



External Assessment Report 2014

Subject(s)	English
Level	Higher

The statistics used in this report are prior to the outcome of any Post Results Services requests

This report provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers/lecturers in their preparation of candidates for future examinations. 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 question papers and marking instructions for the examination.

Comments on candidate performance

General comments

Performance in the Folio of Writing and in Critical Essay was broadly similar to that in 2013. In Close Reading, scores were lower than in 2013, but in a test judged to have been more demanding.

Areas in which candidates performed well

Folio of Writing

Markers reported some excellent work in the Folios.

- ◆ In Creative Writing, around 65% of candidates chose to submit a Personal Reflective piece and around 35% an Imaginative piece. Where a Personal Reflective piece was based on a suitable experience (or range of experiences) and there was sustained and mature reflection, there was often work of high quality.
- ◆ The huge majority of Imaginative Writing was in the form of prose fiction, predominantly in short story form. Some of these were of exceptional quality with a sophisticated grasp of the genre. Several were awarded full marks.
- ◆ As last year there were around 100 submissions of poetry, among which the best work demonstrated a strong command of form and language.
- ◆ There was a small, but often impressive, submission of Imaginative Writing partly or wholly in Scots. A number of candidates wrote with confidence, and exploited effectively the freshness and freedom this option offers them.
- ◆ Some of the best pieces were well under the maximum word count of 1300.
- ◆ The number of submissions in excess of the word limit continues to decline.

Close Reading

- ◆ Candidates found the subject matter (Britain's enduring interest in the First World War) and the two passages engaging and accessible.
- ◆ Understanding questions were, as usual, handled quite well, especially questions 2(b), 3, 6(a), 9, 10 and 12(a).
- ◆ Some of the Analysis questions were handled well, eg 2(a), 4(c), 5, 11, and 13(a).
- ◆ Question 14 (on both Passages) was answered well in terms of identifying three basic points, thanks perhaps to the new wording, which specified the exact number of points to be made.

Critical Essay

- ◆ Specific questions:
 - Question 1: there were good answers on the ideas of 'rejection, isolation or loneliness'
 - Question 6: where a suitable choice of character was made, his/her vulnerability was often explored very well
 - Question 8 produced a number of excellent essays

— Questions 12 and 15 were the most popular choices, often resulting in thoughtful essays

- ◆ Candidates who took a broad view of a text as a whole, and did not get bogged down in constant ‘analysis’, performed well; such candidates were often able to contextualise their comments by effectively narrating key details of selected events.
- ◆ The range of texts offered by candidates remains as wide as in previous years. Williams and Miller were the most popular dramatists, with Shakespeare appearing to be used less often than in the past; *The Great Gatsby* is the most commonly studied text in Prose Fiction; Carol Ann Duffy continues to dominate answers on poetry, with a very wide range of her poems being offered, although two or three are used with considerable frequency.
- ◆ Scottish texts were used widely in all main areas except Drama.
- ◆ Markers who commented on candidates’ expression and technical accuracy were nearly all positive, noting ‘no change’ or ‘a slight improvement’.

Areas which candidates found demanding

Folio of Writing

- ◆ Some submissions showed evidence of careless, or non-existent, proof-reading, which caused work to fail because it did not achieve the criterion of being ‘consistently accurate’.
- ◆ Much of the writing submitted as ‘Personal Reflective’ contained very little reflection or had merely a brief, token observation tacked on at the end.
- ◆ In Discursive Writing, a limited range of topics (cosmetic surgery, size zero models, abortion, euthanasia, same-sex marriage, for example) once again attracted a substantial number of candidates. There was a disappointing sameness about most of these essays and little sense of real engagement.
- ◆ A number of markers noted that many pieces were presented in an unnecessarily small font size.

