Course report 2019

Subject	English
Level	Advanced Higher

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. It would be helpful to read this report in conjunction with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

The statistics used in this report have been compiled before the completion of any post-results services.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Question paper: Literary Study

The Literary Study question paper performed in line with expectations. Feedback from the marking team, and from teachers and lecturers, suggests that the question paper was fair in terms of course coverage and overall level of demand. Candidates could choose from a wide range of questions. Candidate responses varied from very good to more limited.

The convention of requiring candidates to answer on three poems; two novels (or three short stories); two pieces of non-fiction or two plays, is now well established in this question paper. Questions usually asked candidates to 'Discuss …' but terms such as 'Analyse …', 'Compare …' and 'Compare and contrast …' were also used. One question asked candidates to what extent they agreed with a given statement relating to two plays.

As in previous years, writers such as Tennessee Williams, Shakespeare, Seamus Heaney, Sylvia Plath and John Donne were heavily represented in candidates' responses but there was also occasionally evidence of more adventurous choices for study to be found in answers on Restoration comedy and on the novels of the American writer Nella Larsen.

The following table, based on the reported choices of candidates in 2019, shows the relative popularity of the Literary Study questions (figures are rounded to the nearest whole number).

Part A: Poetry	% of candidates	Part B: Prose fiction	% of candidates	Part C: Prose non-fiction	% of candidates	Part D: Drama	% of candidates
A1	4	B8	3	C15	<1	D22	22
A2	8	B9	3	C16	<1	D23	1
A3	1	B10	8	C17	0	D24	2
A4	8	B11	2	C18	<1	D25	9
A5	4	B12	4	C19	<1	D26	1
A6	2	B13	1	C20	<1	D27	8
A7	5	B14	4	C21	0	D28	1

The six most popular questions were:

♦ Compare and contrast the initial presentation and subsequent development of the central characters in **two** plays. *(Drama, Q22)*
♦ Discuss the dramatic presentation of the impact of the past upon the present in **two** plays. *(Drama, Q25)*
♦ Compare the dramatic presentation of familial or community relationships in **two** plays.
♦ 'Literature explores love in all its forms.'
  Compare and contrast the exploration of love in **two** novels or **three** short stories. *(Prose fiction, Q10)*
♦ Compare and contrast the treatment of the natural world in **three** poems. *(Poetry, Q2)*
♦ Discuss some of the principal means by which human weakness or failings are explored in **three** poems. *(Poetry, Q4)*

Question paper: Textual Analysis

Although the question paper generally performed in line with expectations. Feedback from the marking team suggests that candidates who attempted the poetry question found it challenging and tended to perform less well than those who had chosen one of the other three options. There was also a reduction in the number of candidates choosing the poetry question in 2019 compared to the number in 2018. The grade boundary was lowered to reflect this slight increase in demand.

The following table, based on the reported choices of candidates in 2019, shows the relative popularity of the Textual Analysis questions (figures are rounded to the nearest whole number).

Genre	% of total pieces submitted
Poetry	35
Prose fiction	43
Prose non-fiction	14
Drama	8

Portfolio–writing

The portfolio–writing performed in line with expectations. There were some examples of outstanding work and most pieces met the standards required for this level.

The following table, based on the reported choices of candidates in 2019, shows the relative popularity of the genres submitted by candidates (figures are rounded to the nearest whole number).

Genre	Total pieces submitted
Persuasive	1022
Informative	152
Argumentative	282
Reflective	890
Poetry	587
Prose fiction	1465
Drama	290

These figures are broadly in line with last year's and show the continued popularity of the prose fiction, persuasive and reflective genres with candidates.

Project–dissertation

The project–dissertation performed in line with expectations. Markers commented on the continuing prevalence of dystopian fiction and the practice of analysing two thematically linked texts. There were a number of project–dissertations submitted on single texts such as Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*. Most candidates chose appropriate texts and topics for their project–dissertations.

The following table, based on the reported choices of candidates in 2019, shows the relative popularity of the types of project–dissertation submitted by candidates (figures are rounded to the nearest whole number).

