

Higher English Close Reading

Revision of the Comparison Question

Background to the revision

The Comparison Question in the Higher English Close Reading paper provides an important opportunity for candidates to respond to issues in the thematically-linked passages and to take an overview of them.

For some time, however, SQA and its stakeholders have been concerned about the quality of response to this question. In 2009, additional time was allocated in the hope that this would give candidates a better opportunity to plan and execute answers which were more substantial and relevant to the task. While the additional time succeeded in reducing the number of unfinished papers and in improving answers to the questions immediately preceding the Comparison Question, the quality of response to the Comparison Question itself did not improve.

The nature of the question itself was then scrutinised, and after consultation within the profession and informal discussion with some candidates, it was agreed that the requirement to state and justify a preference (in terms of ideas and/or style) was not a realistic task under examination conditions, even in the extended time available. Many, possibly most, candidates did not have a genuine preference and were therefore forced into manufacturing one and attempting to justify it in a rather artificial way.

The revised approach

In and after 2012, the Comparison Question will involve an entirely objective comparison of the similarities and/or differences in the key ideas in the two passages.

The “Evaluation” element, previously bound up with the candidate’s alleged preference, will be contained in the candidate’s judgement of what constitute “key” ideas.

The requirement to use formal continuous prose and the advice to write a “mini-essay” will no longer apply, and candidates will be invited to write, if they wish, using developed bullet points.

Marking Instructions will be less generic than in recent years; specific “key ideas” will be identified.

The Specimen Question Paper for Close Reading on the Higher English page of SQA’s website has been amended to reflect this revision.

A hypothetical example

In the 2011 exam (passages on video games) the Comparison Question was as follows:

Which passage gives you a more interesting insight into the appeal and influence of video games?

Justify your choice by referring to the **ideas of both passages**.

5 U/E

If the revised style of question had been in operation the question would have been:

Consider the attitude displayed by each writer to video games and their effects on young people.

Referring to important ideas in the passages, identify the key areas on which they disagree.

You may answer this question in continuous prose or in a series of developed bullet points.

5 U/E

Note: since these passages adopt such diametrically opposed stances, it would have been pointless to ask on this occasion about similarities, but, depending on the passages chosen in any one year, the question will ask about similarities and differences, **or** similarities alone, **or** differences alone.

(In addition, the italicised introductions to each passage would have been slightly re-worded, with less summarising of each writer's point of view.)

The **Marking Instructions** would have been along these lines.

The mark for this question should reflect the quality of the response in two areas:

- identification of the essential areas of disagreement in attitude/ideas
- reference to/treatment of the ideas which inform the writers' attitudes

A response which clearly identifies at least three essential areas of disagreement in attitude and has at least some supporting evidence will score a minimum of 3 marks.

These essential areas of disagreement are:

- 1 the general status of video games
- 2 the intellectual benefits of video games
- 3 the educational benefits of video games
- 4 the challenge involved in video games
- 5 the reward(s) involved in video games

There will inevitably be some overlap among these points (eg between 2 and 3, and between 2 and 4). Markers will have to judge the extent to which a candidate has covered two points or just one.

Where a candidate has identified satisfactorily at least three of these essential areas, then the decision to award 3, 4 or 5 marks will depend on the sophistication of her/his treatment of the ideas which inform each writer's attitude.

The following guidelines should be used:

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| 5 marks | identification of essential areas of disagreement, with an intelligent use of supporting evidence |
| 4 marks | identification of essential areas of disagreement, with sound use of supporting evidence |
| 3 marks | identification of essential areas of disagreement, with some supporting evidence |
| 2 marks | identification of only two essential areas of disagreement or identification of more than two without supporting evidence |
| 1 mark | identification of just one essential area of disagreement |
| 0 marks | failure to identify any essential area of disagreement and/or complete misunderstanding of the task |

The following main ideas could be used in support, but some other points might be used successfully:

Passage 1:

- ◆ video games are viewed as pointless, but they are not
- ◆ they develop the brain in a number of ways
- ◆ the chess/algebra analogy
- ◆ high level thinking skills are involved
- ◆ they are challenging, at times extremely hard
- ◆ unlike other entertainment pleasure is not immediate
- ◆ they can appear simple but are often very complex
- ◆ the process is more important than the (often simplistic) content
- ◆ they tap into the brain's natural desire for reward

Passage 2:

- ◆ they are narcotically addictive
- ◆ they are a threat to literacy
- ◆ they require no thought or effort
- ◆ they encourage slovenly behaviour and thinking
- ◆ they may pretend to be educational but are totally lacking in educational value
- ◆ they offer immediate and simple pleasures

(Marking Instructions for 2012 are likely to follow a similar structure to the one given above, but will be influenced by the nature of the passages and the question. In addition, the Marking Instructions in any year are not finalised until a sample of candidates' responses has been examined and discussed at the Markers' Meeting for that year.)

