



## External Assessment Report 2009

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Subject	English
Level	Advanced Higher

**The statistics used in this report are pre-appeal.**

**This report provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers/lecturers in their preparation of candidates for future examinations. It 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 question papers and marking instructions for the Examination.**

# Comments on candidate performance

## General comments

There were fewer Advanced Higher English candidates in 2009 than there were in 2008. The performance of these candidates, however, was better than in 2008, resulting in:

- a significant improvement in the A -C pass rate
- an improvement in the number of candidates achieving grade B
- a marginal improvement in the number of candidates achieving Grade A.

Compared with 2008, candidate performance was judged to be:

- in Literary Study, no better but no worse
- in Textual Analysis, marginally weaker
- in Creative Writing, clearly better
- in Specialist Study, significantly better.

## Comments on individual assessment components

### Specialist Study

There were only a few reported instances of candidates failing to comply with evidence requirements.

The vast majority produced serious specialist studies, and there were significantly more examples of genuinely scholarly approaches to challenging topics focused on complex texts. Markers reported a generally good standard of discursive writing.

In a few centres, however, approval was given to topics that made it difficult for candidates to meet the standards of the published assessment criteria. There was also evidence (more widespread) of an unhelpful formulaic approach to the wording of topics (“*A literary study of...*”).

The following table provides data relevant to the nature of the specialist studies undertaken by candidates in 2009. The figures for 2009 are in bold and beneath them, for comparison but not in bold, are the figures for 2008. These continue the pattern of previous years: a clear preference for specialising in prose fiction and, within that, for studying the work of two or more than two novelists.

<b>Drama</b>	<b>83</b> 104	<b>Poetry</b>	<b>107</b> 129	<b>Prose fiction</b>	<b>1249</b> 1398	<b>Other</b>	<b>64</b> 70
One dramatist Three or more texts	<b>28</b> 35	One poet Wide range (7+ poems)	<b>59</b> 71	One novelist Three or more texts	<b>112</b> 128	Mixed genres	<b>49</b> 55
One dramatist Two texts	<b>41</b> 48	One poet Narrow range (-4 poems)	<b>21</b> 20	One novelist Two texts	<b>195</b> 202	Language study	<b>3</b> 3
Two or more than two dramatists	<b>14</b> 21	Two or more than two poets	<b>20</b> 38	Two or more than two novelists	<b>904</b> 1042	Non fiction	<b>9</b> 5
Other drama	0	Other poetry	<b>7</b> 0	Other fiction (including short stories)	<b>38</b> 26	Film or other media	<b>3</b> 7

## Literary Study

The responses of candidates to questions in the Literary Study section of the examination paper were judged by markers to be of a similar standard and to have a similar profile to responses in 2008:

- the vast majority of candidates appeared to have been well taught and thoroughly prepared
- there was evidence that a good range of authors and texts had been studied
- knowledge and understanding of texts was generally secure
- most candidates acknowledged (at least) the general tenor of their selected question
- many, however, were reluctant or unable or lacked the confidence to engage directly with the actual terms of the question
- not many answers, therefore, were at all points fully relevant to the real demands of the question.

There was also some concern expressed about the time-management skills of candidates and about their preparedness to plan and to produce effective critical essays setting out relevant and (where appropriate) progressive lines of thought.

The following table provides information on the uptake of questions in Literary Study. The figures for 2009 are in bold and beneath them, for comparison but not in bold, are the figures for 2008. The wider and slightly more even uptake of questions noted in Poetry and Prose Fiction in 2008 continued in 2009, as did the preference of more than 46% of candidates for Shakespeare or Williams.

