



External Assessment Report 2015

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| Subject | 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 all three elements (Folio of Writing, Close Reading and Critical Essay) was very similar to that in 2014.

Folio of Writing

Areas in which candidates performed well

- ◆ Markers reported some excellent work in the Folios.
- ◆ Personal Reflective writing accounted for 65–70% of the Imaginative element in the Folio, and when a piece was based on a suitable experience (or range of experiences) and there was sustained and mature reflection, high marks were scored.
- ◆ Nearly all Creative pieces were prose fiction, predominantly in short story form. Examiners noted that a higher number than usual of these were of exceptional quality, demonstrating a sophisticated grasp of the genre. A number of these submissions were awarded full marks.
- ◆ Some of the best pieces were well under the maximum word count of 1300.
- ◆ The number of submissions in excess of the word limit continued to decline.

Areas which candidates found demanding

- ◆ Some submissions showed evidence of careless proofreading, which not infrequently caused work to fail because it did not achieve the criterion of being ‘consistently accurate’.
- ◆ A number of markers noted that many pieces were presented in an unnecessarily small font size.
- ◆ Much of the writing submitted as ‘Personal Reflective’ contained too little reflection or had merely a brief, token observation (‘Looking back now I realise ...’) tacked on at the end.
- ◆ In Discursive Writing, a limited range of topics (the impact of technology, body image, euthanasia, for example) once again attracted a substantial number of candidates. Encouraging personal choice can be beneficial when considering topics. Often local and current issues have powerful relevance for candidates.

Close Reading

Areas in which candidates performed well

- ◆ Candidates found the subject matter (the iconic status of James Bond) and the passages engaging and accessible.
- ◆ Understanding questions were, as usual, handled quite well, especially questions 2, 3, 6(a), 8(a) and (b), 10(b) and (c).

- ◆ Question 9 on the symbolic nature of the figurine on M's desk was particularly well answered by many candidates.
- ◆ Some of the Analysis questions were handled well, eg 1(b), 3 and 10(a).

Areas which candidates found demanding

- ◆ Question 5(a): there was some confusion here, caused by candidates' reading of 'twentieth century' as 'old-fashioned', when in the context of the passage it clearly means 'modern'.
- ◆ Question 6(b): while there were many good answers here, a number of candidates misread the writer's tone, or merely asserted that particular aspects were 'humorous' or 'serious' without showing how the writer's use of language achieved this.
- ◆ Question 13(b) was poorly done: few candidates were able to address the sophisticated diction and subtle cadences of Macintyre's concluding paragraph.

Critical Essay

Areas in which candidates performed well

- ◆ Specific questions:
 - Question 1: there were good answers on various characters from a number of plays
 - Question 3: where candidates established successfully that the relationship was 'troubled' before the 'crisis point', answers were usually very good
 - Question 7 produced a number of very competent essays
 - Question 16: when there was an appropriate choice of poem as being 'persuasive' or 'playful' or (especially) 'passionate', essays were often of a high standard.
- ◆ 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 remained similar to previous years. Williams (one play) and Miller (four plays) were the most popular dramatists, with Shakespeare a close third. *The Great Gatsby* was by far the most commonly studied text in Prose Fiction; Carol Ann Duffy continued to dominate answers on poetry, with two of her poems ('Shooting Stars' and 'Havisham') being especially popular choices.
- ◆ 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

- ◆ Specific Questions:
 - Question 2: the word 'rivalry' was defined very loosely by a large number of candidates, for whom it was virtually synonymous with 'conflict'. While all rivalry involves conflict, not all conflict involves rivalry, hence many candidates' responses were of doubtful relevance.

- Question 8: while most candidates successfully established the 'bleakness', the discerning of 'an optimistic or uplifting message' proved challenging.
 - Question 13: many candidates drifted from 'conflicting emotions' to 'different feelings' to 'changes of mood', thus never fully addressed the main thrust of the question.
 - Question 17: many candidates who chose this question did little more than assert that the character was symbolic, without ever defining what the character actually symbolised.
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- ◆ There was evidence of some candidates coming to the exam with essays that had been largely memorised and attempting to adapt these to 'fit' the questions asked. Such answers lack relevance to the question and cannot access high marks.
 - ◆ Again, markers commented on the poor, sometimes near-illegible, handwriting of some candidates, which made it extremely difficult (and time-consuming) to mark the essays. Although no candidate's work has ever been left unmarked for this reason, centres should do their best to reduce this problem by making appropriate alternative arrangements for some candidates.

Advice to centres for preparation of future candidates

This qualification is not available after 2015. The External Assessment Report for the 2015 new Higher English provides advice relevant to the equivalent element in the replacement qualification.

Statistical information: update on Courses

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| Number of resulted entries in 2014 | 31582 |
| Number of resulted entries in 2015 | 14207 |

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 | 25.6% | 25.6% | 3638 | 65 |
| B | 24.2% | 49.8% | 3442 | 57 |
| C | 26.7% | 76.5% | 3788 | 49 |
| D | 8.7% | 85.2% | 1231 | 45 |
| No award | 14.8% | - | 2108 | - |

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.