

Principal Assessor Report 2004

Assessment Panel:

Drama

Qualification area

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

Higher Drama

Statistical information: update

Number of entries in 2003	1704
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Number of entries in 2004	1912
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General comments re entry numbers

There was a significant increase of almost 10% of candidates this year.

Statistical Information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of awards

C – 34.4%
B – 35.5%
A – 10.5%

Comments on any significant changes in percentages or distribution of awards

<p>The exam appeared to be challenging for all candidates, but the overall ability of the group seemed to be lower than that of last year. This may have been influenced by such a sizeable number of candidates from new centres where teachers might well still be coming to terms with the detail and demands of the Higher Drama course.</p>
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Grade boundaries for each subject area included in the report

Distribution of awards	%	Cum %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
A	11.5	11.5	222	70
B	34.5	46.0	663	58
C	33.3	79.3	641	47
D	11.5	90.8	222	
No award	9.2	100.0	176	

General commentary on passmarks and grade boundaries

- While SQA aims to set examinations and create mark schemes which will allow a competent candidate to score a minimum 50% of the available marks (notional passmark) and a very well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70%, it is almost impossible to get the standard absolutely on target every year, in every subject and level
- Each year we therefore hold a passmark meeting for each subject at each level where we bring together all the information available (statistical and judgmental). 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 senior management team at SQA
- We adjust the passmark downwards if there is evidence that we have set a slightly more demanding exam than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance
- We adjust the passmark upwards if there is evidence that we have set a slightly less demanding exam than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance
- Where the standard appears to be very similar to previous years, we maintain similar grade boundaries
- 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 are different. This is also the case for exams set in centres. And just because SQA has altered a boundary in a particular year in say Higher Chemistry 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
- Our main aim is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and all levels and maintain standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

Comments on grade boundaries for each subject area

79.3% of candidates passed the exam this year, which was slightly down from last year reflecting the ability of the cohort. The cut-off scores were down one percent from last year over all grades. This reflected the demands of the Question Paper as well as the large percentage of candidates from new centres. It was felt that the general ability of the group was slightly lower than last year particularly in the higher banding as was reflected in 15.3% who passed at 'A' last year as opposed to the 11.5% who passed this year. The percentage of 'B' candidates was up by 2% and the percentages of 'C' candidates stayed virtually the same.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

The enthusiasm and energy with which candidates and teachers alike, approach the course is commendable. Examiners, commenting on their experience of visiting schools and colleges, are overwhelmingly complementary about their visits and value the opportunity to observe candidates and staff who are so committed to the Higher Drama course.

Candidate response to the Question Papers was very mixed this year, which may be a reflection of the increase in candidates sitting the exam. Some candidates were very strong, demonstrating good writing technique and imaginative responses, whereas others coped less well.

It was felt that the paper was fair but challenging. Some candidates still run out of time but hopefully this will cease to be a problem next year with the new combined Question Paper.

The range of play of CST plays used is now widening which is encouraging with some centres using challenging writers such as Sue Glover. John Byrne is growing in popularity and the answers reflected a positive engagement with the plays studied and a real enthusiasm for the course which does not stop at acting – it encompasses all aspects of Higher Drama.

The acting marks dropped 0.7% from last year, the Paper 1 mark dropped by 0.5%, and the Paper 2 mark dropped by 0.7%.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

ACTING

Acting is still the area where candidates excel, their average mark coming in at almost 70%. Candidates are generally well prepared, well rehearsed, confident, energised and highly motivated to do well in this part of the course. A strong team spirit was evident in many centres and an enormous commitment is shown by staff in their preparation and direction of candidates for this part of the exam.

PAPER 1

In Paper 1, some centres were very strong and demonstrated good technique and practice. In the essays quotations were well used and candidates responded imaginatively to the questions asked. Candidates answering on 'Antigone' tended to do well probably because it is such a short text, has relatively few characters and its themes are straightforward and easy to grasp. There were some interesting responses on Question 5, on climax, from candidates studying 'The Birthday Party.'

In Dramatic Commentary, candidates seem to manage their time better than in previous years. This may be because this part of the paper is being approached first. Some candidates showed a good attention to detail. However, it was noticed that some essays were short this year which may be due to an increased percentage of time being spent on the dramatic commentary.

The ground plans were reasonably well attempted this year with many candidates scoring four or five marks.

PAPER 2

Most candidates are using plays which fit the CST guidelines and only a few write on two texts over three

questions. When question 6 on humour was attempted, it was done very well by some candidates.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

PAPER 1

In Paper 1, there is still a recurring problem where a significant number of candidates do not refer to the question asked and answer on a question of their choice, which is often one of the NABs. Some candidates use a prepared opening paragraph and use it whether it pertains to the question or not.

Question 4 on character was one of the most popular questions, but was not tackled as well as it might have been by some candidates due to the fact that many did not address the importance of the character and instead relied on describing the character they had played in their acting piece. In some instances this was disadvantageous, particularly to those who had chosen lesser characters such as Ismene from 'Antigone' or Mary Warren from 'The Crucible' because not enough material could be generated for them to write about. Other candidates fell into the trap in the second part of the question of only addressing the part of the play they had rehearsed in their acting exam and whereas they had plenty to write about that specific part, it was not a reflection of the whole character.

A considerable number of candidates studying 'The Crucible' misunderstood Question 3 which addressed the social conditions depicted in the play. Instead of answering on Salem society in the seventeenth century, they answered on McCarthyism. Unfortunately, had they read the paper properly, they would have realised that they could have written on McCarthyism for Question 2 on directorial concepts.

