



Course Report 2017

Subject	English
Level	Advanced Higher

The statistics used in this report have been compiled before the completion of any Post Results Services.

This report provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers, lecturers and assessors in their preparation of candidates for future assessment. 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 assessment documents and marking instructions.

Section 1: Comments on the Assessment

Summary of the Course assessment

Component 1: question paper — Literary Study

The Question Paper, Literary Study is worth 20 marks. It consists of four sections: Poetry, Prose Fiction, Prose Non-fiction, and Drama. Candidates choose one question to answer in the form of a critical essay on literary texts from any of these sections. There were seven questions in each section in the 2017 paper. Questions followed the style and format used in the published Specimen Question Paper (SQP) and the Exemplar Question Paper (EQP).

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 paper. Questions usually asked candidates to 'Discuss ...' but terms such as 'Analyse ...' and 'Compare and contrast ...' were also used.

The question paper performed in line with expectations, and feedback from the marking team and from practitioners suggested that it was fair in terms of course coverage and overall level of demand. There was a wide range of questions from which candidates could choose.

This table, based on the reported choices of candidates in 2017, shows the relative popularity of the Literary Study questions.

Part A: Poetry	% of candidates	Part B: Prose Fiction	% of candidates	Part C: Prose Non- Fiction	% of candidates	Part D: Drama	% of candidates
A 1	5	B 8	4	C 15	0	D 22	2
A 2	<1	B 9	8	C 16	0	D 23	12
A 3	10	B 10	2	C 17	0	D 24	3
A 4	10	B 11	4	C 18	<1	D 25	11
A 5	<1	B 12	1	C 19	<1	D 26	2
A 6	5	B 13	4	C 20	0	D 27	3
A 7	4	B 14	1	C 21	0	D 28	10

The five most popular questions were from the Poetry and Drama sections. These were:

- ◆ *'Poetry deepens our understanding of human situations and actions – emotional, intellectual, moral ...'* Discuss with reference to **three** poems. (A3)
- ◆ Analyse the poetic treatment of time and change in **three** poems. (A4)
- ◆ *'The best drama, no matter where or when it is set, offers universal insights into the human condition.'* Discuss with reference to **two** plays. (D23)

- ◆ Discuss the dramatic presentation of women’s experiences in particular societies in **two** plays. (D25)
- ◆ Discuss how the theme of identity is explored in **two** plays. (D28)

Component 2: question paper — Textual Analysis

The question paper, Textual Analysis is worth 20 marks. It consists of four sections: Poetry, Prose Fiction, Prose Non-fiction and Drama. Candidates choose one question to answer in the form of an appropriately-structured critical analysis of a previously-unseen text. The texts selected for 2017 were: Poetry — *Sestina* by Elizabeth Bishop; Prose Fiction — an extract from *South Riding* by Winifred Holtby; Prose Non-fiction — an extract from *Mountains of the Mind* by Robert Macfarlane; Drama — an extract from *Buried Child* by Sam Shepard.

Questions followed the style and format of the Specimen Question Paper (SQP) and Exemplar Question Paper (EQP). Apart from the change in the number of marks allocated to the paper, this (now compulsory) component remains essentially unchanged from the previous version of the qualification in terms of the skills that must be applied by candidates.

The question paper generally performed in line with expectations although, on average, candidates performed less well in Part A — Poetry. Feedback from the marking team and from practitioners suggested that the question paper was fair in terms of the overall level of demand, though the poetry section was slightly more demanding than intended, and this was taken into account when setting grade boundaries.

Poetry and Prose Fiction were (as in previous years) the most popular options for candidates. The following table, based on the reported choices of candidates in 2017, shows the relative popularity of the Textual Analysis questions.

Genre	% of candidates
Poetry	51
Prose Fiction	35
Prose Non-fiction	8
Drama	6

Component 3: Portfolio – writing

The Portfolio – writing requires candidates to submit two pieces of writing for external assessment. Each piece is worth 15 marks. Candidates can submit work in the following genres: Reflective, Fiction, Poetry, Drama, Persuasive, Argumentative, and Informative. Each piece of writing must be from a **different** genre, eg it is not permissible to submit two pieces of fiction or two poems. Fiction and Reflective writing continued to be the most popular of the creative options. Persuasive writing was again the most popular of the ‘new’ genres available at this level.

This component performed in line with expectations.

The table, based on the reported choices of candidates in 2017, shows the relative popularity of the genres submitted by candidates.

Genre	% of total pieces submitted
Reflective	20
Fiction	33
Poetry	13
Drama	7
Persuasive	19
Argumentative	6
Informative	2

Component 4: Project – dissertation

The Project – dissertation requires the submission of a dissertation of 2500–3000 words on an aspect of literature chosen by the candidate, and is worth 30 marks. This component performed in line with expectations.

