



Course Report 2017

Subject	English
Level	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 — Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

Component 1 is Reading for Understanding, Analysis, and Evaluation. This assessment comprises two unseen non-fiction passages, with questions on passage one and one question on both passages. Candidates apply their reading skills in understanding, analysis and evaluation when tackling the questions on passage one. In the question on both passages, they identify three key ideas shared by the two passages and provide evidence from the passages to support their choices.

Component 1 is worth 30 marks and is completed in one hour and 30 minutes.

In 2017, the two passages provided appropriate challenge in terms of content and language. The passages dealt with concepts such as the contrasting roles of music in modern and traditional human societies, the power of norms of behaviour and the importance of inspirational cultural elements. The eight questions on passage one provided opportunities for candidates to apply a range of skills, for example analysis of language, including tone, sentence structure and imagery, as well as explanation of key ideas and of the structuring of the writer's argument. The final question, on both passages, required the candidates to identify three key areas on which the passages agreed, and to support their choices with evidence from the passages.

Overall, this component performed as expected. Candidates found Q8 challenging, and this was taken into account when setting the grade boundaries.

Component 2: question paper — Critical Reading

Component 2 is Critical Reading. This assessment has two sections: Scottish textual analysis and critical essay. In the Scottish text section, candidates apply understanding, analysis and evaluation skills to questions on a previously-studied Scottish text, or extract from a longer text, and link this to the wider text or collection of Scottish set texts studied. In the Critical Essay section, candidates write an extended response to a further previously-studied text from one of the following genres: drama, prose fiction, prose non-fiction, poetry, TV and film media or language.

Component 2 is worth 40 marks (20 marks for the Scottish textual analysis, 20 marks for critical essay) and is completed in one hour and 30 minutes.

In 2017, there was no change to the marking of the Scottish text question, in which the emphasis is on analysis. The lower-tariff 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 ten-mark questions required the 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 exam 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 level and that, across all texts, there was parity in terms of demand and of scope to draw upon the whole text/other texts, to answer fully.

Performance was largely consistent across the fourteen options in the Scottish textual analysis section, and across the three genres of drama, poetry and prose. Options in this section proved to be of very similar demand.

In terms of uptake in this section, the most popular genre was poetry. The most popular option, overall, was Duffy, followed by MacCaig and 'The Cone Gatherers' and then 'Men Should Weep'. In poetry, after Duffy and MacCaig, the more popular choices were Lochhead, then Paterson and Burns. Fewer candidates chose MacLean.

In prose, after 'The Cone Gatherers', the more popular options were 'Sunset Song' and Crichton Smith short stories, followed by 'The Trick is to Keep Breathing' and Mackay Brown short stories. In drama, after 'Men Should Weep', the more popular choice was 'The Slab Boys'. Fewer candidates chose 'The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil.' All options were chosen by some candidates.

Candidates chose a wide range of, mainly literary, texts for their essays. Performance was similar across the different questions and genres. In drama, Shakespeare was popular, especially 'Hamlet', 'Othello', 'Romeo and Juliet' and 'Macbeth.' Other popular playwrights included Tennessee Williams (particularly 'A Streetcar Named Desire' and also 'The Glass Menagerie'), Arthur Miller ('A View from the Bridge', 'Death of a Salesman', 'All My Sons' and 'The Crucible'). Some candidates chose to write on Ibsen's 'A Doll's House'.

In prose fiction, a particularly popular text was F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'The Great Gatsby'. Other choices included Golding's 'Lord of the Flies', Orwell's '1984', Salinger's 'The Catcher in the Rye', works by Charles Dickens and Charlotte and Emily Bronte, as well as more modern novelists such as Margaret Atwood (especially 'The Handmaid's Tale'), Robin Jenkins (especially 'The Changeling'), Bernard MacLaverty ('Cal' and a range of short stories), Ernest Hemingway (both novels and short stories) and Khaled Hosseini's 'The Kite Runner'.

A number of candidates opted for prose non-fiction: George Orwell's essays were particularly popular, especially 'A Hanging' and also 'Shooting an Elephant' and 'Marakesh'. Other non-fiction prose choices included Fergal Keane's 'Letter to Daniel' and Charles Dickens' essays.

