Course report 2025

National 5 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:   49,925

Number of resulted entries in 2025:   50,654

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	20,532	40.5	40.5	73
B	14,192	28.0	68.6	62
C	8,645	17.1	85.6	52
D	4,743	9.4	95.0	41
No award	2,542	5.0	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

Across all components, the assessments performed as expected and provided opportunities for candidates to demonstrate what they had learned during the course. The assessments were at an appropriate level of demand for SCQF level 5.

There was an increase of approximately 750 candidates from last year. The cohort has increased by 5,000 since 2019.

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

This question paper performed as expected, assessing candidates in the skills of reading for understanding, analysis and evaluation at SCQF level 5.

The unseen non-fiction passage 'How Taylor Swift Saved My Writing' was adapted from an article on lithub.com by Ethan Joella. The subject matter was a reflective piece on how listening to the music of Taylor Swift had positively affected the writer's creativity and attitude to writing. We received positive feedback from candidates, teachers and lecturers, and this was mirrored in media coverage which noted the direct relevance of the subject matter to candidates. Candidates approached the assessment task with commitment and there were fewer incomplete responses than in recent years. Teachers, lecturers and markers felt that there was an appropriate level of demand in the questions and the skills assessed. However, it was felt that the passage offered slightly less challenge in reading than last year.

The questions sampled candidates' understanding of the writer's main ideas, and candidates' ability to analyse and evaluate the writer's use of detailed language. There were two questions on the writer's use of structural techniques.

Question paper: Critical Reading

This question paper performed as intended and gave candidates the platform to demonstrate knowledge, understanding, analysis and evaluation of the texts they had studied as part of the course.

For the Scottish text section, Norman MacCaig's poetry was again the most popular option, followed by *Tally's Blood* by Ann Marie di Mambro, poems by Carol Ann Duffy, *Sailmaker* by Alan Spence, poems by Edwin Morgan, and Jackie Kay. Prose was the least popular genre for Scottish text. Anne Donovan had the highest uptake, followed by Iain Crichton Smith and Robert Louis Stevenson.

There is free choice of texts for the critical essay. This year, markers noted that there were longer, more substantial texts than in recent years. As with last year, markers noted the use of contemporary and diverse texts (including, for example the verse novel *The Crossing* by Manjeet Mann). A few texts from the revised Scottish set text list were in evidence, for example *A Voice Spoke to Me at Night* by Helen McClory.

For the critical essay, the largest number of candidates chose prose. Poetry and drama each had similar numbers, followed by film and TV drama.

The following are examples of some of the texts studied for critical essay:

Drama

Macbeth, Romeo and *Juliet* by William Shakespeare, *An Inspector Calls* by J B Priestley, *A View from the Bridge, The Crucible* by Arthur Miller.

Prose

Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck, *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, *The Pedestrian, The Veldt* by Ray Bradbury, *On The Sidewalk Bleeding* by Evan Hunter, *The Test* by Angelica Gibbs, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Lighthouse* by Agnes Owens, *The Lottery* by Shirley Jackson, *A Hanging, Animal Farm* by George Orwell, *Superman and Paula Brown's new Snowsuit* by Sylvia Plath, *The Sniper* by Liam O'Flaherty, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, *The Tell Tale Heart* by Edgar Allan Poe, *Flowers* by Robin Jenkins, *The Red Door* by Iain

Crichton Smith, *At The Bar* by William McIlvanney, *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *Father and Son, Secrets* by Bernard MacLaverty, *Fearless* by Janice Galloway, *The Flowers* by Alice Walker, *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo, *Dead Men's Path* by Chinua Achebe, *The Broccoli Eel* by Michel Faber, *Through the Tunnel* by Doris Lessing, *Stone Cold* by Robert Swindells.

Poetry

Dulce et Decorum Est, Disabled by Wilfred Owen, *Havisham, Shooting Stars* by Carol Ann Duffy, *Mid Term Break, Digging* by Seamus Heaney, *Glasgow 5 March 1971* by Edwin Morgan, *Telephone Conversation* by Wole Soyinka, *Wind, The Jaguar* by Ted Hughes, *The Hill We Climb* by Amanda Gorman, *Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou, *Vultures* by Chinua Achebe, *Out of the Blue – 12* by Simon Armitage, *The Chimney Sweeper* by William Blake.

