



Course report 2023

Higher Drama

This report provides information on candidates' performance. Teachers, lecturers and assessors may find it useful when preparing candidates for future assessment. The report is intended to be constructive and informative, and to promote better understanding. You should read the report in conjunction with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

The statistics in the report were compiled before any appeals were completed.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2022: 2,713

Number of resulted entries in 2023: 2,557

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	679	Percentage	26.6	Cumulative percentage	26.6	Minimum mark required	68
B	Number of candidates	818	Percentage	32	Cumulative percentage	58.5	Minimum mark required	57
C	Number of candidates	653	Percentage	25.5	Cumulative percentage	84.1	Minimum mark required	47
D	Number of candidates	307	Percentage	12	Cumulative percentage	96.1	Minimum mark required	36
No award	Number of candidates	100	Percentage	3.9	Cumulative percentage	100	Minimum mark required	N/A

Please note that rounding has not been applied to these statistics.

You can read the general commentary on grade boundaries in the appendix.

In this report:

- ◆ 'most' means greater than 70%
- ◆ 'many' means 50% to 69%
- ◆ 'some' means 25% to 49%
- ◆ 'a few' means less than 25%

You can find more statistical reports on the [statistics and information](#) page of SQA's website.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Question paper

The choice of questions in section 1 provided opportunities for candidates to analyse their chosen text from a range of focused areas, such as:

- ◆ themes and/or issues
- ◆ key messages in the final scene
- ◆ the motivation behind a character's actions
- ◆ different emotions a character feels
- ◆ different features of the genre
- ◆ a character's social and/or historical background

The questions were sufficiently challenging to enable candidates to demonstrate knowledge of their selected text and knowledge of the theoretical skill of either a director, actor or designer.

The compulsory question in section 2 required candidates to consider a character who undergoes a significant change in their selected text and how they would, as an actor, consider using their voice and/or movement skills. It also asked them to consider, as a designer, both a personal prop and a piece of costume for their chosen character.

Section 3 required candidates to analyse either the status of key characters or the mood or atmosphere. Candidates responded on live performances as well as recordings of live performances.

Feedback from the marking team and teachers and lecturers suggested that the question paper was fair and accessible.

Performance

Feedback from visiting assessors highlighted that almost all candidates were well prepared for this assessment and performed from a wide variety of plays, both classic and contemporary.

This component performed as expected.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Overall, there has been an improvement in the structure that candidates are using for both the extended responses in section 1 — theatre production: text in context and in section 3 — performance analysis. This allowed markers to easily identify where marks could be given for each response.

Section 1, question 1: This was the most popular question in this section. Candidates who identified key moments that communicated the themes and/or issues in their text, performed well when supporting them with appropriate textual references. Many candidates successfully described the ways in which, as a director, they would highlight the themes and issues through effective directing of their actors.

Section 1, question 2: Candidates who identified moments in the final scene that communicated the key message or messages in their text performed well when supporting it with appropriate textual references. Many candidates successfully described the ways in which, as a director, they would highlight the key message or messages through effective directing of their actors.

Section 1, question 3: Candidates who identified the motivations behind a character's actions in their text performed well when supporting it with appropriate textual references. Many candidates successfully described the ways in which, as an actor, they would highlight the motivations through effective acting concepts, describing in detail, with the correct terminology, the voice and movement they would use.

Section 1, question 4: This was the second most popular question in this section. Candidates who identified moments where a character felt different emotions in their text performed well when supporting them with appropriate textual references. Many candidates successfully described the ways in which, as an actor, they would highlight the different emotions through effective acting concepts, describing in detail, with the correct terminology, the voice and movement they would use.

Section 2, question 7(a): Candidates found this question accessible and were able to correctly identify and describe a significant change that a character had undergone.

Section 2, question 7(b): Candidates found this question accessible and were able to access marks by describing voice and/or movement skills they would use and by using correct terminology when doing so.

