

Course report 2026

National 5 English, SCQF level 5

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

For information about the performance–spoken language, you should read the verification summary 2025–26 on the English page of our [website](#).

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: 50,654

Number of resulted entries in 2026: 51,112

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

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	20,827	40.7	40.7	72
B	15,009	29.4	70.1	61
C	8,711	17.0	87.2	51
D	4,351	8.5	95.7	40
No award	2,214	4.3	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

The course assessment performed as intended, sampling candidates' learning from across the course. The assessments were at an appropriate level of demand for SCQF level 5.

The number of entries, at approximately 50,000, was slightly up on last year.

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

This question paper performed as intended, assessing candidates' skills of reading for understanding, analysis and evaluation with an unseen text.

The passage 'Love and affection across the ages' was adapted from an article by Yvonne Roberts in *The Observer*. It discussed the TV series *Old People's Home for 4 Year Olds*, an experiment in bringing together children and old people.

We received positive feedback from candidates, teachers and lecturers on the content, challenge and question types in the assessment. The questions assessed candidates' understanding of the writer's main ideas, and their 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, allowing candidates to demonstrate knowledge, understanding, analysis and evaluation of texts they studied during the course.

The Scottish text section featured the revised Scottish text list, including new writers and texts. This year, there was a change in usual patterns of text selection with *Tally's Blood* by Ann Marie di Mambro the most popular text. The poems of Carol Ann Duffy were next, followed by *Sailmaker* by Alan Spence, poems by Edwin Morgan and then Norman MacCaig. Prose was the least popular genre for Scottish text. Anne Donovan had the highest uptake, followed by Robert Louis Stevenson. The most popular of the new texts was *Yellow Moon* by David Greig.

There is free choice of texts for the critical essay. There was a variety of texts studied for this section, many of which were longer, more substantial drama and prose texts. Most candidates chose a prose question. Poetry and drama each had similar numbers, followed by film and TV drama. A small number of candidates wrote about a language text.

These are some of the texts studied for the critical essay:

Drama

Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare, *A View from the Bridge*, *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller, *An Inspector Calls* by J B Priestley, *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* by Brian Clark, *Bold Girls* by Rona Munro.

Prose

Lord of the Flies by William Golding, *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Pedestrian* by Ray Bradbury, *On The Sidewalk Bleeding* by Evan Hunter, *The Test* by Angelica Gibbs, *The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin, *The Flowers* by Alice Walker, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, *The Rear-Guard*, *Base Details* by Siegfried Sassoon, *Flowers* by Robin Jenkins, *Reunion* by John Cheever, *The Red Door* by Iain Crichton Smith, *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit* by Sylvia Plath, *The Sniper* by Liam O'Flaherty, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J D Salinger, *My Dear Palestrina* by Bernard MacLaverty, *The Body Snatcher* by Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Destructors* by Graham Greene, *At The Bar* by William McIlvanney, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, *The Tell-Tale Heart* by Edgar Allan Poe.

Poetry

The Right Word by Imtiaz Dharker, *Shooting Stars*, *War Photographer* by Carol Ann Duffy, *Boots* by Rudyard Kipling, *Morning Song* by Sylvia Plath, *The Death of Marilyn Monroe*, *Glasgow Sonnet 1* by Edwin Morgan, *He Told Us He Wanted a Black Coffin* by Jackie Kay, *Invisible Children* by Mariana Llanos, *I Wanna Be Yours* by John Cooper Clarke.

Film and TV drama

Jaws, Shutter Island, Adolescence, The Truman Show, 1917, The Angels' Share, Baz Luhrmann's Romeo and Juliet, Dunkirk.

Portfolio-writing

Candidates submit one piece of writing for external assessment, chosen from either broadly creative or broadly discursive writing. These categories are not mutually exclusive, and some candidates created very good hybrid pieces in which they dealt with current issues in creative ways. There was a range of interesting topics. The portfolio-writing performed as expected and the standard of writing was in line with previous years.

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, but the poetry submitted was mostly of a good standard, often containing creative and considered use of language. Candidates who wrote in Scots often performed well.