Film and TV drama

Psycho, 1917, Dunkirk, Shutter Island, Baz Luhrmann's Romeo and Juliet, Get Out, The Dark Knight, Saving Private Ryan, Jaws, The Truman Show, Barbie, Black Mirror, Stranger Things (episode 1).

Very few candidates chose the Language section of the critical essay, but those who did concentrated mostly on the use of persuasive language.

Portfolio–writing

Candidates had to submit one portfolio piece for external assessment, chosen from either broadly discursive or broadly creative writing. The change in assessment conditions this year required candidates to write the first draft under the direct supervision of a teacher or lecturer. This did not affect performance, and the standard of writing was in line with previous years.

In most cases, ideas and content were sufficiently developed and most pieces were close to the word limit. There were few pieces with low marks. The focus on one piece has perhaps helped candidates to demonstrate their writing skills effectively, as the language was mostly clear and technically accurate. Candidates showed

engagement and authenticity in their writing, which was reflected in the marks awarded.

There were more broadly discursive pieces than broadly creative, and more personal writing than imaginative writing. Candidates wrote equally well in all genres. There were fewer pieces of poetry than in recent years.

Candidates chose a wide range of topics for the portfolio–writing. The following are examples of some broadly creative and broadly discursive writing:

Broadly creative

- Lockdown
- Realisation – short fiction
- Transitory love – short fiction
- Roxanne – short fiction
- A fluffy dream (pet)
- Plot twist – short fiction
- Friendship
- Grace – short fiction
- Doorstep tragedy – short fiction
- Demonic treachery – short fiction
- A young boxer – short fiction
- A room of my own
- The wish – short fiction
- My final mistake – short fiction
- The summer of 2022
- The unfinished book – short fiction
- Exchange student – short fiction
- Life in Turkey v life at home
- 3rd of March – short fiction
- The multiverse and the intelligent scientist – short fiction
- Friendship
- Blueberry fields – short fiction
- My illness

- Pokémon and me
- Holiday to Tenerife
- Ambitions
- My broken wrist
- The dream of freedom – short fiction
- Girl falling in love – short fiction

Broadly discursive
- Just Stop Oil
- Orcas
- Scottish football
- Declawing cats
- Beauty industry
- Should phones be banned?
- Can money buy happiness?
- Limiting screen time
- Is golf a sport?
- Are reptiles good pets?
- Tipping in restaurants
- One Direction
- Social media
- Tourism can be bad
- AI
- Medical care
- Shark hunting
- Lawrence Shankland (report)
- The dangers of cooking
- Gender pay gap in football
- School starts too early
- Football in Saudi
- Capital punishment
- A change for the planet
- Instagram – is it a safe platform?
- Sectarianism in Scottish football

- Is VAR destroying football?
- A good read
- How sports improve physical and mental health
- Immigrants in the NHS
- Influencer culture
- Is Britain really a democracy?
- Donald Trump
- Rugby players' pay
- Cheerleading in Olympics

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Markers reported strong performance overall but noted that a few candidates did not seem ready for presentation at National 5 level.

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

Markers noted strong performance in this question paper, with more candidates than last year attempting all questions. Questions requiring candidates to show understanding using their own words remain challenging. Candidates were more successful with structure questions than last year (notably in question 3).

Question paper: Critical Reading

There was strong performance in critical reading, especially in the final questions in the Scottish texts section, and slightly improved performance in the critical essay. Candidates had clearly worked hard on, and engaged with, the texts they studied.

There was evidence of some longer, more challenging texts being studied for critical essay. In this section, there were some very good responses that showed full understanding, and a thorough awareness of the main ideas and themes of the texts studied.

Portfolio–writing

Markers noted strong performance in the portfolio and the standard of writing was in line with previous years. There was a personal authenticity to the writing and most candidates demonstrated fully the skills they had learned. The large variety of topics indicated that candidates had taken advantage of the freedom of choice available for the portfolio–writing. A few pieces of writing were of a very high standard, containing very creative and imaginative use of language.

Overall, personal pieces that communicated genuine thoughts, feelings or reflection, and were reasonably well-crafted achieved good marks.