Section 3, questions 8 and 9: Both were popular questions. Candidates who had accessed appropriate, quality performances were able to write detailed analysis and expressed their appreciation for the performance seen. Some candidates showed evidence of good practice in reading reviews and watching interviews with directors and actors, which helped to support their overall analysis. They were also able to use correct terminology when describing performance concepts in detail.

Performance

Most candidates enjoyed the opportunity to present their work to an audience and the visiting assessor.

Acting

As in the past, this was the most popular choice of specialism. The most successful candidates were fully prepared and cast in suitably challenging roles. They created credible characters and there were some outstanding performances.

Directing

Candidates who were enthusiastic about their chosen play, and knew the whole play, were able to engage their actors with their enthusiasm and knowledge. This, coupled with having a clear directorial vision or concept, allowed them to perform well when they gave concise direction using correct theatre terminology. These candidates were also aware of their timings and ensured that they allowed sufficient time for a complete run through.

Design

Candidates performed well when they had created an imaginative design concept for the whole play, and this was coherent in both their set design and additional production role. Their success was also due to their designs and justifications being rooted in textual clues. These candidates produced ground plans and elevations for every change of scene or act. The elevations gave an impression of the set from the audience's point of view and suggested colour, texture and height that was viable for their chosen venue. Successful candidates also presented full and detailed paperwork for their additional production role and demonstrated knowledge and creativity in the application of their skills. There has been an increase in the use of technology in final presentations.

Preparation for performance

Candidates were very well prepared for this section. Candidates performed well when they had clearly researched their plays and this research was used to inform their roles. Many achieved high marks while adhering to the 500-word guidance.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

Section 1, questions 5 and 6: These were the least popular choice of questions in this section. Candidates accessed marks in the first part of the question when supporting their answers with appropriate textual references. Some candidates, however, failed to successfully describe the ways in which, as a designer, they would use their design skills. Their answers often lacked in terminology and were too vague. For example, 'I would use bright lighting to show the happy atmosphere' would be too vague a response.

Section 2, questions 7(c) and 7(d): Some candidates did not attempt these responses. For others, while they offered a response, their personal prop or piece of costume lacked detail and description and did not support a significant change for a character.

Section 3, questions 8 and 9: Many candidates provided a narrative response to what they had seen, rather than an analysis of the production. They also often lacked theatre terminology or gave a general overview of a scene, rather than breaking down what the director, actor or designer was trying to achieve and how they were doing this.

Many candidates did not manage their time well overall. Candidates need to practice timed responses and, in some cases, candidates did not start their performance analysis response in section 3.

Performance

Acting

Some candidates performed poorly when their extracts were too short to demonstrate a full range of skills. Equally, some candidates presented extracts that were too long, making it more of a challenge to fully sustain the character. Candidates also performed poorly when centres had asked all candidates to perform from the same text, as this did not play to individual strengths, and often scenes were repeated and with the same blocking.

Directing

Some candidates did not perform well as they did not have a clear directorial concept and they spent time telling their cast the plot rather than their vision. Some candidates used little to no terminology when directing their actors, and allowed the actors to use their instincts rather than following clear direction.

Design

Some candidates did not design the set and their additional production role for the whole play. They presented only some scenes or extracts that had been acted out. This meant that they did not perform well, as they were missing many aspects of the design process. An example of this is only designing a few key costumes instead of all costumes required for the whole play, including costume changes. Some candidates did not present a clear and imaginative design concept or fully support their ideas with textual references. Some candidates did not design for a chosen venue.

Preparation for performance

Some candidates well exceeded the 500-word guidance. This is unnecessary, as they can gain full marks without going over the word count. Some acting candidates spent a great deal of time communicating the rehearsal techniques they used, and this was unnecessary. A review that significantly exceeds this recommended length is not considered to be concise and therefore cannot access the top range of marks (9 to 10).

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

Section 1

When candidates have a sound knowledge of the whole play, along with an understanding of the social, historical, and theatrical context of the play, and have learned a range of quotations and/or stage directions, they have a strong basis for success in this section of the question paper. Essay-writing skills should be an integral part of teaching and learning, as this helps candidates to answer the question asked, and not the question they wish they were asked.

