

Course report 2026

Advanced Higher English, SCQF level 7

We've written this report for teachers and lecturers. We recommend you read this with the published course assessment documents and marking instructions.

The report:

- provides a summary of how each course component performed
- highlights areas of the question papers and coursework where candidates performed well and areas where they did not perform well
- has advice you might find useful when preparing candidates for assessment

We collect and prepare the statistics in course reports before we complete the appeals process.

Statistical and grade boundary information

Course entries

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 3,080

Number of resulted entries in 2026: 2,936

Distribution of course awards (including minimum mark to achieve each grade)

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	694	23.6	23.6	66
B	894	30.4	54.1	57
C	894	30.4	84.5	48
D	364	12.4	96.9	39
No award	90	3.1	100	Not applicable

We've not applied rounding to these statistics.

In this report:

- 'Most' means greater than or equal to 70%.
- 'Many' means 50% to 69%.
- 'Some' means 25% to 49%.
- 'Few' or 'a few' means less than 25%.

You can find [statistical reports](#) on our website.

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's 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 make final decisions on grade boundaries based on this information. Senior Qualifications Scotland staff normally chair these meetings.

Principal assessors use 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.

- We can adjust the grade boundaries downwards if there's evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more difficult than usual.
- We can adjust the grade boundaries upwards if there's evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been less difficult than usual.
- If levels of difficulty are comparable to previous years, we maintain similar grade boundaries.

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](#).

How the course assessment performed

Question paper: Literary Study

This question paper performed as intended. We received feedback from the marking team that the paper was fair and accessible. Candidates chose from a range of questions that allowed them to demonstrate their skills and knowledge.

Candidates chose questions from all parts of the paper. The six most popular questions were:

- Drama, question 22: discuss how external conflicts between characters lead to internal conflict within a character in two plays.
- Prose fiction, question 8: discuss how symbolism is used to explore the themes of two novels or three short stories.
- Poetry, question 1: analyse the poetic means by which three poems explore the pain and/or pleasure of love.
- Drama, question 24: discuss the portrayal of psychological or emotional change in two plays.
- Prose fiction, question 10: discuss the ways in which setting is used to reflect the internal and/or external conflicts of characters in two novels.
- Poetry, question 2: compare and contrast the means by which unsettling emotions are explored in three poems.

Only a few candidates chose a prose non-fiction question. The most popular questions from this part were:

- Prose non-fiction, question 18: compare and contrast the techniques used in at least two non-fiction texts to offer the reader a deeper understanding of an issue, an idea, or an argument.
- Prose non-fiction, question 21: 'Memoirs hold a unique power to connect us to the experience of another in profound ways.' Discuss with reference to at least two non-fiction texts.

There was no evidence that any particular question in this paper was more or less demanding than intended, but many candidates answered question 10 of the prose fiction section particularly well:

- Prose fiction, question 10: discuss the ways in which setting is used to reflect the internal and/or external conflicts of characters in two novels.

Question paper: Textual Analysis

This question paper performed as intended. We received feedback from the marking team that the paper was fair and accessible.

The most popular option was prose fiction (the extract from *Our Fathers* by Andrew O'Hagan), followed by poetry ('The Watch' by Danusha Laméris). This year, there was an increase in candidates choosing to answer on prose non-fiction (the extract from *Equiano's Travels* by Olaudah Equiano) and a slight increase in those answering on drama (the extract from *Arctic Oil* by Clare Duffy).

There was no particular question in the question paper that was more or less demanding than intended, but candidates who answered on drama performed particularly well.

Portfolio-writing

The portfolio-writing performed as expected. Candidates submit one piece from any of the specified genres.

Prose fiction was again the most popular genre, followed by persuasive writing and then reflective writing.

Project–dissertation

The project–dissertation performed as expected. Most candidates chose prose fiction texts as the focus of their project–dissertation.

While many candidates chose to submit their dissertations on classic authors and popular genres such as the ‘dystopian novel’, there were a variety of other authors and texts chosen this year, such as *Butter* by Asako Yuzuki, *Night* by Elie Wiesel’s, *Milk Teeth* by Jessica Andrews, *Tender is the Flesh* by Agustina Bazterrica, *Swimming in the Dark* by Tomasz Jedrowski, *Vox* by Christina Dalcher, *Pigeon English* by Stephen Kelman, *At Night All Blood is Black* by David Diop, *How Many Miles to Babylon?* by Jennifer Johnston, *Under the Yoke* by Ivan Vazov, and the short stories of *Harlan Ellison*.

