

Principal Assessor Report 2003

Assessment Panel:

ENGLISH AND COMMUNICATION

Qualification area

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

ENGLISH: ADVANCED HIGHER

Statistical information: update

Number of entries in 2002	
Pre appeal	1205

Number of entries in 2003	
Pre appeal	1704

General comments re entry numbers

The increase in entries took the number of students opting for advanced study in English to the highest level it has reached in the past 20 years.

While encouraging, an increase in candidate numbers is probably better taken as a reflection of national trends than as an indication of the growing popularity of the subject.

Worth noting, however, and a factor that may partly account for the increase, is a more widespread acceptance by candidates and centres of the value of Advanced Higher as a contributor to university entry qualification.

The continuing presence of candidates from the FE sector is welcomed.

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

A—70%
B—60%
C—50%

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 syllabuses evolve and change

Comments on grade boundaries for each subject area

The *a priori* grade boundaries that were accepted as fair at AH for 2002 were accepted as equally fair for 2003.

The only real variable year by year at this level is the external examination. For approximately 70% of candidates, 70% of the final award consists of 40% dissertation + 30% creative writing (submitted work).

Where the external examination paper, therefore, is judged to be of comparable standard to previous years (as was the 2003 paper), there appears to be no compelling reason to adjust grade boundaries.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

There was evidence throughout that candidates had been thoroughly taught and well prepared for assessment.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

Specialist Study

The very best specialist studies—and there were several—were constrained and focused by a tightly-worded statement of intent, showed mature engagement with challenging texts and topics, offered genuinely original critical thought and demonstrated a facility with language that enabled them to convey complex concepts with clarity. Almost all were studies of literature and were presented to a very high standard. Prose fiction was by far the most popular genre. Specialist studies of poetry or drama were disappointingly few. Certain themes—social satire, ill-treatment of minorities—elicited very strong responses.

Creative Writing Folio

Markers reported an improvement in creative writing with very few folios significantly below the required standard. Good work was evident in all categories except drama. Even the reflective essay produced some excellent submissions. Markers noted “commitment and enthusiasm”, “energy and charm”, “more sense that work was being crafted”, “they could only have been written by 17/18 year olds and were all the better for that”.

Literature and Scottish Literature

Candidates were generally well prepared for these papers and, where the terms of the question were fully confronted, there was evidence of impressive analysis and insight. More than 30% of candidates chose to answer the Shakespeare question and there was significant uptake of (with some good work on) questions on Chekhov, Lochhead and Stoppard; Donne, Heaney and Morgan; and Austen, Hardy and Spark.

Textual Analysis

There were some impressive responses to all four options in this paper. Candidates appeared to have been well prepared and equipped with the necessary critical apparatus for reading and analysis at this level.

Reading the Media

In this paper, candidates from one centre produced the best work—writing on cinematic technique and directorial style with comprehensive knowledge, impressive sophistication and precise analytical terminology.

Oral Communication

All candidates conveyed genuine interest in the materials they had selected for study and were able to deliver their analyses competently, making good use of notes and a range of technological aids. There was one outstanding piece on parliamentary rhetoric.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

Specialist Study

There were four particular areas of concern:

- the failure of many candidates to take account of the coded advice offered on their proposed topics
- the insistence of some candidates on offering texts of limited substance or of questionable literary merit, texts that made the demonstration of the candidate's analytical and evaluative skills extremely difficult
- an increasing tendency towards generalised review rather than relevant analysis and evaluation (a disturbingly large number of candidates included lengthy quotations from the text and subjected them to completely inappropriate microscopic analysis, "...he uses three adjectives in this paragraph..." etc)
- more widespread evidence than ever before of a loose and unscholarly approach to dissertation structure and presentation—absence of title and/or clear statement of topic/intent; serial/narrative treatment of texts that obscured or failed to reveal any progressive line of thought; complete disregard of the mandatory requirement to include footnotes and bibliography.

Creative Writing Folio

The reflective essay continued to create some difficulties (but not as many as in previous years). In the minds of some candidates it appeared still to be equated with the "personal essay" (even so titled in some submissions) and consequently lacked that necessary reflectiveness and shaping that might have proved insightful and aesthetically pleasing.

Submissions in dramatic form were often lacking in obvious potential for enactment. The widespread choice this year seemed to be the dramatic monologue. Most candidates who attempted this would have been better served by writing in a prose fiction rather than dramatic format.

Literature and Scottish Literature

While there was little to suggest that the "prepared" essay was being relied upon, a large number of candidates (almost 20%) chose to attempt, usually to their disadvantage, an Alternative Question using the work of the specified authors they had studied.

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

Specialist Study

The best dissertations continue to arise from well-chosen texts and topics that challenge candidates intellectually—to develop their skills in reading, research and analysis and to communicate their findings in a focused and progressive argument.

With the removal of the requirement to submit to SQA for approval the texts and topics that candidates propose to study, it is imperative that the advisory role formerly provided by SQA be rigorously undertaken by teachers/lecturers responsible for the presentation of candidates.

Teachers/lecturers should give close attention to the specific points made in the guidance on the selection of texts and topics already published by SQA.

In particular, they should ensure that

- texts of appropriate substance and quality are selected
- specific and manageable topics are constructed
- unambiguous statements of intent are included (as headings to dissertations)
- length is between 3500 and 4500 words (including quotations)
- mandatory footnotes and bibliographies are provided
- dissertations are free from plagiarism.

Candidates will be seriously disadvantaged if one or more than one of the above points is neglected.

Creative Writing Folio

Rather than concentrate on a limited number of creative writing pieces, candidates should be encouraged to write widely in order to experiment with a variety of forms before concentrating on the two forms of writing that will be offered for assessment. Each submission should indicate clearly the category (Reflective Essay, Fiction, Poetry, Drama) within which it is being offered.

Examination Essays

Thorough knowledge and understanding of texts is clearly essential to effective performance in an unseen closed book examination, and this is usually evident in the facility with which well prepared candidates can move around their texts and recall through quotation or allusion features and details that are relevant to the terms of the question.

The nature of questions asked at this level is best understood by perusal of questions set in previous years. Usually, in Literary Study, a single aspect of an author's work is identified and candidates are asked to deal with that aspect within a defined range.

Since there is normally only a single question set for any of the specified authors in the Literary Study section of the paper (with no alternative questions), candidates must be prepared in the work of more than one author if they are to have a choice of questions.

Teachers/lecturers should remind candidates that

- literary study is mandatory— all candidates must answer a question in the Literary Study section of the examination paper
- 1 hour 30 minutes is the maximum time allowed for an answer to an examination question
- candidates who submit a Creative Writing Folio leave the examination room after that time
- others remain for a further hour and a half to answer their second question from Language Study, Textual Analysis or Reading the Media.