



External Assessment Report 2011

Subject	English
Level	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

Performance in the two examination elements was similar to that in 2010. The introduction of a Folio of Writing allowed all candidates to demonstrate and be rewarded for skills not previously covered in the External Assessment.

Areas in which candidates performed well

Folio

- ◆ Examiners and markers reported some excellent work in many Folios, and felt strongly that the reintroduction of Writing into the External Assessment had been a worthwhile move. In many centres, candidates had clearly been encouraged to achieve beyond their Standard Grade or Intermediate level and to strive for excellence in Writing.
- ◆ In Creative Writing, approximately 65% of candidates chose to submit a Personal Reflective piece, and 35% an Imaginative piece. Where a Personal Reflective piece was based on a suitable experience (or range of experiences) and there was a sustained attempt at mature reflection, there was often work of high quality.
- ◆ The huge majority of Imaginative Writing was in the form of prose fiction, predominantly in short story form. Some of these were of exceptional quality with a sophisticated grasp of the genre. Several were awarded full marks.
- ◆ There were around 130 submissions of poetry, among which the best work demonstrated a command of form and language quite remarkable given the age of candidates.
- ◆ There was a small, but often impressive, submission of Imaginative Writing partly or wholly in Scots. Successful candidates wrote with confidence, and effectively exploited the freshness and freedom this option offered them.
- ◆ Discursive writing was, in the main, executed sensibly and competently. Where candidates opted for a subject in which they had a genuine interest, they wrote with passion and engagement. Structuring of material was sound and vocabulary was appropriate.
- ◆ Presentation of material in the Folios was almost uniformly good: most pieces were word-processed and presented markers with none of the problems inherent in hand-written submissions.
- ◆ The vast majority of candidates were meticulous in the recording of sources for discursive pieces, and were careful to distinguish between legitimate research and merely restating others' opinions.

Close Reading

- ◆ By general consensus candidates found the subject matter (video gaming) and the two passages engaging and accessible.
- ◆ Nearly all candidates completed the paper.
- ◆ Understanding questions were generally answered well.
- ◆ There was good work in questions 1(a), 1(b), 2(b), 3(a), 3(b), 4(b), 5(a), 6, 7(b), 8(a) and 9.

Critical Essay

- ◆ Most candidates wrote two substantial essays.
- ◆ Candidates who were well prepared knew their texts in depth, could select appropriate details/incidents from them, and could quote accurately.
- ◆ Most candidates were fully aware of the need for relevance to the chosen question, and that mere narration of events or unfocused, line-by-line analysis of a poem are not acceptable approaches.
- ◆ 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.
- ◆ Scottish texts were used widely in all main areas except Drama.
- ◆ The number of genre infringements was lower than in previous years.
- ◆ Markers who commented on candidates' expression and technical accuracy were mostly positive and noted 'no change' or 'a slight improvement'.

Areas which candidates found demanding

Folio

- ◆ Many examiners and markers commented that in some centres the Folio had not been given attention commensurate with 20% of the final mark for Higher English. While work from such centres was not incompetent, there was often the sense of a rather perfunctory approach, with candidates being content to submit work of a standard that they could almost certainly have achieved at least a year earlier.
- ◆ There was evidence in a number of submissions of careless, or non-existent, proof-reading, which not infrequently caused a piece to fail because it did not achieve the criterion of being 'consistently accurate'.
- ◆ It was disappointing to see, in an exercise designed to encourage personal choice and individual interests, that in some centres whole classes had been set identical tasks. This is very unlikely to generate work of quality.
- ◆ Much of the writing submitted as 'Personal Reflective' contained very little reflection or had merely a brief, token observation tacked on at the end. Many pieces were on topics on which it was hard to generate convincing reflection.
- ◆ There was, on occasion, some difficulty knowing whether a piece was 'Personal Reflective' or was imaginative fiction written in the first person.
- ◆ Imaginative writing was sometimes attempted by candidates with little skill in, or feel for, the conventions of prose fiction. A common weakness was attempting to compress too much action and/or too many characters into the 1300 words allowed.
- ◆ Imaginative writing of the type known in Standard Grade as 'Imaginative Response to Literature' caused a number of problems, in that such pieces rely heavily on, for example, characterisation and plotting already established by the original writer. This made it difficult for markers to assess a candidate's own input in these areas.
- ◆ A very small number of Drama scripts were submitted. Quality in these was limited by weaknesses in plotting and characterisation.
- ◆ In Discursive Writing, a rather limited range of topics (abortion, euthanasia, cosmetic surgery, size zero models, for example) attracted a substantial number of candidates. While such issues are no doubt of interest to many candidates for Higher English, it was

felt that they were being seen as 'safe' topics on which the key arguments have been well rehearsed. There was a disappointing sameness about many of these essays, and little sense of real engagement from many candidates.

- ◆ Some candidates adopted a rather cavalier attitude to the recording of sources, sometimes failing to acknowledge any sources at all, sometimes acknowledging merely 'bbc website' and/or 'wikipedia', or even simply 'the internet'. It is unlikely to be coincidental that such pieces were almost always of limited quality.
- ◆ While the vast majority of candidates stayed within the word limit of 1300 words, a number exceeded this, albeit usually by no more than 20 or 30 words.