Because most candidates chose poetry for the Scottish textual analysis, relatively few chose this genre for their essay. For those who did, the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Seamus Heaney, John Keats, Robert Browning, Ted Hughes, Philip Larkin and T S Eliot were popular choices.

Some candidates chose a media text for their critical essay — for example, the films 'Psycho', 'The Godfather', 'Shutter Island', 'Vertigo' and 'Bladerunner'. A very small number of candidates chose to write on Language. All options were chosen by some candidates.

This component performed as expected. There were no specific questions which did not perform as expected.

Component 3: portfolio: writing

The Portfolio – writing is made up of two pieces of writing which are submitted by candidates for assessment by SQA.

The Portfolio is worth 30 marks (15 marks for each piece). Candidates submit two pieces of writing in different genres: one broadly creative (personal or imaginative), and one broadly discursive, based on research individually undertaken by candidates.

This component performed as expected.

Section 2: Comments on candidate performance

Areas in which candidates performed well

Component 1: question paper – Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

Candidates engaged well with the passages, which expressed the writers' views on the presence of background music in public places. Candidates approached the task conscientiously and many performed well. The vast majority of candidates had time to complete the paper, including spending sufficient time on the final question on both passages. Most candidates answered all questions. The strength of this performance indicated thorough and appropriate preparation in centres.

Q1: Most candidates correctly identified two objections to music being played in public.

Q3: Most candidates accurately explained two aspects of our ancestors' relationship with music.

Q9: Many candidates managed to identify two or three key areas on which the passages agreed and to provide evidence from the passages to justify their choices. Most candidates provided evidence in the form of quotations and/or brief comments. Fewer candidates managed to provide insightful comments on the evidence they selected.

Component 2: 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 markers commented on the high level of knowledge displayed by candidates.

Many candidates performed well in the shorter analysis questions on the extracts or texts in the Scottish textual analysis. Most candidates devoted sufficient time to answering the final 10-mark question, and many made successful links between the printed extract or text and the wider work studied in class.

Many candidates were able to make perceptive comments on these references 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, most candidates found a suitable question and managed to structure their essays effectively, demonstrating thorough knowledge of the texts they had studied, for example through use of quotation and direct references to areas of content. The majority of candidates showed genuine engagement with the texts, shown in their evaluative stance in the essay.

Component 3: portfolio: writing

It was evident that the vast majority of candidates had worked hard on their portfolios, supported by their teachers, successfully submitting two pieces of writing which clearly addressed the requirement for one 'broadly creative' and one 'broadly discursive' writing piece. Given that the opportunity is there to receive feedback on first drafts, and to then improve and re-draft pieces, the standard of written English was often high

In creative writing, many candidates chose to write about personal experience. 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 submissions and these were often of a high standard. A small number of candidates submitted drama scripts, which were often well written. A small number of candidates wrote in Scots, including some drama scripts and poems in Scots, and some of these achieved a high level of performance.

In discursive writing, it was clear that most candidates chose a subject that interested them. Many chose current issues from the world of politics or aspects of society and culture. Many candidates conducted appropriate research and structured their essays effectively. Some candidates showed impressive engagement with current national and international affairs, and wrote with enthusiasm and commitment. Some candidates chose local topics: these were often tackled well. Some candidates managed to address their chosen subject with originality and humour.

Consistent technical accuracy was achieved by the vast majority of candidates. A number of markers reported an improvement in this aspect in 2017.

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

Areas which candidates found demanding

Component 1: question paper – Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

Q2: Many candidates scored one mark each for basic comments on language, rather than two marks for detailed/insightful comments. Some candidates clearly understood that language was being used to create a negative impression of music being played in public places. However, they asserted that their chosen language features achieved this effect, rather than analysing how it was done. Some candidates included only two examples in their answer (rather than 'at least two examples' as in the question) and so lost potential marks.