Candidates should have a clear structure for their responses. They should be encouraged to scaffold their responses to address the first part of the question with relevant quotations and/or stage directions. It is good practice for candidates to address the second part of the question at this point, so that they can link it to the first part of the response. It is useful if candidates underline key words in the question they are attempting and then use these words throughout their response to demonstrate that they are clearly answering the question asked.

Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to use drama literacy and the correct terminology associated with the roles of a director, an actor or a designer.

Popular texts for Sections 1 and 2 of the question paper in 2023 were *The Crucible*, *Antigone* (various translations), *The Birthday Party*, *A Taste of Honey*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and *Men Should Weep*. In addition, some candidates responded on *Angels in America*, *Medea*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, *An Inspector Calls* and *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*. A full list of recommended texts can be found in the Higher Drama Course Specification, appendix 3.

Section 2

To access the full range of marks in this section, candidates need to have a good understanding of drama terminology and be able to use the appropriate adjective. Candidates do well when they have a clear understanding of the roles of actor, director and designer. There is established vocabulary associated with these roles and teachers and lecturers should teach this in conjunction with the candidate's selected text. The Higher Drama lexicon can be found in the Higher Drama Course Specification, appendix 2.

Section 3

When candidates have the opportunity to experience appropriate, quality professional productions, it can provide a basis for a successful performance analysis. This can be through theatre visits, live streaming, free school broadcasts or recordings of live performances. When candidates have a sound drama vocabulary, in all aspects of theatre production, and can use this effectively in their analysis, they have a strong basis for success in this section.

Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to extend their knowledge of a theatre production by researching theatre reviews and interviews with actors and directors, to develop an understanding of the theatre-making process.

It is good practice for candidates to state the name of the production and when and where they saw it at the beginning of their response. As the four production areas are now consistent within the two questions, this should enable candidates to engage with the whole production and write about a number of moments, instead of using the same moment. This will ensure candidates can access the full range of marks within the section.

In section 3, popular performances this year were Things I Know to be True, Frankenstein, Yerma, Julie, The Crucible and A Streetcar Named Desire.

Candidates should practise timed essays to prepare them for the question paper. The suggested timings for the question paper are:

Section 1: 1 hour

Section 2: 30 minutes

Section 3: 1 hour

Performance

Teachers and lecturers should use the textual clues, for acting, design and directing, to support candidates' understanding of the play or plays that they are using for their performance.

When centres introduce a wide variety of plays that are appropriate for Higher level, they give candidates an opportunity to meaningfully engage with the work. Candidates respond with enthusiasm and give successful performances.

Acting

Successful candidates select plays that interest them, suit their talents and are of the appropriate challenge for Higher level. They know and understand the whole text and are cast in roles that give them enough to do. Candidates should be well-rehearsed in both roles and completely confident in their lines, so they can explore the nuances and subtext of their extract. Extras who are not being assessed should, as far as possible, be well-rehearsed so that they establish believable interaction and complex relationships with the candidate or candidates being assessed.

Teachers and lecturers should ensure that candidates perform the character as the playwright originally intended, to ensure the application of the marking criteria will be both fair and consistent.

Candidates have the option to choose roles that are the same as, or different from, the gender they identify with. It is important to note, however, that the textual clues that make up the character they want to play (age, personality etc) must be adhered to. The gender and names of the characters within the play must not be changed, as this will affect the context and viewing of the play, and what the playwright intended. Teachers and lecturers should support candidates in choosing the most appropriate role for their performance assessment.

Some centres are still using the same text for all actors in at least one of their roles. This results in repetition of the same scene, often with the same blocking. This can mean that candidates are not in a role that suits their aptitude and talent. Some extracts are too short and do not give the candidate the opportunity to demonstrate a full range of skills. Some extracts are too long, making it difficult for the candidate to sustain the character. Ensemble pieces, with more than four characters, can mean that candidates do not have enough individual input to access the marks.

