External Assessment Report 2012

Subject(s)	English
Level(s)	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

Work in the Folio of Writing was felt by most Markers to be slightly better than in 2011, with the most marked improvement coming in Discursive Writing. Performance in the two examination elements was broadly similar to that in 2011.

Folio of Writing: Areas in which candidates performed well

♦ There were, this year, noticeably fewer submissions characterised by general carelessness.

♦ Examiners and markers reported some excellent work in the Folios. In many centres, candidates had clearly been encouraged to achieve well beyond their Standard Grade or Intermediate level and to strive for excellence in Writing.

♦ In Creative Writing, 60-65% of candidates chose to submit a Personal Reflective piece and 30-35% an Imaginative piece. Where a Personal Reflective piece was based on a suitable experience (or range of experiences) and there was sustained and mature reflection, there was often work of high quality.

♦ The revised layout of the Folio flyleaf meant there was no confusion between Personal and Imaginative writing.

♦ 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 90 submissions of poetry (down from 130 last year), among which the best work demonstrated a strong command of form and language.

♦ There was a small, but often impressive, submission of Imaginative Writing partly or wholly in Scots. A number of candidates wrote with confidence, and exploited effectively the freshness and freedom this option offers them.

♦ Discursive writing was, in the main, executed well. Where candidates opted for a subject in which they had a genuine interest, they typically wrote with passion and engagement. Structuring of material was sound and vocabulary appropriate.

♦ Presentation of material in the Folios was almost uniformly good: all but a tiny number of pieces were word processed and thus 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.

- The number of submissions in excess of the word limit was substantially down on last year, and the majority of those who did exceed the limit did so by no more than 20 or 30 words.

Folio of Writing: Areas which candidates found demanding

- A small number of submissions showed evidence of careless, or non-existent, proof-reading, which caused work to fail because it did not achieve the criterion of being 'consistently accurate'.

- In an exercise designed to encourage personal choice and individual interests, it was disappointing to see, once again, 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.

- The number of Drama scripts was higher than last year, but the quality was no better; weaknesses in plotting and characterisation were evident in many of these submissions. Candidates should not think of this as an easy option; on the contrary, it is extremely demanding to demonstrate skill in this genre.

- In Discursive Writing, a limited range of topics (cosmetic surgery, size zero models, abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, for example) once again attracted a substantial number of candidates. While such issues are no doubt of interest to many candidates for Higher English, there was a disappointing sameness about many of these essays and little sense of real engagement.

- Some candidates were rather lax in their 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.

- Some candidates submitted pieces which were above the word limit, which was clearly stated on the Folio flyleaf.

Folio of Writing: Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

- Candidates should be encouraged to strive for the highest quality of work possible and 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 embedded in the descriptors for the upper marking 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.

- While class exercises are a worthwhile 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 poem(s). 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 own creative skills and can lead to simple imitation at best or inappropriate parody at worst. It should be remembered 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. Candidates who have little of depth to say on a 'Personal' topic might be well advised to attempt the Creative option.

- 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 often not 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 herself.

- Candidates should be encouraged to 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 or a musician or a 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, in 2012, was stated clearly on the Folio flyleaf. There are sound practical and

educational reasons for such a limit and it should be adhered to. Candidates who exceed the word limit and those who misrepresent the word count are liable to a penalty.

♦ 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: Areas in which candidates performed well

♦ Candidates appear to have found the subject matter (the Olympic Games) and the two passages engaging and accessible.

♦ The new-style Comparison Question was done well by many candidates. [See 'Appendix on Question 14' below.]

♦ In addition there was good work in questions 1(a), 1(b), 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9(a), 10(a), 10(b), 11(a), 12(b), 12(c), and 13.

♦ Most candidates completed the paper, but a disappointing number failed to reach (or chose not to attempt) question 14. [See 'Appendix on Question 14' below.]

Close Reading: Areas which candidates found demanding

♦ Question 7 and 9(b): there was not enough attention paid to 'the writer's use of language', with many candidates merely paraphrasing what the writer was saying.

♦ Questions 8 and 10(c): many candidates simply did not explore enough material to score 4 marks.

♦ Question 11(b): many candidates failed to relate their comments on word choice to 'the writer's mood of disillusionment'.

♦ Question 12(a): this 'link' question was poorly handled by many candidates who either were unaware of the correct method of answering or who did not examine carefully enough the key ideas in the two relevant paragraphs.

Close Reading: Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

♦ Centres should note the change to the style of the comparison question in and after 2012 and prepare candidates accordingly. [See 'Appendix on Question 14' below.]

♦ With a final question that is more accessible to all candidates than in the past, it is more important than ever that candidates manage their time efficiently in order to complete all the questions.

♦ All general points made in the External Assessment Reports for 2011 and 2010 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).

Close Reading: Appendix on Question 14 (The Comparison Question)

As announced in the Update Letter dated 25 August 2011 (subsequently exemplified in material which is still available on the SQA's website, and at the Higher English 2011 Professional Development Workshops) the final question in Close Reading changed in 2012 from one which asked candidates for a personal preference between the passages and a justification thereof to one which asked for an objective statement of the ideas on which the writers agreed or disagreed or both.

The following points emerged from the first year's operation of the new question, and should be taken into account when preparing candidates for future examinations:

♦ Examiners were generally very pleased with candidates' answers, in which they were able to demonstrate an ability to take an overview of the two passages and the key ideas in them – without having to worry about expressing a preference.

