



## External Assessment Report 2010

Subject	<b>English</b>
Level	<b>Higher</b>

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

Performance, as reported by Markers and Examiners, was broadly similar to that in 2009. The average mark in Critical Essay was exactly the same as in 2009; the mark in Close Reading was slightly lower, due to what was generally agreed to be a slightly more demanding paper.

In Close Reading, responses showed that the passages were understood and that most candidates could make some attempt to analyse the writers' use of language. The problem noted last year about candidates' failure to use 'own words' in Understanding questions was not a significant issue in 2010.

In Critical Essay, a wide range of texts was offered and many Markers felt it was a definite strength that candidates focused well on the key thrust of the question. As in 2010, handwriting which was difficult to read attracted comments from a number of Markers.

## Areas in which candidates performed well

### Close Reading

- ◆ Candidates showed good general understanding of the passages.
- ◆ Questions on Understanding were handled well – especially questions 1a, 5, 6, 9a, 12a and 13a.
- ◆ Analysis in questions 1b, 3, 4, 10c and 13b was generally good.
- ◆ There were some excellent answers to question 8 on imagery.
- ◆ The approach to Analysis questions in general has maintained the improvement seen in recent years. Nearly all candidates go beyond mere quotation (or quotation + bald assertion) and attempt genuinely to analyse.
- ◆ Nearly all candidates completed the paper this year, and some of the answers to question 15 were of high quality, especially responses which took a good overview of the **ideas** of both passages.

### Critical Essay

- ◆ Most candidates were able to write two substantial essays in the time available.
- ◆ Almost all candidates chose questions from Sections A – C. There was a slight improvement (in quantity and in quality) in responses to questions from Section D.
- ◆ Candidates who were well prepared knew their texts in some depth, could select appropriate details/incidents from them, and could quote accurately.
- ◆ 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.
- ◆ Successful candidates continue to pay attention to the structure of their essays, striving to shape them relevantly to the key parts of the question.
- ◆ Candidates who took a broad view of a text as a whole, and did not get bogged down in constant 'analysis', performed well; such candidates were often able to contextualise their comments by effectively narrating key details of selected events.

- ◆ The range of texts offered by candidates remained as wide as in previous years: in Drama, Shakespeare, Miller and Williams continue to dominate. In longer Prose, all the 'standard' novels were widely used, with evidence that some relatively contemporary novels (eg 'Atonement', 'Mister Pip', 'Regeneration', 'The Road', 'The Kite Runner' and 'Captain Corelli's Mandolin') are also being studied as class texts. There were fewer responses using a short story. In Poetry, there continues to be a pleasing and remarkably wide range of material being studied.
- ◆ Scottish texts were used widely in all main areas except Drama; as before, around 50% of candidates answered using at least one Scottish text.
- ◆ Markers who commented on candidates' expression and technical accuracy were mostly positive and noted 'no change' or 'a slight improvement'. Inaccurate use of the apostrophe, however, was widespread, and incorrect punctuation when using 'however', 'therefore' and 'this' was all too frequent.

## Areas which candidates found demanding

### Close Reading

- ◆ In question 2, many candidates did not focus on the comparison between London 'now' and London in the past ('that version') – ie the increase in population and in geographical size.
- ◆ In question 7a, some candidates did not refer to a specific example as instructed, and many did not attempt to explain what was 'surprising' about the change. The most commonly chosen example was the reference to the Sikh community in Southall, which was probably the most difficult to explain.
- ◆ The two questions specifically on structure — 7b and 12b — were not answered well. The instruction to look at 'the paragraph as a whole' and 'the structure of lines 19–26' was frequently overlooked, and the fairly simple point about the structural signposting of 'One ... Another ... And yet another' in 12b was noted by surprisingly few candidates.
- ◆ In question 11a, the meanings of the words 'radical' and 'derivative' caused problems for a number of candidates.
- ◆ A large number of candidates appeared not to have noticed that question 11b was worth 4 marks.
- ◆ Question 15 — the comparison question — was not done well. Despite a clear instruction to concentrate on the **ideas** in the passages, many candidates wrote at length about language features (often re-hashing random points from earlier Analysis questions) and did not make any worthwhile comparison.

### Critical Essay

- ◆ In question 3, a number of candidates did not focus on the tension created in 'a scene'; in question 5, many candidates wrote about a specific confrontation between characters rather than on 'a relationship which ... [was] confrontational'; in question 7, the 'moment of revelation' was sometimes taken as merely a time when something about the character was revealed to the reader; in question 12, some texts noticeably lacking in 'vivid description' were offered.
- ◆ Inappropriate 'micro-analysis' of novels and plays continues to cause some candidates' essays to be unsatisfactory. Examples were noted of candidates quoting at some length from a novel and then subjecting words from it to detailed 'analysis'.

