

Principal Assessor Report 2003

Assessment Panel:

English

Qualification area:

**Subject(s) and Level(s)
Included in this report**

English: Higher

Statistical information: update

Number of entries in 2002	
Pre appeal	28,889

Number of entries in 2003	
Pre appeal	29,612

General comments re entry numbers

Numbers show a slight increase, despite concerns (expressed last year) that some candidates are being presented at an inappropriate level.

Grade boundaries at C, B and A for each subject area included in the report

In view of the interest expressed in Higher English, more details are provided in this section of the report than are usually provided.

All candidates: 29,612

Grade	Number of candidates	(%)	Minimum mark for grade
Upper A	1,664	(5.6%)	71%
Lower A	2,191	(7.4%)	64%
B	5,573	(18.8%)	54%
C	8,108	(27.4%)	45%
Compensatory	4,368	(14.8%)	40%
No award	7,708	(26.0%)	0%

S5 candidates: 19,722

Grade	Number of candidates	(%)
A	3,521	(17.9%)
B	4,380	(22.2%)
C	5,548	(28.1%)

Comments on grade boundaries for each subject area

Grade boundaries in 2003 reflect the major changes in the external assessment; the biggest change is at the pass/fail line — largely because in previous years such candidates benefited proportionally more from the folio and oral/aural element.

It was noted that estimates submitted by centres indicated that centres themselves judged 25% of the candidates to be below the level of attainment required to pass. In addition, 25% of candidates had estimates from centres for grade 6 (the lowest grade of pass).

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

In 2003 there were significant changes to the external assessment of Higher English: two elements in which candidates usually scored well (the Folio and the Oral/Aural component) were removed; in the Literature part of the examination, the unseen Textual Analysis (in which candidates had previously not performed well) was replaced by the requirement to write a second Critical Essay. These changes make direct comparison with previous years difficult.

Nevertheless, examiners were generally satisfied with candidates' performance. Nearly all made a reasonable attempt at the Close Reading paper, with a number of outstanding performances from obviously talented and perceptive young people; in Critical Essay the majority of candidates produced two full essays, with some evidence of more concern than in previous years for relevance and structure. It had been hoped that the extra time which the removal of the Folio and Oral/Aural component would allow centres to devote to the examinable elements would lead to an improvement in these. There was, however, no tangible evidence of such an improvement.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

Close Reading

- ◆ The passages appear to have been widely accessible despite their fairly complex natures, and candidates responded well to the topical nature of the content — answers to Questions 8 and 13, for example, indicated that the main thrust of each passage had been grasped securely.
- ◆ Questions on basic understanding (eg 3, 4(a), 6) were mostly well done.
- ◆ Question 12(a), which was not a standard type of question, drew some very good answers, suggesting candidates' ability to cope well with the slightly unexpected.
- ◆ Markers noted that in many cases the “link” question had been well taught.
- ◆ Most candidates completed all the questions, although in some cases there was evidence of rushing towards the end.
- ◆ Answers to the final question showed, in a number of cases, that the candidates had gained from the material a genuine insight into the topic; despite the sensitive nature of the content, there were no inappropriate or offensive responses.

Critical Essay

- ◆ The apprehension that many candidates would not be able to complete two substantial essays proved groundless.
- ◆ Most candidates were well prepared; they could quote effectively and were aware of the impact of basic literary techniques.
- ◆ There was a satisfactory range of texts used in all genres, even if three or four rather tired old favourites still dominate the poetry section; it was noted with particular pleasure that a wider than usual range of Shakespeare texts was in evidence.
- ◆ The problem of the completely irrelevant response is declining — candidates are beginning to show more willingness to shape relevant responses, even if there is some rather frantic “twisting” taking place on occasions.
- ◆ There were markedly fewer candidates whose basic technical accuracy was entirely unacceptable.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

Close Reading

- ◆ Questions involving the analysis of linguistic technique were often not well done — there was far too much bald assertion and not enough analysis/explanation.
- ◆ Answers on word choice too often relied on quotation and a circumlocutory repetition of the question without any attempt to explore the connotative areas of language.
- ◆ Answers on imagery were particularly weak — few candidates seemed able or willing to show how the literal “origin” of the image was being exploited by the writer.
- ◆ The final question, which asked for a response to the writers’ ideas, caused problems for those candidates who believed that comparative questions are always about language/style; in addition, many candidates’ answers disappointed in that they offered rather perfunctory summaries of main points and eschewed any genuine personal response.

Critical Essay

- ◆ Some answers on Drama and Prose contained excessive amounts of narration with only a cursory nod to the requirements of the question.
- ◆ In Poetry especially, some candidates are so tied to minute exploration of “techniques” that they are losing sight of what the text as a whole is about.
- ◆ Some candidates were clearly adopting the high risk strategy of coming to the examination prepared with only two fairly flimsy texts; the number of genre infringements which involved, for example, “The Pedestrian” treated as a novel or a work of non-fiction suggested strongly that candidates were relying on this text alone for the Prose section, and were driven to desperate measures when no suitable question was found.
- ◆ There was some, though not widespread, evidence that candidates were using the text from their Personal Study Unit to answer in the examination. In principle this is perfectly acceptable; in practice, however, such answers were mostly weak.
- ◆ The increase in the number of questions on non-fiction has not yet led to an equivalent expansion in the study of the genre; it is to be hoped that this will develop in coming years.
- ◆ All answers from the Language section were clearly examples of extemporising on the day and not as a result of any formal study of language.
- ◆ The perennial problem of the comma splice shows no sign of improvement; it was noted that for many candidates of average to above average ability the misuse of the words “however”, “therefore” and “this” was the root cause of a significant number of these errors.

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

Close Reading

Candidates should be reminded that:

- ◆ in questions about word choice, imagery, sentence structure, etc, mere identification of a word, image or feature of sentence structure will gain no marks in itself; assessment is of the quality of comment and depth of insight (in addition, centres should ensure that candidates' work in this area is being properly marked in school and college assessments);
- ◆ the Question(s) on Both Passages will be determined by the nature of the passages themselves (and to an extent by the nature of the preceding questions); it is open to examiners to set questions about ideas or style or both;
- ◆ unnecessarily long answers should be avoided;
- ◆ it is important to allot adequate time to the final few questions, which are often high value questions.

Critical Essay

Candidates should be reminded that:

- ◆ adequate preparation of at least two reasonably substantial texts is essential — responses which have to twist the nature of the text out of recognition are self-penalising; answers which infringe genre boundaries are penalised;
- ◆ answering on a short story is not an easy option — it requires the same insight and awareness of relevant technique as any other genre;
- ◆ the primary focus in every response should be to address the second sentence of the question; while candidates must show an awareness of the use and impact of literary techniques as directed by the third sentence, these techniques should not be allowed to dominate the structure of the essay;
- ◆ in poetry, over-reliance on notes and textbooks which doggedly explore every last morsel of technique can often be counterproductive;
- ◆ there is now a wider range of questions on non-fiction;
- ◆ the questions in the Language section are intended for candidates who have made a serious and sustained study of aspects of language — they are not for random thoughts on the day;
- ◆ the use of a Personal Study text is perfectly acceptable, but it is unlikely that the area explored and line of thought pursued in the Personal Study assessment will recur in one of the examination questions; to be used successfully, Personal Study texts have to be known as thoroughly as any others;
- ◆ quotations should be set out effectively on the page and followed, normally, by a new sentence;
- ◆ the words “however” (as an alternative to “but”), “therefore” and “this” are not simple connectives and require a new sentence to be started.