Directing

Successful directors know and understand the whole text. They understand the characters' motivation and relationships, and the themes and issues the text explores. They have a clear directorial concept. Successful directors are good communicators, good managers, good leaders, and they inspire their actors. They have good timekeeping skills and pace the rehearsal, keeping a good balance between explaining and exploring their concept and directing their actors in terms of voice, movement and use of space. They should use drama terminology as far as possible, such as the areas of the stage, as well as for voice and movement.

It is not advisable to have directors directing actors who are performing the same scene for their own assessment, because the actor will have developed their own acting concepts and the director will not have enough to do, or the actors can end up directing the extract instead.

Design

Successful design candidates not only know and understand the whole text, but they also design for the whole text. Set designs should include ground plans and elevations for every change of scene or location and must be viable in their chosen venue. Designs should be detailed, and candidates should understand how they could translate into practice. Designs for the additional production role should be for the whole text and demonstrate skill appropriate to Higher level.

Candidates should produce detailed cue sheets and/or labelled designs related to the text. Textual references from the play should be used to support design decisions. It is good practice for candidates to rehearse their presentation. The presentation should last approximately 20 to 30 minutes, including 10 minutes for candidates to demonstrate their additional production role.

At Higher level, it is not advisable for designers to design for one of the acting pieces being assessed. It could restrict the candidate's creativity and originality.

For design and directing candidates, centres must ensure that it is only the visiting assessor and candidate who are present during the assessment: the teacher, or any other individual, should not be present. Any recording equipment must be set up and started before the assessment commences.

Preparation for performance

It is good practice for candidates to word process these and to state their word count. This allows the candidate to be more succinct and adhere to the 500-word guidance. Candidates should concentrate on describing the results of their research and the ways that this helped to inform their role.

Appendix: general commentary on grade boundaries

SQA's main aim when setting grade boundaries is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

For most National Courses, SQA aims to set examinations and other external assessments and create marking instructions that allow:

- ◆ a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional grade C boundary)
- ◆ a well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional grade A boundary)

It is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject at every level. Therefore, SQA holds a grade boundary meeting for each course to bring together all the information available (statistical and qualitative) and to make final decisions on grade boundaries based on this information. Members of SQA's Executive Management Team normally chair these meetings.

Principal assessors utilise their subject expertise to evaluate the performance of the assessment and propose suitable grade boundaries based on the full range of evidence. SQA can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the discussion at these meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more, or less, difficult than usual.

- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more difficult than usual.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been less difficult than usual.
- ◆ Where levels of difficulty are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

Grade boundaries from question papers in the same subject at the same level tend to be marginally different year on year. This is because the specific questions, and the mix of questions, are different and this has an impact on candidate performance.

This year, a package of support measures was developed to support learners and centres. This included modifications to course assessment, retained from the 2021–22 session. This support was designed to address the ongoing disruption to learning and teaching that young people have experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic while recognising a lessening of the impact of disruption to learning and teaching as a result of the pandemic. The revision support that was available for the 2021–22 session was not offered to learners in 2022–23.

In addition, SQA adopted a sensitive approach to grading for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses, to help ensure fairness for candidates while maintaining

standards. This is in recognition of the fact that those preparing for and sitting exams continue to do so in different circumstances from those who sat exams in 2019 and 2022.

The key difference this year is that decisions about where the grade boundaries have been set have also been influenced, where necessary and where appropriate, by the unique circumstances in 2023 and the ongoing impact the disruption from the pandemic has had on learners. On a course-by-course basis, SQA has determined grade boundaries in a way that is fair to candidates, taking into account how the assessment (exams and coursework) has functioned and the impact of assessment modifications and the removal of revision support.

The grade boundaries used in 2023 relate to the specific experience of this year's cohort and should not be used by centres if these assessments are used in the future for exam preparation.

For full details of the approach please refer to the [National Qualifications 2023 Awarding — Methodology Report](#).