



Course report 2022

Subject	English
Level	Higher

This report provides information on candidates' performance. 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 appeals.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2022	34025
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Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including grade boundaries

A	Percentage	29.0	Cumulative percentage	29.0	Number of candidates	9850	Minimum mark required	68
B	Percentage	28.1	Cumulative percentage	57.1	Number of candidates	9590	Minimum mark required	57
C	Percentage	23.0	Cumulative percentage	80.1	Number of candidates	7820	Minimum mark required	47
D	Percentage	14.3	Cumulative percentage	94.4	Number of candidates	4875	Minimum mark required	36
No award	Percentage	5.6	Cumulative percentage	N/A	Number of candidates	1890	Minimum mark required	N/A

You can read the general commentary on grade boundaries in appendix 1 of this report.

In this report:

- ◆ 'most' means greater than 70%
- ◆ 'many' means 50% to 69%
- ◆ 'some' means 25% to 49%
- ◆ 'a few' means less than 25%

You can find more statistical reports on the statistics page of [SQA's website](#).

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

The two passages provided appropriate challenge in terms of content and language. The passages focused on the subject of space exploration, considering such topics as the moon landing, the value of scientific achievements and benefits to society so far, as well as future priorities for our planet.

The eight questions on passage 1 provided opportunities for candidates to apply a range of skills, for example analysis of language, including word choice, sentence structure, imagery and tone, as well as explanation of the writer's ideas. The final question, on both passages, required candidates to identify three key ideas on which the writers of the two passages disagreed and to support their choices with evidence from the passages.

This question paper performed as expected. The topic and level of reading demand was deemed to be similar to 2019.

Question paper: Critical Reading

As in previous years, the emphasis in the Scottish text questions was on analysis. The first three questions in each option required the candidates to comment on the use of language and literary techniques to convey central concerns such as characterisation and thematic development and to create, for example, tension or humour.

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 use of setting in relation to both the text printed in the question paper and the wider work or other works. Care was taken to ensure that the final questions for all texts were sufficiently challenging to enable candidates 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.

In terms of uptake, the most popular genre was poetry. The most popular option, overall, was Carol Ann Duffy, followed by Norman MacCaig, *Men Should Weep* by Ena Lamont Stewart, and Iain Crichton Smith. In poetry, after Carol Ann Duffy and Norman MacCaig, the most popular choice was Liz Lochhead, followed by Don Paterson. A small number of candidates chose Robert Burns and 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 Iain Crichton Smith, the next most popular choice was Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, followed by *The Cone-Gatherers* by Robin Jenkins. A small number of candidates chose the short stories of George Mackay Brown and the novel *Sunset Song* by Lewis Grassie Gibbon.

Candidates chose a range of texts for their critical essays. Performance was similar across the different genres. It was noticeable that more candidates wrote about shorter texts, such as short stories or non-fiction essays, than in previous years. Popular short story choices included *Flowers* by Robin Jenkins, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, as well as the work of Ray Bradbury.

The most popular choice in non-fiction prose was *A Hanging* by George Orwell, followed by Orwell's *Marrakech*, and *Letter to Daniel* by Fergal Keane. In longer prose fiction, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald was the most popular novel. Also popular were J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*.

In drama, the most popular text was Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Also popular was Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* and the work of Arthur Miller, particularly *All My Sons*, *The Crucible*, *A View from the Bridge* and *Death of a Salesman*. Some plays by Shakespeare were popular, especially *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Macbeth*.

As many candidates chose poetry for the Scottish text option, there were correspondingly fewer essays on poetry. This year, a number of candidates chose to write about texts that focused on a challenging situation or a strong emotion, for example Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess*, *Visiting Hour* by Norman MacCaig and *Havisham* by Carol Ann Duffy. The works of Sylvia Plath, Seamus Heaney and Wilfred Owen were also evident.

A number of candidates chose to write their essay on a media text. In this genre, popular choices included the films *The Godfather*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Shutter Island*, *1917* and *Get Out*. A very small number chose to write on language. All questions were chosen by some candidates.

