External Assessment Report 2015

Subject(s)	English
Level(s)	Advanced Higher

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

Markers reported that overall candidate performance was much in line with previous years. There was another small improvement in the mean mark for Specialist Study – Dissertation. The mean mark for the Options responses was slightly lower this year. Grade boundary cut-off scores for 2015 were the same as in 2014.

Specialist Study – Dissertation

Based on the reported choices of candidates in 2015, percentages of types of specialist studies submitted by candidates are shown below.

Drama		Poetry		Prose Fiction		Other	
One dramatist Three + texts	1%	One poet Wide range (7+ poems)	3.1%	One novelist Three+ texts	2.4%	Mixed genres	2.5%
One dramatist Two texts	3%	One poet Narrow range (<4 poems)	1.5%	One novelist Two texts	13.5%	Language Study	0.3%
Two or more than two dramatists	2%	Two or more than two poets	0.7%	Two or more than two novelists	65%	Non-fiction	0.2%
Other drama	0%	Other poetry	0.4%	Other fiction (including short stories)	2.6%	Film or other media	1.8%

As in previous years, Prose Fiction continued to be the most popular genre for candidates to study, and basing the dissertation on the work of two or more than two novelists also remained the most popular choice for those choosing this genre. Some markers reported that candidates who attempted to analyse three novels were less successful than those who concentrated on just two texts. Many candidates offered studies of dystopian literature or texts exploring women and their place in society. Most candidates displayed a genuine engagement with the task they were undertaking. While there were many highly effective studies of established 'classic' texts and authors (Austen, Conrad, McEwan et al), there was also some evidence of candidates choosing to study contemporary Scottish texts (including drama texts such as *Black Watch* and *Dunsinane*)

Markers reported the following areas in which candidates performed well:

♦ the best specialist studies were very well presented with appropriate footnotes and bibliographies
♦ choosing topics that prompted effective literary/critical analysis

- making effective use of secondary sources
- specialist studies that examined more than one novel by the same writer
- specialist studies that discussed a wide range of poems by the same poet
- specialist studies that discussed challenging texts of genuinely literary merit

Markers reported the following areas which candidates found demanding:

- general level of expression (which led to ambiguity or inaccuracy)
- editing/proofreading
- choosing texts that were too disparate — often tenuously linked
- attempting historical/sociological critiques using literature to support a line of argument
- failing to include mandatory footnotes and bibliography
- reliance on 'ready-made' notes (*Sparknotes, Shmoop, Gradesaver*, etc)
- groups of candidates from the same centre choosing the same texts/approaches
- inappropriate use of 'micro-analysis' in discussion of textual features

Literary Study

Based on the reported choices of candidates in 2015, figures for the percentage uptake of the Literary Study questions are shown below.

Author	Uptake
Williams	19.9%
Shakespeare	15.2%
Plath	9.2%
Duffy	6.9%
Donne	4.5%
Dickens	4%
Austen	3.9%
Keats	3.6%
Hardy	3.4%
Heaney	3.1%
Atwood	2.9%
Beckett	2.9%
Galloway	2.5%
Pinter	2.5%
Chekhov	2.4%
Joyce	2.3%
Wilde	1.5%
Waugh	1.5%
Lochhead	1.1%
Fitzgerald	1%

Hogg	1%
Byrne	<1%
Friel	<1%
Lindsay	<1%
Stoppard	<1%
Burns	<1%
Chaucer	<1%
Henryson	<1%
MacDiarmid	<1%
Muir	<1%
Yeats	<1%
Gray	<1%
Stevenson	<1%
Prose Non-fiction	<1%

Drama and poetry answers dominated this part of the examination, with answers on Williams, Shakespeare, Plath, Duffy and Donne accounting for over 55% of all candidate responses. Williams (a question asking candidates to discuss the dramatic presentation of three or four male characters in the specified plays) replaced Shakespeare as the most popular choice for candidates in 2015.

Markers reported the following areas in which candidates performed well:

♦ answers on Beckett that concentrated on dramatic presentation
♦ some sharply focused answers on *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* (candidates seemed engaged by the required discussion of the respective roles and functions of Perdita and Miranda)
♦ answers on Heaney that offered relevant analysis of the given poem and two other texts
♦ answers on Hogg
♦ answers on Donne (on the unity of 'form and content') that clearly displayed a thorough and intellectual engagement with the texts and task
♦ answers on Plath that showed genuine insight

Markers reported the following areas which candidates found demanding:

♦ incorporating too much biographical information
♦ answers on Hardy that failed to understand the concept of 'self-knowledge'
♦ answers on Williams that tried to discuss the male characters specified in the question by analysing the female characters in the plays
♦ answers on Williams that ignored the requirement to discuss the 'dramatic presentation' of the characters and offered a series of moral judgements instead
♦ answers to Q8 (a) that failed to deal with the idea of the 'culmination' of the relationships between Othello and Desdemona and between Antony and Cleopatra

- answers on Duffy which included some odd choices of poems to examine the idea of 'the fragility and vulnerability of human experience'
- answers on Fitzgerald which were too often vague and lacking in cohesion

Options

Based on the reported choices of candidates in 2015, figures for the percentage uptake of the four optional components are shown below.

