

Principal Assessor Report 2005

Assessment Panel:

English

Qualification area

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

English: Advanced Higher

Statistical information: update

Number of resulted entries in 2004	1,719
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Number of resulted entries in 2005	1,573
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General comments re resulted entry numbers

Although there were fewer candidates than in 2004, resulted entry numbers remain relatively healthy. It is encouraging to note continuing interest in the course from FE Centres.

Approximately 77% of candidates opted for Creative Writing and approximately 21% opted for Textual Analysis. 21 candidates chose Reading the Media, and the number of candidates selecting Language Study rose to 5 (from 2 centres as opposed to 1 centre in 2004).

Statistical Information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of awards	%	Cum %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark- 100	-	-	-	-
A	8.9	8.9	140	70
B	22.8	31.7	359	60
C	39.5	71.3	622	50
D	13.2	84.4	207	45
No award	15.6	100.0	245	-

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 any significant changes in distribution of awards/grade boundaries

The *a priori* grade boundaries of 70% for A, 60% for B and 50% for C, accepted as fair since the inception of Advanced Higher, were accepted as equally fair for 2005.

The only real variable year by year at this level is the external examination. For approximately 77% of candidates in 2005 (those who chose the Creative Writing Option), 70% of the final award (40% Dissertation + 30% Creative Writing) lies within their own control.

Since the 2005 external examination paper was judged to be of a standard comparable with 2004 and earlier years, there was no compelling reason to adjust grade boundaries.

The resultant distribution of awards, while not dissimilar to previous years, indicated a performance by candidates that was not quite as impressive as in previous years, especially at the upper end of the ability range.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

While candidates had clearly absorbed the materials they had studied for Advanced Higher (and appeared to have enjoyed their studies), there was, throughout the ability range, less evidence of skilful deployment of knowledge and understanding than in previous years.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

Specialist Study

More than half of all dissertations submitted were judged to be competent or more than competent: marked by secure knowledge and understanding, diligent commitment to the selected task, sound deployment of textual evidence and widespread accuracy of expression. The very best of them were clear comparative critical analyses of demanding texts that gave opportunity to candidates to pursue interesting lines of thought and to demonstrate clear critical awareness.

Literary Study

All candidates appeared to have enjoyed their study of literature, giving evidence of serious commitment, good knowledge and understanding and, in the majority of cases, generally sound critical comment. Answers to the questions on Shakespeare and Williams (which were attempted by almost 50% of candidates) proved generally competent and occasionally impressive. Some good answers to the questions on Pinter, Chaucer, Coleridge, Dunn and Hardy were also noted.

Creative Writing Folio

Although, this year, there were some pleasing and competent reflective essays, submissions in prose fiction, generally, were significantly better than submissions in other categories, especially where candidates exhibited a genuine grasp of the conventions of writing fiction, set their narratives firmly in particular times and locations, revealed inventiveness of thought and were able to deploy language skilfully and economically.

Textual Analysis

Responses to non-fiction and drama were considered by markers to be, on the whole, secure, with candidates demonstrating a good overall grasp of the issues addressed by Ascherson in his article and of the developing relationship presented by Munro in the extract from her play. Work in these two genres was described as systematic, helpfully supported by the frameworks for comment offered to candidates in the questions.

Reading the Media

The best work continued to be from those candidates who had thoroughly prepared film studies and who were able to engage in detailed analysis of film techniques.

Language Study

All five candidates acquitted themselves acceptably and, in doing so, communicated considerable enthusiasm for the studies and research they had undertaken.

Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

Specialist Study

Several trends are emerging that appear to be preventing otherwise able candidates from doing better:

- specialist studies of fairly slight texts that make it difficult to engage in the level of detailed critical discourse required by the Advanced Higher criteria
- alleged comparative “thematic” studies of disparate texts that sit awkwardly together with (usually) one text of clear literary substance and merit matched with other texts that bear little or no resemblance to it in complexity
- failure to provide clear titles or statements of intention against which the relative success of the dissertation can be assessed
- the use of “questions” as titles or topics for discussion, often leading to vague, generalised and unstructured treatments of texts
- an increased number of “mixed genres” specialist studies – novels and films, films and plays, plays and poems, etc. – adding a quite unnecessary, undesirable (and usually unrecognised) level of difficulty to the study, and often jeopardising its validity.

