



# Course report 2025

## Higher English

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. You should read the report with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

For information about the performance–spoken language, which is internally assessed, please refer to the 2024–25 Qualification Verification Summary Report on the [subject page](#) of our website.

We compiled the statistics in this report before we completed the 2025 appeals process.

# Grade boundary and statistical information

## Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2024: 36,300

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 37,129

## Statistical information: performance of candidates

### Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	8,776	23.6	23.6	68
B	9,629	25.9	49.6	58
C	8,887	23.9	73.5	49
D	6,756	18.2	91.7	39
No award	3,081	8.3	100%	Not applicable

We have not applied rounding to these statistics.

You can read the general commentary on grade boundaries in the appendix.

In this report:

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

You can find statistical reports on the [statistics and information](#) page of our 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 were on the street artist Banksy, focusing on aspects of his success, the distinctive nature of his approach to art, reasons for his popularity, reasons why he is both criticised and copied, exhibitions he has organised, his humanitarian and satirical stances and his overall impact.

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

This question paper performed as expected. The topic and level of reading demand was similar to passages from recent years.

### **Question paper: Critical Reading**

As in previous years, the emphasis in the Scottish text questions was on analysis. In the first three questions in each option, candidates had to comment on the use of language and literary techniques to convey central concerns such as the feelings and experiences of characters, theme, mood, and to create, for example a sense of place or an effective opening.

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 feature such as use of imagery and/or symbolism in relation to central concerns in both the text in the question paper and the wider work or other works.

The Scottish text section of the question paper performed as intended and gave candidates the opportunity to respond to the text they had studied during the course, demonstrating their knowledge and analytical skill. There were no specific questions that did not perform as expected.

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, the short stories of Iain Crichton Smith and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde*. 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 Sorley MacLean and Robert Burns. 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 and *Jekyll and Hyde*, the next most popular choice was *The Cone-Gatherers* by Robin Jenkins. A small number of candidates chose the short stories of George Mackay Brown, and a very small number chose the novel *Sunset Song* by Lewis Grassie Gibbon.

Candidates chose a range of texts for their critical essays, with most choosing to write on either drama or prose fiction. Performance was similar across the different genres. As in 2024, there was a noticeable increase in the number of candidates studying longer texts, such as novels and plays. These choices worked well for many candidates, as they offered a wide range of material through which to demonstrate their reading skills. Some candidates wrote about shorter texts, such as short stories or non-fiction essays. A number of candidates chose to write about media texts, especially films.

In drama, Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire* was a particularly popular choice. Other popular drama choices included the works of William Shakespeare, especially *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*, and Arthur Miller, especially *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible* and *All My Sons*, and other works by Tennessee Williams, such as *The Glass Menagerie* and *Sweet Bird of Youth*. In prose, F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* was a particularly popular novel, along with J D Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's*

*Tale* and Graeme Armstrong's *The Young Team*. Popular short story choices included *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin and *Flowers* by Robin Jenkins. In non-fiction, many candidates chose the works of George Orwell, especially *Marrakech* and *A Hanging*, along with *Dachau: Experimental Murder* by Martha Gellhorn and *Letter to Daniel* by Fergal Keane.

Since many candidates chose poetry for the Scottish text option, there were fewer essays on poetry. Popular choices in poems included *The Rabbit Catcher* by Sylvia Plath and *Havisham* by Carol Ann Duffy, along with *Night over Birkenau* by Tadeusz Borowski and *Belfast Confetti* by Ciaran Carson. The works of Seamus Heaney, Wilfred Owen and Norman MacCaig were also evident. A number of candidates chose to write their essay on a media text. In this genre, popular choices included *Get Out*, *The Godfather*, *Psycho*, *The Shawshank Redemption* and *Shutter Island*. A very small number chose to write on language. All questions were chosen by some candidates.

The critical essay section of the question paper performed as expected. There were no specific questions that did not perform as expected.

## **Portfolio-writing**

Candidates had to submit one portfolio piece for external assessment, chosen from either broadly creative or broadly discursive writing. This year candidates had to write the first draft under direct supervision of a teacher or lecturer. This change did not affect performance.

The portfolio-writing performed as expected and was in line with previous years.

## **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 passage, which focused on the street artist Banksy. They approached the task conscientiously and many performed well. A small number of candidates did not complete questions 8 and 9, but most had enough time to complete the paper. Most candidates attempted all questions, although a small number did not attempt question 6.

