



Course report 2019

Subject	English
Level	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: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

In 2019, the two passages provided appropriate challenge in terms of content and language. The passages focused on the subject of the internet and how it has affected our perception of truth, considering such topics as 'fake news', the existence of 'filter bubbles', and the contrast between online and traditional journalism. The eight questions on passage one provided opportunities for candidates to apply a range of skills, for example analysis of language, including word choice, sentence structure, imagery and tone as well as explanation of the writer's ideas. The final question, on both passages, required the candidates to identify three key ideas on which the writers of the two passages disagreed and to support their choices with evidence from the passages.

This question paper performed largely as expected. The topic and level of reading demand was deemed to be slightly more demanding than last year. This contributed to grade boundaries which were slightly lower than those of 2018.

Question paper: Critical Reading

In 2019, there were new texts, following the publication of the refreshed Scottish set text list (January 2017). There was extensive consultation with the profession at the time of the refresh, and SQA clearly signalled the change of texts to ensure sufficient time to prepare for the change. In longer texts, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* replaced *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*. In poetry, two poems by each poet were replaced by two new poems, keeping the total at six poems. In short stories, the overall number of texts to be studied was reduced from six to four, and one new short story was introduced. This change was in response to a specific request by teachers for a reduction in the numbers of short stories to improve parity across the genres.

As in previous years, the emphasis in the Scottish text question was on analysis. The lower-mark questions required the candidates to comment on the use of language and literary techniques to convey central concerns such as setting, characterisation and thematic development. The final 10-mark questions required candidates to discuss an element of the writer's work, for example an aspect of characterisation, theme, or a specific technique such as symbolism in relation to both the text printed in the question paper and the wider work or other works. Care was taken to ensure that the final questions for all texts were sufficiently challenging to enable candidates to demonstrate their knowledge and skill at Higher. Across all texts, there was parity in terms of demand and of scope to draw upon the whole text and/or other texts, in order to answer the questions fully.

Performance was largely consistent across the 14 specified texts in the Scottish text section and across the three genres of drama, prose and poetry. Options proved to be of similar demand.

In terms of uptake, the most popular genre was poetry. The most popular option, overall, was Carol Ann Duffy, followed by Norman MacCaig, *The Cone Gatherers*, *Men Should Weep* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

In poetry, after Carol Ann Duffy and Norman MacCaig, the most popular choice was Liz Lochhead, followed by Don Paterson and then Robert Burns. A small number of candidates chose Sorley MacLean. In drama, after *Men Should Weep*, *The Slab Boys* was the more popular choice. A small number of candidates chose *The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black, Black Oil*. In prose, after *The Cone Gatherers* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the next most popular prose choice was Iain Crichton Smith's short stories, followed by *Sunset Song* and then the short stories of George Mackay Brown.

Candidates chose a range of texts for their essays. Performance was similar across the different questions and genres. In drama, the most popular text was Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar named Desire*. Also popular was the work of Arthur Miller, particularly *A View from the Bridge*, *All My Sons*, *The Crucible*, and *Death of a Salesman*. Some plays by Shakespeare were popular, especially *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Macbeth*.

In prose fiction, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald was the most popular choice. Other popular prose texts included William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, JD Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as the works of Ernest Hemingway, Charles Dickens, Kate Chopin, Jane Austen, Bernard MacLaverty, Sylvia Plath and Edgar Allan Poe.

A number of candidates chose to answer on prose non-fiction: George Orwell's essays were popular, especially *A Hanging* and *Marrakech*.

In poetry, a number of candidates chose to write about texts which focused on a character, for example Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* and *Porphyria's Lover*, Carol Ann Duffy's *Havisham* and Walt Whitman's *O Captain, My Captain!*. The works of Sylvia Plath, Seamus Heaney, Philip Larkin and John Keats were also evident.

A number of candidates chose to write their essay on a media text. In this genre, popular choices included the films *The Godfather*, *The Shining*, *Psycho*, *Shutter Island* and *No Country for Old Men*. A very small number chose to write on language. All questions were chosen by some candidates.

This question paper performed largely as expected. There were no specific questions which did not perform as expected. However, markers reported slightly poorer performance across the question paper particularly in essay writing and in the final question in the Scottish text section.

Portfolio-writing

The portfolio-writing performed largely as expected. However, markers reported lower marks in performance at the upper end of the marking range.

Performance-spoken language

The performance-spoken language element of assessment performed as expected. All candidates from the group sampled during this year's verification were successful in meeting the required standards for the Higher English performance-spoken language component.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

Candidates engaged well with the passages, which focused on the impact of the internet on the way we view news. They approached the task conscientiously and many performed well. Most candidates had time to complete the paper, including spending sufficient time on the final question on both passages, although some did not complete the final questions 8 and 9. Most candidates attempted all questions. The strength of this performance indicated thorough and appropriate preparation in centres.