Close Reading

- ◆ Question 1(a): there was often not enough attention to analysis of language.
- ◆ Questions 4(a) and 12(c): these questions on sentence structure produced many weak answers, often relying on mere identification (not always correct) of features of sentence structure without adequately explaining their effect in context.
- ◆ Question 6(b): failure to look at the word in context led many candidates to see a ‘revisionist historian’ as one who revised for an exam.
- ◆ Question 7: too many candidates answered this question with a series of disconnected language points, and did not pay enough attention to the introduction of Harry Patch as the conclusion to the passage as a whole; the contrast between Harry Patch as representative of the ordinary soldier and the preceding discussion of tactics, etc was important in a good answer.
- ◆ Question 12(b): Many candidates struggled to explain what Boyd was saying here: many thought that only one side had the modern weapons.

Critical Essay

- ◆ Specific questions:
 - Question 3: a common weakness was to give either too much attention to the opening scene or too little; a sensible balance was essential in this question.
 - Question 7: in a number of cases the description of the decision ('unexpected or unwise or unworthy') did not allow the candidate to provide a very plausible line of thought.
 - Question 14: this type of question should be attempted only by those with a good grasp of the technicalities involved.
 - Question 15: a number of candidates did not satisfactorily address the idea of 'unsettling'.
- ◆ There was evidence again this year of some candidates coming to the exam with prepared answers and attempting to adapt these to 'fit' the questions asked. Such answers lack relevance to the question and cannot access high marks.
- ◆ More Markers than ever commented on the poor, sometime near-illegible, handwriting of some candidates, which made it extremely difficult (and time-consuming) to mark the essay. While no candidate's work is ever left unmarked for this reason, centres should do their best to reduce this problem by making alternative arrangements for some candidates.

Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

Folio of Writing

- ◆ Careful proof-reading before submission should be strongly encouraged.
- ◆ Word-processed submissions should use a standard font and a font size of 12.
- ◆ Candidates should be reminded that 1300 words is a maximum, not a target. Marks are awarded for quality of thought and language, not for sheer weight of words.
- ◆ Candidates' attention should be drawn to the high standards of language and thought embedded in the descriptors for the upper marking categories.
- ◆ Personal Reflective writing should contain — and ideally be permeated by — genuine and convincing personal reflection. The best 'reflection' is implicit not explicit.
- ◆ Candidates should be encouraged to be a little more adventurous in their choice of topics for Discursive writing. Topics in which there is a genuine personal interest, and topics of specific local interest, often lead to good work.
- ◆ The main sources consulted in the preparation of Discursive writing should be recorded at the end of the piece (or in footnotes). It is not necessary to source every single statistic etc, but good practice requires that principal sources (of fact and of opinion) be acknowledged.
- ◆ All general points made in previous years' External Assessments Reports remain relevant.
- ◆ Extended advice on many aspects of the Folio of Writing can be found on SQA's website (see 'Candidate Guidance Documents' on the dedicated English page).

Close Reading

- ◆ Candidates should be more precise in their use of terms to describe features of sentence structure; the word 'parenthesis' in particular is regularly misused.
- ◆ All general points made in previous years' External Assessments Reports remain relevant.
- ◆ Extended advice on many aspects of the Close Reading paper can be found on SQA's website (see 'Candidate Guidance Documents' on the dedicated English page).

Critical Essay: Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

- ◆ While candidates who plan to answer on a substantial prose or drama text are not expected to have prepared more than one of these, candidates who plan to answer the poetry section should not limit themselves to preparing a single poem. The same applies to the short story and to short non-fiction texts.
- ◆ The use of formulaic approaches to essay writing should be resisted. Candidates who believe that regular repetition of words from the question and the regular insertion of phrases such as '... and this helped me to understand the central concerns of the text' will lead to a successful essay are mistaken.
- ◆ All general points made in previous years' External Assessments Reports remain relevant.
- ◆ Extended advice on many aspects of the Critical Essay paper can be found on SQA's website (see 'Candidate Guidance Documents' on the dedicated English page).

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2013	30401
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Number of resulted entries in 2014	31582
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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 100				
A	21.3%	21.3%	6736	65
B	24.6%	46.0%	7782	57
C	29.1%	75.0%	9184	49
D	10.5%	85.5%	3316	45
No award	14.5%	-	4564	-

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.