



Course report 2019

Subject	English
Level	National 5

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

Candidate responses, and feedback from markers suggest that the passage was accessible, engaging and interesting. The subject matter was familiar to candidates in that it was about societal change in the UK's eating habits brought about by the growth and spread of fast food outlets.

Candidates demonstrated their language learning from the National 5 English course. Most were able to answer all questions, but as with last year, some did not manage to complete the final question, perhaps indicating time management issues. Overall, the performance of candidates made it clear that they were presented at an appropriate level. However, a small proportion were clearly not at the stage in their learning of being ready for assessment at National 5.

The question paper performed as expected with questions providing appropriate levels of discrimination. The topic and level of reading demand was deemed to be marginally more accessible than last year. This contributed to grade boundaries which were slightly higher than those of 2018.

Question paper: Critical Reading

This question paper performed as expected. As in previous years, candidates demonstrated their critical reading skills effectively in responses to both the Scottish text section and the critical essay.

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 *Kidnapped*. 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.

Candidate performance was similar and consistent across all Scottish text options. In terms of uptake, the majority of candidates answered on a poetry text, but there was a significant rise in the numbers choosing drama. This year, Norman MacCaig was the most popular option. Following the pattern set last year, *Sailmaker* by Alan Spence had the second highest uptake, followed by Carol Ann Duffy and then *Tally's Blood* by Ann Marie di Mambro. Prose remains the least popular genre in this section, but there was an encouraging uptake for the newly-added *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

This profile is reversed for the critical essay section, where responses on prose texts predominate. However this year, more candidates opted for poetry here than in 2018.

For the critical essay, novels such as John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* remain popular, but there were new additions, for example *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd, and *The Humans* by Matt Haig. A fairly wide range of short stories was evident, including *The Test* by Angelica Gibbs, *The Pedestrian* by Ray Bradbury, *The Park* by James Matthews, *On the Sidewalk Bleeding* by Ed McBain/Evan Hunter, *The Lighthouse* by Agnes Owens, *The Landlady* and *Lamb to the Slaughter* by Roald Dahl, *The Sniper* by Liam O' Flaherty, *Flowers* by Robin Jenkins, *At The Bar* by William McIlvanney, and *Father and Son* by Bernard MacLaverty. Prose non-fiction responses included the essays of George Orwell.

For the critical essay, drama and poetry questions were done in broadly equal numbers. Drama texts included Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge*, and *Death of a Salesman*, JB Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*, and Layton Green's *The Letterbox*. Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Seamus Heaney featured often in responses to poetry, but candidates also selected poems by the writers on the set text list, most frequently Carol Ann Duffy and Norman MacCaig.

As with recent years, media responses made up approximately 10% of the total. Candidates tended to select popular films such as *Gladiator*, *Jaws*, *Blade Runner*, *Baz Luhrmann's Romeo and Juliet*, and *Psycho*. Again, very few candidates chose questions from the language section.

Portfolio-writing

Candidate performance in the portfolio-writing was similar to that of previous years. Markers noted that candidates' portfolios were interesting to read, that pieces were generally accurate, and that they contained some mature personal reflection and clear evidence of robust skills, indicating that English teachers are working hard to encourage and to develop the skills of writing appropriate to National 5.

For the broadly creative piece, most candidates chose to write about an aspect of their personal experience, one marker observing that 'reflective writing was genuine and full of personality.' A good number of candidates achieved success with a piece of carefully constructed short fiction. There were more poetry submissions this year, and the skill levels suggested that candidates choosing this form of expression had a special interest in the genre. There was also a slight increase in the number of drama scripts submitted, with candidates showing awareness of a range of appropriate genre features.

For broadly discursive pieces, candidates tended to select an issue-based topic, conduct research, and then write about it in a discursive, persuasive or argumentative way. Some candidates chose to employ personal, anecdotal material as part of broadly discursive writing. This was often done to good effect. Common topics for broadly discursive writing this year were environmental and global warming issues, gun control in America, animal testing, zoos, Airbnb, the use of mobile phones, and general and mental health issues. Sports-related topics, such as the use of video assistant referee (VAR) in high-level football matches were also popular. Candidates again wrote successfully on subjects which had local or personal relevance, for example Arran ferry timetable changes, the benefits of almond milk, and a new stadium for Aberdeen FC.

Other candidates successfully pursued, researched and wrote on information-based topics, often in the form of reports. Biographies were also common here. Again, some candidates chose to employ personal, anecdotal material as part of broadly discursive writing. This was often done to good effect.

Performance–spoken language

The performance–spoken language element of assessment performed as expected. Almost all candidates from the group sampled during this year’s verification were successful in meeting the required standards for the National 5 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

Question 1: most candidates were able to provide two examples of word choice with an appropriate analytical comment for at least one example.

Question 2: in a similar way to question 1, most candidates were able to provide a relevant example of the writer's use of language.