Question 1: most candidates identified one way in which the invention of the printing press was important. Many identified two ways. The longevity, wide use, set layout and reliability of the printed medium were all commented on by candidates.

Question 3: most candidates successfully explained at least one aspect of what the writer believed had happened to the idea of truth. Many explained two aspects. Most candidates focused on the difficulty experienced when deciding what is true. Some commented on the lack of a way to achieve consensus and the social division which can follow.

Question 4: most candidates successfully explained one or two ways in which the writer's argument was supported by the example of the Paris attack. Some explained three ways. Popular answers included the pace and wide distribution of false stories as well as the difficulty experienced when countering such stories.

Question 6: most candidates successfully explained one or two reasons why the writer believed that social media has a negative impact on us. Many candidates explained the tendency of 'filter bubbles' to confirm pre-existing beliefs, to isolate us from alternative viewpoints, and to prevent us from experiencing information which would correct false stories.

Question paper: Critical Reading

Centres had clearly prepared candidates thoroughly for the Critical Reading question paper. In both the Scottish textual analysis and the critical essay, candidates showed detailed knowledge and understanding, as well as enthusiasm for their texts.

Many candidates performed well in the shorter analysis questions on the extracts or texts in the Scottish textual analysis. Many candidates devoted sufficient time to answering the final, 10-mark question and made successful links between the printed extract or text and the wider work studied in class. Many candidates were able to make perceptive comments and showed good general understanding of how the question related to the text or texts studied (commonality). Most opted to answer this question in a series of bullet points, an approach which worked well.

In the critical essay section, many candidates found a suitable question and managed to structure their essays effectively, demonstrating thorough knowledge of the texts they had studied, for example through the use of quotation and direct references to areas of content. The majority of candidates showed genuine engagement with the texts and this was demonstrated in their evaluative stance in the essay.

Portfolio–writing

The vast majority of candidates successfully submitted two pieces of writing which clearly addressed the requirement for one broadly creative and one broadly discursive piece of writing. In the portfolio–writing, candidates have the opportunity to redraft and improve pieces, and the standard of written English in some candidates' finished work, including technical accuracy, was high.

In creative writing, many candidates chose to write about personal experience, often focusing on life-changing events such as bereavement, family issues, mental health experiences, and experience of life as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Some reflected on aspects of their personality and the challenges of being a young person in today's world. This was often handled thoughtfully and maturely, creating a strong sense of the writer's personality. Many candidates who chose to submit imaginative writing, showed awareness of genre requirements such as character and plot. Many achieved a high standard of writing in creation of atmosphere and setting and in the use of structure. There was an increase in the number of poetry and drama submissions and creative pieces written in Scots, which were often of a high standard. There were submissions in various dialectal forms of the Scots language, including Doric, Shetland Scots and Glaswegian Scots.

In discursive writing, it was clear that most candidates chose a subject which interested them. Many chose current issues such as aspects of the environment, with the impact of plastic being a popular choice. Many chose to write about aspects of human society, politics and culture, such as the UK's relationship with Europe, attitudes to LGBTQ+ issues and the plight of refugees. A number of candidates explored topics of particular relevance to young people, such as society's tendency to judge them, and the challenges facing young people who experience mental health issues. A very small number of candidates chose to write reports. Many candidates conducted appropriate research and structured their essays effectively. Some candidates chose local topics and these were often tackled well. Some candidates showed impressive engagement with current national and international affairs and wrote with enthusiasm and commitment. Some candidates managed to tackle their chosen subject with originality and humour.

The overwhelming majority of candidates chose to word process their pieces, and the standard of presentation was high. Most identified any sources used.

Performance–spoken language

Many centres took a holistic approach to assessment, offering a wide range of engaging tasks for the performance–spoken language element of the course. Candidates performed well, especially where tasks were linked to the wider context of learning. For example linking presentations to discursive essay-topics being covered in their portfolio–writing, or group discussions linked to aspects of literature being studied for the Higher question paper. Some appropriate standalone activities were also used.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

Question 5: some candidates found the analysis of language to convey the writer's criticism of the way the internet is used to communicate information challenging. Some successfully selected language features such as word choice (popular choices included deliberate manipulation, cascade, unstoppable and momentum) and the use of a list, but did not manage to link their selections to the idea of criticism.

Question 7: some candidates found analysis of imagery and sentence structure to criticise aspects of modern news challenging. When answering on imagery, the most popular selections were junk food, gangs and gorged. The most popular choice in sentence structure was parenthesis: candidates often accurately selected this feature but did not always comment on the function of parenthesis to emphasise a point.