Literary Study

While some candidates had difficulty with particular questions (the concept of “dramatic tension” in Williams, the notion of the “worthy” in Hardy or the “fantastic” in Spark), a more serious failure was the (surprising) inability of a significant number of candidates to select “religious” poems for Donne, “elegies” for Heaney or poems dealing with “human relationships” for Morgan. Markers also drew attention to a lack of essay planning, the weakness of some candidates in constructing a critical essay and the disappointing brevity of some answers despite the generous provision of time.

Creative Writing

Notwithstanding some notable exceptions, candidates performed significantly less well in poetry and in drama than they did in other genres: in poetry, the submission of groups of unrelated poems usually worked against the best interests of candidates; and in drama, there was considered to be too much reliance on detailed stage directions at the expense of attention to characterisation, dialogue and significant action. Concern was also expressed at the relative sterility of creative writing that appeared to emerge from common tasks set for all candidates in some centres.

Textual Analysis

Candidate responses to Question 1 (Fiction) and to Question 3 (Poetry) were disappointing. Many appeared to struggle with the very nature of the short story (possibly betraying a lack of wider reading experience), and the large numbers who opted for poetry (almost 48%) appeared to include many who chose what they considered to be the shortest read and easiest option (again apparently unfortified by width of reading).

Recommendations

Feedback to centres

Specialist Study

In 2004, the following feedback was provided to centres:

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 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.

These recommendations were virtually identical to those issued in 2003.

There is no evidence in the dissertations submitted for 2005 that such recommendations have been taken seriously into account.

It is re-emphasised, therefore, that centres and candidates must give attention to guidance already published by SQA on issues relating to texts, topics, titles and technical matters.

In particular,

- the analytical thrust of studies should be incorporated into clearly formulated statements of intention or titles
- the grouping of disparate texts should be avoided because it makes comparison and contrast between texts difficult and leads inevitably to unevenness of treatment
- mixed genres studies (novels and films, films and plays, plays and poems, etc) should be avoided because they add an unnecessary degree of complexity that is difficult to handle within a short dissertation
- candidates should be acquainted with all of the advice and regulations provided in the Unit Specification, including the standards required at the level of Advanced Higher (NB this recommendation applies to all component units).

Literary Study

From the extensive knowledge and understanding shown by candidates in their responses to their chosen questions, it is clear that literature is being well taught (and thoroughly enjoyed).

What is not so clear is that candidates have sufficiently developed the skills of critical essay writing to a level that allows them to deploy the insights they have gained effectively.

Concern was expressed this year at the number of obviously “prepared” essays forced (uneasily and often unsuccessfully) to “fit” the questions, essays without evidence of planning, essays of inadequate length, essays of limited relevance and essays without a clear structural framework.

It is recommended, therefore, that candidates are thoroughly prepared in the art of critical essay writing. In particular, they should be:

- given ample practice in making effective use of the time available (1.5 hours)
- provided with strategies for addressing the terms of the question and for appropriate planning of their responses
- equipped with a precise and extensive critical vocabulary
- reminded that “analysis” need not always be “inserted” (often inappropriately) in the form of extensive quotation that is then subjected to micro analytical comment on individual words and phrases
- shown how valid analysis may well (better) reside (often by implication) in a permeating thread of relevant critical comment that informs an emerging argument.

Creative Writing

It is recommended that candidates be made aware of the importance of enriching their own experience by reading extensively in the work of other writers (including their peers) in order to familiarise themselves with genre conventions and the range of approaches that might be taken in their own writing.

The submission from centres of pieces generated by common stimuli or arising from whole-class exercises was generally considered to be unfruitful, often lacking in individuality of treatment and distinctiveness of voice.

It should also be noted that in poetry (as in other genres) submissions must take the form of “a piece of creative writing” (singular). Groups of unrelated (or loosely related) poems should be avoided since (usually) the value of one good poem within the group is diminished by the presence of weaker poems.

Textual Analysis

The best preparation for developing the skills required to confront and interrogate unseen texts is to gain the confidence and experience that comes from wide reading in a variety of genres.

Since good critical reading skills were not always evident in the responses of candidates, it is recommended that, through guided reading, essential familiarity with genre conventions should be acquired and that, through extensive practice and teaching, candidates should be provided with the critical apparatus necessary for the analysis and evaluation of complex text(s).