<b>Drama</b>	<b>845</b> 913	<b>Poetry</b>	<b>340</b> 458	<b>Prose Fiction</b>	<b>317</b> 324	<b>Prose Non-Fiction</b>	<b>1</b> 6
1 Beckett	<b>11</b> 27	12 Burns	<b>17</b> 14	23 Atwood	<b>8</b> 21	34	<b>1</b> 1
2 Byrne	<b>7</b> 10	13 Chaucer	<b>18</b> 26	24 Austen	<b>33</b> 37	35	<b>0</b> 5
3 Chekhov	<b>24</b> 29	14 Donne	<b>50</b> 83	25 Dickens	<b>40</b> 52		
4 Friel	<b>29</b> 31	15 Duffy	<b>47</b> 55	26 Fitzgerald	<b>18</b> 25		
5 Lindsay	<b>4</b> 6	16 Heaney	<b>87</b> 135	27 Galloway	<b>23</b> 26		
6 Lochhead	<b>18</b> 23	17 Henryson	<b>6</b> 15	28 Gray	<b>3</b> 5		
7 Pinter	<b>20</b> 36	18 Keats	<b>28</b> 34	29 Hardy	<b>77</b> 105		
8 Shakespeare	<b>434</b> 410	19 MacDiarmid	<b>5</b> 7	30 Hogg	<b>25</b> 12		
9 Stoppard	<b>18</b> 26	20 Muir	<b>4</b> 12	31 Joyce	<b>43</b> 14		
10 Wilde	<b>17</b> 25	21 Plath	<b>52</b> 42	32 Stevenson	<b>32</b> 15		
11 Williams	<b>263</b> 290	22 Yeats	<b>26</b> 35	33 Waugh	<b>15</b> 12		

## Optional Study

Approximate percentage uptake by candidates of the four optional components was as follows (2008 figures in brackets):

- Creative Writing 67.9% (73.2%)
- Textual Analysis 29.4% (24.9%)
- Reading the Media 02.6% (01.6%)
- Language Study 00.1% (00.3%)

Those who opted for Language Study attempted questions on Language and Social Context and acquitted themselves well. Although their references to relevant literature were felt to be somewhat dated, candidates were able to support their arguments with good evidence drawn from clearly enthusiastic and detailed individual/personal research.

The responses of the 39 candidates who opted for Reading the Media were generally sound, especially in the categories of Film and Advertising. There were 22 answers on Film, 12 on Advertising, 4 on Print Journalism and 1 on Television.

A total of 441 candidates opted for Textual Analysis. There were 159 responses to Prose Fiction (a chapter from the novel *No Great Mischief* by Alistair McLeod), 65 responses to Prose Non-fiction (an essay *Where Does Writing Come From?* by Richard Ford, 143 responses to Poetry (the Wordsworth sonnet *The world is too much with us...*) and 74 responses to Drama (an extract from *Walking Through Seaweed* by Ian Hamilton Finlay). Markers reported the overall response of candidates to be “slightly disappointing”, especially in Prose Fiction and in Poetry (where questions were fairly open), although a little more secure in Prose Non-fiction and in Drama (where questions required candidates to concentrate on specific aspects or features of the texts).

The 1021 candidates who opted for Creative Writing submitted:

- 808 pieces of fiction
- 582 reflective essays
- 384 examples of poetry
- 268 examples of drama

In all categories, markers noted a significant improvement in candidates’ grasp of the conventions of the writing forms they had selected. There were very few pieces that could be dismissed easily as formally inadequate or thematically inept. The general impression was of candidates who had been well instructed and given lots of practice and lots of opportunity to improve and refine their final submissions. There were, as always, examples of quite outstanding pieces of creative writing (in all categories), but even the majority (fairly mundane reflective essays and pieces of fiction) were judged this year to be more interesting and better crafted than in recent years. Although Poetry submissions were (usually) either very well done, or very poorly done, there were some very pleasing, well conceived and well executed submissions in Drama.

## Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

Specific advice issued in previous years continues to be relevant.

1. In relation to the Specialist Study, teachers/lecturers should ensure that:

- texts of appropriate substance and quality are selected
- groupings of disparate texts are avoided
- mixed genres studies (novels and films, films and plays, plays and poems, etc.) are avoided

- specific and manageable topics are constructed
- unambiguous statements of intent are included (as headings to dissertations)
- the analytical thrust of each study is incorporated into the statement of intent or title
- length is between 3500 and 4500 words (including quotations)
- mandatory footnotes and bibliographies are provided
- dissertations are free from plagiarism
- candidates are acquainted with all of the advice and regulations provided by SQA.