Question 8: some candidates found the analysis of language to create an inspirational tone challenging. Features which were popular choices included the idea of the struggle being worth it, the use of a short, emphatic sentence and words such as embraced, celebrated and responsibly. Many candidates managed to make basic comments on their choices.

Question 9: some candidates found the selection of three key areas of disagreement challenging. However, most candidates managed to provide one or two key areas of disagreement, supported by appropriate evidence.

In questions where 2 marks could be awarded for a detailed and/or insightful comment and 1 mark for a basic comment, many candidates scored 1 mark, rather than 2. However, some candidates did score 2 marks for detailed and/or insightful comments.

A number of candidates did not manage to use their own words where the question required this and failed to gain marks as a result.

Question paper: Critical Reading

Some candidates tended to assert rather than analyse, both in the shorter questions and in the final 10-mark analysis question in the Scottish text section.

In the final 10-mark question of the Scottish textual analysis, some candidates did not fully concentrate on the question's key focus. For example, in the Carol Ann Duffy question, some candidates did not comment successfully on the use of contrast to explore central concerns, instead commenting on central concerns alone. In the Norman MacCaig question, some candidates did not comment successfully on the connection between characters and their surroundings, instead commenting on characters alone. In *The Slab Boys*, some candidates did not discuss how the theme of deception and/or self-deception was developed, instead listing examples of characters' behaviour without a context.

In the critical essay, some candidates showed understanding of their chosen texts, but did not focus sufficiently on the requirements of the question: their essays were less relevant, as a result. Some candidates spent too long on retelling the narrative or describing characters in a basic way, rather than focusing on analysis and evaluation of the text. Some candidates

experienced difficulty in aspects of essay writing such as organising their ideas and technical accuracy.

A number of candidates had difficulty in choosing an appropriate critical essay question and struggled to match the text they knew to the question chosen. In some instances, candidates' knowledge and understanding would have been better directed in response to another question.

Time management was an issue for some candidates. Markers reported that a small number of candidates wrote long essays and then did not finish their final textual analysis question. Conversely, a number of candidates wrote short essays which tended to lack the detail required to achieve higher marks. Some candidates began by answering the final 10-mark question, an approach which often led to difficulties as they had not familiarised themselves with the text via the shorter questions.

A small number of candidates had difficulty with following the genre requirements of the paper. Examples include using a drama text to answer on prose, or vice versa, or mixing up non-fiction and fiction texts. A very small number did not follow the instruction for the critical essay that *'Your essay must be on a different genre from that chosen in section 1.'* A very small number answered both their Scottish text question and critical essay question on the same text.

Portfolio-writing

Some candidates did not adhere to the published word limit of 1,300 words for each piece of writing. A small number of candidates wrote very short pieces.

In imaginative writing, some candidates concentrated on plot, developing complicated and unrealistic narratives, based on 'sensational' topics, rather than focusing on developing characters or atmosphere.

In discursive writing, some candidates asserted their views but did not provide sufficient argument or evidence to support these.

In a small number of cases, there was evidence that research had been conducted, but it was not employed effectively to support the candidate's viewpoint, for example the use of lengthy quotation from sources without fluent integration into the line of argument.

Markers reported an increase in portfolio submissions scoring around 7–9 marks with fewer scoring in the 13–15 marks range.

Performance-spoken language

While the majority of candidates responded effectively to tasks set by centres, identifying roles within the group, and/or a series of points to cover in discussions, may help support less confident members in group discussion.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

Reading good quality non-fiction, for example broadsheet journalism, will greatly assist candidates to prepare for this part of the course assessment.

It is very important that candidates attempt to adhere to the requirement for own words in questions where this is indicated. Direct lifts of words and expressions from the question and/or passage will gain no marks.

In questions which require the analysis of the writer's use of language, candidates should be aware that no marks are awarded at Higher for references or quotations alone. No marks are awarded for assertion that an effect has been produced: candidates must analyse how this has been done. For example if they choose to answer on a list, it is not enough to assert what the effect of the list is, they must analyse how this effect is achieved. In the case of a list, referring to the number or variety of items in the list is often a useful way forward. If candidates choose to answer on word choice, considering the connotations of the chosen word or expression is an effective approach.

In analyse questions, it is important that candidates use their selections of language to answer the question. For example, if asked how the writer uses language to criticise the way the internet is used, the candidate's comments must link their selections to the idea of criticism.

Candidates should remember the division of marks in many Higher questions, *'2 marks for detailed/insightful comment; 1 mark for more basic comment'*.

Candidates should attempt to explain their analytical comments as clearly and as fully as they can. In questions asking for a response on the writer's ideas, candidates should attempt to ensure that their full understanding is expressed.