This question paper performed as expected. There were no specific questions which did not perform as expected. However, a number of markers reported fewer high-scoring critical essays, with many essays scoring in the 10–12-mark range.

Portfolio–writing

This year candidates were required to submit one portfolio piece, chosen from either broadly discursive or broadly creative work completed throughout the year. The portfolio–writing performed as expected.

Performance–spoken language

The requirement to assess spoken language was removed for session 2021–22.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

Candidates engaged well with the passages, which focused on the value of space travel. They approached the task conscientiously and many performed well. Most candidates had time to complete the paper, including spending sufficient time on the final question on both passages, although some did not complete the final questions 8 and 9. Most candidates attempted all questions, though some candidates missed question 8, instead moving on to complete question 9 instead.

Question 1: most candidates explained at least one aspect of the writer's reaction to the moon landing. Many candidates commented on his disappointment in the event, the sense that it was an anti-climax, and the deflating effect of hearing a TV announcer's voice rather than Armstrong himself.

Question 3: most candidates successfully identified one reason for the interest in space exploration in the 1960s, with many identifying two. Many candidates cited financial gain, the impact on global image, and the growing popularity of science fiction as important reasons.

Question 7: most candidates explained at least one reason why the photograph of earth was significant, with many explaining two or three reasons. Many candidates recognised the beauty and emotional power of the photograph, as well as the sense that it acted as a catalyst for climate awareness.

Question 9: most candidates identified one or two key ideas on which the writers disagreed, with many identifying three key ideas. Many candidates were able to provide appropriate evidence to support their ideas. Many candidates commented on disagreement on the achievements in space exploration so far, the future priorities for our planet, and the impact on international relations.

Question paper: Critical Reading

Candidates were well prepared for the Critical Reading question paper. In both the Scottish textual analysis and the critical essay, candidates showed detailed knowledge and understanding, as well as enthusiasm for their texts.

Many candidates performed well in the first three, lower-mark analysis questions on the extracts or texts in the Scottish textual analysis. Many candidates devoted sufficient time to answering the final, 10-mark question and made successful links between the printed extract or text and the wider work studied in class. Some candidates approached commonality by making perceptive general comments which showed good general understanding of how the question related to the text or texts studied. Some candidates approached commonality by commenting on the text or extract included in the question paper and one other text or extract. Both approaches were valid and done well by many candidates. Most opted to answer this question in a series of bullet points, an approach which worked well.

In the critical essay section, many candidates found a suitable question and managed to structure their essays effectively, demonstrating thorough knowledge of the texts they had studied, for example through the use of quotation and direct references to areas of content. The majority of candidates showed genuine engagement with the texts, and this was demonstrated in their evaluative stance in the essay.

Portfolio–writing

The vast majority of candidates successfully submitted a piece of writing that clearly addressed the requirement for broadly creative or broadly discursive piece writing.

In the portfolio–writing, candidates have the opportunity to redraft and improve pieces, and the standard of written English in candidates' finished work, including technical accuracy, was generally high.

In creative writing, many candidates chose to write about personal experience, often focusing on life-changing events such as mental health experiences, the impact of the pandemic, loss of a family member and the challenges of life as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Some reflected on the experience of growing up in today's world, which was often handled with maturity. Many candidates who chose to submit imaginative writing, showed awareness of genre requirements such as character and thematic development. Many achieved a high standard of writing in creation of atmosphere and setting and in the use of structure. A number of candidates chose to submit poetry or drama. A small number of candidates chose to write in Scots, for example Doric, Shetland Scots and Glaswegian Scots.

In discursive writing, it was clear that most candidates chose a subject which interested them. Many chose current issues such as aspects of the environment, with the development of electric cars being a popular choice. Some candidates chose to write about an aspect of sport, either domestic or international. A number of candidates explored topics of local relevance, and these were often handled well. Many candidates conducted appropriate research and structured their essays effectively. Some candidates showed genuine engagement with current national and international affairs, as well as awareness of how such issues impact on the lives of young people. The overwhelming majority of candidates chose to word process their pieces, and the standard of presentation was high. Most identified any sources used.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

Question 6: some candidates found analysis of word choice and sentence structure to convey criticism of space exploration challenging. When answering on word choice, the most popular selections were 'junk', 'embarrassment' and 'wasteful'. The most popular choices in sentence structure were the use of a question and the use of a dash: candidates often accurately selected these features but did not always comment on the function of the features accurately.

