



Course Report 2018

Subject	English
Level	Higher

This report provides information on the performance of candidates. Teachers, lecturers and assessors may find it useful when preparing candidates for future assessment. The report 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.

The statistics used in this report have been compiled before the completion of any Post Results Services.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Summary of the course assessment

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

This question paper comprises two non-fiction unseen passages, with questions on the first passage and one question on both passages. Candidates apply their reading skills in understanding, analysis and evaluation when tackling the questions on the first passage. In the question on both passages, candidates identify three key ideas shared by the two passages and provide evidence from the passages to support their choices.

In 2018, the two passages provided appropriate challenge in terms of content and language. The passages focused on two major political figures, Nelson Mandela (passage 1) and Barack Obama (passage 2), considering various topics such as the impact of injustice on the individual, the role and status of a hero and the value and pressures of the democratic system. The seven questions on passage 1 provided opportunities for candidates to apply a range of skills, for example analysis of language, including word choice, sentence structure and imagery as well as explanation of the writer's ideas. The final question, on both passages, required the candidates to identify three key qualities shared by the two major political figures and to support their choices with evidence from the passages.

This question paper performed as expected.

Component 2: question paper – Critical Reading

This assessment comprises two sections: Scottish Texts and Critical Essay.

In the Scottish Texts section, candidates apply understanding, analysis and evaluation skills to questions on a previously studied Scottish text, or an extract from a longer text, and link this to the wider text or collection of Scottish set texts studied. This text is chosen from a list of specified texts covering the genres of drama, prose and poetry.

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, film and television drama, or language.

In 2018, as in previous years, the emphasis in the Scottish Texts section was on analysis. The lower mark questions required candidates to comment on the use of language and literary techniques to convey central concerns, for example setting, characterisation and thematic development. The final 10 mark questions required 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 pupils to demonstrate their knowledge and skill at Higher. Across all texts, there was parity in terms of demand and of scope to draw upon the whole text and/or other texts, in order to answer the questions fully.

Performance was largely consistent across the 14 specified texts in the Scottish Texts section, and across the three genres of drama, prose and poetry. Options proved to be of similar demand.

In terms of uptake, the most popular genre was poetry. The most popular option, overall, was Carol Ann Duffy, followed by Norman MacCaig, *The Cone Gatherers* by Robin Jenkins and *Men Should Weep* by Ena Lamont Stewart. In poetry, after Duffy and MacCaig, the most popular choice was Liz Lochhead, followed by Don Paterson and then Robert Burns. A small number of candidates chose Sorley MacLean.

In drama, after *Men Should Weep*, *The Slab Boys* by John Byrne was the more popular choice. A small number of candidates chose *The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black, Black Oil* by John McGrath. In prose, after *The Cone Gatherers*, the most popular prose choice was Iain Crichton Smith's short stories, followed by *Sunset Song* by Lewis Grassie Gibbon and then *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* by Janice Galloway. Fewer candidates chose the short stories of George Mackay Brown.

Candidates chose a range of texts for their critical essays. Performance was similar across the different questions and genres. In drama, Shakespeare was popular, especially *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Other popular choices were the works of Tennessee Williams, especially *A Streetcar named Desire* and *The Glass Menagerie*, and those of Arthur Miller, particularly *A View from the Bridge*, *All My Sons*, *The Crucible* and *Death of a Salesman*.

In prose fiction, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald was particularly popular. Other popular choices were Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Robin Jenkin's *The Changeling*, the works of Ernest Hemingway, Charles Dickens, Charlotte and Emily Bronte, Jane Austen, Bernard MacLaverty and Edgar Allan Poe.

A number of candidates chose to answer on prose non-fiction: George Orwell's essays were popular, especially 'A Hanging', 'Shooting an Elephant' and 'Marrakech'. Some candidates chose the non-fiction essays of Charles Dickens.