Many candidates chose appropriate texts for study at this level and formulated specific and manageable tasks. Some candidates had poor text selection and unsuitable tasks and did not perform well as a result.

How candidates performed

Areas where candidates performed well

Question paper: Literary Study

- Some candidates gained high marks in their essays in response to questions 4, 7, 13, 23, 27.
- Many candidates performed well in essays on *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *The Tempest*, *A Winter's Tale*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello* by William Shakespeare, and also in essays on the works of Tennessee Williams, Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, Arthur Miller, Harold Pinter, Martin McDonagh, Bertolt Brecht, Yasmina Reza, Alan Ayckbourn, Alan Bennett, and Samuel Beckett.
- There were some very good poetry essays on Seamus Heaney, John Keats, Sylvia Plath, Robert Browning, John Donne, Philip Larkin, William Shakespeare (sonnets), W H Auden, Edward Thomas, Liz Lochhead, W B Yeats, William Blake, Helen Dunmore, Charles Bukowski, and Edmund Scrivener.
- There were some good essays on prose fiction texts such as *Klara and the Sun*, *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro, *Summer* and *Ethan Frome* by Edith Wharton, and the short stories of Flannery O'Connor.
- There were some good responses to the more traditional canon, for example *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Persuasion* by Jane Austen, *The Driver's Seat*, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* by Muriel Spark, *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, *Dracula* by Bram Stoker.
- In prose non-fiction, there were some good essays on texts from David Foster Wallace and Joan Didion.
- Many candidates showed a good understanding of their chosen texts and supported their approach with a range of appropriate textual evidence. This allowed them to make good analytical points, which often resulted in particularly strong evaluation.

Question paper: Textual Analysis

- Some candidates gained high marks in response to all four genres.
- In the poem, candidates performed well when they engaged with poetic technique to explore the central concerns of loss, love, and/or memory.
- In prose fiction, many candidates engaged with Jamie's relationship with his grandfather, and the important connection to landscape.
- In prose non-fiction, candidates engaged well with the extract and confidently selected and commented on evidence that illustrated the 'detestable nature of the slave trade'.
- In the drama text, candidates who performed well discerned the tensions between the mother and daughter and could engage with 'responsibility and love' in several ways.
- Most candidates identified theme (and writer's intent) in all four genres.

Portfolio-writing

There was a range of writing on a wide variety of topics.

- There were some high-quality persuasive essays on a range of topics, such as:
 - the deleterious impact billionaires have on democracy
 - the geo-political issues raised by space exploration
 - the death of socialism in the UK
 - the pressures and dangers of striving for physical perfection
 - the importance of migration built around the metaphor of bird migration
 - Jim Morrison, the lead singer of 'The Doors'
 - the professional groupie, Pamela Des Barres
- Some candidates produced very good prose fiction, which showed they understood the conventions of fiction, and they could use, or break, those conventions to good effect. Some pieces were handled with skill and poignancy, such as:
 - looking at a complex mother-daughter relationship evolving from a daughter's ruminations while awaiting the result of a pregnancy test
 - an exploration of war, youth, and death in the Napoleonic Wars
 - looking at the hereditary nature of poverty and deprivation

- observing lives through discarded shopping lists, bus tickets, and bookmarks, and coming to an understanding of the richness of the everyday lives behind the public masks we wear
- the experience of a young girl going on a date as an introspective exercise in understanding her own beauty, psychoses, and narcissism
- A small number of candidates chose to write on drama, and most performed well. They used dramatic conventions and constructed well-developed pieces.
- In reflective writing, some candidates dealt with their own experiences in thoughtful and sensitive ways. They wrote about experiences of love, poverty, genealogical research, loss, isolation, identity, and change.
- Some candidates produced very good poems, constructing pieces that were well-structured and carefully edited. These supported a variety of central concerns, such as urban deprivation, outgrowing the parental home, and a piece looking at the creation of the sestina form, which was highly complex and sophisticated in terms of the topic and poetic execution.