Question 1: most candidates explained at least one reason why the public is so interested in Banksy. Many candidates gained 2 marks, making valid points about, for example, Banksy's anonymity, the unique and costly nature of his work and the mystery of how many people are involved in its production. Most candidates managed to use their own words to express these ideas.

Question 4: most candidates successfully identified one or two points indicating that Banksy's Bristol exhibition was a great success. Some managed to identify three. Popular choices included the huge number of attendees, the length of time they were prepared to queue outside, the fact that they came from all over the world and their ecstatic response to the exhibition. Most candidates used their own words when identifying these points.

Question 5: many candidates successfully analysed at least two examples of language used to convey some people's disapproval of Banksy's work. The most popular technique chosen was word choice. Many candidates made valid comments on 'unengaging', 'mindless', 'scribble', 'vandalism', 'offensive', 'criminal damage' and 'ruined'.

Question 7: most candidates managed to explain one reason why Banksy staged huge art exhibitions; some explained two. Many candidates focused on Banksy's aims to raise money for good causes, to showcase the talent of a global community of diverse artists and to revitalise tourism in troubled areas. Some candidates did not use their own words in explaining ideas and did not gain marks.

Question 9: many candidates successfully identified at least two key areas of agreement about the importance of Banksy. Of the six possible agreements, Banksy's success and humanitarianism were popular choices, along with his role as a provocateur and as the leader of a new artistic movement. Most candidates were able to provide appropriate evidence to support their ideas; some provided detailed/insightful evidence.

### **Question paper: Critical Reading**

As in previous years, candidates had prepared well for the critical reading question paper. In both the Scottish text section and the critical essay, candidates demonstrated interest and enthusiasm for their texts, supported by detailed knowledge and understanding.

Many candidates performed well in the first three, lower-mark analysis questions on the extracts or texts in the Scottish text section, and many successfully selected references or quotations from the extract or text and made appropriate comments on these. Many candidates spent sufficient time on answering the final, 10-mark question, giving full and well-organised answers that made links between the printed extract or text and texts studied. Some candidates approached commonality by making perceptive comments, which showed good general understanding of how the question related to the text or texts studied. Most 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 many candidates performed well. Many candidates structured their answers in 'commonality', 'extract/text' and 'elsewhere/other texts' sections, which helped them organise their ideas. In the 'elsewhere' section (particularly for longer texts), some candidates used references rather than quotations. This worked well as candidates were not tied to



specific quotations. This approach is exemplified in some of SQA's [Understanding Standards materials](#). Most chose to answer this question in a series of bullet points, an approach that worked well. Candidates who were prepared with a broad knowledge of their text(s) and a good understanding of the central concerns/themes were able to respond well to the challenge of the 10-mark question. This was often more successful than trying to fit an answer around specific quotations.

In the critical essay section, most candidates chose a suitable question and demonstrated knowledge and understanding of the texts they had studied, supported by textual evidence. Most candidates showed engagement with the texts, as demonstrated in their evaluative stance in the essay. Many candidates could analyse the effects of features specific to their chosen genre. Candidates who performed well in the critical essay demonstrated the requirement to construct a relevant response to their chosen question and dealt with both parts of the question. Some candidates successfully displayed their knowledge and understanding through a line of argument that was a direct response to the question, using quotation and reference to enhance this argument. This approach helped candidates to structure their essays and stay relevant to the question.

Many essays were in the 10–12 mark range.

## **Portfolio–writing**

Most candidates successfully submitted a piece of writing that clearly addressed the requirement for a broadly creative or broadly discursive piece. 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. The requirement to create the first draft under the supervision of a teacher or lecturer did not affect performance. Candidates' performance was in line with previous years, with most candidates in the 8–11 mark range.

In creative writing, many candidates chose to write about personal experience, often focusing on significant life events such as the loss of a family member, family break up, the challenges of mental and physical health issues, experience of bullying and/or isolation. As in previous years, a few candidates explored their experience of

being, or being close to, a member of the LGBTQ+ community and the specific challenges relating to this. Many explored the experience of growing up in the twenty-first century and coping with stresses such as the pressures on relationships caused by social media. Many candidates who wrote on such personal and often painful topics, did so with maturity and insight. Sporting, musical, dance and dramatic performance achievements were explored by many candidates, often with a significant degree of reflection. Many candidates who chose to submit imaginative writing showed awareness of genre requirements such as character and thematic development, and many achieved a high standard of writing in creation of atmosphere and setting and in the use of structure. A few candidates chose to submit poetry or drama, and this worked well for some candidates. A small number of candidates chose to write in Scots, for example Shetlandic, Doric, and West Coast Scots. This choice often enhanced candidates' writing.

