

Principal Assessor Report 2003

Assessment Panel:

History

Qualification area:

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

Advanced Higher

Statistical information: update

Number of entries in 2002	
Pre appeal	938

Number of entries in 2003	
Pre appeal	1011

General comments re entry numbers

Once again there has been a rise in entry numbers, with the numbers sitting this year just over 1000. The size of this group is encouraging, but it is a cause for concern that there were many candidates who were entered at this level who were well short of the standard required to pass.

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

A	97	69.2%
B	84	60%
C	70	50%
D	63	45%

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 pre-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

There was no valid reason to alter the 2003 grade boundaries from those accepted for 2002, although this will have an impact on the pass rates for 2003, which will be driven down. Examining teams ask themselves searching questions each year about the difficulty of the exam that has been set, in terms of fairness of questions, equivalence of demand and standards of marking.

The lack of any real dissent or critical complaint about the papers from centres is reassuring in that they saw it as an acceptable and equivalent assessment. There might be comments about the way a particular question was phrased, or claims that a question comes from a less-than-mainstream part of the field, but no comment has been received yet which suggests that any 'rogue question' got through in any field and prevented a candidate getting the pass they deserved.

The paper and the standard of marking were of the same rigour as previous years. The evidence suggests that this year's cohort was not collectively operating at the same standard as last year.

The logic of this reasoning is that there is a lower pass rate.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

General comments on dissertations.

1 Points about titles

More were taken from the 'authorised list', although in some cases the candidate still did not turn the title into a set of issues to develop towards a conclusion. The old favourites of 'Slavery: sole or prime cause..', 'Theory and practice of anti-Semitism..', 'The mind of Adolf Hitler..' were often poorly done by the majority of candidates simply because they were so determined to tell a story.

If candidates are going to be allowed to select a dissertation title that is not on the list then it is helpful to get it authorized. The majority of the discussion must fall inside the dates of the course descriptor.

2 Points about structure

It is not mandatory in the Course Arrangements/*Conditions and Arrangements* to have chapters, but very many markers commented that the structure provided by chapters helps candidates do a better job of classifying their material and arguments. It tightens the whole process up and would surely deter some candidates from a non-analytic, narrative ramble through a topic that is almost bound to lead to a fail. It remains the case that some candidates **do** cope very well with a continuous piece of work (3 of the 5 dissertations that were awarded full marks did not have chapters). For the bulk of candidates, however, it is recommended that they consider the advantages that come from a chapter layout.

Introductions and conclusions do matter. Many markers commented that candidates did not know how to set the scene for what they were trying to do. This helps to contextualise the issues and interest the reader in what the dissertation is going to attempt to do.

3 Points about word length

About 10% of candidates exceeded the word limit. This is a major concern to all involved in the marking process.

The instructions to candidates and teachers/lecturers are clear and unequivocal. Any dissertation over 4,000 words will immediately have a 5 mark deduction applied. It is imperative that this area of the (Conditions and) Arrangements is followed, especially given the introductory General Comments above; C-range candidates cannot afford to incur a five-mark penalty.

Also worrying was the amount of evasion that went on:

- a) Writing "around 4,000" was almost guaranteed to get the markers counting.
- b) Missing out a word count figure altogether was a breach of the instructions for presentation.
- c) Signing for 4,000 when it was clearly far more is dishonest.

At the other end of the spectrum there were too many highly abbreviated dissertations that barely reached 3,000 words. This does not condemn a candidate to an automatic fail, but it is difficult to see how there can be the right depth and development of the chosen topic if the candidates have chosen to write only three quarters of the possible amount. It is our suspicion that some of these candidates did little more than stretch a Higher Extended Essay or indeed were providing evidence that they were

struggling to reach the standard of Advanced Higher.

4 Points about footnotes and bibliographies

This was an area of improvement, with only a tiny number of dissertations with excessive footnotes.

Several markers commented on the lack of any decent **original** reading matter referred to in the bibliographies. There are a lot of good new big one-volume efforts or *Access* sets for some fields nowadays, (Hite and Hinton, Corin and Fiehn, Farmer etc) but better candidates should be able to get beyond these and read some of the actual books by the authors themselves! To give the highest marks, markers have to become convinced that the candidate has really engaged with the debate. A dissertation with too many footnote references to class text books tends to suggest the 'worthy trier' rather than the 'higher-flyer'.

