

## Principal Assessor Report 2005

**Assessment Panel:**

**English**

**Qualification area**

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

**English: Higher**

### **Statistical information: update**

<b>Number of resulted entries in 2004</b>	28,831
---	--------

<b>Number of resulted entries in 2005</b>	28,678
---	--------

### **General comments re resulted entry numbers**

No significant change in numbers.

## Statistical Information: Performance of candidates

### Distribution of awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of awards	%	Cum %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark- 100	-	-	-	-
A	13.9	13.9	3,985	65
B	20.4	34.2	5,837	56
C	31.9	66.1	9,148	47
D	14.1	80.3	4,053	42
No award	19.7	100.0	5,655	-

### 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

No significant changes from 2004. The increased pass rate reflects a slight improvement in performance noted by markers and examiners. The slightly higher pass mark takes account of a question in the Close Reading paper in which marks were gained very easily.

## Comments on candidate performance

### General comments

Performance was broadly similar to that in 2004. Centres are now fully familiar with the requirements of the external assessment as revised for 2003 and are preparing most candidates well.

Overall performance in Close Reading was good. Candidates coped well with the less personal and more scientific nature of the subject matter and appeared to have been reassured by the number of “Understanding” questions among the early questions – although the overall balance of questions was similar to that in previous years. There continues to be an improvement in the answering of “Analysis” questions, with nearly 70% of markers who also marked in 2004 reporting a slight or noticeable improvement.

Overall performance in Critical Essay was felt to be marginally better than in 2004. Markers reported improvement in the structuring of essays and in relevance – 30 recorded a “noticeable improvement”, 58 a “slight improvement” and only 18 “no improvement”.

### Areas of external assessment in which candidates performed well

#### Close Reading

- Candidates responded well to the subject matter, despite the difference in style and subject matter from passages in recent examinations. Key ideas were well understood in questions such as 1(a), 2(a), 3(a), 6 and 8.
- Questions on Passage 1 were, in the main, answered well.
- Questions on Understanding were approached correctly, with candidates striving to use “own words”.
- The approach to Analysis questions continues to improve. Most teachers and lecturers are ensuring that candidates go beyond mere quotation (or quotation + bald assertion) and attempt genuinely to analyse. In imagery questions especially, the idea of working from the literal “root” of the image is now well established in many centres.
- Most candidates completed the paper, and many provided lengthy responses to the final question.
- Many answers to the final question indicated a genuine understanding of and engagement with the subject matter, as well as an appreciation of the contrasting styles of writing in the two passages.

#### Critical Essay

- Most candidates were able to write two substantial essays in the time available.
- Candidates who were well prepared knew their texts in some depth, could select appropriate details/incidents from them and could quote accurately.
- There was some evidence that candidates are paying more attention to the structure of their essays, striving to shape them relevantly to the key part(s) of the question.
- The range of texts offered by candidates remained as wide as in previous years: in Drama, Shakespeare

and Arthur Miller were pre-eminent; in longer Prose, “The Cone-Gatherers”, “The Great Gatsby” and “Sunset Song” were the most commonly used; in shorter Prose and in Poetry, a pleasing and remarkably wide range of material is being studied.

- Scottish texts were used widely in all main areas except Drama.
- Most candidates seem fully aware of the need for relevance to the chosen question, and that mere narration of events or unfocused, line-by-line analyses of a poem are not acceptable approaches.
- Of markers who commented about candidates’ expression and technical accuracy, 75 were positive and 22 were neutral (out of 130).

## Areas of external assessment in which candidates had difficulty

### Close Reading

- In question 7 many candidates failed to relate their comments on the sentence to the content of the paragraph as a whole.
- Many candidates performed relatively poorly in Passage 2. This could be because of the high incidence of Analysis questions in this part of the paper or because of poor time-management. Questions 10 and 14 for example (both 4-mark Analysis questions) were often not well done.
- A surprising and rather alarming number of candidates showed in their answers to question 13 that they did not understand what was meant by “style of writing” or by “preceding”.
- Some answers to Analysis questions in general continue to be vague and extremely unanalytical. There is evidence that the approach to this aspect of Close Reading varies significantly from centre to centre.

### Critical Essay

- Some candidates persist in structuring their essays around “techniques”, often providing in the first paragraph a list of techniques and then writing a paragraph about each. This does not lead to an effective essay, which should instead focus on the main part of the question and on the central concerns of the text. There should of course be acknowledgment of the impact/effect of relevant literary techniques, but only as a support to the candidate’s line of thought.
- Markers continue to report candidates who appear to have prepared only two texts and are therefore led to implausible lines of argument in order to force a text to “fit” a question. In Poetry especially, where questions are of necessity “focused” (in order to allow the Performance Criterion of relevance to be met), candidates should have studied a range of poems.
- Where a question asked candidates to do two things (eg “Explain ... and then discuss ...”) a number of candidates failed to pay sufficient attention to the second part.
- Markers and examiners felt that some of the texts offered by candidates were of insufficient depth and complexity for Higher level.
- A number of candidates offering a response on a short story appeared to see this as an easy option and demonstrated no appreciation of the subtlety and sophistication of the short story genre.
- Candidates’ inability to use the apostrophe correctly was criticised many times, and candidates’ almost indecipherable handwriting caused problems on a number of occasions.

## Recommendations

### Feedback to centres

#### Close Reading

##### Candidates should be reminded that:

- careful time-management is essential in the Close Reading paper – not only should all questions be answered, but all should be given an appropriate amount of time;
- where a question asks about the effectiveness of a sentence as a conclusion to a paragraph, reference must be made to the content of the paragraph as well as to the sentence. (Similarly, where the effectiveness of a paragraph as a conclusion to a passage is questioned, there must be reference to both.)
- 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; also responses to comparison questions should be focused and structured (recent examination Marking Instructions and NAB Marking Guidelines make it clear that marks are not awarded “point by point” but for the overall quality of the answer);
- 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 – careful attention should be given to the re-formatted Specimen Question Paper for use in and after 2006, which contains expanded instructions and advice, and has dispensed with the “third sentence”;
- essays should be carefully structured, but simplistic formulae such as “In this essay I will ...” and “I will show how the writer uses setting, theme and key incidents ...” should be avoided;
- 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 a prepared, 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 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 – attention should be drawn to the Specimen Question Paper for use in and after 2006, in which there is a question requiring reference to more than one short story;
- great care should be taken (in the Prose section especially) that, in terms of genre, the text is entirely suitable for the question; candidates should be clear about terms such as “fiction”, “non-fiction”, “novel”, “short story”, etc; genre infringements will 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);
- while due consideration is given for the pressure under which they are writing, they should ensure that their handwriting is legible to markers; centres should explore the provision of appropriate arrangements for candidates whose handwriting is seriously weak (or is known to become so under examination pressure);
- 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.