In discursive writing, most candidates chose a subject that interested them and about which they felt strongly. Markers noted candidates chose a wide range of topics, which they handled in a thoughtful and enthusiastic way. Many chose environmental topics such as climate change, or technological challenges such as the impact of generative artificial intelligence. A few candidates wrote about socially significant topics such as assisted dying, disability rights and the education system. Some candidates chose complex topics such as the importance of bilingualism or the significance of culturally influential figures. These were handled with some depth and sophistication. A few 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 engagement with current national and international issues, as well as awareness of how these impact on the lives of young people. Most 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 2: some candidates found explaining what is distinctive about Banksy's approach to his art challenging. Many candidates were awarded 1 mark; fewer were awarded 2 or 3 marks. Some candidates focused on describing specific examples of his artworks, rather than commenting on the distinctive nature of his approach. Some candidates did not express the ideas in their own words and did not gain marks.

Question 3: some candidates found it challenging to analyse how language conveyed the traditional nature of Bristol Museum, and the surprising nature of Banksy's exhibition. Some popular choices were well handled by candidates, for example including word choice of 'grand', 'marble', 'radically', and 'humour'. Some candidates quoted long expressions, rather than individual words, and their analysis often lacked focus as a result.

Question 6: some candidates found it challenging to analyse how both imagery and sentence structure were used to convey how Banksy has been exploited. Some candidates commented on word choice, rather than imagery or sentence structure, and did not gain marks. In imagery, popular choices, which were handled well by some candidates, included 'flood', 'pirating' and 'stratospheric'. However, some candidates did not comment on the overwhelming nature of a flood, or the sky-high nature of stratospheric prices, and missed out on marks. In sentence structure, candidates often chose parenthesis and examples of lists. Some candidates made generic comments about these features, rather than commenting on how the specific examples in the passage worked.

As in previous years, it was noticeable that, in questions requiring candidates to analyse the use of language features, some candidates had difficulty in analysing how the language features created effects, instead tending to assert the effects they created. These answers were not successful.

## Question paper: Critical Reading

As in previous years, some candidates tended to assert rather than analyse, both in the lower-mark 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 commented on central concerns, but without referring to the use of symbolism and/or imagery to explore these. Similarly, in the Norman MacCaig question, some candidates listed central concerns without referring to how the connection between people and place was used to explore these.

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 by answering the first three questions. Some candidates approached the 'elsewhere' part of the final question by basing their answer on specific, pre-learned quotations. This approach often limited the scope and relevance of the answer, and they could not gain high marks. There is no requirement to use quotations, and candidates who performed well demonstrated their wider knowledge through comments accompanied by references and/or quotations.

In the critical essay, some candidates attempted to structure their essays around quotations, rather than structuring a line of thought and using quotations or references to support this. Their essays tended to lack structural coherence and did not demonstrate breadth of knowledge, as a result.

Some candidates showed understanding of their chosen texts but did not focus enough on the requirements of the question, producing a more generic, possibly pre-prepared essay. Their essays were less relevant and did not gain high marks. Some candidates wrote very short essays and were unable to address the question fully. Some candidates had difficulty with the requirement to 'discuss how this contributes to your appreciation/understanding of the text as a whole.' Some candidates focused on retelling the narrative or describing characters in a basic way, rather than on analysis and evaluation of the text. Some essays included

inappropriate microanalysis, for example detailed consideration of word choice or punctuation in drama or longer prose texts.

A few candidates had difficulty in choosing an appropriate critical essay question and struggled to match the text they knew to the question chosen. A few candidates had difficulty with following the genre requirements of the paper, for example 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.' In some cases, this included writing on prose fiction for the Scottish text question and non-fiction for the essay. A very small number answered both their Scottish text question and critical essay question on the same writer or the same text.

Some candidates had difficulty with time management, either writing a long essay and not finishing the Scottish text questions or writing long answers for the Scottish text questions and not finishing the essay.

## **Portfolio-writing**

A few candidates did not adhere to the word limit of 1,300 words. This approach did not tend to work well for candidates, producing overlong and less well-structured pieces. A few candidates wrote very short pieces.