These are examples of some broadly creative and broadly discursive writing:

Broadly creative

- Facing my fears (college placement)
- Forgotten but never gone
- How moving to Scotland changed my life
- Through loss I learned
- Grief
- The importance of family
- DofE experience
- The day my life came crumbling down on me
- The most special place for me
- Little me
- More than a medal
- As I was going through my camera roll

- Drowning in deadlines
- I'm always the first person wanting to leave
- The skate park
- The snow was gently glistening
- My granda
- The nightmare of the north
- The last teens on earth
- Horse riding: the 'mane' event

Broadly discursive

- The Ballon d'Or
- Do violent and unruly protests make a change?
- The UK justice system needs to be changed
- Should head contact be banned from contact sports?
- Al the big business money machine
- The reality of Hogwarts
- Slipknot
- Swimming: a skill for life
- United? I can fix them
- Hidden planets
- Why music is key to the soul
- Gang and knife crime problems in the UK
- Why people should experience the gym
- Cats v dogs
- Disney princesses
- Taylor Swift is the icon of our generation
- Kilmarnock: a town at a tipping point
- Disposable vape ban
- Why Stranger Things is the best show
- MMA is a good thing
- ADHD in girls

How candidates performed

Areas where candidates performed well

Many candidates performed well, especially in the critical reading question paper and the final question in the Scottish text section.

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

Most candidates engaged well with the questions. Many candidates used short, bullet points to answer the questions clearly.

- Question 1: most candidates demonstrated understanding by explaining at least one thing ‘we learn about old age.’
- Question 2: most candidates identified two relevant examples of language together with appropriate analysis. Not all candidates dealt exclusively with word choice; some answered successfully on the writer’s use of a list.
- Question 3: candidates had to ‘identify five things we learn about Victor’ from lines 10–21. Most candidates answered this question well, using their own words effectively and separating their points clearly. Many candidates who chose to use bullet points in their answer performed well.
- Question 4: some candidates did very well, precisely separating out the ‘things that the TV series is trying to do.’
- Question 5: many candidates identified two relevant examples of language together with appropriate analysis.

Question paper: Critical Reading

- Most candidates performed well in critical reading.
- Candidates prepared well for the final question in the Scottish text section. Their answers were full and demonstrated good knowledge and understanding of texts they studied during the course.
- Most candidates coped well with close analysis of extracts in the Scottish text section and answered the final 8-mark questions well.

- Responses to substantial drama texts (for example William Shakespeare and Arthur Miller) produced very good critical essays.
- In critical essay responses to media texts, many candidates confidently used critical terminology.
- Most candidates used effective structures for their critical essays.

Portfolio-writing

- Most candidates' pieces showed sufficient development of ideas and coherent structures, using mostly clear and technically accurate language. Most candidates demonstrated good engagement with the writing process and authenticity in their writing.
- There was evidence of very good creative writing in which candidates used language that was appropriate to purpose and genre.
- Many candidates demonstrated they could produce thoughtful reflection in personal writing. This was most successful where candidates effectively used their own voice.
- Some candidates confidently used their research, integrating it well into their line of argument. Candidates who adopted and sustained a clear stance and line of thought performed well in discursive writing.
- Some candidates wrote well on local issues.
- Most candidates' sentence structure, spelling and punctuation were good and there was some improvement in the use and variety of sentence structure.
- There were few pieces with very low marks.

Areas where candidates did not perform well

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

The need for precision and showing understanding of a writer's ideas using own words was challenging for some candidates.

For analysis questions, some candidates used lengthy quotations that did not allow them to carry out detailed or specific analysis.

- Question 1: candidates who did not gain 2 marks usually used key words from the passage in their answers.
- Question 4: this question elicited a range of marks. Many candidates answered in general terms or used key words from the passage. Some candidates did not give detailed differentiation between mental and physical aspects and/or aspects involving young or older people.
- Question 5: when dealing with the word 'treacherous,' some candidates did not give enough sense of the dangers involved. When dealing with the simile 'like the Sahara Desert', some candidates did not provide sufficiently detailed analysis.
- Question 6: this question focused on how 'the treatment of old people has changed over time.' Candidates had to address the key word 'treatment'. Some candidates did not do this, instead offering general statistical information about old people then and now.
- Question 8: this structural link question asked candidates to refer to part of the sentence quoted in the question. Some candidates quoted the whole sentence back without referring to a specific part of it and gained no marks.
- Question 9: many candidates did not provide a relevant structural comment to accompany their reference.