5 Points about plagiarism

Markers are always vigilant for wholesale 'lifts' from published works or internet sites. There has been a big improvement in the selection of quotes extracted from historical literature and put into the dissertation. There were few +150 word quotes that used to fill some dissertations. However, there are still too many un-ascribed quotes where a comment is thrown in [in inverted commas] but no acknowledgement made of its origin. Many markers also commented on the difficulty some candidates had in integrating their historiography into the development of the issues.

More worrying is an approach also present in the examination essays. It is poor practice in a dissertation to hand in a piece which is 75% narrative, with a historiographical section tacked onto the back as the last chapter/or conclusion. This is clumsy to say the least, but by the time the marker gets to the historians' analysis at the end, the dissertation may have already been consigned to failure by the sheer quantity of 'story' that has already been looked at. There is clearly a skill that needs to be taught in how to construct a good quality dissertation. There may be the lone candidates who are not being given the necessary support and instruction to write a dissertation up to an acceptable standard. As one marker commented, 'there were too many instances where candidates appear to have been left to their own devices'.

6 Proof reading

This was an improvement compared to last year, but it is still worrying that some candidates do not seem to want to present their work and their thoughts in the best possible light. Several markers commented that candidates should be asked to read the other candidates' dissertations in their schools, to help pick out glaring errors and infelicitous or meaningless expressions.

7 Typography

This was still mixed, with some centres handing in very unattractive efforts, in close type, small font and/or single spacing. (See comments under Point 2 above.)

Markers were appreciative that the instruction to forget about the fancy binding and stapling of dissertations was widely followed. These were much easier to get at and mark, just being in the cellophane envelopes.

General Comments on examination scripts

1 Getting the source questions right

There is still far too wide a variation in the candidates' ability in answering the source questions. Page 6 of the 2002 PA's report contained a clear 'formula' which directed the candidate exactly at the ingredients of the satisfactory answer to the source questions. It is disappointing to see that many candidates still are not putting that advice into practice. Many candidates spent much too much time in dubious provenance assertions or speculations, then the rest of their time paraphrasing the source. Some centres clearly have got it right; there were many candidates who were quickly into the perspectives that the views in the sources helped support or contradict. These candidates demonstrated excellent technique.

This issue of getting the source questions right will become even more important in 2004 in respect of the source comparison question. This will be worth 16 marks. It is essential that candidates get it right. It will be very difficult to retrieve a decent overall grade if the comparison question is done poorly.

To that end therefore, after consultation with setters and the examining team, this summary of advice for the source comparison question is offered.

The formula for the source comparison question

Examples: *Consider the differing perspectives offered by Sources A and B on
Compare the views in Sources A and B as perspectives on ...
What do Sources A and B reveal about differing perspectives on*

In these source comparison questions avoid lengthy comment on provenance (eg discussion on whether it is primary/secondary, memoir/contemporary etc). Some of this may come through naturally as the answer develops.

Key point 1

There must be clear signs that the views in the sources are recognized and understood. This does NOT mean paraphrasing the source or rewriting it.

Having detailed what the views in the sources are, this should be supported with information selected from the source, and corroborated with additional supporting information from recall.

The plan of action **for each source** might therefore be to say

- 1 The view in the source is eg optimistic/pessimistic about, critical/favourable of, taking a line which emphasizes ...
- 2 This because the source makes the comments that.....
- 3 The reasons **why** this view is held are because....(this is where the recall comes in that shows the candidate has contextualised the view)

It may be helpful to contrast the sources at each stage.

Key point 2

The question requires consideration of the views in the sources **as perspectives** on an issue. This

means that the candidate must clearly be able to show knowledge of some of the **other** perspectives it may be possible to hold.

This means the candidate might:

- (a) give additional recalled factual evidence which shows support for a different interpretation
- (b) give additional information on differing schools of thought to which historians subscribe, which diverge from the views in the two sources
- (c) refer to different historians, by name or quoted comment, whose views either support or diverge from the sources.

Key point 3

A strong conclusion is important. At the risk of seeming slightly formulaic, a possible start may be:

‘It can be seen therefore that the sources do shed light as perspectives on x because..... But nevertheless one can see how valid other views are like....’

Additional recall of a factual nature can support or contradict the views in the source(s). This is best if integrated into the answer, but may come more naturally as a development of particular points. This type of recall is essential to achieve a pass in the question. Recall which illuminates various historical schools of thought may be seen as an enrichment of the answer, and is likely to be present in the best answers.