♦ The Marking Instructions for this year's question were such that candidates who successfully identified one area of agreement and one area of disagreement scored a minimum of 3 marks. Thus succinct, sensible and relevant responses automatically scored at least 3 marks, and marks of 4 or 5 – very rare in the old-style question – were attained by many candidates.

♦ The most significant problem in the answering of this question was that a surprising number of candidates appeared to think they were being given a choice to deal with agreement **or** disagreement, despite the fact that the question asked unambiguously for candidates to 'Identify key areas of agreement and disagreement …'. The maximum mark for such an answer was 2. It must be made clear to candidates that future comparison questions will, depending on the nature of the passages, ask for areas of agreement **or** for areas of disagreement **or** for both.

♦ Some answers were overlong, either because they attempted to identify too many allegedly 'key' ideas or because they offered too much supporting reference. While no marks were deducted for unnecessary length, it reduced the likelihood of scoring beyond 3 marks. Candidates should be trained to be brief and focused.

♦ The choice to use continuous prose or extended bullet points made no noticeable difference to the marks scored. It should be for each candidate to adopt the approach she or he prefers.

♦ Whether written in continuous prose or developed bullet points, responses to this question must, above all else, have a clear structure. The better answers were always well structured, while a lack of structure was a feature of most of the weaker answers, some of which, for example, merely listed – or created a table of – some key points from each passage such that it was not clear where any agreements/disagreements lay. It is essential that candidates structure their answers sensibly and purposefully.

♦ The use of quotation is neither mandatory nor forbidden; candidates are free to quote or to summarise in support of their points. When used, quotations should, however, be short and focused.

♦ The question (whether it is on agreement or disagreement or both) will always ask for '**key** ideas' and candidates will never be expected to offer more than three of these. The essence of

the question lies in distinguishing 'key ideas' from less significant ones – ie the Evaluation included in the coding.

Critical Essay: Areas in which candidates performed well

♦ Most candidates wrote two substantial essays.

♦ Candidates who were well prepared and who 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. Tennessee Williams has joined Miller and Shakespeare as the pre-eminent dramatists studied; Carol Ann Duffy dominates answers on poetry, with a very wide range of her poems being offered.

♦ Scottish texts were used widely in all main areas except Drama.

♦ The number of genre infringements was broadly the same as in previous years, with the majority of cases concerning confusion of prose genres.

♦ Markers who commented on candidates' expression and technical accuracy were nearly all positive, noting 'no change' or 'a slight improvement'.

Critical Essay: Areas which candidates found demanding

♦ Specific Questions:

♦ Question 1: a number of candidates were uncertain about exactly what was meant by 'instability' and allowed their definition to wander as the essay progressed
♦ Question 4: some candidates failed to distinguish between the character's 'view of himself/herself' and the view of other characters or of the audience
♦ Question 8: many candidates who chose this question made a very promising choice of character, but then failed to deal with both aspects ('realistic' and 'symbolic'); more often than not, the 'realistic' element was given scant treatment, or overlooked entirely
♦ Question 12: 'complexity' was ascribed to some highly improbable figures in poetry
♦ Question 13: this question was attempted by too many candidates who offered a poem in which 'aspects of structure' are not, in all honesty, a key element
♦ Question 15: 'the problems of growing older' were alleged to be a key feature in a number of poems for which the case could not be made with any degree of conviction.

- There was more evidence than in recent years of candidates coming to the exam with prepared answers (often on questions from recent exam papers, as the appearance of key words suggested) and attempting to adapt these to 'fit' the questions asked.

- The high number of inappropriate choices of poem for questions 12 and 13 leads to the suspicion that significant numbers of candidates are coming to the exam with just one poem on which they are determined to answer come what may. This practice cannot be discouraged strongly enough.

- A number of candidates are in the habit of writing at the end of most paragraphs stock phrases such as '… and this helped me to understand the central concerns of the text', without ever having stated what they believed these central concerns to be, let alone how what they had just described had aided their understanding of them.

- The term 'theme' continues to be used in an inappropriate way by some candidates, as if it were a 'technique', similar to, for example, setting, characterisation or symbolism. A proper understanding of 'theme' is key to the study of literature.

- Inappropriate 'micro-analysis' of novels and plays continues to cause some concern. Examples were noted of candidates quoting a short sentence from a novel and then subjecting individual words from it to detailed 'analysis'.

- Many Markers once again commented on the poor, sometime near-illegible, handwriting of some candidates, which made it extremely difficult (and time-consuming) to mark the essay. While no candidate's work is ever left unmarked for this reason, centres should do their best to reduce this problem by making alternative arrangements for some candidates.

Critical Essay: Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

- While candidates who plan to answer on a substantial prose or drama text are not expected to have prepared more than one of these, candidates who plan to answer the poetry section should not limit themselves to preparing a single poem.

- 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 helped me to understand the central concerns of the text' will lead to a successful essay are mistaken.

- All general points made in the External Assessment Reports for 2011 and 2010 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 2011	30068

Number of resulted entries in 2012	29683

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	19.3%	19.3%	5719	65
B	25.6%	44.9%	7604	56
C	28.3%	73.2%	8398	48
D	10.9%	84.1%	3233	44
No award	15.9%	100.0%	4729	-

General commentary on grade boundaries

- While SQA aims to set examinations and create marking instructions which 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 SQA therefore 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 Business Manager 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.