Question 3: candidates were, largely, able to make at least two points of summary here.

Question 4: most candidates were able to supply one or two relevant examples of language. Some candidates gave precise analysis of how the use of language made it clear that a visit to McDonald's could, at one time, have seemed strange.

Question 5: candidates were slightly more successful with this structural link question than with the similar question from last year.

Question 6: most candidates were able to isolate and to identify a number of points here. The most successful candidates were careful to tie their points closely to the key phrase from the question: eating habits.

Question 7: a good number of candidates achieved at least 1 mark here — mostly for demonstrating an understanding of what was meant by 'convenience'.

Question 8: candidates coped well with the requirement to deal with two time periods: 'now' and 'then' in their responses.

Question 9: many candidates gained a mark for selecting an appropriate expression, but only some were able to link it structurally to a similar earlier expression, or to a specific main idea of the passage.

Question paper: Critical Reading

The majority of candidates were successful in the demonstration of their skills of understanding, analysis and evaluation in the questions on the extract of their choice. For the most part, marks were good here. Many candidates successfully employed a clear three-part structure for their answers to the final question. This seemed to help them to ensure coverage of all aspects of the question.

Candidates were generally able to select an appropriate critical essay question, and then offer a response that was detailed, relevant, and displayed knowledge of the text studied. Markers observed that candidates seemed to write more convincingly and more fully on texts with a fairly high degree of challenge, for example Shakespeare. Although mark variations were slight, candidates did better with questions related to a theme or issue. Most essays met the minimum standards required for technical accuracy.

Portfolio–writing

Candidates had clearly worked with commitment on their portfolios of writing, demonstrating that they understood the standard required and that they were able to meet it. Most had no difficulty in showing their ability to write for different purposes within the two defined categories broadly creative and broadly discursive. The vast majority of candidates expressed themselves effectively in written English, using detailed language with clarity, and showing an awareness of structure. Some candidates went further and wrote with developing style and flair. It was clear that successful candidates had taken effective advantage of teacher or lecturer feedback on one earlier draft of writing.

Many candidates wrote about their own life experiences in sensitive, and often mature ways. Candidates expressed ideas and opinions frequently with some developed thought, showing their ability to engage thoughtfully with the world around them. As noted above, a reasonably wide range of topics was covered in broadly discursive writing. In general, candidates appeared to do better when they pursued topics which were of interest to them, or they felt strongly about. This would seem to suggest that personalisation and choice is a significant factor here.

In broadly discursive writing, it was evident that most candidates had conducted a reasonable amount of research in the exploration of their chosen topics. Candidates mainly acknowledged sources clearly and systematically.

Again, candidates who chose to submit pieces of drama or poetry often showed an awareness of forms and structures particular to the genre.

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, presentations linked to discursive essay topics being covered in the portfolio–writing, or group discussions linked to aspects of literature being studied for the National 5 question paper. Some appropriate standalone activities were also used.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

Question 1: some candidates were not able to give precise analytical comments to accompany the examples of word choice cited.

Question 2: some candidates used the word 'unfamiliar' (which was a lift from the stem of the question) as part of their analytical comment.

Question 3: the requirement for the use of own words here was an issue for many candidates. It should be noted that own words were not required for terms such as 'Happy Meal' and 'drive-thru.'

Question 4: some candidates based their analytical comments on the word 'strange' which was a lift from the phrasing of the question.

Question 5: candidates were required to make a selection from the sentence quoted in the question, and explain how it linked backwards or forwards, thereby showing an awareness of structure. Some candidates quoted the whole sentence in line 28, rather than following the question's instruction 'By referring to any part of the sentence in line 28.' However, it should be noted that candidates did this 'structural link' question more successfully this year than the similar question from last year.

Question 6: some candidates based their answers on feelings and reactions, rather than 'eating habits'.

Question 7: some candidates found difficulty in using their own words for this question, lifting expressions such as 'fast food' and 'we hung around' from the passage. Others found it difficult to demonstrate an understanding of the concept of 'formality'.

Question 8: some candidates did not select examples from different time periods, offering two from 'now,' or two from 'then'.

Question 9: most candidates made an appropriate selection, but not all were able to link it to an earlier expression or idea or to a specific main idea.

Question paper: Critical Reading

In the Scottish text section, some candidates' answers to 'writer's use of language' questions on the extracts did not make sufficiently developed analytical comments, and concentrated on meaning only. Some candidates provided a restatement of the wording of the question instead of an analytical comment.

Some candidates offered long, or extended, quotations from the Scottish text extracts. While sometimes this is appropriate, candidates should be careful to make it clear exactly which specific words or expressions they are directing their analytical comments to.

In the final question of the Scottish text section, some candidates did not address their answers sufficiently closely to the focus of the question. A few candidates offered very little

in terms of reference to either 'elsewhere' within one text or to another text by the same writer.

