

Principal Assessor Report 2004

Assessment Panel:

English

Qualification area

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

English - Higher

Statistical information: update

Number of entries in 2003	29,612
---------------------------	--------

Number of entries in 2004	28,831
---------------------------	--------

General comments re entry numbers

Numbers are similar to 2003 numbers, despite concerns (expressed in 2002 and in 2003) that some candidates are being presented at an inappropriate level.

Statistical Information: Performance of candidates

A	13.2%
B	19.4%
C	31.4%
D	14.7%
No award	21.3%

Comments on any significant changes in percentages or distribution of awards

No significant changes from 2003. The increased pass rate reflects a modest improvement in performance of candidates at C and a better understanding of the new Arrangements.

Grade boundaries for each subject area included in the report

Distribution of awards	%	Cum %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
A	13.2	13.2	3,810	64
B	19.4	32.6	5,582	55
C	31.4	64.0	9,060	46
D	14.7	78.7	4,240	41
No award	21.3	100.0	6,139	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

Grade boundaries in 2004 are similar to those in 2003. The slightly higher pass mark reflects a Close Reading paper which was felt to be marginally less demanding than that set in 2003.

As in 2003, it was noted that around 25% of candidates had been estimated by centres not to pass, and that a further 25% were estimated at grade 6.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

After the significant changes to the external assessment of Higher English in 2003, the format of the examination in 2004 was unchanged. This allowed centres to be more confident, and there was a strong impression of a better understanding of the new Arrangements.

Examiners noted a modest improvement in comparison with performance in 2003, especially in the Critical Essay paper. This was borne out by the fact that of those markers who had marked in 2003 also, 85 reported a “noticeable” or “slight” improvement in the key area of relevance, while only 21 reported “no improvement”. It is likely that this improvement is due to better preparation of candidates (with the time no longer required for the Folio and the Oral/Aural component being more efficiently managed) and to a better understanding of national standards (via Professional Development Workshops, development visits, and website candidate guides).

In Close Reading, there was a sense of some progress in the problem area of Analysis questions, with over 50% of markers noting a “slight improvement”. The availability of further NAB/prelim material as well as the PDWs etc will have assisted this. As a test overall, the 2004 paper was judged to be slightly less demanding than that for 2003 – again borne out by markers’ reports. While the questions were of the same type and standard as last year, the subject matter of the passages made them readily accessible (although a number of candidates missed the subtlety and irony of the second passage).

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

Close Reading

- The passages were felt to be very accessible and candidates responded positively to the subject matter, which will have been close to the experience of most. A high number of good answers to questions 2(a), 3 and 8 indicated that the key points had been securely understood.
- In general, all questions on Understanding (especially from Passage 1) were tackled well. Candidates had been well trained to use their own words and not to rely on quoting from the passage.
- Few candidates failed to complete the paper, and some of the answers to the final question were of commendable length.
- In Analysis questions there was less reliance on “reference alone”.
- Many candidates who approached the last question as instructed (ie on ideas rather than on style) produced thoughtful and sophisticated responses, handling well the complex task of assessing four different viewpoints: Furedi’s, the two writers’, and their own. Most candidates supported Melanie Reid’s stance, although some of the best answers were more inclined to side with Catherine Bennett.

Critical Essay

- Most candidates managed to write two complete essays in the time available.
- Most candidates were well prepared and had a sound grasp of the details of the texts they had studied; they could refer effectively to key moments in longer texts and quote appropriately and (mostly) accurately.

- The range of texts has not diminished: in Drama and longer Prose Fiction there have been no changes worthy of comment (although the extent to which Shakespeare continues to be studied and the range of his plays being used in the examination should be noted with satisfaction); in shorter Prose Fiction and in Poetry, while there is still a tendency for a handful of well-known texts to dominate, there was also evidence of new work, in Poetry especially.
- Scottish texts were used widely, especially in Prose and Poetry.
- As noted above, over 80% of markers reported some improvement in candidates' approach to relevance. There was very little mere narration of events and it seems now to have become firmly established in candidates' minds that the writing of Critical Essays for Higher English is not simply a matter of memory and that it involves using knowledge of a suitable text in order to shape a relevant response to the question.
- 70% of markers who commented on Technical Accuracy were positive about candidates' work and around 30% of these felt it was better than in 2003. The number of demonstrably weaker candidates continues to decline.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