This table, based on the reported choices of candidates in 2017, shows the relative popularity of the types of dissertation submitted by candidates.

Drama	%	Poetry	%	Prose fiction	%	Other	%
One dramatist - three or more texts	<1	One poet - wide range of poems	3	One novelist - three or more texts	<1	Mixed genres	3
One dramatist - two texts	4	One poet - narrow range of poems	2	One novelist - two texts	11	Literary non-fiction	<1
Two or more than two dramatists	3	Two or more than two poets	1	Two or more than two novelists	61		
One play	<1	One (substantial) poem	<1	One novel	7		
Other drama	0	Other poetry	<1	Other fiction (including short stories)	3		

Please note that it is no longer possible to submit dissertations on the topics of Media or Language for the new Advanced Higher — all dissertations must be on an aspect or aspects of literature.

Section 2: Comments on candidate performance

Areas in which candidates performed well

Component 1: question paper – Literary Study

Candidates responded well to almost all questions in the paper. All questions were attempted, apart from C15, C16, C17 and C20. Questions A1, A3, A4, A6, B9, B11, B13, D23, D25 and D26 tended to elicit strong responses. There were examples of candidates gaining full marks in response to most of the questions in the paper.

Markers reported that most responses usually showed engagement with the texts being discussed. Last year's popular writers were again very much in evidence: Williams, Shakespeare, Donne, Plath, Duffy, Heaney, Hardy and Austen were to the fore. There was, however, also some excellent work on other writers, including Chaucer and Nabokov. There were some excellent answers on Prose fiction and on Drama (especially on identity in *Hamlet* and *King Lear* or in *Hamlet* and *Othello*). Responses to B9 (on the use and thematic significance of setting) were well done. Answers on short stories often scored highly.

Component 2: question paper – Textual Analysis

Markers reported that the paper was generally fair and allowed candidates to respond at length to their chosen question. There were some insightful and interesting comments in response to all four texts.

- ◆ There were some very good poetry responses (although these were in the minority) which displayed a high level of analysis of form and content.
- ◆ Some markers felt that the clarity of the Prose Fiction task ('Discuss the ways in which you find the opening of this novel effective in establishing setting and character') resulted in candidates responding well to that particular question.
- ◆ Many candidates who attempted the Drama question showed understanding of the complexity of the situation presented to the audience and the dynamics between the characters.
- ◆ There was an increase in the percentage of candidates who attempted Prose Non-fiction this year and most of these seemed to find the Macfarlane extract engaging. Bullet-point type responses worked well for some candidates.

Component 3: Portfolio – writing

Good work was evident in all the creative genres. There were a good number of fiction pieces which displayed imagination and a real sense of being crafted. Markers commented on candidates making effective use of techniques appropriate to their chosen genre. Reflective writing (including some interesting pieces on mental health and LGBT issues) was often well done, so long as it avoided being merely an account of events or experience. The best argumentative or persuasive essays (often with a political slant) were well received by markers. The best poetry was clearly the result of thoughtful composition. There were fewer dramatic monologues in evidence this year, and most of the drama submitted made effective use of appropriate dramatic conventions.

Component 4: Project – dissertation

Markers reported that, in general, the performance of candidates this year was adequate or more than adequate.

As has been the case for a number of years now, dystopian fiction (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Road*, *Brave New World*) and texts which portray women overcoming societal prejudices and conventions remained very popular choices. Many dissertations dealt with twentieth century American literature (The American Dream) or nineteenth century English literature (Austen; the Brontes; Dickens). Themes relating to mental health continued to be a popular choice (*The Bell Jar*; *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*). Scottish writers were represented in dissertations on work by Welsh, Banks and Stevenson (often in tandem with Wilde to examine duality). Many poetry dissertations were on Plath (although markers also noted interesting work on Blake and Frost) while Miller and Shakespeare dominated drama.

As now seems to be the case every year, markers reported that candidates did well in dissertation when there was a clearly stated task with a closely defined focus and the texts chosen for study were sufficiently complex and sophisticated to allow candidates to display the understanding, analysis and evaluation demanded at this level. Markers reported that the more 'literary' the text, the better the candidates tended to do. Candidates also did well when they made use of reputable academic secondary sources. The best dissertations were very well presented with appropriate footnotes and bibliographies. Some of the dissertations on a single text were excellent (providing the text chosen was sufficiently complex).