In creative writing, some candidates made effective use of narrative voice and atmosphere. Some made confident use of features such as imagery, symbolism and intrigue.

Most discursive pieces were well-structured with a reasonably clear line of thought; topic sentences and linking words or phrases were used successfully. There was often evidence of a reasonable amount of independent research. Information-based reports were tightly constructed and detailed.

Most pieces contained expression which was sufficiently clear and accurate. A small number of candidates submitted writing that contained some errors in paragraphing and sentence structure.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

Question 1: this assessed candidates' understanding of the opening paragraph. Some candidates answered in a general, non-specific way without making two clear points. The use of own words was a significant obstacle for some candidates. A few candidates responded in the first person, as if they were the writer, which perhaps impeded understanding.

Question 2: the word choice aspect of this question was done well by many candidates. However, some candidates approached this type of question by providing synonyms for a word selected for analysis. This can result in an answer that is not specific enough or close enough to the question. Many candidates were able to provide an example of the use of sentence structure but often they were not able to make a relevant analytical comment.

Question 3: in this question on structure, candidates had to select and comment on 'any part of the sentence in line 13'. This was done well by most candidates. However, some did not make a relevant selection and dealt with the sentence as a whole, and they missed out on marks as a result.

Question 5: many candidates were able to identify an appropriate example of language, but some candidates did not gain full marks because they used key words from the question ('Frankie is in control') as the main part of their analytical comment.

Question 6: six key points of understanding were required, but some candidates were not able to draw clear distinctions between the writer's ideas, often repeating their points. Some were unable to put key ideas in their own words. Some candidates did not stay close enough to the requirement of the question to address 'aspects of the song' and strayed into the territory of question 7, which asked about 'how listening to Taylor Swift has affected the writer'.

Question 7: some candidates did not demonstrate a full understanding of the writer's ideas. For example in line 44, the writer observed that 'She (Taylor Swift) made we want to write'. To show a full understanding here, candidates had to go beyond saying 'she inspired him'; they also had to indicate what she inspired him to do.

Question 9: most candidates were able to make an appropriate selection, but some were not able to explain how it contributed to the passage's effective conclusion, often commenting on meaning instead.

Question paper: Critical Reading

In both the Scottish text section and in the critical essay, a few candidates relied too heavily on summarising the content of texts rather than demonstrating analysis.

A small number of candidates had difficulty in navigating the options available in the question paper.

Scottish text section

A few candidates chose examples of language from outwith the specified line numbers.

In the Scottish text final questions, some candidates used the wording of the questions instead of their own analytical comments.

Question 39: some candidates did not identify the emotion(s) explored by the poet.

Question 44: some candidates did not define the important thoughts and/or feelings explored by the poet.

Critical essay section

In critical essays which responded to drama and prose texts, some candidates concentrated on microanalysis of small sections of the texts. This limited their ability to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the whole text.

A few candidates appeared to rely on learned responses that lacked relevance to the question chosen. Some did not select the most suitable question to allow them to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding.

Question 5: in their responses on a poem, some candidates did not define a mood or atmosphere.

Question 7: a few candidates did not make an appropriate selection of a scene or sequence, either focusing on several scenes or dealing with the whole film. Some candidates did not make reference to the central concerns of the text.

Portfolio–writing

In short fiction, a few candidates had difficulty in devising a coherently concise narrative with clear characters. In these cases, plots were often over-elaborate and were the dominant feature.

For personal writing, less successful pieces were heavily narrative, resulting in writing that was thin in reflection and lacked creativity in language use.

In some discursive writing, the writer's voice was not strong or clear and relied too heavily on ideas or statistics featured in the quoted references. In such cases, the writing could be repetitive.

In terms of technical accuracy, sentence structure was the main area of concern for a few candidates.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

This question paper is an assessment of candidates' general reading skills. The best way for candidates to prepare for it is to read widely (including non-fiction), thinking about main ideas and writers' use of language. Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation requires careful and precise reading of texts that are detailed in content and use of language.