Candidates should be aware that *'at least two examples'* does not mean that they are restricted to giving two points in their answer. In 4-mark analysis questions, providing four points is one effective strategy.

The use of bullet points might assist candidates in the structuring of answers for high mark questions.

Question paper: Critical Reading

Most candidates showed genuine enthusiasm for their texts and sincere engagement with, for example, characters and themes.

Ensuring that candidates have a broad knowledge of literature and have tackled texts of sufficient demand for Higher is important.

Candidates should be aware of the need to analyse when answering the shorter questions in the Scottish text section.

Candidates should read the 10-mark question carefully, and make sure that they use their textual knowledge to construct an answer which meets the demands of the entirety of the question.

Candidates should continue to make appropriate links within a longer text or between shorter texts, for use in the final question in the Scottish text section.

Candidates should be aware of the three part requirement of the final question in the Scottish text section. This is 2 marks for showing general understanding of how the question links to the text or texts (commonality), 2 marks for analysis of the extract or text printed, 6 marks for commenting on the wider text or texts. Organising their answers in a series of bullet points within three sections might benefit candidates.

In the commonality part of the 10-mark answer, candidates should focus on general points about the writer's work in relation to the question, or refer to specific texts. They should go beyond making a basic link between the question and a text or texts for the full 2 marks. A careful reading of the question is very helpful here.

In the final 6 marks, which relate to the wider text or texts, when answering on shorter texts (poetry or short stories) it is acceptable for candidates to refer to one or more than one other text. When answering on the writer's wider work, candidates should be aware that restricting their comments to, for example, one other poem will not always yield sufficient material for the 6 marks available. A wide-ranging knowledge across the other shorter texts or the rest of the longer text is more likely to provide sufficient further points.

Teachers and lecturers should remind candidates of the requirements for choosing a question from the critical essay section. This must be from a different genre to the Scottish text section. They should make sure that they choose the appropriate genre of question for their text.

Candidates should be careful to select an appropriate critical essay question. Some candidates were disadvantaged by choosing an inappropriate question.

It is important that candidates are aware that their critical essay must be relevant to the question. They should try to avoid retelling the story or repeating information which is not relevant to the question. Preparing an essay and trying to make it 'fit' a question in the exam is not a helpful strategy.

Candidates should be reminded that microanalysis is not always needed or advisable in a critical essay, particularly on a larger text. There are many acceptable approaches to planning and developing the line of argument in an essay.

Candidates should be aware that technical accuracy is important in the critical essay section.

Portfolio–writing

Candidates are reminded to adhere to stated word limits, 1,300 words maximum for each piece. It is possible to achieve a high standard of performance without reaching this maximum. However, very short pieces are unlikely to gain high marks.

Clarity of structure should be encouraged in candidates' writing.

In personal writing, candidates should try to focus on conveying thoughts, feelings and personality rather than relating events.

In imaginative writing, candidates should try to focus on developing characters and atmosphere, rather than over-elaborate and/or unrealistic narrative on 'sensational' topics.

Candidates are required to submit one piece of broadly creative writing. When submitting poetry, it is acceptable to submit more than one poem, but, if doing so, these should be linked, for example thematically or through the use of different narrative voices. A group of poems will be considered as one piece.

All sources used in preparation for pieces of writing must be acknowledged. Time taken on the organisation and acknowledgement of sources improves presentation, assists markers, and helps to develop good study habits.

Encouraging personal choice can be beneficial when considering topics for discursive writing. Often local and current issues have powerful relevance for candidates.

In discursive writing, sufficient research should be undertaken in order that the candidate's argument can be fully explored. Evidence should be included in an essay as part of the coherent structure.

Technical accuracy is very important in the portfolio–writing and candidates should be encouraged to take care when preparing their final drafts.

Performance–spoken language

Linking tasks to the wider context of learning, for example using literature being studied for the question paper, or research linked to the portfolio–writing was very effective practice.

Almost all centres provided clear evidence of the aspects of performance being either achieved or not achieved. This was in the form of a detailed checklist of a candidate's verbal response(s) or detailed observation notes including examples of the candidates 'choice and use of language' and 'relevant responses'.

Centres are reminded to use the detailed marking instructions provided by SQA when assessing a candidate performance. There are clear examples of assessment of the performance–spoken language, including documentation for recording evidence, available on the [Understanding Standards website](#). Access to these materials is available via SQA co-ordinators.

Grade boundary and statistical information:

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2018	36185
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Number of resulted entries in 2019	35461
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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	23.0%	23.0%	8151	67
B	25.0%	48.0%	8879	57
C	25.2%	73.2%	8937	48
D	18.5%	91.7%	6556	38
No award	8.3%	-	2938	-

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.