The SQA website provides exemplars of model answers on source comparison questions from at least some of the ‘big fields’

2 Historiography

Some candidates are still failing to put in any historians’ views into their essays. This means an automatic fail. Candidates who add on a memorised and often parroted historians’ views section at the end may hope to get a pass, but this does not make for a very coherently argued or elegant essay, when so much of the rest of the essay may be narrative detail.

3 Legibility

Centres may be well advised to take steps to ensure that all their candidates produce writing that is clear enough to gain for them whatever credit they deserve. If their writing is so bad under examination conditions [and this would surely have been thrown to light in their prelims] then centres should apply for scribes. There is no direct fixed penalty for bad writing, but one can only mark what can be read and understood. There were a small number of cases where, after consideration by several members, the Examining team could still make no headway in interpreting large sections of some candidates’ scripts.

Comments on performance in the examination papers follow, under their particular fields. In forming comments in this area, grateful appreciation is acknowledged of the full and detailed reports that each marker submitted. So also are the always helpful comments that the other members of the Examining team offered during the two marking events. Here and there the views of different markers have been quoted.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

Field 1: North Britain

Most candidates appeared to understand the questions and tried to answer them (within the limits of their knowledge).

Field 2: Scottish Wars

Essay questions 2, 3 and 4 were most popular, and most candidates included relevant historiographical references, although debate was limited. Too often they provided historians' references *'but only to illustrate points made, rather than to illustrate the viewpoint on the debate.'* In the source questions, a lack of detailed knowledge and context prevented higher marks.

The standard of English was generally good

Field 3: Renaissance

Essays 2 and 4 were most popular, and *'a reasonable grasp of appropriate knowledge was shown'*. There were also *'some good answers to question 3.'* There was a growing awareness of the need to use historiographical referencing and a good effort was made to focus on the questions asked.

Field 4: Louis XIV

There were only three candidates; *'one was well acquainted with the views of historians.'*

Field 5: Georgians and Jacobites

Most candidates knew the basics of their chosen essay topics.

Field 6: British economic/political development

No candidates sat this field this year. It will not be offered again.

Field 7: US Civil War

Questions 3 and 6 were the most popular, and were generally well done; *'the essays were generally of a good length.'* There was *'a good grasp of the principles of essay writing.'* In many cases, the essays *'showed clear evidence of an awareness of historiography.'*

The two single source questions were reasonably well tackled. There were some *'good answers as pupils used recall well to 'open out' the question.'* Some of the source answers were *'impressive'*

Field 8: Japan

Some candidates showed top quality ability in every aspect of the examination.

Field 9: Germany

Essays 1,3 and 4 were popular. There were very few really bad essays and *'virtually every candidate exhibited some awareness of historiographical debate and/or discussion.'* *'Quite an encouraging number were thinking and writing beyond Higher level, though 'A' candidates were scarce.'*

'Responses to source questions were rarely disastrous, normally competent and occasionally inspired.'

Field 10: South Africa

There were some very good essays; *'the best were analytical and aware of historiography.'*

Field 11: Soviet Russia

'Individual schools showed the benefits of excellent teaching' and *'written English was impressive.'*

'Some pupils answered the source questions impressively....'

Field 12: Spanish Civil War

There were a couple of top quality candidates, but most did not write enough in their essays.

Field 13 Britain at War and Peace.

Essay question 1 was most popular, and *'essays were generally well enough done with almost all candidates making an attempt at historiography.'* Some *'very broad knowledge of historiography was apparent.'*

Source Question 2 had *'a lot of very good responses.'*

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty**Field 1: North Britain**

Some pupils still *'have not been instructed in, or have forgotten, the crucial importance of historiography in the essays.'*

Some pupils did not know the "drills" for the source questions and there was too much paraphrasing of the sources and not enough contextual recall.

Field 2: Scottish Wars

Overall the standard was disappointing, *'with factual knowledge lacking real depth.'* In some cases, *'poor essay structure remains an issue.'* Often there was a lack of good introductions and consequently a lack of focus on the question.

The comparison question was poorly done, *'with candidates failing to focus on the question of Bruce's motivation.'* More time could be spent profitably on teaching technique in these source questions. *'Candidates can expand on points made in the sources, but rarely comment on the broader perspectives available.'*

The standard of English was often poor with a lot of misspelling of names and places: *'the word "biasness" cropped up!'*

Field 3: Renaissance

Question 4 was the most popular, but in their essays, *'weaker candidates struggled to make appropriate use of historiography.'* Essays on the princely court were not well done. *'Assumptions were widely made about Medici use of art as propaganda that don't stand up to scrutiny.'*

In the source questions, *'many pupils failed to develop their recall fully.'*

Field 4: Louis XIV

Introductions were brief and outlined the issues in single sentences. *'Where it existed, historiography was "bolted on".'*

'There was a tendency to treat the source questions as essays, with resulting swathes of narrative incorporated.'