Fewer candidates chose to write their essays on poetry, as most chose this genre for the Scottish Texts section. For those who did, the works of Sylvia Plath, Seamus Heaney, Philip Larkin, Robert Browning and Walt Whitman were popular choices.

An increased number of candidates chose to write their essay on a media text. In this genre, popular choices were the films *The Dressmaker*, *The Shining*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Psycho*, *The Prestige*, *Shutter Island* and *Pleasantville*. A very small number chose to write on language. All questions were chosen by some candidates.

This question paper performed as expected.

Component 3: portfolio–writing

For the portfolio–writing, 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.

The portfolio–writing 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 very well with the passages, which focused on the political careers of Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama. They approached the task conscientiously and many performed well. The vast majority of candidates had time to complete the paper and spent sufficient time on the final question on both passages. Most candidates answered all questions. The strength of this performance suggested there was appropriate preparation in centres.

Question 1: most candidates explained Mandela’s attitude to either life or death; many managed to cover both life and death.

Question 3(a): most candidates correctly explained one reason why Mandela became a revolutionary, with the majority focusing on racial prejudice; many explained a second reason, often referring to Mandela’s sense of equality and justice.

Question 6: most candidates successfully explained two or three ways in which Mandela was changed by his time in prison.

Question 7: most candidates explained one reason why Mandela gave up his position, with the majority referring to the idea of setting an example. Many candidates also successfully explained Mandela’s prioritising democracy over his own power.

Component 2: question paper – Critical Reading

Candidates had clearly prepared thoroughly for the Critical Reading question paper. In both the Scottish Texts and the Critical Essay sections, 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 Texts section. 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 they had studied in class.

Many candidates made 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 section, 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, displayed 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 or lecturers. They successfully submitting two pieces of writing which clearly addressed the requirement for one 'broadly creative' and one 'broadly discursive' writing piece. In the portfolio, candidates have the opportunity to redraft and improve pieces, and the standard of written English in their finished work, including technical accuracy, was often high.

In creative writing, many candidates chose to write about personal experience, often focusing on life-changing events such as bereavement, family issues, mental health experiences, travel as well as the rewarding nature of sporting and creative opportunities. Some reflected on aspects of their personality and experience as a young person. 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 their creation of atmosphere and setting, and in the use of structure. There was an increase in the number of poetry and drama submissions and these were often of a high standard. A small number of candidates wrote in Scots, including some drama scripts and poems in Scots and many of these were of a high standard.

In discursive writing, it was clear that most candidates chose a subject which interested them. Many chose current issues from the world of politics, both national and international, or aspects of society and culture, often focusing on issues of particular relevance to young people. A small number of candidates chose to write reports. 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. Others chose local topics, and these were often tackled well. Some candidates managed to address their chosen subject with originality and humour.

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

Areas which candidates found demanding

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

Question 3(b): some candidates found the analysis of sentence structure and word choice to convey Mandela's awareness of injustice challenging. Many candidates commented on the use of lists, repetitive or parenthetical structure and question, often scoring 1 mark for a basic comment, rather than 2 marks for detailed or insightful comments. Many candidates selected 'pernicious', 'oppression' or 'irrevocably' when answering on word choice and some found it challenging to analyse these choices.

Question 4: some candidates found the analysis of language used to present Mandela as a heroic figure challenging, with many scoring 1 mark for a basic comment, rather than 2 marks for detailed or insightful comments. Popular choices for this question were 'fairy tale', 'superhuman' and the comparison of Mandela to other historic figures.

Question 5: many candidates found the analysis of imagery and sentence structure to convey the impact of prison life on Mandela challenging, with many scoring 1 mark for a basic comment, rather than 2 marks for detailed or insightful comments. Many candidates selected the images 'moulded', 'teachers' and 'pruned' and the sentence structure features of list, repetition, question and parenthesis.

Question 8: some candidates found the selection of three important qualities shared by Mandela and Obama challenging, with some commenting on shared experiences, rather than qualities. However, most candidates managed to provide a combination of shared qualities and appropriate evidence.