The importance of the topic to be pursued in the Specialist Study 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. It should be emphasised, therefore, that vague, generalised and unfocused topics are unlikely to enable candidates to demonstrate attainment of the standards against which their dissertations will be assessed.

2. In relation to Literary Study, teachers/lecturers should ensure that candidates are:

- offered an experience of literary study of sufficient depth and width 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 (1.5 hours)
  - 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 microanalytical comment on individual words and phrases
  - shown how valid analysis may well reside (often by implication) in a permeating thread of relevant critical comment that informs an emerging argument.
- In relation to Creative Writing, it is recommended that:
    - candidates should enrich their own experience by reading extensively in the work of other writers (including their peers) in order to familiarise themselves with genre conventions and the range of approaches that might be taken in their own writing
    - the submission of pieces generated by common stimuli or arising from whole-class exercises should be avoided
    - the submission of groups of unrelated (or loosely related) poems should also be avoided.

3. In relation to Textual Analysis, it is recommended that candidates should:

- through guided reading, develop close and essential familiarity with the conventions of a range of literary genres
- through focused teaching and extensive practice, acquire the critical apparatus necessary for the analysis and evaluation of complex text(s).

In addition to specific advice already issued, there are two further general issues that might well be considered by teachers/lecturers in the light of the features of candidate performance in 2009.

## **Coursework submissions**

Arising from the relatively disappointing coursework submissions of candidates in 2008, it was suggested that there might be a “need for refreshment and enhancement of the tutorial skills of teachers/lecturers in monitoring and advancing the independent study and coursework skills of their candidates”. The significantly improved coursework submissions of candidates in 2009 may well be due, at least in part (and commendably), to the seriousness with which teachers/lecturers have taken this issue. Whatever the reason, in order to maintain and build on the improved attainment of candidates in these components in 2009, it is recommended that the Specialist Study Unit and the Creative Writing Unit continue to be the subject of rigorous teaching and monitoring. Regular use of the Specialist Study NAB published in 2008 should help with the process of the monitoring and formative assessment of candidates’ dissertations as they emerge and are refined through their various stages and revisions. Similarly, Creative Writing requires judicious and regular teaching and tutorial input emphasising to candidates the importance (in all writing) of substance, form, coherence, clarity and economy of expression.

## **External assessment**

With regard to the preparation of candidates for those components assessed by the external examination (Literary Study, Language Study, Textual Analysis, Reading the Media), candidates should be given clear guidance and practice not only in what to include in their answers, but also in how to shape and present their comments. It should be noted that for each of these components, the Unit outcome itself (“Respond critically to...” or, for Language Study, “Describe and analyse...”) and the Unit evidence requirements assume that candidates should be able to produce a “critical essay”, a “critical response” or, for Language Study, an “essay/analytical report”. To make full and profitable use, therefore, of their undoubted knowledge and understanding, candidates should be well taught, well grounded and well practised in those higher order skills required for the writing of clear, relevant and effective essays at the level of Advanced Higher.

## Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2008	1713
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Number of resulted entries in 2009	1590
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## Statistical information: Performance of candidates

### Distribution of Course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of Course awards	%	Cum. %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark - 100				
A	10.0%	10.0%	159	70
B	25.5%	35.5%	406	60
C	39.3%	74.8%	625	50
D	11.6%	86.5%	185	45
No award	13.5%	100.0%	215	-

## General commentary on grade boundaries

- While SQA aims to set examinations and create marking instructions which will 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.
- Each year SQA therefore holds a grade boundary meeting for each subject at each level where it brings 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.
- An exam paper at a particular level in a subject in one year tends to have a marginally different set of grade boundaries from exam papers in that subject at that level in other years. This is because the particular questions, and the mix of questions are different. This is also the case for exams set in centres. If SQA has already altered a boundary in a particular year in say Higher Chemistry this does not mean that centres should necessarily alter boundaries in their prelim exam in Higher Chemistry. The two are not that closely related as they do not contain identical questions.
- 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.