



# **National Qualifications 2011 Internal Assessment Report English**

The purpose of this report is to provide feedback to centres on verification in National Qualifications in this subject.

# Standard Grade

## Standard Grade Talking

### General comments

As in previous years, there was very little evidence of inconsistency in the application of national standards. All centres verified this year were assessing Talking by accurate and consistent application of the Grade Related Criteria (GRC).

All centres verified were thoroughly familiar with the procedures for the assessment of Standard Grade Talking.

The new Arrangements for the assessment of Talking require that the centre has an Internal Verifier responsible for standards within the department. This system appears to be firmly in place, and understood to be a crucial factor in procedures and standards in line with national requirements.

The following combines two sections of the report: good practice and specific areas for improvement.

### Areas of good practice/areas for improvement

The identification, in the 1987 Arrangements, of the four 'modes' of Standard Grade English — Reading, Writing; Talking (and Listening) — presented a new challenge for English departments: the full integration of Talking (and Listening) into the formal (and formally assessed) syllabus. Twenty-four years later, Talking is still seen by some as the poor relation of Reading and Writing, and its status within the Standard Grade Course is, here and there, that of an impediment to the 'real' business of the Course. By contrast, centres in which Talking and Listening are fully integrated offer a version of Standard Grade English which is lively, and full of debate, discussion and inquiry.

The integrated model, in which opportunities for discussion and reporting back are found in Course components from Close Reading to the study of Literature, is the one likely to achieve the best results. A couple of one-off talks given as the annual assessments are clearly less likely to engage pupils and ensure progression than a situation where discussion is a normal part of classroom practice. The former, it should also be stressed, does not fulfil the formal requirements of Standard Grade English.

The integrated model clearly has benefits, too, for the teacher as assessor of Standard Grade Talk. Assessing 30 Individual Talks, allowing for those who'd prefer to come with a few friends at a lunch-time, is a week's work. Classroom discussion, in groups, on key aspects of a novel might allow the assessment of six to ten contributions to discussion, and assessment of the same number of individuals reporting back, in a double period. Arguably, too, engagement with the text will be enhanced by the discussion.

Regular opportunities for Talking and Listening are, therefore, likely to enhance the Standard Grade Course, and, in any case, the planning of regular opportunities is a requirement of course design at this level. Talk should be taught and assessed over two years, in a thorough and systematic way, and the final assessments for Group Discussion and Individual Talk should reflect progression over a two-year course.

The final grade awarded must be an aggregate of performances in both types of Talk. It is not acceptable to ignore or relegate the importance of either Discussion or Individual Talk because of difficulties arising in assessment.

### **Some advice on reluctant performers**

A candidate who, as a result of non-attendance or reluctance, is able to produce no more than one or two Individual Talks, has taken no part in the teaching and learning of Talking, and has contributed nothing to group discussions, is *not* able to meet the requirements of Talking for Standard Grade English, and cannot, therefore, complete the Course.

Candidates who take part in discussion in a reluctant or negative way should still be assessed using the GRC. Turning up and joining the group (which may be defined as participating in group discussion) ensures the award of a grade. Taking part, though saying nothing, will fail to meet the criteria for Grade 6, but may be awarded Grade 7.

Colleagues should note an obvious point: the GRC are expressed as criteria related to a positive performance in Talking, no matter how limited. Candidates deliberately disrupting the process are, by implication, not assessable, and should be awarded Grade 7. Such an award will reduce the candidate's aggregate grade (and, therefore, the award) and may well be a useful 'motivator' for the unco-operative.

A similar approach might justifiably be taken to disruption of general classroom discussion. Colleagues will be aware that, on occasion, classroom discussion will be assessable as Group Discussion. If colleagues are satisfied that a discussion meets the criteria for assessment, then those who contribute enthusiastically should be rewarded, and those who disrupt the process, penalised.