Project–dissertation

- Many candidates showed clear knowledge and understanding of the chosen text or texts.
- In some cases, there was evidence of sophistication of thought and engagement with primary and secondary texts.
- Many project–dissertations had a clear, specific focus, allowing candidates to engage effectively with their chosen texts.
- Detailed analysis of a single text often achieved high marks, especially if there was literary complexity in the text choice, for example *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy, *Mansfield Park* by Jane Austen, *Notes from Underground* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Goblin Market* by Christina Rossetti, and *Prelude* by William Wordsworth.
- In many cases, there was clear evidence of engagement with the chosen texts.
- Many candidates performed well when studying traditional classics (for example, Jane Austen, Leo Tolstoy, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, Oscar Wilde, and William Shakespeare) that allowed them to offer in-depth analysis and reference to many secondary sources.

Areas where candidates did not perform well

Question paper: Literary Study

- Some candidates found it challenging to provide the level of analysis required at Advanced Higher level.
- Question 1: some candidates found it hard to engage with the full implications of the 'pain and/or pleasure of love' and often wrote about 'love' in general.
- Question 8: some candidates, when dealing with symbolism, struggled to fully connect specific symbols with the 'central themes'.
- Question 22: in the drama section, some candidates did not make the connections between the 'external conflicts' of characters and the impact this had on 'internal conflict', which was required to access the higher band ranges.
- In prose fiction questions, a few candidates narrated plots and did not engage with the literary techniques in the texts. Strong literary analysis and evaluation is required to gain marks in the higher band ranges.

Question paper: Textual Analysis

In all four genres, particularly poetry, an increasing number of candidates structured their responses as a series of bullet points. They started with a quotation and then a brief microanalysis, which did not address the central concerns of the text and requirements of the question. These points were often disconnected, making it hard to evaluate the text as a whole. This approach did not help them create a cohesive and developed response to the text. Instead, it created a fragmented and undeveloped response where they struggled to gain an understanding of the entire text. With the poem in particular, candidates using this approach did not gain marks from the higher band ranges.

- In the poem, some candidates demonstrated a lack of engagement with poetic structure and technique, and they did not engage fully with the poem.
- Some candidates struggled to engage with the central concerns that underpinned the poem.
- In prose fiction, some candidates did not see the importance of landscape and/or place in understanding the nature of Jamie's relationship with his grandfather.

- In prose non-fiction, although candidates were able to recognise and comment on the aspects of the extract which showed the slave trade to be 'detestable', many candidates did not engage with the more sophisticated aspects of the extract, which were underpinned by tone and structure.
- In drama, some candidates did not identify that the daughter was an environmental activist, and the complexity this added to her relationship with her mother, and the questions this raised about 'responsibility and love'.

Portfolio-writing

- In prose fiction, some candidates did not plan or edit their pieces well. Some submissions lacked the complexity and sophistication required at this level, with only a limited ability to use the conventions of the genre. For example, some short stories included a lot of description but did not use techniques and features such as structure, imagery, symbolism, effective plotting, and characterisation.
- Some candidates did not show a firm understanding of the importance of poetic structure, shaping, and poetic technique when crafting a poem.
- Some candidates chose to submit a group of poems, in which a weaker poem affected the overall mark.
- Some candidates showed little evidence of editing and/or redrafting and there were problems with technical accuracy.

Project-dissertation

- Some dissertations focused on ideas related to mental health, society, history or politics rather than the literary techniques that drive and illustrate these ideas within the dissertation.
- Some dissertations had tasks that were too broad in scope and were unhelpful to candidates, for example 'Being a woman in the Victorian period'.
- Some candidates were overly reliant on retelling the story and not engaged in the analysis and evaluation of their chosen text or texts.
- Some candidates chose a text or texts (often contemporary genre-based fiction) that did not contain enough literary content, and they could not access the higher mark ranges. For example, Agatha Christie novels, *A Game of Thrones* novels by George R R Martin, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, *The*

Hunger Games novels by Suzanne Collins, *Red, White, and Royal Blue* by Casey McQuiston, and the football biographies of Neil Lennon and Scott Brown. These texts are not complex and sophisticated to the level required at Advanced Higher.

