



External Assessment Report 2009

Subject	English
Level	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

Performance, as reported by Markers and Examiners, was broadly similar to that in 2008.

In Close Reading, the additional time given to candidates this year led to a significant reduction in the number of candidates who failed to answer all the questions. This advantage, however, was offset in the work of many candidates who did not use “own words” when answering some of the Understanding questions.

In Critical Essay, the recent years’ improvement in attention to relevance has been maintained, and it was felt that there was a further slight improvement in 2009 in the overall quality of responses. Many Markers felt it was a definite strength that candidates focused well on the key thrust of the question. Handwriting which was difficult to read attracted comment from a number of Markers.

Areas in which candidates performed well

Close Reading

- Candidates showed good general understanding of the passages.
- Where candidates followed the rule to use “own words”, questions on Understanding were handled well.
- Analysis in questions 1(b), 5(c) and 8(b) was generally good.
- There were some excellent answers to question 4(b) on tone.
- The approach to Analysis questions in general has maintained the improvement seen in recent years. Nearly all candidates go beyond mere quotation (or quotation + bald assertion) and attempt genuinely to analyse.
- Nearly all candidates completed the paper this year, and some of the answers to question 12 were of high quality, especially responses which took a good overview of the ideas of both Passages.

Critical Essay

- Most candidates were able to write two substantial essays in the time available. It was noted again this year, however, that some candidates’ essays were unnecessarily long and that this often weakened the overall impact of their work.
- Almost all candidates chose questions from Sections A – C. There was a slight improvement (in quantity and in quality) in responses to questions from Section D.
- Candidates who were well prepared knew their texts in some depth, could select appropriate details/incidents from them and could quote accurately.
- Most candidates seem fully aware of the need for relevance to the chosen question, and that mere narration of events or unfocused, line-by-line analyses of a poem are not acceptable approaches.
- Successful candidates continue to pay attention to the structure of their essays, striving to shape them relevantly to the key part(s) of the question.

- Candidates who took a broad view of a text as a whole, and did not get bogged down in constant “analysis”, performed well; such candidates were often able to contextualise their comments by effectively narrating key details of selected events.
- The range of texts offered by candidates remained as wide as in previous years: in Drama, Shakespeare, Miller and Williams continue to dominate; in longer Prose, all the “standard” novels were widely used, with evidence that some relatively contemporary novels are also being studied as class texts; there were fewer responses using a short story; in Poetry, there continues to be a pleasing and remarkably wide range of material being studied.
- Scottish texts were used widely in all main areas except Drama; around 50% of candidates answered using at least one Scottish text.
- Markers who commented on candidates’ expression and technical accuracy were mostly positive and noted “no change” or “a slight improvement”.

Areas which candidates found demanding

Close Reading

- The requirement to use “own words” in Understanding questions has long been established in Close Reading at this level. It is stated clearly on the cover page every year. This year, for no obvious reason, a significant number of candidates did not adhere to this rule, either relying too closely on the wording of the passage or blatantly quoting from it, and consequently lost marks in several questions, most notably in 4(a), 5(b), 5(d), 6(b), and 6(c).
- Question 2 (a traditional “link” question) and question 9(c) (a traditional “imagery” question) were poorly handled by many candidates.
- Question 4(b) was challenging; many candidates were able to identify a suitable tone, but were unable to explain *how* it had been created.
- In question 9(b), many candidates were unable to distinguish between the views of the writer and the views of the conference delegates, despite the careful wording of the question (cf question 8 in 2008).
- In question 11, many candidates were inclined to repeat the word “dismissive” from the question and quote some words from the paragraph, without appropriate analysis of *how* the tone had been created.
- Question 12 – the comparison question – was answered this year at greater length than in the past (no doubt because of the additional time), but not always to better purpose. Comments on style were especially weak and there was a lack of genuine comparison. Too many candidates rely on merely re-stating the writers’ key points.