Field 5: Georgians and Jacobites

In the essays, *'many wrote down knowledge regardless of relevance.'* Most essays were slightly short.

In some questions 'There was a marked contrast between candidates who made naïve points about provenance and those who brought their knowledge of the author to bear on a serious assessment of his writing.'

'The last source question required knowledge of 1790's radicalism. No candidate was well informed on this topic – which happens to be the last thing in the syllabus.'

Field 6: British economic/political development

No candidates sat this field this year.

Field 7: US Civil War

Some candidates had problems with time management, and there were some attempts to re-word the questions to suit what the candidate had already prepared. *'Several candidates were failing to answer the question and made up their own.'* Some candidates are *'still failing to put in any historiography.'*

'More candidates who have received minimal teacher input/guidance are emerging.'

In the source questions, *'too much time is spent on provenance,'* and candidates were not able to develop a wider analysis. The source comparison question was *'fairly poorly done.'* Few candidates *'achieved a high standard across all three source questions.'*

Field 8: Japan

There was a tendency of weaker candidates to slip back to prepared answers.

Field 9: Germany

There was relatively high proportion of weaker candidates.

‘Some candidates seemed ill prepared and immature in thought, expression and how to organise their thoughts.’ ‘An awful tendency to paraphrase the sources ..’ ‘Recall was problematic.’ ‘Too few had ‘immersed’ themselves in the period to be comfortable/knowledgeable bringing in recall.’

Field 10: South Africa

There was little awareness of opposition by Whites to apartheid.

Field 11: Soviet Russia

Essays 1 and 2 were popular, but *‘many candidates just didn’t have the structure for doing them.’* Additionally, these two questions were widely misinterpreted with candidates providing much too much background from **well outside the course**. The HSDU support materials give the basis for Essay 1 on p 14 and pp 20-21. That did not include background as far back as Alexander II. The HSDU materials provide the basis for Essay 2 on pp 15-16 and 24-27. These are good materials; pupils could study them profitably.

‘Some candidates produced very rehearsed answers both in content and structure.’

‘Some schools still allow their pupils to sit the exam without knowing that historiography is essential in essays.’

Field 12: Spanish Civil War

‘Too many short essays and a lot of ‘bending’ of titles to suit.’ Candidates tended to re-write the source(s).

Field 13: Britain at War and Peace.

It appeared that some centres had been ‘topic spotting’ and hadn’t covered the whole course. Where candidates had not covered the content of the source section, they were doomed. It simply led to a lot of vague rehearsal of the source. *‘Too many formulaic answers to the sources questions.’*

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

1: A reminder, for general information, of the issue raised in respect of Field 5 and Field 13

Source questions may come from any part of a field.

2: Large centres presenting several fields

Several centres with large entries have candidates doing several fields, and these candidates are clearly being taught in classes, not just left to pursue the course by themselves. Yet, there are quite distinct differences in the overall performance of the different fields **within the same school**, in terms of historiography in essays, too much focus on provenance in answering source questions, word count of dissertations etc. These centres would be well-advised to scrutinise their results carefully and copy the teaching/presenting principles of the 'best' field.

3: A reminder, for general information, of the issue raised with respect of dissertations

The overall contribution that the dissertation makes to the final mark is too important to take it lightly and risk failing it. It is very difficult (and unlikely) for candidates to pull themselves up from a failed dissertation by performing disproportionately well in the examination. One looks forward to a rise in the quality of dissertations next year, and to each dissertation not exceeding the 4,000 word limit. It would help all concerned if a word total appeared at the foot of each page, as well as in the overall total at the end.

4: A reminder, for general information, of the comment on the source comparison question

The issue of getting the source questions right will become even more important in 2004 in respect of the **source comparison question**. This will be worth **16 marks**, and it is absolutely essential that candidates get it right. It will be very difficult to retrieve a good overall grade if the comparison question is done poorly. Any time that candidates spend rehearsing the drills for this question, will be amply rewarded during the examination. It is intended that exemplars be posted on the SQA website.