

# SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY

## English: Advanced Higher

### Guidance for centres on the selection of suitable topics for the dissertation for the Specialist Study in Advanced Higher English

#### 1 Introduction

The National Qualifications Review Report: English (Advanced Higher) (2002) recorded SQA's decision to end the approval process for dissertation topics and instead to provide guidance on choice of topics.

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance for centres and for candidates on the formulation of topics that will enable candidates to make the most of the opportunities offered by the course and unit requirements to produce a dissertation for assessment.

#### 2 Requirements

What is required of candidates and centres is determined by the regulations of the National Course and Unit specifications, key parts of which are given below.

The Specialist Study dissertation will carry a weighting of 40%.

The Specialist Study Unit is concerned principally with extending the **critical and analytical skills of candidates**.

The Outcome of the Specialist Study Unit at Advanced Higher requires candidates to make an **independent study** of and produce a dissertation on an aspect or aspects of language or literature or media or some combination of these.

The chosen topic and materials on which it is **based must be deemed by the centre to be suitable for independent study** (of appropriate quality, personally selected by candidates, not the subject of teaching in this Unit or of teaching or assessment in other Units of this Course or other Courses).

Candidates should select a topic **that will enable them to offer a full exposition and discussion** of a particular aspect of their chosen study.

The first stage in the process is the selection by the candidate of texts or topics for study and the formulation of a brief descriptive statement of what the candidate proposes to study. **This proposal must be submitted to the teacher/lecturer for approval in order to ensure that the proposed materials are appropriate to an English course and worthy of study at this level, and that the study itself is manageable.**

In order to achieve the Unit Outcome, the dissertation which candidates are required to produce must meet:

- ◆ all of the Evidence Requirements
- ◆ all of the Performance Criteria.

### 3 Some implications of these requirements

These requirements have important implications for teachers/lecturers and candidates, both regarding the nature and presentation of the dissertation in its final form and in creating the contexts that will support candidates in their work. They emphasise:

- ◆ the scale of the task: the dissertation is a substantial piece of discursive writing based on personal investigation
- ◆ the need for candidates to practise independent study skills
- ◆ the need to develop and to demonstrate a genuine thoughtfulness and scholarliness of approach
- ◆ the need for teachers/lecturers to work with candidates to formulate a topic that will enable individual candidates to meet the evidence requirements and the Performance Criteria.

Recognition of these key aspects of the Specialist Study Unit is essential in order to achieve success.

### 4 Implications of the removal of the approval process

The process of seeking approval from SQA for dissertation topics provided a formal check for centres and candidates on the validity, appropriateness and manageability of topics submitted. The removal of this process places the onus on teachers/lecturers to ensure that topics are **valid** (in that they enable candidates to meet all of the Evidence Requirements), **appropriate** (in that they enable candidates to meet all of the Performance Criteria) and **manageable** (within the limits of available time and specified length).

In the past, the coded comments by examiners on topics submitted sought to support candidates and teachers/lecturers by providing a body of consistent advice and reassurance on matters relating to **validity, appropriateness and manageability**.

The comments sought to ensure that candidates achieved success at this level by formulating topics that clearly revealed them to be:

- ◆ engaging in some detailed comparative analysis of texts or parts of texts
- ◆ focusing on literary/linguistic aspects of the study
- ◆ focusing on a number or range of texts appropriate to the nature of the proposed study
- ◆ studying works of appropriate literary quality
- ◆ avoiding over-reliance on critical works
- ◆ offering serious study of non-literary texts.

The list of comments previously provided by SQA and the principles that underpin them offer useful guidance on the formulation of dissertation topics. (See Appendix B.)

## 5 **Some notes on validity, appropriateness, manageability**

Although the following notes of guidance are offered under separate headings, it must be understood that the three principles that should inform a ‘good’ dissertation topic — validity, appropriateness and manageability — are interrelated.

Both the task proposed **and** the materials selected for study should be informed by these three principles.

Some of the issues raised in this section are exemplified in the list of proposed topics with comments provided in Appendix A.

### *Validity*

Candidates and teachers/lecturers must ensure that the wording of topics enables candidates to meet the requirements of the Unit.