A number of candidates studying 'The Crucible' were also confused between the play text and the film. They are quite different in parts, and candidates must be aware of these.

A considerable number of candidates did not write the number of the question they were addressing. This was very time consuming for markers who always tried to give candidates the benefit of the doubt.

Dramatic Commentary responses were mixed. A considerable number of candidates did not use stage terminology and the technical responses were weak and often not well justified. It is important that an accurate lighting state must be given at the start of the commentary and at the end. Some candidates started their commentaries with "lights up" and finished with "lights down". Lights only go up at the start of an act and only come down at the end so it is important that candidates are familiar with the structure of the play. Some candidates offered little or no vocal advice to actors. Others had their actors sitting in the same place for all of the extract. The first part of the commentary asks for 'Moves and interpretative notes for actors'. This should be addressed in full.

Although ground plans were generally well done, some candidates studying 'The Crucible' were confused over which act the excerpt came from. Many candidates set their ground plan in Act 3. Details of the film were confused with those of the play.

PAPER 2

This is the paper which candidates find most challenging. Too many candidates rely on pre-prepared answers and do not even try to fit these to the question posed. Others make some attempt to answer the question but still revert to generalisations and retelling of the story to bulk out their answers when they should be making textually appropriate quotations and refer explicitly to the question asked in order to address it. In the time available few answer both questions well, even the more able candidates. The new format of the paper should address this problem in the 2005 examination.

This year, the interpretation of vocabulary by some candidates raised problems in the more popular questions: Question 1 – social inequality was understood to mean poverty.

Question 2 – political was interpreted as social.

Question 4 – romanticism was interpreted as romantic.

Question 7 – independent was interpreted as strong.

Question 5 on nostalgia was particularly badly answered. Most candidates who attempted this had learned a list of the elements of nostalgia and intended to use it regardless of the question posed.

Although question 6 was well answered by some, others tried to skew it to nostalgia.

Current Issues is still an unpopular section with very few candidates attempting questions from this area, which is unfortunate as many of the questions are very accessible.

Analytical responses were few and some answers were short, lacking understanding of structure and quotations and not adequately addressing the question being asked.

On a specific point, some candidates referred to the film of ‘Slab Boys’ by John Byrne and not the play text. This is not acceptable.

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

ACTING EXAMINATION

Visiting Examiners need privacy when they are writing notes during the exam. It is important that members of the audience cannot read what is being written about candidates.

In the acting exam sheet, it is essential that all candidates fill in the 'additional notes' category so that the examiner has an idea of how the candidate intends to play a part. This is not optional and if it is not completed, the examiner is entitled to ask the candidates to do so before the exam takes place.

Equally it is important that these notes pertain to the character played as stated by the playwright and should not just reflect the personality of the candidate.

It was felt that some audiences were too young to respond well to the material chosen by some centres. This is difficult as suitable audiences are not always available.

It was felt that some acting pieces were too long while at the other extreme, it was felt that some were too short. Ten to fifteen minutes per piece is a good yardstick depending on the number of candidates involved in each piece.

Set text is always more difficult to perform than CST and often needs more rehearsal. Centres should remember that they can use all the set texts – not just the text they study. This gives a lot more flexibility to the candidates in acting.

Some candidates were disadvantaged by acting with pupils who were only reading in as their mark for 'relationship with other actors' was affected.

Numerous repetitions of the same extract directed in the same way can disadvantage candidates however hard the Visiting Examiner tries to be objective and supportive.

Where possible, it is best to have an external audience but it is appreciated that this is not always possible.

THE QUESTION PAPER

Staff have prepared their candidates well to complete the challenges of the written exam and work within very difficult time limits. In 2005 that will change. More time will be available for candidates to address questions and they will only have to concentrate on one area of study for CST since this part of the exam will be subsumed into one paper. This should address many concerns which have been voiced and will give candidates the time to show their real ability, not how able they are at time management.

PAPER 1

Markers still feel that candidates need to be taught the skills of answering the question asked rather than answering a question they want to answer. Taking the time to plan an essay in advance and using five minutes to do so keeps a candidate on track and encourages them to be specific in their answers.

It is important that candidates know their prescribed text well and can instantly recognise where the dramatic commentary excerpt comes from. This helps to ensure an accurate ground plan.

Candidates should remember to justify all technical effects in their dramatic commentaries.

It is important that stage terminology is used in dramatic commentaries.

It is important that candidates remember to move their characters in the excerpt.

The text opposite the dramatic commentary must be numbered or marked up in a way that is easy for a marker to follow.

Candidates studying 'The Crucible' must know the differences between the play text and the screenplay.

PAPER 2

This is an area where candidates all too often reproduce a NAB which does not answer the question posed. They must take time to think about their answer and plan it, since this will gain marks.

Sometimes the interpretation of vocabulary by candidates is problematic. A large number of candidates answered the question on independent women on strong women. They had the information to answer the question, but to do so well required thought and a sifting of material, which many did not do.

Candidates should be encouraged in their essays to grow beyond giving a list of elements which pertain to the broad areas in the CST paper. It is common to read a list of elements of nostalgia for example, which, as often as not, does not answer the question asked. The list gives the candidate information which can be used to help them answer the question, but they must employ that information appropriately.

Too many candidates still tell the story of the play in the hope that this will gain them some marks. They do not answer specifically.

Candidates are using more of a range of Scottish texts in their answers. We still see 'The Steamie' and 'Men Should Weep' as the most popular texts but these are now being combined with others and that breadth helps the candidates in their overall understanding of CST.