Some general marking principles:

- ◆ There will never be a single "correct" way to approach this task; different candidates will approach it in different ways.
- ◆ Markers will be open to all reasonable approaches; they will simply be looking to see how well candidates have identified and supported the key ideas.
- ◆ Direct quotation from the passages is permitted, but if used should be used sparingly; a patchwork of quotation will not be an effective way of showing overall understanding.
- ◆ Quality of expression is not, in itself, a criterion in this task; however, responses must be coherent, and better answers are expected to be reasonably fluent.
- ◆ If "extended bullet points" are used they need not be grammatically complete sentences, but should make the point(s) clearly.

By way of guidance for English teachers and lecturers, there follows a selection of sample answers to the above question, with marks and brief commentaries based on the Marking Instructions.

These answers were generated in early June 2011 by three groups of students who had sat the "real" exam in May, and kindly agreed to take part in a trial of the new style of question. Despite lacking training or practice in this type of question, the overwhelming majority of these students were very positive about the proposed revised approach.

SQA is grateful to staff and students in the following centres: Preston Lodge High School, Prestonpans; George Heriot's School, Edinburgh; Lornshill Academy, Alloa.

Answer 1

Steven Johnson's attitude to video gaming is that it helps to educate children. He describes them as "chores", and suggests patience is key to gaming. However, in passage two, Boris Johnson describes them as "drugs" and believes that gaming distracts children from learning. He feels that children are less intelligent if they play games a lot.

Passage one has a more positive attitude to video gaming. He feels it teaches its own set of skills that you may not find from a textbook in school. Passage two detests video gaming, however, and believes skills can only be taught by teachers and books: "the only way to learn to write is to be forced ..." (line 30).

Passage one encourages video gaming. He realises that rewards are far more demanding in a game than reality. It is not the game itself that intrigues children it is the reward. This teaches patience, but is also why children are so addicted. However, passage two believes that games are pointless: "Phooey ... that was it (line 23). He does not see any skills or anything special about gaming.

Passage one realises that as much as reading brings its own qualities and skills, a game almost makes challenges a reality unlike novels. They teach children decisions and strategies. Passage two is the opposite. He feels games stop you from learning skills and merely create addicted children. He feels gaming gives them an attitude against learning in school. He also states "these machines teach them nothing" which goes against everything passage one states.

This answer covers key point 1 in several places, there is an amalgam of points 2 and 3, and point 4 is touched in a roundabout way, so it qualifies for at least 3 marks. Despite a clear and sensible structure on the surface, the answer is in fact very loose and repetitive. Its use of evidence is neither "sound" nor "intelligent" and therefore cannot go above 3.	Mark: 3
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Answer 2

The writer in Passage 1 appears to have a positive attitude towards video games. He explains the way in which video games are used almost to train the mind – how they help to exercise a mental muscle and how they help children to become far more reactive and quicker thinkers. However, passage two is far more closed minded, and discusses how video gaming has a negative rather than a positive effect on children, and how they become dependent on incessant gaming. There are key areas in which the passages disagree:

Firstly, the point of whether these "other forms of media" have intellectual benefits is questioned. Passage one discusses how the gaming media helps to make the mind sharper and more reactive and that there is far more to games than they are given credit for. However, passage two immediately throws aside the idea of gaming. By comparing gaming to an addictive substance, the writer is suggesting the damage that games are causing to the minds of children.

The passages also disagree on the reason for regular gamers. Passage one describes how, because of the nature of the human mind, humans are simply attracted to situations where they can explore in order to achieve things – much like the scenario in a video game. However, passage two disagrees, discussing how although they are notoriously addictive, children are getting no intellectual benefits from them.

The two passages disagree completely on both the motives for playing video games – and the effects of them.

This answer covers point 1 ("positive", "closed minded") and deals somewhat randomly with point 2. In the penultimate paragraph, there is a nod to point 5, but there is a distinct lack of clarity.	Mark: 2
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Answer 3

- The effect of gaming on intelligence:
Passage 1 states that video games improve players' intelligence as they exercise the brain. Passage 2 states that video games reduce players' intelligence as they prevent them from reading and do not exercise the brain
- The difficulty of gaming:
Passage 1 describes games as "maddeningly hard" and as such require and develop problem solving skills, thus making games beneficial to the player
Passage 2 describes the players as "spoon-fed" so offer no challenge to the player so do not develop any skills
- Strategy required to play video games:
Passage 1 states that the majority of the time players have to engage in boring tasks to gain longer term rewards, this develops players' concentration as they must persevere for long term reward.
Passage 2 states the opposite – that players are given "undeserved praise" and that the rewards are immediate" suggesting there is no concentration, or long term tactics required to play video games so players do not develop any skills
- The happiness gained from gaming:
Passage 1 states that players receive huge satisfaction from playing video games as they receive rewards "larger and more vivid and more clearly defined than life", so gaming
Passage 2 suggests that video games are as addictive as drugs and as such when they are not playing them they are "sobbing and shrieking". This suggests that far from making gamers' lives happier, video games make every moment they are not playing misery.