Drama	Poetry	Prose fiction	Mixed genres/other
6%	10%	80%	4%

As in previous years, prose fiction texts were by far the most popular subjects for study in the project–dissertation. There was a slight rise in the number of submissions on poetry this year. There were also a number of good project–dissertations on single texts.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper: Literary Study

There was evidence of candidates achieving high marks in all four sections of the paper. Full marks were awarded to some candidates in 14 of the 28 questions. In addition to the popular questions listed above, the following questions were done especially well: A2, A5, D23, and D24.

Markers recognised the following positive features of candidate performance:

♦ in many cases candidates had clearly been well prepared for the demands of this question paper
♦ successful candidates demonstrated an awareness of the need to analyse and evaluate as well as to show understanding of their texts
♦ the appropriate incorporation of references to secondary sources in responses
♦ high quality responses on John Donne, Angela Carter, Sylvia Plath, Tennessee Williams
♦ sophisticated responses to question D28 (including one on *Macbeth* and *The Crucible*)

Question paper: Textual Analysis

Markers recognised the following positive features of candidate performance:

♦ some excellent responses to all four questions
♦ some sophisticated responses on prose-fiction which showed perceptive insight into Ian McEwan's creation of the narrative voice
♦ a number of very sophisticated readings of the subtle nuances in the prose non-fiction piece
♦ responses to the drama extract which showed clear knowledge and understanding of dramatic techniques and conventions
♦ effective use of the bullet points included in some of the questions to structure responses

Portfolio–writing

Markers recognised the following positive features of candidate performance:

♦ some original and insightful writing on more unusual topics, such as why violence 'is the answer' and essential to entertainment of the crowd in ice hockey
♦ some strong responses to current events: environmental issues, modern slavery, sexuality, the trauma suffered by a young Syrian boy
♦ some high quality writing in Scots, including a play
♦ some very powerful pieces of reflective writing on subjects as diverse as the life of a chorister at Old Saint Paul's Church in Edinburgh, the progress of a grandmother's dementia, and a Scottish upbringing coupled with the writer's African heritage

♦ some excellent experimentation with genre in prose fiction, such as 'Choose your own adventure' style narratives and also 'case files' consisting of interview transcripts, psychology and pathology reports, self-assessment questionnaires and other professional documents

♦ the submission of short stories which showed an awareness of and clever exploitation of the conventions of the genre

♦ some good persuasive essays on 'voluntourism'

♦ effective use of appropriate stimulus materials such as three monologues based on characters from Greek myth

♦ informative pieces that read like accomplished journalism — on subjects such as the jazz musician Chet Baker, the Magdalene Laundries, and sexual misconduct in Hollywood

Project–dissertation

Markers recognised the following positive features of candidate performance:

♦ appropriate tasks and topics were formulated with care and this allowed candidates to fully do justice to their chosen texts

♦ some very good dissertations on poetry (including one on John Milton's *Paradise Lost*)

♦ the choice of more unusual or challenging texts (such as George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Hanif Kureishi*'s The Buddha of Suburbia*, Gustave Flaubert'*s Madame Bovary*, *The* Alexandre Dumas' *Count of Monte Cristo,* and EM Forster's *Maurice*) which seemed to be linked to an obvious interest and passion for the subject matter

♦ project–dissertations on short stories (including Angela Carter and Saki)

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper: Literary Study

Markers noted that some candidates:

♦ did not offer a relevant response to the question

♦ provided analysis that lacked the rigour demanded at this level

♦ wrote poetry responses which merely went through the poems in a linear fashion, picking out random words and phrases and making shallow comments about word-choice or connotations

♦ wrote poetry responses which often appeared to be pre-prepared analyses of standard quotations. Responses of this nature tended to lacked a full evaluative response thus preventing candidates from reaching the higher mark ranges

♦ struggled to offer coherent arguments on themes and characterisation in Shakespeare texts

♦ continued to discuss literary characters as if they were real people rather than constructs

♦ structured the critical essay poorly

Question paper: Textual Analysis

Markers noted that some candidates:

♦ had difficulty in understanding the language and central concerns of the Gerard Manley Hopkins poem
♦ had difficulty in recognising the obvious form and structure of the Gerard Manley Hopkins poem
♦ offered analysis and evaluation which was little more than a series of disjointed quotations plus comments
♦ made vague assertions, for example comments on 'lots of commas' or images 'painting a picture in your head'
♦ failed to comment on techniques such as stage directions, music, costume, props and setting in the drama responses

Portfolio–writing

Markers noted that some candidates:

