



## External Assessment Report 2013

Subject(s)	English
Level(s)	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 in the Folio of Writing and in Critical Essay was broadly similar to that in 2012. In Close Reading, scores were higher than in 2012 but in a test judged to be less demanding.

## Areas in which candidates performed well

### Folio of Writing

- ◆ Markers reported some excellent work in the Folios. In many centres, candidates had clearly been encouraged to achieve well beyond their Standard Grade or Intermediate level and to strive for excellence in Writing.
- ◆ In Creative Writing, 60–65% of candidates chose to submit a Personal Reflective piece, and 30–35% an Imaginative piece. Where a Personal Reflective piece was based on a suitable experience (or range of experiences) and there was sustained and mature reflection, there was often work of high quality.
- ◆ The huge majority of Imaginative Writing was in the form of prose fiction, predominantly in short story form. Some of these were of exceptional quality with a sophisticated grasp of the genre. Several were awarded full marks.
- ◆ There were around 100 submissions of poetry (up from last year), among which the best work demonstrated a strong command of form and language.
- ◆ There was a small, but often impressive, submission of Imaginative Writing partly or wholly in Scots. A number of candidates wrote with confidence, and effectively exploited the freshness and freedom this option offers them.
- ◆ The number of submissions in excess of the word limit was lower than last year.

### Close Reading

Candidates found the subject matter (consumerism) and the two passages very engaging and accessible.

- ◆ The proportion of 'Understanding' questions was higher than in previous years, and these questions were handled well, especially questions 1(a), 2, 3(a), 3(b), 6(a), 6(b), 8, and 12.
- ◆ In addition there was good work in questions 1(b), 3(c), 9(b), 9(c) and 11.
- ◆ Question 7 was particularly well answered.

### Critical Essay

- ◆ Specific Questions:
  - Question 2: there were many good answers to the 'self-delusion' idea.
  - Question 4: candidates who made a good choice of scene mostly wrote good essays — and were not distracted by the fact that the second sentence of the question did not make it clear to what extent the essay should focus on the scene

or on the play as a whole. (Makers were instructed not to penalise either approach.)

- Question 8 attracted a number of successful essays.
- Question 13 was a popular choice; where the poem offered was appropriate, answers were often impressive.

- ◆ Most candidates were fully aware of the need for relevance to the chosen question, and that mere narration of events or unfocused, line-by-line analysis of a poem are not acceptable approaches.
- ◆ 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. Tennessee Williams appears to have surpassed Miller and Shakespeare as the pre-eminent dramatist studied; Carol Ann Duffy dominated answers on poetry, with a very wide range of her poems being offered.
- ◆ Scottish texts were used widely in all main areas except Drama.
- ◆ Markers who commented on candidates' expression and technical accuracy were nearly all positive, noting 'no change' or 'a slight improvement'.

## **Areas which candidates found demanding**

### **Folio of Writing**

- ◆ Some submissions showed evidence of careless, or non-existent, proof-reading, which caused work to fail because it did not achieve the criterion of being 'consistently accurate'.
- ◆ A number of markers noted that many pieces were presented in an unnecessarily small font.
- ◆ It was disappointing to see, once again, that in some centres whole classes had been set identical tasks. In an exercise designed to encourage personal choice and individual interests, this is very unlikely to generate work of quality.
- ◆ Much of the writing submitted as 'Personal Reflective' contained very little reflection or had merely a brief, token observation tacked on at the end.
- ◆ In Discursive Writing, a limited range of topics (cosmetic surgery, size zero models, abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, for example) once again attracted a substantial number of candidates. There was a disappointing sameness about most of these essays and little sense of real engagement.

### **Close Reading**

- ◆ Questions 4 and 10(b): many candidates simply did not explore enough material to score 4 marks.
- ◆ Question 5: many candidates failed to make clear that they understood the meaning of 'over-catastrophising'.
- ◆ Question 12(a): the 'link' question was poorly handled by many candidates who either were unaware of the correct method of answering or did not examine carefully enough the key ideas in the two relevant paragraphs.

- ◆ Question 13: although most candidates approached this question sensibly, there was some difficulty in establishing 'key' areas. Some candidates made too many points and, inevitably, some rather trivial ones were included.

