

Principal Assessor Report 2004

Assessment Panel:

English

Qualification area

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

English - Advanced Higher

Statistical information: update

Number of entries in 2003	1,704
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Number of entries in 2004	1,719
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General comments re entry numbers

The marginal increase in entries keeps the number of candidates opting for advanced study in English at an encouragingly high level.

The more widespread acceptance by candidates and centres of the value of Advanced Higher as a contributor to university entry qualification appears to be a significant factor in maintaining such high entry numbers.

The continuing and slightly increased number of FE candidates and centres opting for Advanced Higher English is particularly welcomed.

Approximately 79% of candidates chose Creative Writing as their preferred option, with approximately 20% opting for Textual Analysis. Some 20 candidates chose Reading the Media and, for the first time ever, 2 candidates (from the same centre) selected Language Study.

Statistical Information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of awards

	% of candidates
A	12.7
B	26.6
C	36.0
D	11.5
No award	13.2

Comments on any significant changes in percentages or distribution of awards

There were no significant changes in percentages or distribution of awards. The overall pass rate remained very solid. The distribution of awards in 2004 was also very similar to the distribution in 2003.

Grade boundaries for each subject area included in the report

Distribution of awards	%	Cum %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
A	12.7	12.7	218	70
B	26.6	39.3	458	60
C	36.0	75.3	619	50
D	11.5	86.8	197	45
No award	13.2	100.0	227	0

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 for A, B and C that were accepted as fair at AH for 2002 and 2003 were accepted as equally fair for 2004.

The only real variable year by year at this level is the external examination. For approximately 70% of candidates, 70% of the final award (40% dissertation + 30% creative writing) lies within their own control.

Where the external examination paper, therefore, is judged to be of comparable standard to previous years (as was the 2004 paper), there appears to be no compelling reason to adjust grade boundaries.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

As is evident from the percentages and distribution of awards, the vast majority of candidates demonstrated a level of competence appropriate to the standards required at Advanced Higher with approximately 50% of all candidates producing work that was either more than competent or indicative of excellence.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

Specialist Study

In this distinctive and compulsory component of course assessment, there was almost universal evidence of candidate commitment, enthusiasm and pride. The dissertations submitted were clearly the product of substantial study and, as in previous years, gave evidence of interest in a refreshingly wide variety of texts and topics. The majority were marked by workmanlike competence. The best continued to delight and inform through their thoughtfulness and acuity of critical comment.

Literary Study

In this, for the first time, compulsory component of course assessment, the majority of candidates produced relevant and substantial responses that gave good evidence of thoroughness of preparation. Almost all responses were marked by impressive textual knowledge and the very best of them by high levels of skill in critical analysis and evaluation. Markers reported some very good responses in Drama to the individual questions on *Hamlet* and *King Lear* and to the questions on Pinter and Williams, in Poetry to the questions on Coleridge, Donne and Morgan, and in Prose Fiction to the questions on Dickens, Forster and Spark.

Creative Writing Folio

Markers generally responded well to the creative writing pieces submitted by candidates with very few folios falling significantly below the required standard. There were some excellent examples of finely crafted prose fiction, several fine poems, a few capable dramatic pieces and some reflective essays on clearly traumatic personal situations that were extremely powerful and moving.

Textual Analysis

Prose fiction, Prose non-fiction and Drama produced generally perceptive, stimulating and lively responses, with evidence of sound understanding and thoughtful analysis and evaluation.

Reading the Media

In this option, as in previous years, the best work was produced in the Film section, where candidates displayed knowledge and enthusiasm combined with an ability to select and deploy evidence effectively in pursuit of pertinent argument.

Language Study

The two candidates who chose this option were well prepared and performed creditably.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

Specialist Study

Particular areas of concern continue to be:

- the insistence of some candidates/centres 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 appeared to have been told to include somewhere, and these usually surfaced at random, lengthy quotations from the text and to subject 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.

Literary Study

The most disappointing feature of candidate responses was the apparent inability of some candidates to grapple constructively with the terms specified in the question, often resorting instead to vague generalised observations that were supported mainly through loose and sequential narration.

Textual Analysis

Responses to Poetry (selected by the majority of candidates) were surprisingly disappointing, often characterised by much theorising about meaning in the course of a line-by-line plod through the perceived literal nature of the poem *Indian Summer*, an expression clearly beyond the cultural ken of a significant minority of candidates.

Creative Writing Folio

In the minds of some candidates and centres, the Reflective Essay 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 of dramatic monologues continued to disappoint. Most candidates who attempted this would have been better served by writing in a prose fiction rather than a dramatic format.

Many submissions in Poetry failed to respect constraints of form, were lacking in structure and deficient in deployment of words and imagery. The impression left by a significant minority of submissions in this category was that poetry was regarded by some candidates and centres as an easy "folio filler".

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

Specialist Study

The crucial factor that appears to determine success in the production of acceptable dissertations at this level is the choice of appropriate texts and topics.

Teachers/lecturers are again reminded of 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 3,500 and 4,500 words (including quotations)
- mandatory footnotes and bibliographies are provided
- dissertations are free from plagiarism.

Candidates will be seriously disadvantaged by neglect of one or more than one of the above points.

Literary Study

There must be thorough knowledge and understanding of texts for 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. Candidates should be reminded that the relevance/irrelevance of their comments to the terms of the question is a key criterion underpinning/undermining the value of their responses.

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.

Textual Analysis

Candidates who choose this option must be taught. They must acquire the critical apparatus necessary for the understanding, analysis and evaluation of unseen texts and they must develop skill in applying such apparatus through extensive experience of confronting unseen texts in a variety of genres. The obvious starting point is the analysis of seen texts and the beneficial correlation that exists between mandatory Literary Study and the Textual Analysis option.

Creative Writing Folio

If candidates are to become effective creative writers, they must be taught the skills of creative writing in a range of genres, writing widely in order to experiment with a variety of forms before concentrating on the two forms that will be offered for assessment.