Candidates should be aware that markers of the dissertation use the statement of the topic on the version of the dissertation submitted for assessment not only to measure the extent to which the stated intention has been achieved but also to consider the validity of the study.

It follows that:

- ◆ in the early stages, statements of topics, while providing guidance and support to candidates, should be sufficiently flexible to enable candidates to change direction as their studies develop;
- ◆ **all dissertations when submitted should have as a heading a final, precisely worded statement that indicates the nature, scope and purpose of the completed study.**

### *Appropriateness*

The Unit Specification states that the centre should ensure that:

‘the proposed materials are appropriate to an English course and worthy of study at this level’.

The materials chosen and the tasks selected should be sufficiently demanding to enable candidates to demonstrate the skills required for success at this level.

### *Manageability*

The following advice is given in the Unit Specification:

‘the study should explore a limited area and examine it in detail with appropriate supporting evidence’.

It can be stated with some certainty that a very wide topic or a very large number of texts can only result in a superficial and over-generalised handling and that the best dissertations take a limited area and examine it in detail.

It is not possible to be prescriptive about the number of texts to be studied. The number of texts that a candidate studies depends upon:

- ◆ the nature of the texts, their scale of complexity and level of difficulty;
- ◆ the nature of the task that the candidate has chosen.

Such decisions rest upon the judgements of candidates and of the teachers/lecturers whose responsibility it is to approve topics.

It may be that the depth, complexity — or, perhaps, length — of novels or plays chosen means that fair treatment can be accorded only to two; or it may be that the relative simplicity, transparency — or brevity — of texts chosen means that a greater number have to be studied to enable the candidate to meet the Performance Criteria.

It may be that the argument proposed in a particular topic is best served by a detailed comparison of two novels or plays; or it may be judged necessary, in order to develop a line of thought, to cover three major texts.

Similar principles apply to the selection of poems for study. It may be that a particular topic is best explored through a close analysis of 8 – 10 relatively short poems, with references made to a number of others, while a topic requiring a broader sweep may require less-detailed treatment of a wider range of poems.

There is no putative ‘norm’ relating to the number of texts chosen for study. However, candidates and teachers/lecturers should be aware of the dangers of:

- ◆ basing a dissertation at this level on a limited number of slight or ‘easy’ texts
- ◆ adding to an already adequate specification a text to which fair treatment cannot be given within the context of a short dissertation.

## **6 Conclusion**

SQA’s decision to end the approval process places responsibility on teachers/lecturers to ensure that candidates undertake Specialist Studies that are in substance and quality commensurate with the value of this component in course assessment.

To this end, the formulation of a precisely-worded topic is a crucial element in ensuring that the study is valid, appropriate and manageable.

## Appendix A

By way of illustration, some dissertation topics recently submitted to SQA for approval are offered with annotations that relate to the validity, appropriateness and manageability of the topics and their usefulness in providing guidance to candidates on the purpose, structure and shape of their study.

<p>1</p>	<p>A study of the effects of the Catholic Religion on the central characters in three of Graham Greene's works, effecting a literary comparison across <i>The Power and the Glory</i>, <i>Brighton Rock</i> and <i>The Heart of the Matter</i>.</p> <p><i>This topic exhibits a common tendency by candidates to regard an author's characters as 'people'. Clearly, the emphasis here should be on the process of Greene's characterisation.</i></p>
<p>2</p>	<p>An exploration of the influence that 'feminism' has on the central female characters' life-choice in three Brontë novels — <i>Wuthering Heights</i>, <i>Jane Eyre</i> and <i>The Tenant of Wildfell Hall</i>. I intend to focus on the contribution of these characters' desire for independence, their desire for a family, the contribution of the central male characters and also how the authors' backgrounds are mirrored in their works.</p> <p><i>The stated focus of the dissertation — in particular, the reference to investigating the authors' backgrounds — does not offer opportunities for a profitable <b>literary</b> study. The application of a modern term like 'feminism' to mid-nineteenth-century fiction may be difficult for the candidate.</i></p>
<p>3</p>	<p>I intend to conduct a linguistic and literary comparison of the Irish Troubles, centred on the Easter Rising of 1916. My chose texts are Sean O'Casey's <i>The Plough and the Stars</i>, Roddy Doyle's <i>A Star called Henry</i> and W.B. Yeats's <i>Easter 1916</i>.</p> <p><i>The opening statement requires elaboration and refinement in order to be helpful to the candidate. Presumably, the intention is to compare the literary and linguistic ways in which writers have, <b>in different periods and in different genres</b>, dealt with that defining moment in Irish history.</i></p>
<p>4</p>	<p>A literary and linguistic study of a selection of Sylvia Plath's poetry with specific reference to the recurring themes of isolation, entrapment, self-hatred and contempt for men, whilst investigating possible links between these themes and her own life-experiences.</p> <p><i>Candidates must beware of the risk of straying into the area of biographical rather than literary study. The candidate should, by the stage of formulating a detailed proposal, have a good idea of the number and range of texts to be studied.</i></p>
<p>5</p>	<p>Dickens's world — through a variety of writings the study will try to establish wherein his skill lies as a writer and the views he held on humanity.</p>
<p>6</p>	<p>I intend to examine the various poetic techniques used to make the narrative poem which takes love as its topic such an acceptable form of poetry for so many people.</p> <p><i>Both of these topics are unrealistic and unmanageable. They place no limits on the study and make demands that cannot be realised in a short dissertation.</i></p>