# National Qualifications (NQ) Units

## Titles/levels of NQ Units verified

Unit 1 Language Study (Access 3 to Higher)

Advanced Higher: Literary Study

Advanced Higher: Creative Writing

## General comments

### Unit 1 Language Study (Access 3 to Higher)

In 2011, central verification focused on Unit 1 Language Study. In most cases, there was effective use of valid instruments of assessment, and reliable application of assessment criteria. More detailed comments and guidance are provided below.

### Advanced Higher

There was a limited sampling of centres offering Advanced Higher. These centres were visited in the Christmas term, so the focus was on interim rather than final evidence, with assessments available regarded as provisional. The focus of the visits reflected the work done in centres, mostly on Literary Study, Creative Writing and Dissertation. Advice on good practice is offered below.

In work sampled and centres visited, there was good understanding of the Unit specifications, and of the application of the Performance Criteria to candidate scripts.

Instruments of assessment in use were, in most cases, valid. In most cases, too, relevant marking guidelines had been applied accurately. Further, more detailed, guidance on these matters is given below.

Where instruments of assessment had been designed by the centre, careful thought appeared to have been given to ensuring that the Performance Criteria were met, and that resulting judgements were likely to be secure.

Scripts sampled indicated that candidates and teachers were thoroughly familiar with the relevant exemplification materials.

The following combines two sections of the report: good practice and specific areas for improvement.

## Areas of good practice/areas for improvement

### Advanced Higher Units

Each year, there is a limited sampling of centres presenting candidates for Advanced Higher English. These visits are normally in response to a request from the centre. In addition, there is a limited sampling of centres from around the country. In both cases, the verification of assessment is only part of the purpose of the visit. There is wide-ranging discussion of the following: selection of the most appropriate Units; teaching and learning of the Units; resources, including deployment of staff; course outlines; timetabling and timings.

The timing of development visits (the Christmas term) often means that there will be limited opportunity for scrutiny of standards of assessment of the completed Unit product; instead, there is a sampling of candidate work produced during the Unit, and advice is offered on bringing provisional assessments into line with national standards, and on the most effective means of meeting the Unit requirements.

Development visits are normally carried out by the Senior Verifier, who has overall responsibility for standards in internal assessment at all levels.

This year, there were visits to six centres. Approaches to the Advanced Higher Course were very varied, at their best when there was a local dimension provided by a writer, theatre, or other resource or facility. In some cases, consistency and integration were achieved by the efforts of one real enthusiast with responsibility for the whole Course; more usually, the teaching was shared by members of the department, with one colleague (often the Principal Teacher) having overall responsibility.

Some excellent work was evident in all Units sampled. Courses in which an attempt had been made to integrate components were, largely, more successful than those which offered the Course as discrete Units. For example, better Creative Writing happens when writing is modelled on, or stimulated by, texts studied; better Textual Analysis of unseen texts is generally achieved when candidates have developed the required skills in the analysis of seen texts.

The most effective teachers of the Course recognised the importance of providing a social/political/literary context for literature, including reference to work beyond the specified texts and authors of the Literary Study Course. Most English teachers verified at this level accept readily the suggestion that a candidate completing a Course in Advanced Higher English should have read Hamlet, to pick one obvious example, even though it is not a specified text.

With this notion in mind, there were impressive reading lists in use in some centres, issued for summer reading in advance of the Course, and including the texts with which that department felt the student of English should be familiar. Lists, of course, varied.

### **Unit 1 Language Study (Access 3 to Higher)**

Of the two National Units that comprise the National Courses from Access 3 to Higher, the Language Study is the one more likely to lead to a verification result of 'Not accepted'.

There are a number of reasons for this, but the most common are:

- ◆ Misunderstanding of the Unit specifications, principally the requirement that passes must be achieved in both Outcomes. Both Close Reading and Writing must be passed for the Unit award. No partial award is possible.
- ◆ Use of commercially produced and other materials, or SQA past papers, as evidence of successful completion of the Close Reading Outcome. Only secure-site National Assessment Bank Close Reading passages are acceptable as evidence of completion of Close Reading.
- ◆ Overly generous marking, particularly at the borderline.

This year, Verifiers commented on the following features of performance in the Language Unit:

## Close Reading

In many centres which passed, there was evidence of extensive and rigorous internal verification, resulting in some sensible amendments to original marks. Internal verification procedures are surely an important factor in the centre's consistency and adherence to national standards.

