



External Assessment Report 2011

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

Markers reported that in all components of external assessment apart from Textual Analysis candidate performance was at least in line with and probably marginally better than expectations. Particular improvement was noted in Literary Study.

Comments on individual assessment components

Specialist Study

The following table provides data relevant to the reported nature and scope of the specialist studies undertaken by 1802 candidates in 2011. The figures continue the pattern of previous years: a clear preference (82%) for specialising in Prose fiction and, within that, for studying the work of two or more than two novelists.

Drama	146	Poetry	114	Prose fiction	1486	Other	56
One dramatist Three or more texts	47	One poet Wide range (7+ poems)	54	One novelist Three or more texts	91	Mixed genres	38
One dramatist Two texts	72	One poet Narrow range (-4 poems)	31	One novelist Two texts	350	Language study	1
Two or more than two dramatists	26	Two or more than two poets	25	Two or more than two novelists	997	Non fiction	5
Other drama	1	Other poetry	4	Other fiction (including short stories)	48	Film or other media	12

The main point to be noted about the quality of candidate performance in the Specialist Study component is that almost all candidates appeared to take their specialist studies seriously, producing widespread evidence of commitment and enthusiasm, demonstrating sound understanding of their selected texts/materials, and delivering their conclusions with acceptable clarity within the constraints of the published mandatory regulations and requirements.

The most effective specialist studies were marked by a clear analytical focus on valid literary/linguistic features of texts/materials that were challenging enough to merit detailed comparative study at the level of Advanced Higher. The least effective were often based on an inappropriate and/or unbalanced selection of texts/materials, and frequently took a narrative and/or biographical approach to the 'exploration' of some impossibly wide and vaguely perceived 'themes'.

While commending the insight and dedication of candidates, and their ability to handle complex literary texts and ideas and to use secondary sources in support of their own observations, Markers also drew attention to the disappointingly low number of dissertations produced on Scottish texts, on drama and on poetry, the relatively poor quality of mixed genres and societal studies, the continued use (in a few centres) of chapter or section headings, and the unprofitable yoking together of texts that had little in common.

Once again, however, variations of approach and achievement tended to be more marked between centres than between candidates within centres. The correlation between Advanced Higher achievement and Advanced Higher delivery models (including resourcing) may be worth considering.

Literary Study

The following table provides information on the reported uptake of questions in the Literary Study section of the 2011 examination paper by 1743 candidates. More than 52% of all candidates chose to answer a question on Drama, and more than 77% of these candidates (40% of all candidates) opted for either Shakespeare or Williams. Significantly more candidates than in previous years chose to address the questions on Williams, Chaucer, Keats, Atwood, Galloway, Hogg and Joyce.

Drama	918	Poetry	433	Prose fiction	391	Prose non-fiction	1
1 Beckett	32	12 Burns	2	23 Atwood	33	34	1
2 Byrne	8	13 Chaucer	29	24 Austen	56	35	0
3 Chekhov	31	14 Donne	47	25 Dickens	52		
4 Friel	26	15 Duffy	97	26 Fitzgerald	19		
5 Lindsay	0	16 Heaney	64	27 Galloway	34		
6 Lochhead	14	17 Henryson	0	28 Gray	15		
7 Pinter	37	18 Keats	47	29 Hardy	74		
8 Shakespeare	370	19 MacDiarmid	4	30 Hogg	19		
9 Stoppard	26	20 Muir	2	31 Joyce	36		
10 Wilde	31	21 Plath	119	32 Stevenson	25		
11 Williams	343	22 Yeats	22	33 Waugh	28		

Candidates' responses to questions in the Literary Study section of the examination paper were judged by markers to be very secure in textual knowledge and understanding and better focused than in previous years on the terms of the questions. There appeared to be widespread evidence of good teaching and thorough preparation. Particularly good work was reported in the Drama section on Beckett, Chekhov, Pinter and Shakespeare, in the Poetry section on Heaney and in the Prose fiction section on Austen, Dickens and Hardy.

Relatively poor responses were noted in the Poetry section, especially to the questions on Keats and Plath, and the tendency (less evident than in past years) to rely on narration and description proved characteristic of candidate responses to Williams, Atwood and Stevenson.

Options

Based on the reported choices of 1784 candidates in 2011, figures for the percentage uptake of the four optional components were broadly similar to 2010.

- ◆ Creative Writing 64.7% (68.9% in 2010)
- ◆ Textual Analysis 31.6% (28.5% in 2010)
- ◆ Reading the Media 03.4% (02.2% in 2010)
- ◆ Language Study 00.3% (00.4% in 2010).

Five candidates from two centres were presented for **Language Study** in 2011. These candidates appeared well enough informed but their responses to the questions they attempted (four on *Language and social context* and one on *The linguistic characteristics of informal conversation*) were more obviously 'prepared' answers than answers that directly engaged with the issues raised in the questions.

There was a significant increase in the number of candidates attempting **Reading the Media** in 2011 (61 candidates from 10 centres). 52 of these candidates chose to answer a question on *Film*, one on *Television* and eight on *Advertising*. All of the films studied were of appropriate quality and were subjected by candidates to generally relevant and well informed critical analysis. Responses to questions on Advertising were equally satisfactory. Candidates had clearly been well taught.

The 563 candidates who opted for **Textual Analysis** in 2011 produced:

- ◆ 210 responses to Prose fiction
- ◆ 26 responses to Prose non fiction
- ◆ 227 responses to Poetry
- ◆ 52 responses to Drama

Responses to Prose non fiction and to Drama were generally very good (and, occasionally, very impressive). With only a few notable exceptions, however, responses to Poetry were no more than adequate, and responses to Prose fiction were particularly disappointing.

The 1155 candidates who opted for **Creative Writing** submitted:

- ◆ 652 reflective essays
- ◆ 954 pieces of fiction
- ◆ 343 poems
- ◆ 361 examples of drama

While there was good evidence that almost all candidates had approached Creative Writing with enthusiasm and commitment, and that their submissions in Fiction and Drama were generally secure, the Reflective Essay continued to be confused with the Personal or the Discursive essay, and Poetry was either very good or very poor.

Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

Advice offered to centres in past years for the preparation of future candidates remains valid and is set out below.

For 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.

For **Literary Study**, teachers/lecturers should ensure that 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 (1.5 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 micro-analytical 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

For **Creative Writing**, it is recommended that:

- ◆ candidates should 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
- ◆ 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

For **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 texts

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2010	1,839
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Number of resulted entries in 2011	1,861
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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	22.8%	22.8%	425	65
B	31.4%	54.3%	585	56
C	26.7%	80.9%	496	48
D	6.9%	87.9%	129	44
No award	12.1%	100.0%	226	-

General commentary on grade boundaries

SQA aims to set examinations and create marking instructions that 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, though, very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject at every level.

Each year, therefore, SQA 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 Head of Service 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.