<p><b>7</b></p>	<p>A close comparative examination of the portrayal of women in nineteenth-century fiction through the author's use of theme and characterisation in <i>Thérèse Raquin</i>, <i>Madame Bovary</i>, <i>Anna Karenina</i>.</p> <p><i>The topic of the portrayal of women in nineteenth-century fiction is too general to be satisfactorily dealt with in a short dissertation based on three texts. What is meant by 'use of theme'? Given the depth and complexity of the texts chosen — and the assertion that a 'close' examination is to be made, a dissertation on <b>two</b> of these novels would be acceptable.</i></p>
<p><b>8</b></p>	<p>A discussion of the metaphysical insights gained and experienced by Aldous Huxley in <i>Doors of Perception</i> and <i>Heaven and Hell</i> and how these are manifested in the utopia of <i>Island</i> and the dystopia of <i>Brave New World</i>.</p> <p><i>There is no literary or linguistic focus given to the study. Candidates require much more detailed direction than is provided here.</i></p>
<p><b>9</b></p>	<p>A comparative examination of how the satire and humour deployed in three political texts — <i>Boiling a Frog</i>, by Christopher Brookmyre, <i>The Ragged-trousered Philanthropists</i>, by Robert Tressell, and the Alan Clarke Diaries — contribute to their veracity.</p> <p><i>The problem here is in the disparate nature of the texts; in particular, the comparison of fiction and non-fiction texts creates difficulties for candidates.</i></p>
<p><b>10</b></p>	<p>A study of popular, romantic fiction, focusing on the styles and techniques of four representative works. The study will explore the literary conventions and the language used and consider the appeal of these novels to the reader and the commonly held view that they are inferior literature.</p> <p><i>While a topic based on non-literary texts is permissible under the Arrangements, such a Specialist Study is fraught with difficulties for the average candidate:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— <i>a thorough understanding of the conventions of the chosen genre is necessary</i></li> <li>— <i>texts must be subjected to serious, detailed analysis</i></li> <li>— <i>four slight texts — there seems little evidence on which to base judgements about the genre</i></li> <li>— <i>the topic seems to suggest that the candidate will challenge the 'commonly held' view that such works are 'inferior literature' — here lies danger.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>11</b></p>	<p>A comparative analysis of the style of Colin Thubron in <i>Among the Russians</i> and <i>In Siberia</i> with particular reference to the language and imagery used to create setting and atmosphere.</p> <p><i>The topic is clearly defined, of an appropriate level of difficulty and manageable within the context of a short dissertation.</i></p>

**12** A comparative literary study of aspects of the Scottish psyche as represented both individually and collectively in *The House with the Green Shutters*, *Gillespie* and *Greenvoe*. I intend to examine similarities and contrasting features of the Scots personality and types of Scottish community as represented through such techniques as setting, character, theme and symbol.