This well-organised response covers points 2, 4 and 5 with confidence (and the whole answer implies a full understanding of point 1). The evidence is deployed skilfully and shows an intelligent understanding of the passages and of the task.	Mark: 5
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Answer 4

Passage 1 has a very positive and constructive attitude to video games, whereas Passage 2 is entirely negative and critical.

The first passage argues against the "conventional wisdom" that games don't improve children's mental ability; the writer believes they are a benefit. The writer of passage 1 believes that the "fiendishly hard" games enhance players' learning. Passage 2 completely disagrees about this key area of educational benefit. The writer has a very negative attitude and disagrees that video games enhance the mind by stating how "These machines teach them nothing".

They also disagree about another key area/issue. Passage 1 argues that games can make someone more pro-active and thoughtful as games challenge them to problem solve on everyday life – "mentally working through the problem". Passage 2 disagrees and claims that video games do not encourage thought and simply turn people into morons. He mentions in great detail the "catastrophic effect" games are having on thought and literacy.

The passages disagree on a further key area – rewards and gratification that video games give. Passage 2 argues that the reward is achieved too easily and that games award players with "undeserved praise" destroying any work ethic they may have. This is the key idea of passage 2, which emphasises the writer's opinion of our "hedonistic 21st century lives" and culture of instant gratification, completely disagrees with the ideas of passage 1, which believes that games have the ability to motivate and encourage work amongst "the demographic group most averse to doing chores".

A fluent and well-organised answer which covers points 1, 2, 4 and 5 clearly and intelligently. Short quotation is used effectively to support the candidate's main points.	Mark: 5
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Answer 5

The writer in passage one believes that video gaming is quite difficult and challenging for the brain. The author of passage two feels that the games create no mental stimulation at all. The writer of passage two also believes that the games do not teach the children anything and he feels that they are worthless and time would be better spent on anything else. In passage one, however, the author discusses how the games manage to keep the attention of the players for many hours at a time although they are often looked upon as “brain dead”. The writer of passage one also explains that the games often involve masses of problem solving. This is easily comparable with the idea in passage two that the games and gaming software are what is distracting young boys from reading books. Therefore the two writers’ main ideas are almost exact opposites.

This candidate begins well, nailing point 4 right away. She then attempts point 3 but fails to pin down the contrast. Thereafter there are stabs at point 2 and point 3 (again) but never clearly defined.	Mark: 1
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Answer 6

There are several main points where both writers disagree. Firstly, Steven Johnson claims that most people who play video games will consume other forms of media/entertainment, whilst Boris Johnson seems to imply that the only people who play them are young males, and they do not engage with other forms of entertainment such as books. The first writer argues that video games have different “intellectual virtues” to books, but that they are just as important. The second writer is the polar opposite – he claims that games have a “catastrophic effect” on the literacy skills of young males. The first writer claims that games get kids to learn without realising, whilst the second writer claims that games “teach them nothing” and that some games “pretend to be educational”. Overall, the first writer claims that video games enhance the analytical portion of our brain, whilst the second writer concludes that video games damage the mind and parents should destroy them.

The first point in this answer is muddled, and certainly would not constitute a “key difference”. The next two sentences deal sufficiently with point 3, which is then dealt with again in the next sentence. The final sentence covers point 2.	Mark: 2
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Answer 7

The attitude displayed by each writer is very different. The writer of passage one has a very positive attitude and believes video games are very challenging and thought-provoking activities. However, the writer of passage two strongly disagrees with this and believes that video games are destroying the intelligence of young people.

The writer of passage one states that these games are very hard at times and not always as simple and robotic as many people assume. He says “find yourself mentally working through the problem” and “the tasks themselves are more like chores than entertainment”. In contrast, the writer of passage two believes that video games are not in any way shape or form educational or though provoking. He says “The red soldiers robotically slaughtered the white soldiers and then they did it again, that was it.”