In the critical essay, some candidates offered analysis that concentrated on meaning, rather than the impact of techniques. Some responses relied too heavily on plot or narrative summary.

Time management was an issue for a few candidates in the critical reading question paper. There was evidence of some having spent too long on the first section of the paper.

For the critical essay, a few candidates had difficulty with the genre requirements of the question paper. Some did not follow the instruction 'Your answer must be on a different genre from that chosen in section 1.' Some selected a question from a section that did not match the genre of their chosen text.

Portfolio–writing

In personal writing, some candidates relied too heavily on an account of events at the expense of an exploration of thoughts, feelings, reactions and reflection.

In discursive writing, some candidates found difficulty in the construction of a reasonably coherent line of argument.

A small amount of discursive writing was thin in ideas or information, or lacked length and development.

A few candidates did not make sufficient acknowledgement of sources consulted.

There were indications that some candidates had not taken the opportunity to revise or redraft their writing.

Performance–spoken language

While the majority of candidates responded effectively to tasks set by centres, having some identified 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

Personal reading, and supported reading in class will greatly assist in preparation for this part of the course assessment. As will the discussion of ideas, opinions, and interesting uses of language featured in a wide variety of reading material.

Candidates should pay careful attention to the requirement to use their own words to demonstrate their understanding of key ideas in the passage. The expression 'own words' is emboldened where appropriate in order to remind candidates of its importance. Direct lifts of words or expressions from the question and/or passage will gain no marks in this type of question.

When attempting to recast key ideas from the passage into their own words, candidates should focus on the whole idea, and not just part of it. Marks are often lost when candidates make only a 'partial gloss' of an idea from the passage. However, candidates should be reassured that tolerance is applied in the case of single words which are difficult or impossible to gloss (for example Happy Meal, drive-thru, and food).

In questions which require the analysis of the writer's use of language, the simplest model to follow is: reference plus relevant comment. At National 5, appropriate references are awarded 1 mark. A further 1 mark is given for a relevant analytical comment. Candidates should try to explain their analytical comments as clearly and as fully as they can.

If a question requires candidates to refer to 'examples of language,' candidates should be careful to make precise selections and beware of quoting too much from the passage (where selection is not obvious).

In a question such as question 5, candidates should make specific reference to a part of the sentence identified, and then explain its structural purpose. Does it 'look back,' or 'look forward'? In other words, does it relate to preceding or following ideas? And which ones? This is exemplified in the published marking instructions. When dealing with questions on the ending of a passage, for example question 9, candidates should aim to make a point specifically on structure in their responses. Again, refer to the published marking instructions for exemplification of this.

The use of bullet points is often an effective way to structure a response, especially in 'identify' or 'summarise' questions worth a large number of marks.

Question paper: Critical Reading

Candidates should try to have a sense of the work as a whole in terms of a play, novel, collection of short stories or poems while preparing for the final question in the Scottish text section (for example key ideas, themes and characterisation). Consideration given to thematic concerns is highly valuable.

Candidates should be aware of the three-part requirement of the final question in the Scottish text section (commonality, extract, elsewhere). A clear understanding of this might help candidates to structure their responses. Candidates should be reminded to ensure that their response to the final question (the demonstration of their knowledge and understanding) has direct relevance to the question.

Teachers and lecturers should remind candidates of the rules of the question paper, in particular the requirement to choose a critical essay question from a genre which is different from their Scottish set text.

Candidates should give a clear indication of which critical essay question they are responding to.

Candidates should be reminded of the need to maintain relevance to the question in critical essay responses.

Portfolio-writing

In broadly creative writing, teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to choose genres and subject matters which suit their personal creative expression.

Clarity of expression and structure should be encouraged in candidates' writing.

In creative writing, candidates should be aware of, and try to use, the key features of the genre.

When submitting poetry, one poem is perfectly acceptable. There is no minimum word length.

In personal writing, candidates should attempt to express an exploration of, or reflection on, their thoughts, feelings, and reactions to an experience.

If candidates acquire careful research skills this will assist them greatly when producing broadly discursive writing. They should consider the sources they have consulted, as this will encourage clarity of thought and engagement with issues. It may also help to ensure that a developed argument emerges. Candidates must acknowledge all sources they use in preparation for writing. Time taken to do this will help develop good study habits.

As with broadly creative writing, a degree of personalisation and choice seems to be beneficial when candidates are considering topics for discursive writing.

Candidates should take the opportunity to reflect on and to redraft their pieces of writing following feedback on a first draft.

Performance–spoken language

Linking tasks to the wider context of learning, for example using literature being studied for the critical reading 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 is clear exemplification 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	44477
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Number of resulted entries in 2019	45593
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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	35.3%	35.3%	16085	72
B	30.3%	65.5%	13801	61
C	20.7%	86.3%	9459	51
D	9.8%	96.1%	4462	40
No award	3.9%	-	1786	-

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.