♦ confused the different requirements of the argumentative and persuasive genres
♦ failed to display knowledge of appropriate genre features (for example, those pertaining to the short story) in their own writing
♦ failed to proofread or edit their work effectively
♦ had problems with syntax, grammar and control of expression
♦ produced discursive writing which lacked proper development of arguments and made little attempt to use appropriate genre markers
♦ submitted reflective essays with little reflection in them
♦ failed to make effective use of referencing in persuasive and discursive essays
♦ produced poetry of a very limited nature in terms of use of language, form and structure

Project–dissertation

Markers note that some candidates:

♦ were overly reliant on secondary sources such as Shmoop, and Sparknotes
♦ chose topics and tasks which were overly complex and wordy and which were difficult to deal with given the required word limits
♦ chose single texts such as Kathryn Stockett's *The Help,* which hindered their ability to offer appropriate analysis and evaluation
♦ struggled to provide appropriate work on traditional children's or young adult fiction
♦ concentrated on themes such as racism, sexism or mental health to the detriment of the literary analysis of their texts
♦ displayed poor expression and technical accuracy
♦ made many assertive statements often unsubstantiated by textual evidence and/or reference

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper: Literary Study

For the Literary Study question paper teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates are:

♦ offered an experience of literary study of sufficient depth and breadth to allow reasonable choice in the context of an unseen examination
♦ thoroughly prepared in the art of critical essay writing
♦ given sufficient practice in making effective use of the time available (1 hour and 30 minutes)
♦ 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

Question paper: Textual Analysis

For the Textual Analysis question paper teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates:

♦ develop close and essential familiarity with the conventions of a range of literary genres (including the more common forms and structures of poetry) through guided reading
♦ experience texts from a range of time periods in English literature
♦ are prepared to answer on more than just one genre in the examination
♦ acquire the critical apparatus necessary for the analysis and evaluation of complex texts through focused teaching and extensive practice
♦ are prepared to analyse more than just word choice and imagery when discussing poetry

Portfolio–writing

For the portfolio–writing it is recommended that:

♦ candidates enrich their own experience by reading extensively in the work of other writers (including their peers) to familiarise themselves with genre conventions and the range of approaches that might be taken in their own writing
♦ skills for the portfolio–writing could usefully be taught alongside skills for the Textual Analysis question paper
♦ the submission of groups of unrelated (or even loosely related) poems should be avoided
♦ candidates are made fully aware of the conventions of the different discursive genres available to them and to take care when labelling these submissions

Project–dissertation

For the project–dissertation teachers and lecturers should ensure that:

♦ texts of appropriate substance and quality are selected
♦ groupings of disparate texts are avoided
♦ specific and manageable topics are constructed
♦ the analytical focus of each study is incorporated into the wording of the title
♦ length is within the limits set by SQA
♦ mandatory footnotes and bibliographies are provided
♦ dissertations are free from plagiarism
♦ candidates are familiar with all of the advice and requirements provided by SQA, including material on the Understanding Standards website

The importance of the topic candidates pursue in the project–dissertation 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 therefore be emphasised that vague, generalised and unfocused topics are unlikely to enable candidates to demonstrate attainment of the standards against which their project–dissertations will be assessed. Further guidance on the selection of topics is available on the Understanding Standards website.

Grade boundary and statistical information:

(Completed by SQA)

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2018	2485

Number of resulted entries in 2019	2347

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of course awards	Percentage	Cumulative %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum mark				
A	20.7%	20.7%	485	65
B	26.8%	47.5%	629	56
C	31.0%	78.4%	727	47
D	11.8%	90.3%	278	42
No award	9.7%	-	228	-

General commentary on grade boundaries

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.

SQA aims to set examinations and create marking instructions that allow:

♦ a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional C boundary)
♦ 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.

Therefore, SQA holds a grade boundary meeting every year for each subject at each level to bring 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. Members of the SQA management team chair these meetings. SQA can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper has been more, or less, challenging than usual.

♦ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper is more challenging than usual.
♦ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the exam is less challenging than usual.
♦ Where standards 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 to year. This is because the particular questions, and the mix of questions, are different. This is also the case for question papers set by centres. If SQA alters a boundary, this does not mean that centres should necessarily alter their boundary in the question papers that they set themselves.