Close Reading

- A surprising number of candidates showed that they had not grasped the irony in some parts of Passage 2 – answers to questions 10(c)(ii) and 12 showed this quite clearly. In particular, question 12 (a 4 mark Analysis question) had been deliberately left open to allow candidates to explore the writer's language in any way they chose but it was not answered well. Also, the point made in the final sentence of the second passage proved too complex for most.
- While there was less reliance on "reference alone" in the approach to many of the Analysis questions, the comments made in the answers were sometimes very inadequate and often relied on bald assertion rather than analytical explanation.
- Answers on imagery continue to cause some problems – for example, many candidates did not know (or were unwilling to show that they knew) what a "battery hen" was and so their comments on the writer's use of the image were inevitably unsatisfactory. Similarly, many answers on sentence structure merely identified the feature being exploited and did not explain its effect.
- In question 14, despite a clear instruction to deal with ideas, a significant number of candidates wrote predominantly or exclusively about the style of the passages.
- Some candidates continue to penalise themselves by writing unnecessarily long answers to low value questions. It is stated clearly in the examination paper: "The number of marks attached to each question will give some indication of the length of answer required."

Critical Essay

- The unhelpful practice of structuring essays round a list of techniques (rather than addressing the crux of the question and using exploration of the writer's literary techniques to illustrate the argument) appears to be on the increase.
- A number of candidates appeared to have been less than fully prepared for the demands of this part of the examination. In the Poetry section in particular, markers noted a common problem with candidates

who seemed to have prepared only one poem and could not find a question which they could answer sensibly. This led to some very contorted lines of argument or in some cases to total irrelevance.

- The majority of markers expressed disappointment at the lack of variety in the texts being offered. The dominance in a number of centres of just two poems (both by Norman MacCaig) was commented on, as was the number of poems and short stories which were felt to be not sufficiently demanding or substantial to allow scope for appropriate responses at Higher level.
- Answers using a short story were often weak, with the candidate apparently unaware of the subtlety that underpins an effective short story or of the techniques and features specific to the genre.
- While there is no cause for undue concern over technical accuracy, markers and examiners noted that the comma splice shows no signs of extinction, while the correct use of the apostrophe, on the other hand, certainly does.

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 at Higher level; marks are awarded for the quality of comment and the depth of insight (in addition, centres should ensure that candidates' work in this area is being appropriately marked in school and college assessments);
- answers to questions on imagery should show an understanding of the literal “root” of the image;
- some Analysis questions will specify the techniques to be dealt with, some will offer suggestions, and some will be left open for the candidates to identify and comment on appropriate techniques;
- the Question(s) on both Passages will be about ideas **or** style **or** both; and candidates must answer accordingly;
- the length of answers should be appropriate to the number of marks available – candidates who write inappropriately long answers to early questions often have little time to deal successfully with later questions, which are often high-value ones;
- it is important to check that all parts of a question – especially if it has been sub-divided into (a) and (b) or (i) and (ii) – have been answered;
- they should read the italicised introductions to the passages, which provide helpful starting points (and will often identify the gender of the writer).

Critical Essay

Candidates should be reminded that:

- they should not structure their essays around a number of techniques, but should address throughout the response the crux of the task (in the second sentence of the question) and use appropriate reference to literary techniques in order to support their argument (the third sentence of the question is intended as a reminder and a suggestion of some techniques which could be referred to – it is not a guide to the basis of the essay);
- thorough preparation is essential; candidates who rely on just two texts (especially if one is a short story or a fairly brief poem) are taking a sizeable risk;
- in order to allow markers to assess relevance (one of the Performance Criteria), all Critical Essay questions have a defined focus and that a fully prepared and memorised essay is not an option;
- while there is an element of criticism among the profession of “narrow” or “restrictive” poetry questions, this approach is actually welcomed and supported by the vast majority of markers, who see it as a way to require candidates to think and not to rely on the “guided tour”; candidates should have studied a range of poems;
- studying a short story should not be seen as an easy option;

- genre infringements incur a penalty (not by a strict mathematical formula, but by taking into account the extent to which the candidate may have benefited from the infringement) and great care should be taken (in the Prose section especially) that the text is entirely suitable for the question;
- while due consideration is given for the pressure under which they are writing, they should take every care to maintain “sufficient technical accuracy” – especially in basic matters such as the correct use of the apostrophe and avoidance of the comma splice.