Close Reading

- ◆ Questions 1(c) and 10: many candidates simply did not explore enough material to score 4 marks.
- ◆ Question 2(a): identification of sentence structure features was easy enough, but comment on how they functioned in the given lines was often not well explained.
- ◆ Question 4(a): the key point — that the human brain appears to be 'hard-wired' to respond strongly to rewards — was not picked up on in most cases.
- ◆ Question 8(b): very few candidates paid sufficient attention to the wording of the question, which asked how the writer created 'an impression of outrage'. The fact that the writer was self-consciously exaggerating was overlooked.
- ◆ Question 13 — 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

- ◆ Question 3: many candidates did not focus sufficiently on how the tension was created 'at the beginning or at the end', and wrote more generally about tension in the play as a whole.
- ◆ Question 8: candidates had some difficulty going beyond a basic description of the narrative point of view.
- ◆ Question 10: a number of candidates stretched the meaning of 'outrage or shock' to accommodate texts which did not, in reality, contain emotions of that strength. Orwell's essays, for example, were somewhat misrepresented in this respect.
- ◆ Question 14: this question was done poorly by most who attempted it. The 'narrative' element of the poem was largely ignored, and there were many unsuitable choices of text.
- ◆ Question 16: the option of writing about a poem with a 'cynical' tone was chosen by a number of candidates who appeared to have little understanding of what 'cynical' actually means.
- ◆ Inappropriate 'micro-analysis' of novels and plays continues to cause concern. Examples were noted of candidates quoting stage directions from a play and then subjecting them to detailed 'analysis'.
- ◆ A number of candidates were in the habit of writing at the end of most paragraphs stock phrases such as '... and this help me to understand the central concerns of the text', without ever actually stating what they believed these central concerns to be, let alone how what they had just described aided their understanding of them.

- ◆ 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. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that no candidate's work was left unmarked for this reason.

Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

Folio

- ◆ Candidates should be encouraged to strive for the highest quality of work possible and should be reminded that the Folio mark has an impact on their final grade. This need not mean endless re-drafting, but candidates' attention should be drawn to the high standards of language and thought in the descriptors for the upper marks categories.
- ◆ Creative writing (in any genre) should come as the result of sustained study and teaching of the form, building on what candidates have learned about creative writing throughout their study of English; it is not simply a matter of telling a candidate to 'write a story'.
- ◆ While class exercises are reasonable tactic in the teaching and learning process for writing, candidates should be allowed the freedom to choose the nature of their final submissions.
- ◆ The submission of poetry is welcomed, especially from candidates who are alert to the essence of poetry (linguistic precision, creation of 'voice', a sense of sound and rhythm ...). Submission of a 'series of poems', however, requires caution: for example, such a sequence will inevitably be weakened by the least successful poems. A single poem of quality is usually the wiser option.
- ◆ The 'Imaginative Response' type of task should be treated with extreme caution. Tasks which allow (or oblige) a candidate to rely on groundwork already prepared by an established writer make it difficult for the candidate to show her/his own creative skills and can lead to simple imitation at best or inappropriate parody at worst. Remember that such writing is used at Standard Grade to demonstrate skill in *Reading*, not *Writing*.
- ◆ Personal Reflective writing should contain — and ideally be permeated by — genuine and convincing personal reflection. A blow-by-blow account of a holiday or of a sporting triumph, for example, is unlikely to generate much mature insight.
- ◆ While it is recognised that the illness or death of a close relative or friend is a deeply upsetting experience for any young person, writing about such an experience is not always in the candidate's best interest. Raw emotion is not the same as reflection, and it can be hard for candidates to maintain a critical distance when writing about events such as these. Moreover, there is a danger that the person who is the subject of the writing becomes the focus of the writing, rather than the writer him/herself.
- ◆ Candidates should be a little more adventurous in their choice of topics for Discursive writing. Topics in which there is a genuine personal interest and topics of specific local interest often lead to good work.
- ◆ Report writing is an acceptable option, but it should be noted that a Report must follow the requirements set out in the Arrangements document and, more importantly, that it is not easy to demonstrate in a Report the sophistication of language and line of thought which characterises Categories I, II and III of the Marking Instructions for Higher.

- ◆ Where work initially generated in another subject is used in the Folio, it cannot simply be imported wholesale. Purely factual biographies of an artist, musician, or designer, or accounts of an historical event or controversy, or descriptions of a biological process, for example, do not constitute Discursive writing at Higher level.
- ◆ The main sources consulted in the preparation of Discursive writing should be noted and then recorded at the end of the piece (or in footnotes). It is not necessary to source every single statistic etc, but good practice requires that principal sources (of fact and of opinion) be acknowledged.
- ◆ A word limit of 1300 words was widely advertised when the introduction of the Folio was announced and was reinforced at the exemplification events and in related website materials. There are sound practical and educational reasons for such a limit and it should be adhered to.
- ◆ Extended advice on many aspects of the Folio of Writing can be found on SQA's website (see 'Candidate Guidance Documents' on the dedicated English page).

Close Reading

- ◆ Centres should note the change to the style of the comparison question in and after 2012 and prepare candidates accordingly. [See Update Letter dated August 2011.]
- ◆ All general points made in the Reports for 2010 and 2009 are still relevant.
- ◆ 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

- ◆ The use of formulaic approaches to essay writing should be resisted. Candidates who believe that dogged repetition of words from the question and the regular insertion of phrases such as '... and this helps me to understand the central concerns of the text' lead to a successful essay is mistaken.
- ◆ All general points made in the Reports for 2010 and 2009 are still relevant.
- ◆ 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 2010	29,470
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Number of resulted entries in 2011	30,068
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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	18.3%	18.3%	5,503	64
B	25.5%	43.8%	7,655	55
C	27.7%	71.5%	8,328	47
D	10.9%	82.4%	3,287	43
No award	17.6%	100.0%	5,295	-

General commentary on grade boundaries

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, though, 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 maintain comparable standards across the years, even as Arrangements evolve and change.