

Course report 2026

National 5 Music, 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 paper 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: 8,087

Number of resulted entries in 2026: 8,068

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

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	3,915	48.5	48.5	70
B	1,872	23.2	71.7	60
C	1,279	15.9	87.6	50
D	646	8.0	95.6	40
No award	356	4.4	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

The question paper performed as expected. Marker feedback and statistical analysis show that it was fair and balanced, with good course coverage and a wide range of genres, and content was consistent with previous years. There was an appropriate mix of straightforward and challenging questions.

Assignment

Most candidates submitted compositions produced using score-writing programs or digital audio workstations, and most centres uploaded files digitally through the portal. Compositions included a range of styles and genres, with a variety of instruments and/or voices.

Most candidates submitted the three required pieces of evidence — an audio file, a score or performance plan, and a composing review.

Performance

Most candidates performed a variety of music on instruments from the approved instrument list. Most candidates met the required performance time of 8 minutes — performing on two instruments or one instrument and voice.

How candidates performed

Areas where candidates performed well

Question paper

Most candidates demonstrated familiarity with question types, displayed appropriate exam technique and attempted all questions.

Most candidates answered the following questions well:

- Question 1(a) — identifying gospel
- Question 1(d) — identifying bass as the type of voice
- Question 3(d) — identifying the note value
- Question 4(c) — recognising atonal and flutter-tonguing
- Question 4(e) — recognising contrary motion and brass band

Many candidates answered the following questions well:

- Question 1(b) — identifying bothy ballad
- Question 3(a) — identifying and inserting the time signature as 3/4
- Question 3(f) — identifying the cadence as imperfect
- Question 4(a) — identifying pan pipes
- Question 7(b)(i) — identifying concerto

Many candidates answered the following questions quite well:

- Question 1(c) — identifying 12/8
- Question 1(e) — recognising rallentando and descant
- Question 3(e) — identifying and inserting the missing notes
- Question 4(e) — identifying the texture as polyphonic or contrapuntal
- Question 7(a)(i) — identifying reel

Assignment

Composition

A few candidates composed very good or excellent compositions. These candidates imaginatively developed a range of musical ideas, selecting and using elements creatively.

Some candidates composed good pieces, and a few candidates composed very good or excellent pieces. These candidates chose instrumental or vocal timbres, and a style, that they were familiar with, or wrote for a small number of instruments.

Some candidates wrote good or satisfactory compositions that demonstrated their understanding of musical elements and showed development of musical ideas.

Composing review

Many candidates gave at least a satisfactory account of their main decisions in their composing reviews. Some candidates gave sufficient explanation of the exploration and development of musical ideas, and satisfactory identification of strengths and/or areas for improvement.

Performance

Most candidates were well prepared, and many performances were of a high standard. Personalisation and choice were evident in most candidates' programmes.

Most candidates who performed on drum kit used the drum kit style bank.

Many vocal candidates performed from memory, although this is not mandatory, and they chose songs that were appropriate for their musical and technical skills.

Areas where candidates did not perform well

Question paper

Many candidates did not answer the following questions well:

- Question 1(f) — identifying the chord progression
- Question 2, part 2 — identifying glissando
- Question 3(b) — identifying an appropriate dynamic marking: the question asked for a dynamic (Italian term) at the start of the music; however, some candidates responded with Italian tempo markings, not dynamics
- Question 3(c) — identifying the interval as a tone
- Question 4(b) — identifying pentatonic scale
- Question 7(b)(ii) — reason for concerto: many candidates did not identify or imply a solo instrument with orchestra

Most candidates found the following question challenging:

- Question 7(a)(ii) — reason for reel: most candidates did not provide enough information to demonstrate they understand a reel

A few candidates did not follow the instructions for multiple-choice questions; for example, where the question asked for two answers but they only ticked one.

Assignment

Composition

Many candidates:

- Who wrote for instruments they were unfamiliar with did not demonstrate effective instrumental writing, including knowledge of their range.
- Did not demonstrate successful development of musical ideas appropriate to their chosen style. Candidates who repeated a substantial section without any development of — for example — melody, rhythm, harmony or timbre frequently gained lower marks.

Some candidates:

- Did not write effective harmonic progressions in their chosen style, which we often saw through dissonance between melodic lines and accompaniment, due to lack of harmonic understanding.
- Composed melodies using only notes from the chords and no passing notes, creating awkward melodic lines that lacked flow.

A few candidates:

- Who chose to work with pre-recorded loops did not provide sufficient detail in either their performance plan or composing review to clearly show their own creative input.
- Used online resources when exploring ideas for their composition — for example, chord generators and software — then imported these into their music. However, often they did not include enough detail in their composing review to clearly show how they developed these imported elements to become original ideas.
- Included piano accompaniments that may have been realised by someone else — for example, a teacher or instructor creating an accompaniment based on given chords. Candidates should clearly indicate in the composing review their own creative input and the direction given to teachers playing the accompaniment.
- Submitted poor scores or performance plans; for example, that provided:
 - no information about harmonies
 - no information about the structure of the piece
 - song lyrics only, without added chords
 - individual parts only instead of a score showing all parts
- Submitted compositions that received 0 marks because:
 - their performance plan included screenshots of a digital audio workstation with only names of instruments, with no further information or explanation
 - they provided guitar and/or bass parts in TAB only, without standard notation

- Submitted compositions that were outwith the mandatory duration of 1 minute to 2 minutes and 30 seconds.