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 Texts section.

In the final 10 mark question of the Scottish Texts section, some candidates did not fully concentrate on the question's key focus. For example in the Carol Ann Duffy question, some candidates did not comment on 'concerns about identity', but on other aspects of personality.

In the Critical Essay section, some candidates showed understanding of their chosen texts but did not focus sufficiently on the requirements of the question. Their essays were less relevant as a result. 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. Markers reported that a small number of candidates wrote long essays and then did not finish their final analysis question. Conversely, a number of candidates wrote short essays which tended to be self-penalising.

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 the Critical Essay section 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. A small number of candidates wrote very short pieces.

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.

In a small number of cases, 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

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

It is very important that candidates attempt to adhere to the requirement to use their own words (indicated in the wording of the question where this is required). Direct lifts of words and/or 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 for references or quotations alone. No marks are awarded for an 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 variety 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 be reminded that there are 2 marks for detailed or insightful comment and 1 mark for more basic comment in many Higher questions.

Candidates should 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 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 4 mark analysis questions, providing four points is one effective strategy.

The use of bullet points might assist candidates when structuring answers for high mark questions.

Component 2: question paper – Critical Reading

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

Candidates should read the 10 mark question carefully and make sure that they use their textual knowledge to construct an answer which 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 Texts section.

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

In their response to the 'commonality' part of the 10 mark question, candidates can make general points about the writer's work in relation to the question or refer to specific texts. They should go beyond making a basic link between the question and a text or texts for the full 2 marks.

In the final 6 marks which relate to the wider text or texts, when answering on shorter texts (poetry or short stories), it is acceptable for candidates to refer to one or more than one other text.

Teachers and lecturers should remind candidates:

- ◆ the question they choose for the Critical Essay section must be from a different genre to the one they chose for the Scottish Texts section. They should also make sure that they choose a question from the appropriate genre for their text.
- ◆ to stay relevant to the question in their responses to critical essay questions. They should avoid retelling the story or repeating information which is not relevant to the question.
- ◆ that microanalysis is not always needed or advisable in a critical essay, particularly on a larger text. There are many acceptable approaches to planning and developing the line of argument in an essay.

Candidates should be careful to select an appropriate critical essay question. Some candidates were disadvantaged by choosing an inappropriate question.

Component 3: portfolio-writing

Candidates should be reminded to adhere to the stated word limit of 1,300 words for each piece of writing. It is possible to achieve a high standard of performance without reaching this maximum. However, very short pieces are likely to be self-penalising.

Candidates should be encouraged to structure their writing clearly.

In personal writing, candidates should focus on conveying thoughts, feelings and personality rather than relating events.

In imaginative writing, candidates should 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, for example thematically or through the use of different narrative voices. A group of poems is 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 and helps to develop good study habits.

Encouraging personal choice can be beneficial when considering topics for discursive writing. Local and current issues often have powerful relevance for candidates.

In discursive writing, sufficient research should be undertaken so that the candidate's argument can be fully explored. Evidence should be included in an essay as part of the coherent structure.

Grade boundary and statistical information:

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2017	35716
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Number of resulted entries in 2018	36185
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Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of course awards	Percentage	Cumulative %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum mark				
A	23.4%	23.4%	8462	69
B	26.4%	49.8%	9542	59
C	26.2%	75.9%	9478	50
D	10.7%	86.6%	3865	45
No award	13.4%	-	4838	-

General commentary on grade boundaries

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.

SQA aims to set examinations and create marking instructions which 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.

Therefore SQA holds a grade boundary meeting every year for each subject at each level to bring 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.

Grade boundaries from exam papers in the same subject at the same level tend to be marginally different year to year. This is because the particular questions, and the mix of questions, are different. This is also the case for exams set by centres. If SQA alters a boundary, this does not mean that centres should necessarily alter their boundary in the corresponding practice exam paper.