



External Assessment Report 2010

Subject	English
Level	Advanced Higher

The statistics used in this report are pre-appeal.

This report provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers/lecturers in their preparation of candidates for future examinations. It is intended to be constructive and informative and to promote better understanding. It would be helpful to read this report in conjunction with the published question papers and marking instructions for the Examination.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

Markers reported the performance of candidates in 2010 to be generally secure in all assessment components, with particular improvements noted in relevance, textual understanding, analysis and attention to detail.

Comments on individual assessment components

Specialist Study

There was good evidence that almost all candidates had fully understood, and been enthusiastically engaged with, the texts they had selected for study. The dissertations they produced were judged by markers to be generally competent.

The best work was evident in centres where all candidates had clearly benefited from the provision of sound guidance and support, especially about the crucial importance of choosing suitably challenging texts and formulating appropriate topics from stated intentions that made clear what it was that candidates hoped to demonstrate from their study of these texts. Unfortunately, not all centres appeared to have provided for their candidates clear guidance and support. The most frequent observation of markers was that, in too many centres, ill-advised textual choices and/or unhelpfully vague topic statements were disadvantaging apparently able candidates.

The following table provides data on the nature and scope of the specialist studies undertaken by candidates in 2010. The figures for 2010 are in bold and beneath them, for comparison but not in bold, are the figures for 2009. These continue the pattern of previous years: a clear preference (82%) for specialising in prose fiction and, within that, for studying the work of two or more than two novelists.

Drama	125 83	Poetry	119 107	Prose fiction	1484 1249	Other	77 64
One dramatist	44 28	One poet	65 59	One novelist	141 112	Mixed genres	62 49
Three or more texts		Wide range (7+ poems)		Three or more texts			
One dramatist	54 41	One poet	21 21	One novelist	233 195	Language study	1 3
Two texts		Narrow range (- 4 poems)		Two texts			
Two or more than two dramatists	27 14	Two or more than two poets	33 20	Two or more than two novelists	1086 904	Non fiction	7 9
Other drama	0 0	Other poetry	0 7	Other fiction (including short stories)	24 38	Film or other media	7 3

Literary Study

Candidates' responses to questions in the Literary Study section of the examination paper were judged by markers to be very secure in textual knowledge and understanding, and (in general) relevantly focused on the terms of the questions. Whatever the quality of candidate responses, there appeared to be widespread evidence of good teaching and thorough preparation. Particularly good work was reported in the Drama section on Beckett, Chekhov, Pinter and Shakespeare (*Antony and Cleopatra*), and on Austen, Dickens and Joyce.

Relatively poor responses were noted in the Poetry section, especially to the questions on Duffy and Plath where candidates were required, as part of their answers, to provide a detailed analysis of a given poem. The tendency (less evident than in past years) to rely on narration and description proved characteristic of candidate responses to Williams, Hardy and Stevenson.

The following table provides information on the uptake of questions in Literary Study. The figures for 2010 are in bold and beneath them, for comparison but not in bold, are the figures for 2009. More than 50% of all candidates chose to answer a question on Drama, and more than 70% of these candidates (38% of all candidates) opted for either Shakespeare or Williams. Significantly more candidates than in previous years chose to address the questions on Lochhead, Duffy, Plath, Dickens and Hogg.

Drama	966 845	Poetry	420 340	Prose Fiction	405 317	Prose Non-Fiction	14 1
1 Beckett	29 11	12 Burns	6 17	23 Atwood	6 8	34	14 1
2 Byrne	2 7	13 Chaucer	9 18	24 Austen	54 33	35	0 0
3 Chekhov	38 24	14 Donne	65 50	25 Dickens	70 40		
4 Friel	40 29	15 Duffy	129 47	26 Fitzgerald	15 18		
5 Lindsay	0 4	16 Heaney	66 87	27 Galloway	11 23		
6 Lochhead	50 18	17 Henryson	0 6	28 Gray	8 3		
7 Pinter	66 20	18 Keats	13 28	29 Hardy	89 77		
8 Shakespeare	409 434	19 MacDiarmid	0 5	30 Hogg	41 25		
9 Stoppard	23 18	20 Muir	1 4	31 Joyce	58 43		
10 Wilde	30 17	21 Plath	118 52	32 Stevenson	32 32		
11 Williams	279 263	22 Yeats	13 26	33 Waugh	21 15		

Options

Approximate percentage uptake figures for the four optional components in 2010 were broadly similar to 2009.