As well as disagreeing on how challenging video games can be, both passages also disagree on the educational values. The writer of passage 1 states “learning algebra isn’t about acquiring a specific tool; it’s about building up a mental muscle ... so it is with games”. The writer suggests

and supports that video games are of educational benefit and help extend intelligence and the ability to work through a problem. Passage two, however, disagrees stating “we demand that teachers provide our children with reading skills; we expect the school to fill them with a love of books; and yet at home we let them slump in front of the consoles”. This writer implies that there is a major educational difference between what you learn at school and what you learn through playing video games – he believes video games deaden the brain and makes this very clear throughout his ideas.

Overall, both passages have very differing ideas and opinions and both make their views clear throughout their passages.

<p>The first paragraph gets point 1 clearly enough (with intimations of points 2 and 4 to come). The second paragraph just manages to cover point 4, and the third paragraph eventually does enough to get point 3, although in a very long-winded and roundabout way. The final sentence is a good example of a completely unnecessary comment. Enough to score 3, but no more than that.</p>	<p>Mark: 3</p>
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Answer 8

The writer of Passage 1 shows a definite liking for video games and attempts to clean up the bad name they have held for so long. Passage 2 takes a firm stance against video games, seeing no value in them at all.

Passage 1 makes the point that video games are very difficult and the majority of the time spent playing them is laborious and painful. Passage 2 makes the argument that video games relax players into a trance-like state as if gaining pleasure for no effort.

Passage 1 argues that video games help people learn through small “intricacies” that subtly teach the players things from the game that are applicable in real life: “industrial economics” from Sim City. Passage 2 rejects this argument. The writer is blunt and severe in his argument that education in video games is a cunning deception and even if it has direct historical reference to, for example, “Vikings”, that is no reason to believe its authenticity.

Passage 1 also stands to make a point that gaming is not a rabid fury that engulfs the player into a mindless rage. The writer takes a deeper look and makes the point that behind an angry exterior lie complex decisions that require smart and quick judgement. Passage 2 opposes this and says that video games are mindless, comparing the players to “mindless lizards” and denying the idea that video games require any conscious thought.

Passage 1 believes that books are not the sole source of education. He states that other forms of media – TV, the Internet and video games – should be held in a higher regard for their enrichment of people’s minds. Passage 2 states that books are the only way children can possibly learn. The title “Strike A Blow For Literacy” demonstrates his idea that video games should be forcefully removed to allow room for literature.

Both passages continuously disagree. Passage 1 giving a fair and justified view on the strengths and weaknesses of video games, while Passage 2 simply seeks their removal in an exaggerated and blustering tone.

<p>This answer deals comfortably with points 1, 4, 3, and 2 (in that order). The penultimate paragraph is simply an extension of point 3 (and from the wrong perspective). In the final paragraph (and elsewhere) the candidate strays into matters of style. This weakens the answer slightly.</p>	<p>Mark: 4</p>
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Answer 9

- 1: video games are not completely a waste of time and actually require important decisions and strategies to be planned out; 2: they are a complete waste of time and everything is being done for them and they are being gifted different things by the game for no reason
- 1: manages to see and explore the benefits video games have and the parts of your brain it forces you to use and develop; 2: they are destroying our brains rather than enhancing them and they cannot teach you anything
- 1: the skills you gain from playing video games are as important as the ones you acquire from reading books; 2: skills learnt from reading are hugely important in everyday life and are essential skills that you will only be able to gain by spending more time reading and less time playing video games
- 1: games manage to get children to learn without them even realising it; 2: they have no educational value and cause the mind to completely stop functioning properly

This brisk and efficient answer covers points 4 and 2 clearly, then fluffs point 3, before returning to the same point and nailing it neatly. Qualifies for a minimum of 3, and since the use of supporting goes beyond the basic, can score 4 marks

Mark:
4

Answer 10

- Passage 1: idea that video gaming teaches children about things that books don't therefore are beneficial to children's brains ("intellectual virtue in [its] own right"), whereas Passage 2 has the idea that video games aren't beneficial at all as instead of adding to the knowledge children gain by reading it actually destroys what their brains have developed by reading books ("teach them nothing")
- Passage 2: children are so hooked on playing video games because it makes them feel happy to shoot people and blow up places and kill things ("richly congratulating him on his bogus massacres"), whereas Passage 1 believes that it is not the sense of achievement but the need to know what happens next, the reward and the competitive nature these games bring out in people children that leaves them hooked on playing the games ("... the reward system that draws players in.")
- Passage 2: children would benefit from having and playing no video games whatsoever – they should only have books and be made to read "strike a blow for literacy"); whereas Passage 1 has the idea that video games should not be cut out altogether but we should manage them evenly.

Although presented rather unnecessarily in bullet points, this answers starts very promisingly, picking up points 3 and 5 comfortably in the first two sections. The final point, however, is badly off target: even if what was said about Passage 1 were true, it would not constitute a key point. The answer has not reached the "barrier" for 3 marks and can score only 2.

Mark:
2