Composing review

Many candidates did not sufficiently explain their exploration and development of musical ideas.

Some candidates showed limited or very limited identification of strengths and areas for improvement.

In both cases, musical detail was frequently lacking.

Performance

Most candidates' mark sheets showed a programme of music that met the minimum time requirement of 8 minutes. However, during the performance assessment, a few candidates either did not attempt to perform one or more pieces, or only performed part of a piece, meaning their performances were under 8 minutes.

Where cuts had been made to accommodate timings, a few candidates played sections of music below the minimum requirement (Grade 3 or above).

A few candidates who performed chordal guitar or chordal ukulele did not provide a notated melody line, which is a requirement.

A few chordal guitar and chordal ukulele candidates did not demonstrate the minimum 12 chords required.

A few drum kit candidates did not select their four styles from the drum kit style bank and did not demonstrate four-way independence in every style.

A few candidates performed keyboard programmes without left-hand chords. If a candidate plays with right hand only, they will receive 0 marks for the piece.

Preparing candidates for assessment

Question paper

Candidates should:

- Be able to identify concepts from the National 3, National 4 and National 5 concept lists, as the question paper draws from all three levels.
- Use the information provided in short-answer questions to guide them towards the answer. For example, in question 4(d) when polyphonic or contrapuntal was the expected response, the stem of the question guided candidates to name the texture of the music.
- Clearly indicate whether a note is on a line or in a space, and fill in the note head fully if required, in question 3. They cannot gain marks if their intention is not clear.
- Read the question and headings carefully to ensure their answers are relevant. In questions 5 and 8, the table headings may change from year to year. [Past papers](#) and the specimen question paper give examples of the question styles and marking instructions.
- Ensure they give an adequate reason in their response to question 7(a)(ii) and 7(b)(ii), which may require more than one word. For example, a single tempo marking or time signature may not sufficiently demonstrate a candidate's reasoning, as it could also apply to other styles of music. Past papers and the specimen question paper give examples of 7(a)(ii) and 7(b)(ii) questions and marking instructions.
- Give answers related to the excerpt in question 8, avoiding long lists of unrelated concepts. Lists of concepts unrelated to the music or extensive lists of contradictory concepts will prevent candidates accessing the full range of marks.

When preparing formal assessment and listening exams, you must consider:

- A past paper or specimen question paper in its entirety cannot be the only evidence submitted for examination exceptional circumstances consideration.
- You may need to amend some questions from older past papers as they may not provide appropriate scope, coverage or balance.

- You must submit a copy of the marking instructions even if questions are drawn from past papers.

Assignment

You should encourage candidates to choose instrumental or vocal forces, and compose in a style that they are familiar with.

Avoid structured template approaches to composition. For example, you must not set any of the following features in a template:

- number of instruments
- instrumentation
- prescribed harmonies in certain bars
- changes of time signature in certain bars
- prescribed rhythmic, melodic or structural features in certain bars

This would go beyond the acceptable amount of reasonable assistance.

Providing structured templates for composing can stifle personalisation, choice and creativity, and can limit the marks candidates can gain.

You should:

- Remind candidates that performance plan screenshots of a digital audio workstation with no further information or explanation of the composition, or guitar parts in TAB without standard notation, will receive 0 marks.
- Use a range of resources and stimuli when candidates are exploring ideas for their composition. If these include, for example, the use of chord generators or loops, you should ensure candidates adapt these to show their original input. Alterations could include, for example, modifying rhythms, changing accompaniment patterns, altering chord types or rearranging the order of chords.
- Avoid providing structured templates for composing reviews. This includes giving candidates statements to use or providing text with a missing word for them to fill in.
- Guide candidates in their composing review to detail their own input and adaptation of elements when using stimuli that they did not initially create.

Similarly, you should encourage candidates to indicate their creative decisions for an accompaniment that has been realised by someone else, such as a teacher or instructor.

- Ensure that candidates' composing reviews are in the one-page mandatory template available on [our website](#).
- Ensure that files are organised and labelled clearly to show audio, score or performance plan, and review.

You may find the following resources helpful:

- a new [Academy course](#) providing support for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher assignments
- materials on the [Understanding Standards](#) website, including an audio presentation highlighting changes to the course specification and coursework assessment tasks in session 2025–26, and the [assignment resource](#)
- the Music Assignment Catalogue, available on [our secure site](#)

We provide additional guidance about the assignment in the [common questions](#).

Performance

You should familiarise yourself with the performance sections in the course specification, which you can find on [our website](#).

You should also refer to the information for teachers and lecturers document for visiting assessment. This is published on our secure site and issued alongside the candidate mark sheets in January.

We provide additional guidance about performance in the common questions.