- ◆ Creative Writing 68.9% (67.9% in 2009)
- ◆ Textual Analysis 28.5% (29.4% in 2009)
- ◆ Reading the Media 02.2% (02.6% in 2009)
- ◆ Language Study 00.4% (00.1% in 2009)

All of the eight candidates (from three centres) who were presented for **Language Study** in 2010 were well informed and responded with commendable skill and understanding to the questions they attempted (two on *The historical development of English or Scots*, two on *Language and social context*, and four on *The linguistic characteristics of informal conversation*).

Of the 40 candidates opting for **Reading the Media**, 33 chose to answer a question on Film; the remaining seven chose to answer a question on Advertising. Although the calibre of responses varied widely, work done on Film was generally competent or more than competent, with occasional signs of excellence. Responses to questions on Advertising were equally satisfactory, with only one really poor answer.

A total of 513 candidates opted for **Textual Analysis**. There were 254 responses to Prose fiction (an extract from Chapter 2 of *Vanity Fair*), 49 responses to Prose non-fiction (a humorous essay entitled *The Secret Life of James Thurber*), 149 responses to Poetry ('The Year's Afternoon' by Douglas Dunn) and 61 responses to Drama (a short play entitled *Mother Figure* by Alan Ayckbourn). Although there were some impressive examples of sensitive textual analysis in response to all four texts, candidates responded particularly well to Prose non-fiction and to Drama. Responses to Prose fiction proved less penetrating analytically, and responses to Poetry were least satisfactory.

The 1244 candidates who opted for **Creative Writing** submitted:

- ◆ 987 pieces of fiction
- ◆ 848 reflective essays
- ◆ 368 poems
- ◆ 285 examples of drama

While there were some quite outstanding pieces of creative writing in all categories, the most consistently secure submissions were in the category of Fiction, possibly because fiction is the area of pleasurable reading with which candidates are most familiar, whose conventions they best understand, and which they find imaginatively most stimulating.

Poetry submissions were by far the least successful, especially where candidates appeared to have little awareness of (or little respect for) the various technical means by which genuinely poetic effects may be created. Giving little or no attention to technical aspects of form or genre also diminished submissions in the categories of the Reflective Essay and Drama. Many submissions in all categories (from a significant number of centres) also suffered from the stultifying effects of imposed class exercises that appeared to have dampened rather than stimulated the latent creativity of individual candidates.

Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

The major concern of markers in 2010 continued to be the debilitating effect on the performance and attainment of candidates of inappropriate Specialist Study texts and/or topics. It is your responsibility to approve the texts and topics selected by your candidates and you are encouraged, therefore, to make full use of all of the advice published on SQA's website about this.

Attention has been drawn to this issue, and advice has been given, year after year without much evidence of centres responding constructively. All earlier advice offered on this, and on other matters related to the preparation of candidates, remains valid.

In relation to the **Specialist Study**, teachers/lecturers should ensure that:

- ◆ texts of appropriate substance and quality are selected
- ◆ groupings of disparate texts are avoided
- ◆ specific and manageable topics are constructed
- ◆ unambiguous statements of intent are included (as headings to dissertations)
- ◆ the analytical thrust of each study is incorporated into the statement of intent or title
- ◆ length is between 3500 and 4500 words (including quotations)
- ◆ mandatory footnotes and bibliographies are provided
- ◆ dissertations are free from plagiarism
- ◆ candidates are acquainted with **all** of the advice and regulations provided by SQA

The importance of the topic to be pursued in the Specialist Study cannot be overstated. In specifying topics, candidates and centres should be aware that they are effectively selecting and defining their own individual instruments of assessment. It should be emphasised, therefore, that vague, generalised and unfocused topics are unlikely to enable candidates to demonstrate attainment of the standards against which their dissertations will be assessed.