In imaginative writing, some candidates did not focus enough on developing character, atmosphere and theme, instead concentrating on plot, developing complicated and sensational narratives. Some candidates submitted a collection of poems, in which a weaker poem affected the overall mark.

In personal writing, some candidates spent too long recording the events of the experience, instead of exploring their thoughts, feelings and reactions. These did not gain high marks.

In discursive writing, some candidates asserted their views but did not provide sufficient argument or evidence to support these. Some candidates explained the same arguments more than once, leading to over long and repetitive pieces.

In a small number of cases, there was evidence that candidates had conducted research, but this was not used effectively to support their viewpoint, for example the use of quotation from sources without appropriate integration into the line of argument.

## **Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment**

### **Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation**

This paper requires candidates to demonstrate both broad and close reading skills. As in previous years, reading good quality non-fiction, for example broadsheet journalism and travel writing, greatly helps candidates to prepare for this part of the course assessment. Exploring how writers use language to convey ideas and how specific features such as imagery and word choice achieve their effects in a real world setting helps candidates develop their confidence in approaching a range of questions. Practising identifying key ideas in a writer's line of argument helps when preparing for the final question on both passages.

In questions asking for a response on the writer's ideas, candidates should ensure they show their full understanding.

It is very important in 'Identify' and 'Explain' questions that candidates show their understanding by adhering to the requirement to use their own words. Direct lifts of words and expressions from the question and/or passage gain no marks.

Candidates should attempt to explain their analytical comments as clearly and as fully as they can. In questions that require 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 candidates choose to answer on an image, it is not enough to assert what the effect of the image is: they must analyse how this effect has been achieved. If the chosen technique is a list or parenthesis, it is not enough to provide a generic comment on the function of the feature: the comment must refer to the passage and to the demands of the question. When answering on a list, referring to the number, scale or variety of items is a good starting point. When answering on parenthesis, or the use

of short sentences, candidates should discuss the emphatic nature of such structural features, in the context of the passage.

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, we recommend that candidates focus on one word or a small group of words, rather than quoting a whole sentence or longer expression. This helps 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. Comments that only explain the meaning of an expression gain no marks.

Teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates are aware that the division of marks in many Higher questions is '2 marks for detailed/insightful comment; 1 mark for more basic comment'.

Candidates should be made 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 help candidates in the structuring of answers for high-mark questions.

## **Question paper: Critical Reading**

From session 2025-26, the duration of the Critical Reading question paper will be extended by 15 minutes. Candidates will now have 1 hour and 45 minutes to complete the question paper. We hope this change will allow candidates more time to plan and consider their responses, ensuring they are fully relevant to the questions they have chosen. To support your candidates with this change, you should consider advising them on how best to manage their time and use the additional 15 minutes. We have removed the guidance on the front cover of the question paper that previously advised candidates to spend approximately 45 minutes on each section.

In 2025, most candidates showed enthusiasm for their texts and engagement with, for example, characters and themes. Teachers and lecturers should ensure that candidates have a broad knowledge of literature and have tackled texts of sufficient



demand for Higher. The course support notes, in the appendix of the Higher English course specification, provide more advice about selection of texts suitable for study at this level.

For both Scottish text and critical essay, candidates should revise overarching ideas, themes and issues when preparing their texts. A good overall knowledge of the play, novel, collection of short stories or poems is needed for the final question in the Scottish text section.

Teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates are aware of the need to analyse when answering the lower-mark questions in the Scottish text section. This goes beyond asserting what the impact of a word or expression is, by demonstrating understanding of how that impact is achieved. Explaining only the meaning of a word or an expression gains no marks.

Candidates should read the 10-mark question carefully, and make sure that they use their textual knowledge to construct an answer that meets the demands of the entirety of the question. For example, if a question asks how the writer uses setting in time and/or place to explore central concerns, it is not enough to identify settings or central concerns: candidates must comment on how the setting is used to explore the central concerns (for example main themes, ideas).

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 that there is no need to quote when making these connections: relevant references are just as valid.

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 ('elsewhere'). Candidates might benefit from organising their answers in a series of bullet points in three sections.

In the commonality part of the 10-mark answer, there are two acceptable approaches. One is to focus on general points about the writer's work in relation to

the question or refer to specific texts. Alternatively, candidates may choose to 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 important here. For example, if the question asks about the link between the experiences of characters and central concerns, they should ensure that their answer refers to this. Similarly, if the question refers to a specific technique, such as imagery and/or symbolism or contrast, they should ensure that their answer refers to this technique, rather than making general comments about central concerns.