Creative Writing	65.5%
Textual Analysis	32%
Reading the Media	2%
Language Study	0.5%

These figures are very similar to those for 2014.

Creative Writing

Markers reported the following distribution of genres submitted in Creative Writing folios:

Reflective Essay	33%
Fiction	41%
Poetry	12%
Drama	14%

There was an increase in the percentage of Reflective Essays submitted in 2015 compared with 2014, and a slight decrease in the percentage of Poetry.

Markers reported the following areas in which candidates performed well:

- using the conventions of drama to good effect
- adopting the appropriate style and tone (all genres)
- producing some very imaginative and intriguing prose fiction pieces
- the best reflective essays showed insight, self-awareness and imaginative deployment of language
- using descriptive language to good effect

Markers reported the following areas which candidates found demanding:

- too many submissions were superficial/short
- reflective essays frequently lacked any 'reflective' quality
- apparent failure to edit/redraft effectively
- creating poetry which lacked understanding of poetic forms/techniques
- creating poetry which was too simplistic or which lacked clarity

As in previous years, work submitted in Scots (including some very effective comic writing) was often of a high standard, especially where the candidate made consistent use of appropriate dialect forms and orthography.

Textual Analysis

Based on the reported choices of candidates in 2015, figures for the percentage uptake of the four Textual Analysis questions are shown below.

Prose fiction	32%
Prose non-fiction	9%
Poetry	47%
Drama	12%

In 2015 there was a threefold increase in the percentage of candidates choosing the Prose non-fiction question (on *Hemingway's Boat*) and a significant decrease in the number of candidates who chose Prose fiction (from Nathaniel Hawthorne's nineteenth century novel, *The Scarlet Letter*). Drama and Poetry were also more popular in 2015 than in 2014.

Although markers reported candidate performance as at least *adequate* in terms of *relevance to the question, understanding, analysis and evaluation*, weaker Prose fiction answers showed a lack of understanding of the concept of 'the narrative voice', and some candidates perhaps found the style of the selected passage rather challenging.

Those candidates who approached the Prose non-fiction passage systematically and with sensitivity did well. Candidates who chose this question responded very well to the passage which many clearly found engaging and stimulating.

Responses to Poetry continued to show significant variation in quality. As has often been the case in previous years, too many candidates tried to impose a narrative on the text that was not there and then analyse it in light of this.

The Drama question yielded some impressive answers, with the best candidates using appropriate technical vocabulary to comment on the dramatic means by which the specified relationship was presented.

Reading the Media

Based on the reported choices of candidates in 2015, figures for the percentage uptake of Reading the Media questions are shown below.

Question 1	38%
Question 2	25%
Question 10	37%

Markers commented on a significant increase in the uptake for Q10 in 2015 (requiring an analysis of two print advertisements). Candidates' performance was judged to be generally *adequate* at this level, although some analysis was deemed *less than adequate*. Answers to Q10 were often largely descriptive and sometimes candidates could not identify what was being advertised.

Language Study

Based on the reported choices of candidates in 2015, figures for the percentage uptake of Language questions are shown below.

Question 9	66%
Question 13	33%

In answers to the Language Study questions, candidates were clearly engaged by their chosen areas of study and showed a generally sound understanding of *Language and social context* and of *The linguistic characteristics of political communication*. In general, candidates' responses were reported as being *more than adequate* in terms of *Relevance* and *Understanding, Analysis, Evaluation* and *Expression.*

Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

Advice offered to centres in past years remains valid for the new version of this qualification which will be offered in session 2015–16.

Dissertation

For the Dissertation, teachers/lecturers should ensure that:

♦ texts of appropriate substance and quality are selected
♦ groupings of disparate texts are avoided
♦ mixed genres studies (eg plays and poems) are avoided
♦ specific and manageable topics are constructed
♦ unambiguous statements of intent are included (as headings to dissertations)
♦ 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

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.

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' (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

Writing Portfolio

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
♦ the submission of pieces generated by common stimuli or arising from whole-class exercises should be avoided
♦ the submission of groups of unrelated (or loosely related) poems should also be avoided

Textual Analysis

It is recommended that candidates should:

♦ through guided reading, develop close and essential familiarity with the conventions of a range of literary genres
♦ through focused teaching and extensive practice, acquire the critical apparatus necessary for the analysis and evaluation of complex texts

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2014	1716

Number of resulted entries in 2015	1750

Statistical information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of Course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of Course awards	%	Cum. %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark - 100				
A	20.6%	20.6%	361	65
B	29.9%	50.6%	524	56
C	30.1%	80.7%	527	48
D	8.9%	89.5%	155	44
No award	10.5%	-	183	-

Assessments performed as intended. No reason to adjust Grade Boundaries

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.