Course Report 2018

Subject	English
Level	National 5

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)

Feedback from markers, teachers and lecturers, together with candidates' responses, suggest that the passage was accessible, engaging and interesting. The topic was universal in that it was about cats. The subject matter ranged over historical aspects and contained a link to literacy.

Candidates approached the questions with commitment and demonstrated their language learning from the course. Most were able to answer all questions but some did not manage to complete the final question. Overall, the majority of candidates' performances suggested that they were presented at an appropriate level. However, there were a few very low scores which suggested that some were not yet ready for National 5.

This question paper performed as expected with all questions providing appropriate levels of discrimination and grade boundary decisions were broadly consistent with those of 2017.

Component 2: question paper: Critical Reading

Candidates demonstrated their critical reading skills effectively in responses to both the Scottish text section and the critical essay. This has consistently been the case for this question paper.

Candidate performance was similar and consistent across all Scottish text options. In terms of uptake, the majority of candidates answered on a poetry text but there was a significant rise in the numbers choosing drama. Carol Ann Duffy was again the most popular option, but this year *Sailmaker* by Alan Spence had the second highest uptake, followed by Norman MacCaig and then *Tally's Blood* by Ann Marie di Mambro. Prose remains the least popular genre in this section, but this is reversed for the critical essay where responses on prose texts predominate. Novels such as *Of Mice and Men*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Lord of the Flies* remain popular, but there were others, for example *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. A fairly wide range of short stories was evident, including: *The Darkness Out There* (from Penelope Lively's *Pack of Cards* collection), *A Warm Golden Brown* by Alexander Reid, *The Pedestrian* by Ray Bradbury, *Fearless* by Janice Galloway, *On the Sidewalk Bleeding* by Ed McBain/Evan Hunter, *The Lighthouse* by Agnes Owens, *The Luncheon* by Somerset Maugham, *The Sniper* by Liam O' Flaherty, *The Tell-Tale Heart* by Edgar Allan Poe, *Father and Son* by Bernard MacLaverty. Prose non-fiction responses tended to address the writings of George Orwell or Fergal Keane.

Candidates chose the drama and poetry questions in broadly equal numbers. Drama texts included *Macbeth*, *A View from the Bridge*, *An Inspector Calls*, *Educating Rita*, and *The Letterbox*. In responses to poetry, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Seamus Heaney featured often but there was also some variety, for example Shakespeare sonnets, poems by John Cooper Clarke and the Scottish writer Elissa Soave.

Media responses made up approximately 10% of the total, as was the case last session. Candidates tended to select films such as *The Dark Knight*, *Psycho*, Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Untouchables*, rather than TV drama. Very few candidates chose the language questions from section 2 Critical essay.

This question paper performed as expected and grade boundary decisions were broadly consistent with those of 2017.

Component 3: portfolio–writing

Candidate performance in the portfolio–writing was very similar to that of 2017. There was clear evidence of robust writing skills of the standard required, and now firmly established, at National 5.

For the 'broadly creative' piece, most candidates chose to write about an aspect of their personal experience, but a good number achieved success with a piece of short fiction. A few candidates submitted poetry, Scots prose or drama scripts. There was a slight increase in drama scripts, perhaps reflecting the increase in those doing drama for section 1 Scottish texts, in the Critical Reading question paper.

For 'broadly discursive' pieces, candidates tended to select an issue-based topic, conduct research and then write about it in a discursive, persuasive or argumentative way. A common topic this year was gun control in America but a wide range of topics were covered. Some of the topics were: prisoners' rights, veganism, rewilding wolves, safe standing areas at football matches, cycling versus cars, life expectancy in Glasgow, the representation of autism in the media, artificial intelligence, Star Wars v Star Trek, school uniform.

Some candidates responded to interesting discussion questions, for example: Do we need to re-evaluate safety culture? Should land borders exist? Should clothing be shared? Sharks – friends or foes? Do appearances matter? Should we consider moving to Mars? Is university always the best option? Should schools start later in the day? Why are home-made cookies always better than shop-bought cookies?

Other candidates successfully pursued, researched and wrote on information-based topics, for example biographies, film reviews, geographical areas. Again, some candidates chose to employ personal, anecdotal material as part of 'broadly discursive' writing. This was often done to good effect.

Component 4: performance–spoken language

In the sample verified, all candidates were able to meet the demands of the performance– spoken language. There was evidence of a small number of centres applying standards which exceeded those described in the detailed marking instructions provided by SQA, but this did not prevent candidates from successfully achieving the component.

Centres used a range of assessment tasks which offered candidates personalisation and choice or linked to course assessment. They were all of a similar level, appropriate for National 5 and allowed candidates to demonstrate detailed and relevant ideas. Candidates

also demonstrated a high level of engagement with these tasks. Some candidates demonstrated research, analysis and evaluation skills within the presentation tasks, as well as meeting the requirements of communicating effectively.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas in which candidates performed well

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

Question 1: most candidates achieved 1 mark here, frequently for an understanding that the cat has importance in the shop. Some showed a very good understanding of the idea of the cat being, in some way, the 'spirit of the place'.