In the final 6 marks, which relate to the wider text or texts ('elsewhere'), 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 enough further points.

In the final 6 marks, candidates should be aware that quotations are not needed. Learning a series of quotations and attempting to 'fit' these to the question is not beneficial to candidates. An approach based heavily on pre-learned quotations may be limited in scope or lack relevance to the question. References are just as valid as quotations. Using very short quotations, including one-word quotations, is unlikely to provide enough material to answer this part of the question well. For poetry answers, learning quotations from other poems can be a starting point, but the comments are where candidates gain marks. Developing a broad understanding of the wider work or works is a more useful approach in preparation for this part of the question.

When preparing for the critical essay section, teachers and lecturers should remind candidates of the requirements for choosing an appropriate question. 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 carefully 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 retelling the story or repeating information that 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. Learning a series of quotations and attempting to structure the essay around these tend to lead to an essay lacking in coherence and structure. There are many acceptable approaches to planning and developing the line of argument in an essay.

Teachers and lecturers should remind candidates that technical accuracy is important in the critical essay section. When selecting texts for the critical essay, teachers and lecturers 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 a candidate's favour.

An audio presentation and candidate evidence which demonstrate many of these points are available on SQA's [Understanding Standards website](#).

## **Portfolio-writing**

To help candidates to develop their writing skills, reading pieces written in a range of genres is an effective starting point. Teachers and lecturers should remind candidates to adhere to stated word limits. It is possible to achieve a high standard of performance without reaching the maximum and overlong essays can become repetitive and, therefore, self-penalising. However, very short pieces are unlikely to gain high marks.

Teachers and lecturers should encourage clarity and coherence of structure in candidates' writing.

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

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

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 is considered and marked as one piece: therefore, inclusion of a weaker poem in a collection might negatively affect the overall mark. Candidates should not add an explanation or analysis of their own work: this is not taken into consideration when marking. Teachers and lecturers should take care when providing poetry as a stimulus for writing and should not encourage candidates to write their own 'versions' of poems which remain close to the structure or content of the original.

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/or current issues have powerful relevance for candidates.

In discursive writing, candidates should do sufficient research so that they can fully explore their argument. Candidates should include evidence in an essay as part of the coherent structure, rather than added as, for example, a long quotation from a source.

Technical accuracy is very important in the portfolio-writing and teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to take care when preparing their final drafts.

We remind teachers and lecturers 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 benefit candidates. There is no single genre that is likely to gain higher marks: each piece is read and assessed entirely on its own merits.

When preparing candidates for assessment, we remind centres of the conditions of assessment:

‘Candidates are given the opportunity to demonstrate their writing skills at the most appropriate time in the course. That is, when their writing skills have reached the level of development and maturity required for Higher English. There is no time limit for the production of the coursework, and the writing process can take place over a period of time. However, the first draft of the assessment piece must be done in class under supervision over a period of up to 4 hours. This may take place over several sessions, if required. There is no requirement for a formal timed write-up.

The early stages of the writing process can be completed outwith the learning and teaching situation. When candidates are ready to complete the first draft of the assessment piece, this must be done in class under the supervision of a teacher or lecturer and with access to appropriate resources (for example notes, outline plan, research and/or ICT, as appropriate). Following teacher or lecturer feedback on the first draft, candidates then complete the final piece of writing under some supervision and control. Note: centres should only submit the final piece of writing for external marking.’

Teachers and lecturers should support candidates as they work through their initial and final drafts of portfolio pieces. It is acceptable for a teacher or lecturer to provide an initial discussion with candidates on the selection of a topic, theme, genre, leading to an outline plan and written or oral feedback on one draft of writing. It is not acceptable for a teacher or lecturer to provide, for example, model answers which are specific to candidate tasks, key ideas, or a specific structure or plan.

We remind centres about SQA’s current position statement on the use of [generative artificial intelligence \(GenAI\) in assessments](#) (including examples for English).

# Appendix: general commentary on grade boundaries

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

For most National Courses, we aim 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, we hold 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 our 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. We 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.

Every year, we evaluate the performance of our assessments in a fair way, while ensuring standards are maintained so that our qualifications remain credible. To do this, we measure evidence of candidates' knowledge and skills against the national standard.

For full details of the approach, please refer to the [Awarding and Grading for National Courses Policy](#).