Question 8: some candidates found the analysis of language to create an inspirational tone challenging. Features which were popular choices included the expression 'fight for the

future', the use of short sentences and the word 'heroes'. Many candidates managed to make basic comments on their choices.

In questions requiring candidates to analyse the use of language features, a number of candidates had difficulty in analysing how the language features created effects, instead tending to assert the effects they created.

Question paper: Critical Reading

Some candidates tended to assert rather than analyse, both in the shorter questions and in the final 10-mark analysis question in the Scottish text section.

In the final 10-mark question, 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 successfully on the impact of change, instead commenting on change alone. Some candidates attempted to comment on commonality, but their comments were limited. Some candidates began by answering the final 10-mark question, an approach which often led to difficulties as they had not familiarised themselves with the text via the first three questions.

In the critical essay, 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 wrote very short essays and were consequently unable to address the question fully. Some candidates spent too long on generalised comments, re-telling the narrative or describing characters in a basic way, rather than focusing on analysis and evaluation of the text. Some essays included inappropriate microanalysis, for example detailed consideration of word choice or punctuation in drama or prose texts. A number of candidates had difficulty in choosing an appropriate critical essay question and struggled to match the text they knew to the question chosen. A small number of candidates had difficulty with following the genre requirements of the paper. Examples included 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 that 'Your essay must be on a different genre from that chosen in section 1.' A very small number answered both their Scottish text question and critical essay question on the same text.

Portfolio-writing

Some candidates did not adhere to the published word limit of 1,300 words. A small number of candidates wrote very short pieces.

In imaginative writing, some candidates concentrated on plot, developing complicated and unrealistic narratives, rather than focusing 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 quotation from sources without fluent integration into the line of argument.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

Reading good quality non-fiction, for example broadsheet journalism and travel writing, will greatly help 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 in questions where this is indicated. Direct lifts of words and expressions from the question and/or passage will gain no marks.

In questions that 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 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 often 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. When answering on word choice, it is recommended that candidates focus on one word or a small group of words, rather than quoting a whole sentence or longer expression. This will help candidates to analyse the impact of the word or words and avoid making generalised comments that are more about explaining the meaning, rather than analysing the technique.

In analyse questions, it is important that candidates use their selections of language to answer the question. For example, if asked how the writer uses language to criticise space exploration, the candidate's comments must link their selections to the idea of criticism.

Candidates should remember the division of marks in many Higher questions, '2 marks for detailed/insightful comment; 1 mark for more basic comment'.

Candidates should attempt to 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 attempt to 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 in the structuring of answers for high-mark questions.

Question paper: Critical Reading

Most candidates showed genuine enthusiasm for their texts and sincere engagement with, for example, characters and themes. Ensuring that candidates have a broad knowledge of literature and have tackled texts of sufficient demand for Higher is important.

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

Candidates should be aware of the three-part requirement of the final question in the Scottish text section. This is 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 printed, 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 the commonality part of the 10-mark answer, candidates should focus on general points about the writer's work in relation to the question or refer to specific texts. Alternatively, they could comment on the text or extract in the question paper and one other text or extract. They should go beyond making a basic link between the question and a text or texts for the full 2 marks. A careful reading of the question is very helpful here.

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. When answering on the writer's wider work, candidates should be aware that restricting their comments to, for example, one other poem will not always yield sufficient material for the 6 marks available. A wide-ranging knowledge across the other shorter texts or the rest of the longer text is more likely to provide sufficient further points.

Teachers and lecturers should remind candidates of the requirements for choosing an appropriate question from the critical essay section. This must be from a different genre to the Scottish text section. They should make sure that they choose the appropriate genre of question for their text.