Critical Essay

- More Markers than ever before commented on the poor handwriting of some candidates, which sometimes made it extremely difficult (and time-consuming) to mark the essay. This is a serious problem in a Critical Essay, which might extend over five or more pages, making it hard to follow and concentrate on the candidate's line of thought. It must be stressed, however, that no candidate's work was (or ever has been) left unmarked for this reason.
- Markers continue to report candidates who appear to have prepared only two texts and are therefore led to implausible lines of argument in order to force a text to "fit" a question. In Poetry especially, where questions are of necessity "focused" (in order to allow the Performance Criterion of relevance to be met), candidates should have studied a range of poems.
- The number of "genre infringements", was down slightly, although there were some rather extreme confusions, eg play for novel and *vice versa*. The most common infringement continues to be in Section B – Prose, where candidates use a short story to answer on a question on a novel. While this might be an accident induced by examination nerves, it is hard not to conclude that in most such cases candidates are simply under-prepared and are forced to desperate measures – not infrequently claiming that well-known short stories are in fact "novels".
- Inappropriate "micro-analysis" of novels and plays continues to cause some candidates' essays to be unsatisfactory. Examples were noted of candidates quoting a relatively unimportant sentence from a novel and then subjecting words from it to detailed "analysis".
- Inaccurate use of the apostrophe was noted in many cases, and incorrect punctuation when using "however", "therefore" and "this" was not infrequent.

Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

Close Reading

Candidates should be reminded that:

- when answering Understanding questions, they must use "own words" as far as possible;
- despite the additional time, careful time management is important in the Close Reading paper – not only should all questions be answered, but all should be given an appropriate amount of time; attention should be paid to the number of marks available, eg a 2-mark "Understanding" question (of which there were nine in this year's paper) should be answered concisely;
- answers to "link" questions must show an understanding of the key ideas before and after the "link" sentence; they should read beyond the link sentence before attempting to answer a question about its linking function;
- answers to questions on imagery must show an understanding of the literal "root" of the image and of how this is being developed figuratively by the writer;
- in questions on word choice, imagery, sentence structure, etc, mere identification of a word, image or feature of sentence structure will gain no marks in itself at Higher level; marks are awarded for the quality of comment and the depth of insight;
- they should pay careful attention to the "focus" given in most Analysis questions (eg questions 1(b), 7, 9(b) and 11 in this year's paper) and avoid analysing in a vacuum;
- the question on both Passages is a key feature of the Higher English Arrangements and tests valuable reading skills; it is worth a significant number of marks; responses to comparison questions should be focused, structured and written in continuous prose;

- extended advice on many aspects of the Close Reading paper can be found on SQA’s website (see “Candidate Guidance Documents” on the dedicated English page).

Critical Essay

Candidates should be reminded that:

- they must ensure that their handwriting is clearly legible to Markers; centres should explore the provision of appropriate alternative arrangements (eg use of ICT without spellcheck, or transcription without correction) for candidates whose handwriting is seriously weak (or is known to become so under examination pressure);
- thorough preparation of a range of appropriate texts is essential;
- the distinctions in prose genres should be fully understood and the terms of the question adhered to; infringements, whether accidental or deliberate, are always penalised, often quite substantially;
- in order to allow Markers to assess relevance (one of the Performance Criteria), all Critical Essay questions have a defined focus; a prepared, memorised essay is not an option;
- essays should be carefully structured to respond to the task set, but simplistic formulae such as “Throughout this essay I will ...”, “I will be writing about ...” and “In this paragraph I intend to ...” should be avoided;
- “analysis” should support, not dominate, the line of thought in a Critical Essay; when attempting to analyse, they should deal with features/techniques which are appropriate to the genre; “micro-analysis” of novels and plays should be avoided;
- while merely narrating the events or re-stating the content of a text is not acceptable, some narration is often useful in order to contextualise comments; appropriate, limited narration of events can be a strength;
- care should be taken with the layout of quotations; while there are no absolute rules for this, basic conventions (such as paragraphing and indenting longer quotations, integrating shorter ones into a sentence) should be observed; they should avoid following a quotation with “This quote shows ...”;
- while due consideration is given for the pressure under which they are writing, they should take every care to maintain “sufficient technical accuracy”; care should be taken with punctuation when “however”, “therefore” and “this” are being used as connectives – a full stop (or semi-colon), not a comma, is the convention;
- extended advice on many aspects of the Critical Essay paper can be found on SQA’s website (see “Candidate Guidance Documents” on the dedicated English page).

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2008	27178
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Number of resulted entries in 2009	28389
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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	18.4%	18.4%	5231	65
B	23.7%	42.1%	6729	56
C	26.8%	68.9%	7608	48
D	10.4%	79.4%	2963	44
No award	20.6%	100.0%	5858	-

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.