*An inclusive topic that may be useful as a starting point but that requires limitation and more careful definition in order to be properly helpful to the candidate. The individual aspects of the topic might be separated from the group or community aspects or the range of techniques restricted to, say, two.*

**13** I intend to examine three short stories by James Lee Burke. I intend to concentrate on characterisation, language and setting. I also hope to explore a number of themes prominent in American short stories: loss, courage, betrayal, friendship, violence and heroism.

*Three complex short stories analysed in very close detail **might** represent an adequate focus of study at this level. However, the looseness of the wording makes it unclear where this topic is going to take the candidate.*

**14** A comparative study of the nature and function of narrative voice in three novels by Edith Wharton.

*An admirably concise and precise statement of the candidate's intention to study a limited and very important aspect of this author's narrative technique.*

**15** A detailed critical comparison of the dramatic and literary techniques employed by Willy Russell in *Educating Rita*, *Shirley Valentine* and *Blood Brothers* in revealing the indomitable spirit of the central female characters.

*Again, this topic is helpfully worded to give a clear focus to what the candidate intends to do.*

**16** A study of recurring themes and characteristic techniques in the work of Oliver Stone. Drawing evidence from the three films: *Wall Street*, *JFK* and *Any Given Sunday*, I intend to make a comparative analysis of his treatment of the theme of the search for power and the conflict (both between and within characters) that derives from this search. I intend to address issues such as the importance of language in his films as well as the effectiveness of shot-composition and sequencing, his editing techniques and other relevant aspects of his cinematography.

*A comprehensively-worded topic that makes clear the focus of the study and effectively reminds the candidate that at the heart of the study is the detailed, technical analysis of aspects of these media texts.*

- 17** An analysis of the uses of positive and negative linguistic terminology amongst primary school children in Mosstodloch (Moray).

*Apparently an appropriate topic; however, explanation is required of the methodology to be employed in this complex and specialised language study in order to keep the candidate on the right track and to reassure the teacher/lecturer that the topic is valid and manageable.*

## Appendix B

List of codes and comments used to offer advice on nominated dissertation topics sent for approval with respect to the examination in 2003.

- 1 Topic of study **approved**.
- 2 Topic of study **approved**. In the candidate's own interests, however, it is recommended that the wording should be as amended.
- 3 Topic of study **approved**. It is recommended, however, that the candidate should effect some detailed comparison.
- 4 Topic of study **approved**. It is recommended, however, that the candidate should be careful to concentrate in this dissertation on the literary and/or linguistic aspects of the topic.
- 5 Topic of study **approved**. It is recommended, however, that the field of study should be so narrowed that it can be dealt with in some depth within the limits of a short dissertation.
- 6 Topic of study **approved**. It is recommended, however, that the dissertation should concentrate on a limited number of texts treated in detail.
- 7 Topic of study **approved**. It is recommended, however, that a substantial body of reading should be dealt with.
- 8 Topic of study **approved**. The candidate, however, may not be examining enough texts for a study at this level. The candidate should consider the merit of adding another text to the proposed reading.
- 9 Topic of study **approved**. The candidate, however, should consider the possibility of including study of some additional author's treatment of comparable material.
- 10 Topic of study **approved**. The candidate must ensure, however, that works of reasonable literary quality are selected.
- 11 Topic of study **approved**. The candidate is advised, however, that such topics have been found to conceal the danger of excessive reliance on critical and other source material, which is penalised.
- 12 Topic of study **approved**. The candidate must ensure, however, that clear evidence is offered of the **serious study** of any non-literary texts.
- 13 It is recommended that this topic be **resubmitted**. The topic indicated is not sufficiently specific. It has been found that candidates often act against their own best interests by failing to direct their study towards a sufficiently limited aspect of the topic chosen.
- 14 Topic of study **not approved**. The examiners do not consider that this topic is sufficiently demanding for a study at this level. Another topic should be submitted.

- 15 Topic of study **not approved**. The topic, as proposed by the candidate, does not seem to be either literary or linguistic. Another submission, which either makes evident the literary or linguistic elements in the topic or refers to some other field of literary or linguistic study, should be made.
- 16 Topic of study **not approved**. Topics of this nature do not allow candidates to do themselves justice. In the candidate's own interests, another topic or alternative authors should be submitted.
- 17 Topic of study **not approved**. Biography-centred topics are excessively limiting.