Question paper: Critical Reading

- Some candidates found the critical essay more challenging than the Scottish text section. There was a disparity here for some candidates.
- Some candidates struggled to demonstrate skills of analysis in the critical essay.
- Some candidates retold the plot in their critical essay or produced essays that were very short or unfinished.
- For critical essays in response to drama or prose texts, some candidates followed an approach of isolating word choice from quotations and then giving connotations, rather than offering, for example, analysis of character or episode. In doing this, candidates could not show their understanding of the whole text or themes.
- Some candidates' critical essays did not refer to the breadth of the text and were too narrow in focus.

Portfolio-writing

- In terms of technical accuracy, sentence structure was the main area of concern for some candidates. Some used overlong sentences, no full-stops or capital letters, or did not maintain verb tense.
- In short fiction writing, some candidates presented narratives that lacked clarity, logical progression and resolution. Detailed character depiction was lacking in some pieces.
- In informative writing, some candidates used lists of information that were not thoughtfully structured or edited, which made these pieces repetitive.

Preparing candidates for assessment

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

This question paper assesses candidates' reading skills in an unseen context. It requires careful and precise reading of texts that are detailed in content and use of language.

You should ensure candidates:

- read widely (including non-fiction), thinking about writers' main ideas and use of language
- aim for detailed precision in their responses
- read the passage carefully, identifying and thinking about the writer's key ideas
- read each question carefully, and ensure that they address key words and all aspects of the question
- practise expressing responses clearly, using own words as far as possible (where required)
- do not base responses on the words of the question, or key words from the passage
- avoid using a 'translation' or synonym-based approach to understanding questions as this can be limiting and 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
- 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
- follow the model 'reference plus relevant comment', which is helpful in questions that require the analysis of a writer's use of language. 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

- know it can be helpful to organise their ideas in bullet points in responses to 'summary' or 'identify' questions
- for a structural link question, know they must refer to part of 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. This is true too of a question on the passage's 'effective conclusion'
- practise time management and handwriting (where appropriate) to ensure that they can write clearly and legibly in the time available

Question paper: Critical Reading

Section 1: Scottish texts

You should ensure candidates:

- 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
- are aware they should address key aspects of analysis relevant to the text's genre, when answering the final Scottish text questions
- develop their own critical stance towards the texts they're studying
- for the Scottish text section, are aware they should not repeat the key words of the question and use them in place of analytical comment, particularly 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 as valid as quotations, especially with longer texts
- when answering a question on, for example 'important thoughts and/or feelings' (question 47), or 'difficult experiences' (question 39), know it is important to define and explain the thoughts, feelings or experiences in the texts

Section 2: Critical essay

When choosing texts for the critical essay, you should 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. The [National 5 English Course Specification](#) has guidance on text selection.

You should ensure candidates:

- are aware when constructing their critical essay, that these are pieces of critical writing, which must 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
- are familiar with the critical essay marking instructions so that they're fully aware of what is required
- practise time management and handwriting (where appropriate) to ensure that they can write clearly and legibly in the time available
- are aware of the requirements of the question paper and know how to navigate the large range of options successfully

Portfolio-writing

You should ensure candidates:

- explore different genres and types of writing. The piece submitted for assessment should suit candidates' own strengths: personalisation and choice promote candidate engagement in the task. A whole cohort approach to a type, topic and/or genre of writing is unlikely to meet candidates' needs
- are aware of the importance of thinking skills in writing. Candidates should see that writing is thinking, and that the portfolio-writing provides opportunities to explore their own ideas, thoughts, feelings and creativity
- in creative writing, are aware of, and try to use, the key features of their chosen genre in a detailed way

- in personal writing, 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
- if they are using a published text as a stimulus for creative writing, are aware they must demonstrate their own writing skills, ideas and creativity
- for poetry, are aware 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
 - there is no minimum word count for poetry
- in discursive writing, know their writing must contain their own ideas, commentary and voice. The piece should not just be a compilation of ideas contained in quoted or referenced sources
- are aware they must acknowledge all sources they use in preparation for writing
- take time on the organisation and acknowledgement of sources, which improves presentation, assists markers, and helps to develop good study habits
- aim for clarity of expression and structure in their writing, including careful use of sentence structure. They should take care with verb tense, making sure that any changes in tense correspond with intended effects
- focus on the quality of the language chosen and the use of appropriate language techniques to improve their writing skills
- proofread for technical errors, especially in sentence construction
- are aware of, and adhere to, the word limit for the assessment (1,000 words)

When preparing candidates for assessment, you must refer to the 'Assessment conditions' section for the portfolio-writing in the National 5 English Course Specification on our [website](#).

Note: centres should only submit the final piece of writing for external marking.

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