Areas which candidates found demanding

Component 1: question paper – Literary Study

Markers reported that some candidates had difficulty with the following questions:

A6 – the 'too often' in the question was ignored by many candidates in their responses

A7 – candidates appeared to have problems marrying the persona to the central concerns of the text

B8 – candidates appeared to struggle with concept of 'constraints'

B13 – candidates failed to distinguish between 'role' and 'function'

D22 – candidates failed to understand 'dramatic irony'

D23 – some candidates had difficulty in understanding what was meant by 'the human condition'

Some essays were poorly constructed. Despite the wide range of questions available, the selection of an appropriate question remained problematic for some candidates.

Component 2: question paper – Textual Analysis

Markers reported that many candidates seemed to find the chosen poem, 'Sestina' challenging. These candidates struggled with the poem's form and failed to comment on it in a meaningful way. Analysis of this text was often based solely on word-choice and imagery. Some candidates attempted to impose a 'correct' reading on the poem rather than exploring

a possible range of meanings. Candidates' difficulties with the poem were reflected in the average mark for this question being lower than those of the other genres in this paper.

Some candidates who adopted a bullet-point type approach did not offer anything beyond a series of 'quote + comment' statements, which did not allow them to display anything other than a very basic analysis. Some candidates who adopted what seemed a formulaic approach to constructing an answer offered responses that were somewhat limited.

Component 3: Portfolio–writing

Some candidates were hampered by submitting work that had not been proof-read or edited effectively. There was some confusion in the labelling of Persuasive and Argumentative pieces. Some candidates struggled to move beyond the kind of discursive writing acceptable at lower levels.

Many American topics were chosen (gun control; inmates on death row), which did not always lead to successful pieces of writing. Poor expression hampered some candidates.

As was the case last year, weaker poems often ignored any attempt to make use of poetic techniques and were really just pieces of prose laid out as verse. Markers also commented that some poems were particularly obscure, and that candidates should remember that clarity is often just as effective in a poem as ambiguity is.

Component 4: Project – dissertation

Some candidates were rather unambitious in their selection of texts. For example, dissertations which discussed only two short stories or two brief poems did not allow candidates to display fully the kind of knowledge, understanding and analysis that would give their work access to the higher end of the mark range. There were also instances of centres whose candidates were using the same (or very similar) texts and topics for dissertation. This approach was unlikely to allow candidates to pursue their individual interests and enthusiasms, which should be a feature of the personalisation and choice available to candidates at this level.

Markers noted that candidates struggled with this component if the texts selected for study lacked sufficient depth and complexity. Candidates often struggled to offer meaningful analysis of texts such as *The Help* or young adult fiction.

There were too many examples of candidates making what were, at best, tenuous connections between texts. Some candidates also offered no real analysis, but rather a narrative commentary of their chosen texts.

Despite the inclusion of a check box on the Dissertation flyleaf this year, there was still evidence of some candidates ignoring the requirements for footnotes/referencing and bibliographies. There was also evidence of poor structure and apparent lack of effective planning in some dissertations.

Section 3: Advice for the preparation of future candidates

Advice offered to centres in previous Course Reports remains valid for the duration of this version of the Advanced Higher English National Qualification.

Component 1: question paper – Literary Study

For Literary Study, teachers/lecturers should ensure that 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 ample practice in making effective use of the time available (1.5 hours)
- ◆ 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’ 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

Component 2: question paper – Textual Analysis

For Textual Analysis, it is recommended that candidates should:

- ◆ develop close and essential familiarity with the conventions of a range of literary genres through guided reading
- ◆ acquire the critical apparatus necessary for the analysis and evaluation of complex texts through focused teaching and extensive practice
- ◆ be prepared to analyse more than just word-choice and imagery when discussing poetry

Component 3: Portfolio – writing

For the Portfolio – writing, it is recommended that:

- ◆ candidates should 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 the textual analysis component of the course
- ◆ the submission of groups of unrelated (or loosely related) poems should be avoided

Component 4: Project–dissertation

For the Dissertation, teachers/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 thrust of each study is incorporated into the statement of intent and title
- ◆ length is within the limits set by SQA
- ◆ mandatory footnotes and bibliographies are provided
- ◆ dissertations are free from plagiarism
- ◆ candidates are acquainted with **all** of the advice and regulations provided by SQA, including material available on the *Understanding Standards* website

The importance of the topic to be pursued in the 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 be emphasised, therefore, that vague, generalised and unfocused topics are unlikely to enable candidates to demonstrate attainment of the standards against which their dissertations will be assessed.

Grade Boundary and Statistical information:

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2016	2303
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Number of resulted entries in 2017	2627
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Statistical information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of Course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of Course awards	%	Cum. %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark -				
A	21.2%	21.2%	558	65
B	24.2%	45.5%	637	56
C	30.4%	75.9%	799	47
D	11.6%	87.5%	305	42
No award	12.5%	-	328	-

Decision Making Record Statement:

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.