## **Critical Essay**

- ◆ Specific Questions:
  - Question 3: the 'subterfuge' option was chosen infrequently – even when the play offered would have led to a good answer.
  - Question 4: some candidates chose a 'scene' which was not actually part of the dramatic action of the play (eg John Proctor's affair with Abigail; Joe Keller's decision to ship out the faulty parts). This showed poor understanding of drama, and was self-penalising.
  - Question 6: the idea of a character being 'influenced by' the setting was overlooked in many essays, which simply described the setting(s).
  - Questions 14 and 16: there were some very unlikely and unconvincing choices for these questions.
- ◆ There was evidence again this year of candidates coming to the exam with prepared answers (often on questions from past exam papers, as the appearance of key words suggested) and attempting to adapt these to 'fit' the questions asked. Such answers lack relevance to the question and cannot access high marks.
- ◆ The number of genre infringements was higher than in previous years, with the majority of cases involving the use of a short story in a question requiring a novel.
- ◆ Inappropriate 'micro-analysis' of novels and plays continues to cause some concern. Examples were noted of candidates quoting a short sentence from a novel and then subjecting individual words from it to detailed 'analysis'.
- ◆ Many Markers once again commented on the poor, sometime near-illegible, handwriting of some candidates, which made it extremely difficult (and time-consuming) to mark the essay. While no candidate's work is ever left unmarked for this reason, centres should do their best to reduce this problem by making alternative arrangements for some candidates.

## **Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates**

### **Folio of Writing**

- ◆ Careful proof-reading before submission should be strongly encouraged.
- ◆ Word-processed submissions should use a standard font and a size of 12 points.
- ◆ Candidates' attention should be drawn to the high standards of language and thought embedded in the descriptors for the upper marking categories.
- ◆ While class exercises are a worthwhile tactic in the teaching and learning process for writing, candidates should be allowed the freedom to choose the nature of their final submissions.
- ◆ Personal Reflective writing should contain — and ideally be permeated by — genuine and convincing personal reflection. A blow-by-blow account of a holiday or of a sporting triumph, for example, is unlikely to generate much mature insight. Candidates who have

little of depth to say on a 'Personal' topic might be well advised to attempt the Creative option.

- ◆ Candidates should be encouraged to be a little more adventurous in their choice of topics for Discursive writing. Topics in which there is a genuine personal interest, and topics of specific local interest, often lead to good work.
- ◆ The main sources consulted in the preparation of Discursive writing should be noted and then recorded at the end of the piece (or in footnotes). It is not necessary to source every single statistic etc, but good practice requires that principal sources (of fact and of opinion) be acknowledged.
- ◆ Extended advice on many aspects of the Folio of Writing can be found on SQA's website (see 'Candidate Guidance Documents' on the English subject page), and all points made in the Reports for 2011 and 2012 are still relevant.

### **Close Reading**

- ◆ All general points made in the Reports for 2011 and 2012 are still relevant.
- ◆ The 2012 Report contains an Appendix on the Comparison question. Candidates' attentions should be drawn to this, especially to the statement: 'The question (whether it is on agreement or disagreement or both) will always ask for **'key ideas'**, and candidates will never be expected to offer more than three of these. The essence of the question lies in distinguishing 'key ideas' from less significant ones — ie the Evaluation included in the coding.'
- ◆ Extended advice on many aspects of the Close Reading paper can be found on SQA's website (see 'Candidate Guidance Documents' on the English subject page).

### **Critical Essay**

- ◆ While candidates who plan to answer on a substantial prose or drama text are not expected to have prepared more than one of these, candidates who plan to answer the poetry section should not limit themselves to preparing a single poem. The same applies to the short story and to short non-fiction texts.
- ◆ The use of formulaic approaches to essay writing should be resisted. Candidates who believe that dogged repetition of words from the question, and the regular insertion of phrases such as '... and this helped me to understand the central concerns of the text', will lead to a successful essay are mistaken.
- ◆ All general points made in the Reports for 2011 and 2012 are still relevant.
- ◆ 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 2012	29683
Number of resulted entries in 2013	30401

## 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	20.4%	20.4%	6190	67
B	24.3%	44.7%	7392	59
C	29.2%	73.9%	8878	51
D	10.9%	84.8%	3317	47
No award	15.2%	100.0%	4624	-

## 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.