- ◆ Use of bullet-point format (when appropriate) allowed candidates to focus answers clearly.
- ◆ Half marks were often incorrectly awarded, and should be avoided, unless specifically permitted in the marking guidelines.
- ◆ In some cases, analysis questions were consistently leniently marked. This was especially true of questions on imagery, with full marks awarded when an image was not de-constructed.
- ◆ Responses to questions on sentence structure were occasionally over-rewarded, with full credit incorrectly given for descriptive rather than analytical answers.
- ◆ Marking guidelines make clear when blatant 'lifts' are acceptable. In most cases, and particularly at Intermediate 2 and Higher, marks should not be awarded.

## Close Reading — some additional considerations

The best Close Reading answers show a confident awareness of the conventions of the kind of writing most often featured in the Close Reading exam, particularly at Higher: non-fictional prose (be it informative, reflective, persuasive, discursive) of the kind found in the quality/broadsheet newspapers. Reading this kind of prose regularly, and coming to an understanding of how it works, is far and away the best preparation for Close Reading. Here are a few other points.

- 1 Note that meaning resides in every aspect of the text: in the punctuation, the positioning of words, and the division into paragraphs; in the word choice and the language of the passage; in the imagery; even in the typographical arrangement.
- 2 Some of this meaning needs to be inferred (or deduced). Especially at Higher, pupils have to be able to spot innuendo, and show understanding that some of what is said is not said explicitly, but implied by the writer.
- 3 Most of those who do well in Close Reading have a clear understanding of the difference between *denotation* (the straightforward definition of a word or phrase) and *connotation* (something the word or phrase might suggest to the reader).

## Writing

- ◆ Candidates would be likely to benefit from helpful feedback on 'next steps' — particularly when there was a clear focus on meeting the Performance Criteria.
- ◆ Errors in scripts submitted often appeared to be careless. Thorough editing and proof-reading of work by candidates is recommended. For teacher feedback, an assessment grid or feedback form would provide 'structured' guidance.
- ◆ In some cases, tasks for writing had to be inferred from the evidence. Labelling of work, with a clear indication of genre and task, is recommended.
- ◆ Non-fictional writing on local themes and issues provided a welcome change from the standard explorations of the more predictable topics.
- ◆ The writing of a report is encouraged, but reports must follow the guidelines for this type of writing as set out in the Unit specification, particularly the need for a specific remit.

This year, there was a closer match between external and internal assessment, with the introduction of the Folio of Writing. It was evident from the centres sampled that there is some confusion over the dual assessment of the Writing pieces. Two important distinctions are, perhaps, worth emphasising:

- 1 There is a lower word limit for Writing pieces assessed internally for Language Unit Outcome 2, but **no upper word limit** is specified in the Unit specification. There is no penalty for excessive length, leaving it to centres to advise candidates on the scope of the individual piece.  
An upper word limit **is** specified for each of the Writing pieces included in the Folio for external assessment.
- 2 Although the 25-point scale devised for the external assessment of Writing will be a useful and constructive tool in advising candidates on specific demands and next stages, the mark scale itself should not be used for the assessment of Learning Outcome 2: Writing. The award of Pass or Fail (with no mark) is assessed according to the Performance Criteria in the Unit specification, with the Pass awarded when all four of the criteria are met.

### **National Assessment Bank**

The National Assessment Bank for English contains three types of resource:

- 1 Assessment instruments for Close Reading and Textual Analysis
- 2 Exemplification of candidate performance with commentary
- 3 Guidance on teaching and learning in the Units

For all three, the security of the materials should be taken very seriously, particularly in the case of the assessment instruments.

NABs need not be selected at random. Teachers and lecturers should give some thought as to the most appropriate assessment instrument for the course as taught in that centre. When an assessment instrument has to be designed (for example in Literary Study at Advanced Higher), centres should follow the advice given in the annual reports published on SQA's website, the Arrangements and Unit specifications, and the various available guidance documents.