Question 2: most candidates were able to identify at least two positive points about cats from this section (avoiding the distraction of material on dogs).

Question 3: candidates were, largely, able to identify at least two ways that cats 'held a special place in the ancient world'.

Question 5: many candidates were able to identify an example of the writer's use of sentence structure, most often a short sentence, or a list.

Question 6: most candidates were able to supply one or two relevant examples of word choice. Some candidates gave precise analysis of how word choice was used in relation to the writer's points about the preservation of Egyptian writing.

Question 7: candidates did well with this question, which is worthy of note given that a degree of inference or an understanding of tone was required.

Question 8: many candidates identified at least two stages of the 'journey', even though they were often not able to provide a full summary of the writer's account of how cats have 'ended up in bookshops'.

Question 9: many candidates gained marks for selecting an appropriate expression, but only some were able to link it evaluatively to a similar earlier expression, or to a main idea of the passage.

Component 2: question paper: Critical Reading

The overwhelming majority of candidates showed signs of having been well-prepared for the extract-based textual analysis. They were consistently successful in demonstrating their skills of understanding, analysis and evaluation in the questions on the extract of their choice. For the most part, marks were good here. Many candidates successfully employed a clear three-part structure for their answers to the final question. This seemed to help them to ensure coverage of all aspects of the question.

Candidates were generally able to select an appropriate critical essay question and then offer a response that was detailed, relevant, and displayed knowledge of the text. Most essays met the minimum standards required for technical accuracy.

Questions 1 and 4: these questions on a main character from a drama or prose work were handled well by candidates. Strong relevance was often a feature here.

Question 3: this was the most popular critical essay question with most candidates selecting an 'issue' as their focus.

Question 5: many candidates had success with this question, often taking war as an 'aspect of human experience,' and responding on war poetry. A broad definition of 'human experience' was accepted in the marking process.

Component 3: portfolio–writing

Candidates had clearly worked with commitment on their portfolios of writing, demonstrating that they understood the standard required, and that they were able to meet it. Most had no difficulty in showing their ability to write for the different purposes, 'broadly creative' and 'broadly discursive.' The vast majority of candidates expressed themselves effectively in written English, used detailed language with clarity, and showed an awareness of structure. Some candidates went further and wrote with developing style and flair.

Many candidates wrote about their own life experiences in sensitive, and often mature, ways. Ideas and opinions were frequently expressed with some amount of developed thought, showing candidates' ability to engage thoughtfully with the world around them. As noted above, a reasonably wide range of topics was covered in 'broadly discursive' writing. In general, candidates appeared to do better when they pursued topics which were of interest to them or they felt strongly about. This would seem to suggest that personalisation and choice is a significant factor here.

In 'broadly discursive' writing, it was evident that most candidates had conducted a reasonable amount of research when exploring their chosen topics. They often acknowledged sources clearly and systematically.

Candidates who chose to submit pieces of drama or poetry often showed an awareness of forms and structures particular to the genre.

Component 4: performance–spoken language

In the sample verified, all candidates achieved the performance–spoken language. Many centres took a holistic approach to assessment. This gave candidates a number of opportunities to engage with tasks and demonstrate their skills over a range of contexts.

Areas which candidates found demanding

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

Question 1: some candidates were not able to demonstrate precise understanding of the ideas, especially the notion that the cat 'gives you approximately five seconds to impress him' (an understanding of both time and interest were required here).

Question 2: although candidates were generally able to identify some positive points about cats, they often only partially demonstrated an understanding of each point. This was often because of issues relating to using their own words.

Question 3: the requirement to use their own words here was an issue for many candidates.

Question 4: markers noted that this question was not well-answered overall. Candidates were required to make a selection from the sentence quoted in the question, and explain how it linked backwards or forwards, thereby showing an awareness of structure. Many candidates offered only non-specific, generalised answers.

Question 5: candidates were able to identify aspects of sentence structure, but accompanying analytical comments were often weak or vague.

Question 6: some candidates were not sufficiently specific in their selection of examples of word choice. Some candidates did not link their analytical comments to the key focus of the question (preserving Egyptian writing).

Question 8: candidates were generally able to offer a reasonable number of summary points, but using their own words was again an issue for many.

Question 9: most candidates made an appropriate selection but some were unable to link it to an earlier expression/idea or to a specific main idea.

Component 2: question paper: Critical Reading

In section 1 Scottish texts, in their answers to the 'writer's use of language' questions, some candidates did not make sufficiently developed analytical comments, and concentrated on meaning only. Some provided a restatement of the wording of the question instead of an analytical comment.