Candidates should be careful to select an appropriate critical essay question. It is important that candidates are aware that their critical essay must be relevant to the question. They should try to avoid re-telling the story or repeating information which is not relevant to the question. Preparing an essay and trying to make it 'fit' a question in the question paper is not a helpful strategy.

Candidates should be reminded that microanalysis is not always appropriate 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 aware that technical accuracy is important in the critical essay section. When selecting texts for the critical essay, centres should be aware of the need to support complex analysis appropriate to SCQF level 6. Shorter or less demanding texts do not always work in the candidate's favour.

Portfolio–writing

Candidates are reminded to adhere to stated word limits, 1,300 words maximum. It is possible to achieve a high standard of performance without reaching this maximum and overlong essays can be self-penalising. However, very short pieces are unlikely to gain high marks.

Clarity of structure should be encouraged in candidates' writing.

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

In imaginative writing, candidates should try to focus on developing characters and atmosphere, making effective use of language, rather than developing over-elaborate and/or unrealistic narratives.

When submitting poetry, there is no requirement to submit more than one poem. It is acceptable to submit a collection of poems, but these must be linked, for example thematically or through the use of different narrative voices. A group of poems will be considered and marked as one piece. There is no need to add anything else to the piece, other than the poem or poems, and no other additions will be taken into consideration when marking.

In discursive writing, candidates must acknowledge all sources they use in preparation for pieces of writing. Taking time on the organisation and acknowledgement of sources improves presentation, assists markers, and helps to develop good study habits. Encouraging personal choice can be beneficial when considering topics for discursive writing. Often local and current issues have powerful relevance for candidates. In discursive writing, sufficient research should be undertaken in order that the candidate's argument can be fully explored. Evidence should be included in an essay as part of the coherent structure.

Technical accuracy is very important in the portfolio–writing and candidates should be encouraged to take care when preparing their final drafts.

Centres are reminded that encouraging candidates to choose their topics for discursive and/or creative pieces, tends to work in candidates' favour. A whole cohort or most of a cohort submitting pieces in the same genre is unlikely to serve all candidates well.

Appendix 1: general commentary on grade boundaries

SQA's main aim when setting grade boundaries is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

For most National Courses, SQA aims to set examinations and other external assessments and create marking instructions that allow:

- ◆ a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional grade C boundary)
- ◆ a well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional grade 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 for each course to bring together all the information available (statistical and qualitative) and to make final decisions on grade boundaries based on this information. Members of SQA's Executive Management Team normally chair these meetings.

Principal assessors utilise their subject expertise to evaluate the performance of the assessment and propose suitable grade boundaries based on the full range of evidence. SQA can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the discussion at these meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more, or less, difficult than usual.

- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more difficult than usual.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been less difficult than usual.
- ◆ Where levels of difficulty are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

Grade boundaries from question papers in the same subject at the same level tend to be marginally different year on year. This is because the specific questions, and the mix of questions, are different and this has an impact on candidate performance.

This year, a package of support measures including assessment modifications and revision support, was introduced to support candidates as they returned to formal national exams and other forms of external assessment. This was designed to address the ongoing disruption to learning and teaching that young people have experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, SQA adopted a more generous approach to grading for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses than it would do in a normal exam year, to help ensure fairness for candidates while maintaining standards. This is in recognition of the fact that those preparing for and sitting exams have done so in very different circumstances from those who sat exams in 2019.

The key difference this year is that decisions about where the grade boundaries have been set have also been influenced, where necessary and where appropriate, by the unique circumstances in 2022. On a course-by-course basis, SQA has determined grade boundaries in a way that is fair to candidates, taking into account how the assessment (exams and coursework) has functioned and the impact of assessment modifications and revision support.

The grade boundaries used in 2022 relate to the specific experience of this year's cohort and should not be used by centres if these assessments are used in the future for exam preparation.

For full details of the approach please refer to the [National Qualifications 2022 Awarding—Methodology Report](#).