- Some candidates, when writing about two novels or dramas, treated the texts in an unbalanced way. Sometimes the second text did not suit the task set by the candidate.
- Some responses demonstrated literary analysis that lacked critical depth, often where candidates chose to focus on an issue (for example mental health or poverty) rather than an analysis of the literary features.
- Some dissertations had a limited range of quotations to support candidates' approach to their task, and this impacted their ability to analyse the text and build an evaluation based on evidence.
- Some dissertations focused on graphic novels. This was problematic when the focus was on the visual elements of the graphic novel and not the literary elements. As the dissertation is to be on literary analysis, a focus on visual elements weakens the literary analysis. Some candidates focused on film scripts which, similarly, are problematic due to the filmic content, which is not assessed as literary analysis.
- A few dissertations focused on film, which is not an accepted genre in Advanced Higher English.
- A few dissertations focused on song lyrics, which were dealt with as poetry and candidates struggled to analyse these in terms of poetic structure and technique.
- Some dissertations showed little evidence of editing and/or redrafting and there were problems with expression and technical accuracy.

Preparing candidates for assessment

Question paper: Literary Study

You should ensure candidates:

- are offered an experience of literary study with sufficient depth and breadth to allow reasonable choice in the context of an unseen exam
- practise the skill of critical essay writing
- make effective use of the time available in the exam
- are aware they should read all the questions before making their choice
- have strategies for understanding and addressing the requirements of the question and planning their response
- have a precise and extensive critical vocabulary
- use a range of quotations from their chosen texts that allows them to analyse their texts appropriately
- are aware that analysis should not be in the form of extensive quotation that is then subject to microanalytical comment on individual words and phrases
- are aware that valid analysis may be in a thread of relevant critical comment that informs an emerging argument
- refer to example Literary Study essays on our [Understanding Standards website](#)

Question paper: Textual Analysis

You should ensure candidates:

- are familiar with the conventions of a range of literary genres (including the more common forms and structures of poetry) through guided reading
- experience texts from a range of time periods in English literature
- are prepared to answer on more than one genre in the exam, where possible
- make effective use of the time available in the exam
- practise the necessary skills to analyse and evaluate complex and sophisticated texts
- are prepared to analyse more than word choice and imagery when discussing poetry

- can connect their analytical points to create an overarching evaluative stance of the text
- are aware that a response made up of only brief, unconnected bullet points is unlikely to gain high marks
- refer to example Textual Analysis responses on our [Understanding Standards website](#)

Portfolio–writing

You should ensure candidates:

- read the work of other writers (including their peers) to familiarise themselves with genre conventions and the range of approaches they might use in their own writing
- are aware how they could use the techniques analysed in the Literary Study and Textual Analysis question papers in their own writing
- are advised to submit only one poem, if submitting poetry, rather than a group of unrelated (or even loosely related) poems
- know not to submit poems with any commentary on their poem
- are aware of the conventions of the different discursive genres and take care when stating these on their flyleaf
- are familiar with the techniques used in poetry and prose fiction to produce writing that is complex and sophisticated
- edit their work before final submission
- refer to the exemplar pieces of writing on our [Understanding Standards website](#)

Project–dissertation

You should ensure candidates:

- select texts of appropriate substance and quality, and that their choice of text or texts is ‘complex and sophisticated’
- construct specific and manageable topics, which should have a literary focus and not be too vague or too narrow, for example: identity, masculinity, female empowerment, trauma, repression, guilt, and power

- refer to the Advanced Higher English project–dissertation topics examples on our [Understanding Standards website](#) as a good starting point to create focused and manageable tasks
- incorporate the analytical focus of each study into the wording of the title or topic, and are always aware that this is primarily a study of an ‘aspect or aspects of literature’
- avoid groupings of disparate texts, especially mixing genres, for example grouping a poem and a novel
- focus on broad concerns such as setting, characterisation and theme in a novel rather than inappropriate microanalysis, including analysis of individual examples of word choice and isolated images
- provide a range of relevant quotation to support their approach to the task. For example, a candidate who uses only five quotations to support their approach to a task on a 500 page novel will struggle as analysis should focus primarily around textual evidence. Limitations in textual evidence often leads to limitations in analysis and evaluation. The examples on our [Understanding Standards website](#) show the advantages of firmly and consistently engaging with textual evidence of the chosen text or texts
- refer to the word limits, assessment conditions and course support notes in the [Advanced Higher English course specification](#)
- know they must provide footnotes and bibliographies
- refer to the *Advanced Higher English: marks and genre* document on our [website](#), which outlines available Understanding Standards materials
- refer to the *Advanced Higher English November 2024 – Project Dissertation* webinar on our [website](#), which summarises the core information to create a successful dissertation