

Prescribed texts — background

It is a number of years now since the availability of school editions of Classics texts began to present a problem. In recent years, new types of examination, together with new types of approach to learning and teaching, have meant different requirements: no longer simply the prescription of, for example, one or two books of the *Aeneid* or the *Odyssey*, but the production of new selections from the works of several authors, prose and verse, with provision of the plain text for reference in “open-book” examinations. These changes have led to a new approach in provision of texts for examinations in Scotland (conducted previously by the Scottish Examination Board, and now by the Scottish Qualifications Authority).

Several decades ago, the system of Classics prescriptions was fairly straightforward and routine. The Scottish Examination Board’s Classics Panel knew from experience which suitable editions had been published, and checked publishers’ catalogues to make sure that books under consideration for prescription were still in print. The Board’s officer for Classics would write to publishers to obtain confirmation that the books concerned were likely to remain in print for the years for which prescription was envisaged. Regular requests were received from teachers to have details of prescriptions several years in advance, in order to requisition books; the Panel met such requests by forward planning, and the Board issued details of future prescriptions well in advance of the years of the examinations concerned. For some years, this system ran quite smoothly: the published editions or selections more or less matched what the Panel considered appropriate for prescriptions; books remained in print; and copies were readily available.

Then problems began to appear. Some books, despite publishers’ earlier assurances, became difficult to obtain. Sometimes the very prescription of a book caused a sudden demand, which led to a shortage, which led to reprinting, which led to temporary unavailability at the precise time when schools needed copies for the course. On occasion, the Board obtained permission from the publishers to photocopy the prescribed pages for issue to schools which had ordered copies of the book in good time, but, because of delays during reprinting, had not received them. Instructions were given to destroy such photocopies as soon as the book became available. In those days, nearly every school Classics department had its own horror story about non-availability of prescribed texts. This situation was profoundly unsatisfactory for all concerned — pupils, teachers and the Examination Board.

In 1983, a new examination began to be considered: Standard Grade. This was to replace Ordinary Grade, for pupils at age 16. No longer was a syllabus to be defined in terms of content (eg unseen, seen, background); instead, elements of a subject were to be identified, with skills for each element, and Grade Related Criteria (GRC) for assessment. For Standard Grade Latin, three elements were identified: Translation (ie unseen), Interpretation (ie seen) and Investigation (ie background).

Interpretation was the element concerned with study of the content, style and effect of prescribed literature. The decision was taken that some of the prescription would be in the original, and some in English. The new type of skill-based questions in the examination would require candidates to range widely over the prescription, rather than (as before, in Ordinary Grade) translating seen work — which might involve memorisation more than anything else — and answering factual questions on a short extract.

For the new examinations, candidates would require to have access to the complete prescribed text in the examination-room. The “examination” text would have to be a plain text, without help from introduction, notes or vocabulary; yet pupils would require such help in their study of the text during the course. That seemed to mean annotated editions for class-work and plain texts for the examination. Extracts from several authors were considered suitable for the first prescription: some letters of Pliny, some short poems by Catullus, and Ovid’s version of the story of Icarus, from the *Metamorphoses*. Was this going to involve several separate editions, and also translations of the sections prescribed for study in English — and plain (Oxford or other) texts for the examination? Expense had to be considered. It was also crucial to establish which texts (and translations) would be used for the examination, since readings and punctuation could affect the meaning and the interpretation.

The solution reached for Standard Grade Latin – and later for Standard Grade Greek – was for the Examination Board to produce, print and issue a booklet of plain text, containing the sections prescribed in the original, and the further sections prescribed in English. Publishers gave permission for use of the short sections of Latin text (plain edited text), and new translations of the other sections were written by the Classics committees concerned. Copies of the booklet were freely available from the Board to presenting centres for use in class; separate copies were provided for the examinations. This system ensured that the basic text remained available for the duration of the prescription. Publishers and curriculum agencies could produce support material for the prescription as they saw fit; teachers could use such material, and refer to more scholarly editions, at their discretion.

This arrangement seemed to work well, and the introduction of a new prescription for Standard Grade Latin in 1994 followed the same system.

For Higher Grade and Certificate of Sixth Year Studies, the situation was more difficult. Larger amounts of text were prescribed at these levels than at Standard Grade, and particular editions and translations were still prescribed, with all the attendant problems of availability. Plain texts were provided by the Board in examinations, but these had to be returned to the Board after the examinations, for reasons of copyright (for the English sections especially).

In 1992, the Board’s Classics Panel began to consider a new prescription for Higher Grade Latin. Teachers had made requests for a booklet of text to be made available for use in class, as was the case for Standard Grade. Thus began a three-year project by the Classics Panel to produce a booklet of prescribed text. This booklet was issued by the Board for the 1997 Higher Grade Latin examination. The text consisted of extracts from the works of Cicero (*In Verrem II V*), Virgil (*Aeneid VI*) and Plautus (*Rudens*), partly in Latin and partly in English. The translations were the work of the Panel; the aim was to provide a straightforward version suitable for teenage students.

No system is without flaws or criticisms; but the indications are that the advantages outweigh any disadvantages in the development outlined above. The same system of provision of texts now applies not only to Standard Grade and Higher but also to the newer examinations (Intermediate 1, Intermediate 2, Advanced Higher).

The booklets of prescribed text for Latin and Classical Greek at all levels are available from the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) to centres on request, free of charge.