In relation to **Literary Study**, teachers/lecturers should ensure that candidates are:

- ◆ offered an experience of literary study of sufficient depth and width to allow reasonable choice in the context of an unseen examination
- ◆ thoroughly prepared in the art of critical essay writing
- ◆ 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 reside (often by implication) in a permeating thread of relevant critical comment that informs an emerging argument

In relation to **Creative Writing**, it is recommended that:

- ◆ candidates should enrich 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 of pieces generated by common stimuli or arising from whole-class exercises should be avoided
- ◆ the submission of groups of unrelated (or loosely related) poems should also be avoided

In relation to **Textual Analysis**, it is recommended that candidates should:

- ◆ through guided reading, develop close and essential familiarity with the conventions of a range of literary genres
- ◆ through focused teaching and extensive practice, acquire the critical apparatus necessary for the analysis and evaluation of complex text(s)

Arising from the relatively disappointing coursework submissions of candidates in 2008, it was suggested that there might be a 'need for refreshment and enhancement of the tutorial skills of teachers/lecturers in monitoring and advancing the independent study and coursework skills of their candidates'. The significantly improved coursework submissions of candidates in 2009 may well be due, at least in part (and commendably), to the seriousness with which teachers/lecturers took this issue.

Whatever the reason, to maintain and build on the improved attainment of candidates in these components, it is recommended that the Specialist Study unit and the Creative Writing unit continue to be the subject of rigorous teaching and monitoring. Regular use of the Specialist Study NAB published in 2008 should help with the process of the monitoring and formative assessment of candidates' dissertations as they emerge and are refined through their various stages and revisions. Similarly, Creative Writing requires judicious and regular teaching and tutorial input emphasising to candidates the importance (in all writing) of substance, form, coherence, clarity and economy of expression.

With regard to the preparation of candidates for those components assessed by the external examination (Literary Study, Language Study, Textual Analysis, Reading the Media), candidates should be given clear guidance and practice not only in **what** to include in their answers, but also in **how** to shape and present their comments. It should be noted that for each of these components, the unit outcome itself ('Respond critically to...' or, for Language Study, 'Describe and analyse...') and the unit evidence requirements assume that candidates should be able to produce a 'critical essay', a 'critical response' or, for Language Study, an 'essay/analytical report'. To make full and profitable use, therefore, of their undoubted knowledge and understanding, candidates should be well taught, well grounded and well practised in those higher-order skills required for the writing of clear, relevant and effective essays at the level of Advanced Higher.

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2009	1590
Number of resulted entries in 2010	1839

Statistical information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of Course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of Course awards	%	Cum %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark — 100				
A	20.4%	20.4%	376	65
B	29.9%	50.3%	549	56
C	32.0%	82.3%	589	48
D	9.1%	91.4%	167	44
No award	8.6%	100.0%	158	—

General commentary on grade boundaries

- ◆ While SQA aims to set examinations and create marking instructions that will allow a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional C boundary), and a well prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional A boundary), it is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject at every level.
- ◆ Each year, therefore, SQA holds a grade boundary meeting for each subject at each level where it brings together all the information available (statistical and judgemental). The Principal Assessor and SQA Qualifications Manager meet with the relevant SQA Head of Service and Statistician to discuss the evidence and make decisions. The meetings are chaired by members of the management team at SQA.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the exam is more challenging than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the exam is less challenging than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance.
- ◆ Where standards are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.
- ◆ 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, and the mix of questions, are different. This is also the case for exams set in centres. If SQA has already altered a boundary in a particular year in, say, Higher Chemistry, this 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.

- ◆ SQA's main aim is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and all levels, and to maintain comparable standards across the years, even as Arrangements evolve and change.