In the final question of the Scottish text section, some candidates did not address their answers sufficiently closely to the focus of the question.

In section 2 Critical essay, time management was an issue for some candidates. There was evidence of some having spent too long on section 1 of this question paper.

In the critical essay, some candidates offered analysis that concentrated on meaning rather than the impact of techniques. Some responses relied too heavily on plot/narrative summary.

A few candidates had difficulty with the genre requirements for the critical essay. Some did not follow the instruction 'Your answer must be on a different genre from that chosen in section 1'. Some selected a question from a section that did not match the genre of their chosen text.

Component 3: portfolio–writing

In personal writing, some candidates relied too heavily on an account of events at the expense of an exploration of thoughts, feelings, reactions and/or reflection.

In discursive writing, a small number of candidates had difficulty constructing a reasonably coherent line of argument.

In a small number of cases discursive writing was thin in ideas or information, or lacked length and development.

A few candidates did not make sufficient acknowledgement of the sources they consulted.

There were indications that some candidates had not taken the opportunity to revise or redraft their writing.

Component 4: performance–spoken language

In the sample verified, there was no evidence that particular aspects of the assessment had been excessively demanding.

Section 3: advice for the preparation of future candidates

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

Personal reading, and supported reading in class will greatly assist in preparation for this part of the course assessment. As will the discussion of ideas and opinions generated from reading material.

Candidates should pay careful attention to the requirement to use their own words, to demonstrate their understanding of important ideas in the passage. The expression 'own words' is emboldened where appropriate in order to draw candidates' attention to it. Direct lifts of words or expressions from the passage will gain no marks in this type of question.

When attempting to recast key ideas from the passage into their own words, candidates should focus on the whole idea, and not just part of it. Marks are often lost when candidates make only a 'partial gloss' of an idea from the passage. However, candidates should be reassured that tolerance is applied in the case of single words which might be difficult or impossible to gloss (an obvious example this year is the word 'cat').

In questions which require the analysis of the writer's use of language, the simplest model to follow is: reference plus relevant comment. At National 5, appropriate references are awarded 1 mark. A further 1 mark is given for a relevant analytical comment. Candidates should try to explain their analytical comments as clearly and as fully as they can.

If a question requires candidates to refer to 'examples of language,' they should be careful to make precise selections and beware of quoting too much from the passage (where selection is not obvious).

In a question such as question 4, candidates should make specific reference to a part of the sentence identified and then explain its structural purpose (does it relate to previous or following ideas? Which ones?). This approach is exemplified in the published marking instructions.

The use of bullet points is often an effective way to structure a response, especially in the high mark 'identify' or 'summarise' questions.

Component 2: question paper: Critical Reading

Candidates should try to have a sense of the work as a whole in terms of a play, novel, collection of short stories or poems, while preparing for the final question in the Scottish text section (for example key ideas, themes, characterisation).

They should be aware of the three-part requirement of the final question in the Scottish text section (commonality, extract, elsewhere). A clear understanding of this might help them to structure their responses. They should also be reminded to ensure that their response to the final question (the demonstration of their knowledge and understanding) has direct relevance to the question.

Teachers and lecturers should remind candidates of the rules of the question paper, in particular the requirement to choose a critical essay question from a genre which is different to their Scottish set text.

They should also remind candidates to give a clear indication of which critical essay question they are responding to and of the need to maintain relevance to that question.

Component 3: portfolio–writing

Clarity of expression and structure should be encouraged in candidates' writing.

In creative writing, candidates should be aware of, and attempt to employ, the key features of the genre.

When submitting poetry, one poem is perfectly acceptable. There is no minimum word length.

In personal writing, candidates should attempt to express an exploration of, or reflection on, their thoughts, feelings, and/or reactions to an experience.

If candidates acquire careful research skills this will assist them greatly when producing 'broadly discursive' writing. They should consider the sources they have consulted as this will encourage clarity of thought and engagement with issues. It may also help to ensure that a developed argument emerges. Candidates must declare all the sources they have used in preparation for writing. The time taken to do this will help to develop good study habits.

A degree of personalisation and choice seems to be beneficial when candidates are considering topics for discursive writing.

Candidates should take the opportunity to reflect on, and to redraft, their pieces of writing following feedback on a first draft.

Component 4: performance–spoken language

Centres are reminded to use the detailed marking instructions provided by SQA when assessing a candidate performance. They are also reminded of the requirement to provide detail in relation to candidate performance in their assessment records to support the basis of their assessment judgements clearly.

Grade boundary and statistical information:

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2017	46273

Number of resulted entries in 2018	44477

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	35.8%	35.8%	15916	69
B	27.0%	62.8%	12009	59
C	22.0%	84.8%	9776	49
D	10.1%	94.8%	4475	39
No award	5.2%	-	2301	-

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.