- ◆ The term ‘theme’ was sometimes used in an inappropriate way, as if it were a ‘technique’, similar to, for example, setting, characterisation or symbolism. A proper understanding of ‘theme’ is crucial to the study of literature.
- ◆ Many Markers again commented on the poor handwriting of some candidates, which sometimes made it extremely difficult (and time-consuming) to mark the essay. This is a serious problem in a Critical Essay, which might extend over five or more pages, making it hard to follow and concentrate on the candidate’s line of thought. It must be stressed, however, that no candidate’s work was (or ever has been) left unmarked for this reason.
- ◆ Markers continue to report candidates who appear to have prepared only two texts leading to implausible lines of argument in order to force a text to ‘fit’ a question. In Poetry especially, where questions are of necessity ‘focused’ (to allow the Performance Criterion of relevance to be met), candidates should have studied a range of poems.
- ◆ The number of ‘genre infringements’, was similar to previous years, although there were some rather extreme confusions, eg play for novel and *vice versa*. The most common infringement continues to be in Section B — Prose, where candidates use a short story to answer on a question on a novel. While this might be an accident induced by examination nerves, it is hard not to conclude that in most such cases candidates are simply under-prepared and are forced to desperate measures — not infrequently claiming that well-known short stories are in fact ‘novels’.

## **Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates**

### **Close Reading**

Candidates should be reminded that:

- ◆ There are clear instructions that, when answering Understanding questions, they must use ‘own words’ as far as is reasonably possible and not simply repeat the wording of the passage.
- ◆ Careful time management is important in the Close Reading paper — not only should all questions be answered, but all should be given an appropriate amount of time. Attention should be paid to the number of marks available, eg a 1-mark ‘Understanding’ question (of which there were four in this year’s paper) should be answered very concisely, and 4-mark ‘Analysis’ questions should be answered in considerable detail.
- ◆ Answers to questions on imagery must show an understanding of the literal ‘root’ of the image and of how this is being developed figuratively by the writer.
- ◆ In questions on 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.
- ◆ They should pay careful attention to the ‘focus’ given in most Analysis questions (eg questions 1b, 3, 4, 7b and 11b in this year’s paper) and avoid analysing in a vacuum.
- ◆ ‘Structure’ is often about more than commas and lists; 7b and 12b in this year’s paper are good examples of questions requiring a broader view of structure.
- ◆ The question on both Passages is a key feature of the Higher English Arrangements and it tests valuable reading skills. It is worth a significant number of marks. Responses to comparison questions should be focused, structured and written in continuous prose.
- ◆ Extended advice on many aspects of the Close Reading paper can be found on SQA’s website (see ‘Candidate Guidance Documents’ on the dedicated English page).

## Critical Essay

Candidates should be reminded that:

- ◆ They must ensure that their handwriting is clearly legible to Markers. Centres should explore the provision of appropriate alternative arrangements (eg use of ICT without spellcheck, or transcription without correction) for candidates whose handwriting is seriously weak (or is known to become so under examination pressure).
- ◆ Thorough preparation of a range of appropriate texts is essential.
- ◆ The distinctions in prose genres should be fully understood, and the terms of the question adhered to; infringements, whether accidental or deliberate, are always penalised, often quite substantially.
- ◆ To allow Markers to assess relevance (one of the Performance Criteria), all Critical Essay questions have a defined focus; a prepared, memorised essay is not an option.
- ◆ Essays should be carefully structured to respond to the task set, but simplistic formulae such as 'Throughout this essay I will ...', 'I will be writing about ...' and 'In this paragraph I intend to ...' should be avoided. There is no 'correct' or 'ideal' way to structure an essay — the structure will depend on the text(s), on the question, and on preferred style of the candidate.
- ◆ 'Analysis' should support, not dominate, the line of thought in a Critical Essay. When attempting to analyse, they should deal with features/techniques which are appropriate to the genre; 'micro-analysis' of novels and plays should be avoided; 'theme' is not a 'technique'.
- ◆ While merely narrating the events or re-stating the content of a text is not acceptable, some narration is often useful to contextualise comments; appropriate, limited and purposeful narration of events can be a strength.
- ◆ Care should be taken with the layout of quotations. While there are no absolute rules for this, basic conventions (such as paragraphing and indenting longer quotations, integrating shorter ones into a sentence) should be observed; they should avoid following every quotation with 'This quote shows ...'.
- ◆ While due consideration is given for the pressure under which they are writing, they should take every care to maintain 'sufficient technical accuracy'. The very simple rules for the use of the apostrophe should be learned and applied; care should be taken with punctuation when 'however', 'therefore' and 'this' are being used as connectives – a full stop (or semi-colon), not a comma, is the convention.
- ◆ Extended advice on many aspects of the Critical Essay paper can be found on SQA's website (see 'Candidate Guidance Documents' on the dedicated English page).

## Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2009	28389
Number of resulted entries in 2010	29470

## 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	18.6%	18.6%	5489	64
B	23.6%	42.2%	6950	55
C	25.9%	68.1%	7641	47
D	10.1%	78.2%	2980	43
No award	21.8%	100.0%	6410	—

## 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.