In preparation for this assessment, candidates should:

- read the passage carefully, identifying and thinking about the writer's key ideas
- read each question carefully, and make sure that they address key words and all aspects of the question
- practise expressing responses clearly, using own words as far as possible (where required)
- be careful not to base responses on the words of the question or key words from the passage

The practice of using a 'translation' or synonym-based approach to understanding questions can be limiting and potentially misleading. Candidates who follow this approach quote sections of the passage and then try to translate each word by synonym. Often, this does not allow candidates to demonstrate full understanding of the writer's ideas.

Candidates should pay careful attention to the requirement to use their own words to demonstrate their understanding of key ideas in the passage. The expression 'own words' is emboldened where appropriate to remind candidates of its importance. Direct lifts of significant words or expressions from the question and/or passage gain no marks for this type of question.

In questions that require the analysis of a writer's use of language, a helpful 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 make their language selection clear (either quotation or reference) and should try to explain their analytical comments as clearly and as fully as they can, making sure that their response stays relevant to the question.

To separate ideas into clear, distinct points, it can be helpful to organise responses to 'summary' or 'identify' questions in bullet point form.

For a structural link question, candidates must make a selection from the sentence quoted in the question: retrieving and basing a response on the whole sentence gains no marks. Candidates must approach it as a question on structure, not a 'word choice' question.

Candidates should practise time management and handwriting (where appropriate) to ensure that they can write clearly and legibly in the time available.

Question paper: Critical Reading

Candidates should revise overarching ideas, themes or issues when preparing a play, novel, collection of short stories or poems for the final question in the Scottish text section. When answering the final Scottish text questions, key aspects of analysis relevant to the text's genre should be addressed.

For the Scottish text section, candidates should not repeat the key words of the question and use them as the basis for analytical comment. This is especially true in the final question. This question requires the skill of analysis and candidates should not rely on a narrative summary of the texts studied. Similarly, an approach based heavily on quotes learned may suffer from a lack of relevance to the question. References to the text are just as valid as quotations, especially with longer texts.

When answering a question on, for example, 'powerful emotions,' or 'challenging situations,' it is important to define the emotions or situations cited.

When choosing texts for the critical essay, it is important to promote good quality literature while ensuring that candidates feel included in and represented by the texts they study. Equally, texts should expand candidates' imaginative, intellectual and emotional horizons.

When constructing critical essays, candidates should remember that these are pieces of critical writing, which should have coherence and a line of thought relevant to the question selected. The essay should not be a list of separate points, or a collection of notes. Importantly, the language candidates use should communicate a line of thought at first reading: paragraphing, sentence construction and spelling should be sufficiently accurate. Candidates should be familiar with the critical essay marking instructions so that they are fully aware of what is required to achieve certain mark bands.

Candidates should practise time management and handwriting (where appropriate) to ensure that they can write clearly and legibly in the time available.

Teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates are aware of the requirements of the question paper and know how to navigate the range of options successfully.

Portfolio–writing

Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to explore different genres and types of writing, and to take pride in what they write. The piece submitted for assessment should suit candidates' own strengths: personalisation and choice promotes candidate engagement in the task. A whole cohort approach to a type and/or genre of writing is unlikely to meet candidates' needs.

In creative writing, candidates should be aware of, and try to use, the key features of the genre chosen. In personal writing, candidates should attempt to express an exploration of, or reflection on, their thoughts, feelings, and reactions to an experience. They should not rely on a narrative summary of events.

In discursive writing, candidates should ensure that their writing contains their own ideas, commentary and voice. The piece should not only be a compilation of ideas contained in quoted or referenced sources. Candidates must acknowledge all

sources they use in preparation for writing. Candidates should take time on the organisation and acknowledgement of sources, which improves presentation, assists markers, and helps to develop good study habits.

Candidates should aim for clarity of expression and structure in their writing. They should take care with verb tense, making sure that any changes in tense correspond with intended effects.

When preparing candidates for assessment, we remind teachers and lecturers 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 National 5 English. There is no time limit for the production of this 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.'

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

Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to take care with the technical accuracy of their writing, especially when preparing their final drafts.

For poetry, a single poem is treated in exactly the same way as any other piece of writing: one piece is required. It is acceptable to submit a group of related short

poems, but these are treated as one piece and marked as such. Candidates should not include introductory and/or explanatory comments.

Teachers and lecturers should remind candidates of the word limit (no more than 1,000 words).

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](#).