subject page.

Grade boundary and statistical information:

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2017	2627

Number of resulted entries in 2018	2485

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of course awards	Percentage	Cumulative %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum mark				
A	25.9%	25.9%	644	66
B	28.4%	54.3%	706	57
C	26.9%	81.2%	669	48
D	10.1%	91.3%	250	43
No award	8.7%	-	216	-

General commentary on grade boundaries

SQA's main aim is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and all levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

SQA aims to set examinations and create marking instructions which allow a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional C boundary) and a well prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional A boundary).

It is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject at every level.

Therefore SQA holds a grade boundary meeting every year for each subject at each level to bring together all the information available (statistical and judgemental). The Principal Assessor and SQA Qualifications Manager meet with the relevant SQA Business Manager and Statistician to discuss the evidence and make decisions. The meetings are chaired by members of the management team at SQA.

♦ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the exam is more challenging than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance.
♦ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the exam is less challenging than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance.
♦ Where standards are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

Grade boundaries from exam papers in the same subject at the same level tend to be marginally different year to year. This is because the particular questions, and the mix of questions, are different. This is also the case for exams set by centres. If SQA alters a boundary, this does not mean that centres should necessarily alter their boundary in the corresponding practice exam paper.