Q4: Many candidates scored one mark each for basic comments on sentence structure and/or imagery, rather than two marks for detailed/insightful comments. Some candidates clearly understood that sentence structure and imagery were being used to criticise our modern relationship with music. However, they asserted that the aspect of sentence structure or image achieved this effect, rather than analysing how it was done. Some candidates included only two examples in their answer (rather than 'at least two examples' as in the question) and so lost potential marks.

Q7: Many candidates scored one mark for a basic comment on the function of the lines in the development of the writer's language, namely the movement from the problems of muzak to the positive solution of musical appreciation. Fewer candidates managed to make a detailed/insightful comment on this turning point.

Q8: Many candidates found analysing how language is used to create an inspirational tone challenging. Some candidates clearly recognised that an inspirational tone was being created and correctly identified examples of language used to create this. However, they asserted that this effect was achieved, rather than analysing how it was done. Some candidates included only two examples in their answer (rather than 'at least two examples' as in the question) and so lost potential marks.

Component 2: question paper – Critical Reading

Markers reported that some candidates tended to assert rather than analyse in the shorter questions on the Scottish textual analysis.

In the final 10-mark question of the Scottish textual analysis, some candidates did not concentrate on the question's key focus fully. For example, in the Duffy question, some candidates answered on 'emotional conflict' rather than 'emotional conflict within an individual'. Some candidates struggled to organise their answers effectively.

In the Critical Essay, some candidates showed understanding of their chosen texts, but did not focus sufficiently on the requirements of the question: as a result, their essays were less relevant. 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.

A small 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 a small number of candidates, who either did not finish their essays or chose to write their essays first and did not finish the Scottish textual analysis.

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 Critical Essay that 'Your essay must be on a different genre from that chosen in Section 1.'

Component 3 – portfolio: writing

Some candidates did not adhere to the published word limit of 1,300 words for each piece of writing.

In imaginative writing, some candidates concentrated on developing complicated and unrealistic narratives, rather than concentrating on developing characters or atmosphere.

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

For some candidates, 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 sufficient integration into the line of argument.

Section 3: Advice for the preparation of future candidates

Component 1: question paper – Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

It is evident that teachers continue to prepare their candidates thoroughly for this component and they are to be commended. Careful and useful preparation should continue.

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

Candidates should attempt to adhere to the requirement for own words, where required, to demonstrate understanding of important ideas in the passage. The requirement for own words is indicated in bold in questions where this is needed. Direct lifts of words/expressions from the 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 level 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 range of items in the list is 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.

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

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 four-mark analysis questions, providing four points is one effective strategy.

The use of bullet points, etc, might assist candidates in the structuring of answers for high-tariff questions.

Component 2: question paper – Critical Reading

It is clear that teachers have focused effectively on the key areas of study in the texts they have taught their candidates, leading to high levels of knowledge and understanding. Most candidates showed genuine enthusiasm for their texts and sincere engagement with, for example, characters and themes. This conscientious and helpful approach should continue.

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

Candidates should read the ten-mark question carefully and make sure that they use their textual knowledge to construct an answer which fully meets the demands 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 textual analysis.

Candidates should be aware of the three part requirement of the final question in the Scottish textual analysis: 2 marks for showing general understanding of how the question links to the text or texts ('commonality'), 2 marks for analysis of the printed extract or text, 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.

Candidates should be reminded of the requirements for choosing a question from the Critical Essay section of the paper. This must be from a different genre to the Scottish Textual Analysis. They should make sure that they have chosen 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.

Candidates should be reminded to stay relevant to the question in their responses to Critical Essay questions. They should try to avoid re-telling the story or repeating information that is not relevant to the question.

Component 3 – portfolio: Writing

It is evident that teachers have provided their candidates with appropriate guidance, enabling them to produce their best writing for the portfolio. This impressive work should continue.

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.

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 in some way, 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 declared. 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.

Grade Boundary and Statistical information:

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2016	36356
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Number of resulted entries in 2017	35716
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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	24.7%	24.7%	8823	68
B	27.0%	51.7%	9634	58
C	25.6%	77.3%	9152	49
D	10.0%	87.3%	3576	44
No award	12.7%	-	4531	-

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.