



## Course Report 2016

Subject	English
Level	Advanced Higher

The statistics used in this report have been compiled before the completion of any Post Results Services.

This report provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers, lecturers and assessors in their preparation of candidates for future assessment. It is intended to be constructive and informative and to promote better understanding. It would be helpful to read this report in conjunction with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

# Section 1: Comments on the Assessment

## Summary of the Course assessment

### Component 1: Question paper (Literary Study)

The question paper, Literary Study, is worth 20 marks. It consists of four sections: Poetry, Prose Fiction, Prose Non-fiction and Drama. Candidates choose one question to answer in the form of a critical essay on literary texts studied this year from any of these sections. There were seven questions in each section in the 2016 paper. Questions followed the style and format used in the published specimen question paper (SQP) and the exemplar question paper (EQP).

The question paper performed in line with expectations, and feedback from the marking team and from practitioners suggested that it was fair in terms of course coverage and overall level of demand. The removal of specified authors and texts from this component of the new version of the qualification did not affect the performance of candidates.

The table, based on the reported choices of candidates in 2016, shows the relative popularity of the Literary Study questions.

Part A - Poetry	% of candidates	Part B – Prose Fiction	% of candidates	Part C – Prose Non-Fiction	% of candidates	Part D – Drama	% of candidates
A 1	8	B 8	<1	C 15	<1	D 22	6
A 2	1	B 9	8	C 16	<1	D 23	1
A 3	3	B 10	2	C 17	0	D 24	4
A 4	1	B 11	5	C 18	<1	D 25	5
A 5	1	B 12	1	C 19	<1	D 26	5
A 6	8	B 13	4	C 20	0	D 27	14
A 7	8	B 14	3	C 21	0	D 28	12

### Component 2: Question paper (Textual Analysis)

The question paper, Textual Analysis, is worth 20 marks. It consists of four sections: Poetry, Prose Fiction, Prose Non-fiction and Drama. Candidates choose one question to answer in the form of an appropriately structured critical analysis of a previously unseen text. The texts selected for 2016 were: Poetry – *The Phantom Horsewoman* by Thomas Hardy; Prose Fiction – *Explaining Death to the Dog* by Susan Perabo; Prose Non-fiction – *H is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald; Drama – *The Hard Problem* by Tom Stoppard.

Questions followed the style and format of the SQP and EQP. Apart from the change in the number of marks allocated to the paper, this (now compulsory) component remains essentially unchanged from the previous version of the qualification in terms of the skills that need to be applied by candidates.

The question paper performed in line with expectations, and feedback from the marking team and from practitioners suggested that it was fair in terms of overall level of demand. Some markers and practitioners commented favourably on the fact that the Prose Fiction text was a short story printed in its entirety. Poetry and Prose Fiction were (as in previous years) the most popular options for candidates.

The table, based on the reported choices of candidates in 2016, shows the relative popularity of the Textual Analysis questions.

Genre	% of candidates
Poetry	47
Prose Fiction	42
Prose Non-fiction	4
Drama	7

### **Component 3: Portfolio-writing**

The portfolio requires candidates to submit two pieces of writing for external assessment. Each piece is worth 15 marks. The range of possible genres available to candidates was expanded to include discursive writing in 2016. Candidates can now submit work in the following genres: Reflective, Fiction, Poetry, Drama, Persuasive, Argumentative and Informative. Fiction and Reflective writing were, as in previous years, the most popular of the creative options. Persuasive writing was the most popular of the 'new' genres available at this level.

This component performed in line with expectations.

The table, based on the reported choices of candidates in 2016, shows the relative popularity of the genres submitted by candidates.

Genre	% of total pieces submitted
Reflective	22
Fiction	35
Poetry	10
Drama	8
Persuasive	17
Argumentative	6
Informative	2

### **Component 4: Project-dissertation**

The Project-dissertation requires the submission of a dissertation of 2500 – 3000 words on an aspect of literature chosen by the candidate. This component is worth 30 marks. The reduction in word limit (compared with the previous qualification) did not impinge on the

standard of work produced by candidates. A number of candidates also took advantage of the opportunity, introduced this year, to study a single substantial text for this component.

This component performed in line with expectations.

The table, based on the reported choices of candidates in 2016, shows the relative popularity of the types of dissertation submitted by candidates.

Drama	%	Poetry	%	Prose fiction	%	Other	%
One dramatist - three or more texts	<1	One poet - wide range of poems	<1	One novelist - three or more texts	<1	Mixed genres	3
One dramatist - two texts	4	One poet - narrow range of poems	3	One novelist - two texts	14	Literary non-fiction	<1
Two or more than two dramatists	2	Two or more than two poets	1	Two or more than two novelists	62		
One play	<1	One poem	<1	One text	3		
Other drama	<1	Other poetry	<1	Other fiction (including short stories)	3		

## Section 2: Comments on candidate performance

### Areas in which candidates performed well

#### Component 1: Question paper (Literary Study)

Candidates responded well to almost all questions in the paper. Questions A1, A5, A6, A7, B9, B10, B13, B14, D23, D24 and D26 tended to elicit strong responses.

Markers reported an interesting and rewarding range of prose fiction texts in evidence, including new texts not on the old set text list. A small number of candidates wrote essays of a high standard on Alasdair Gray.

There were some excellent answers on Shakespeare. Markers reported a significant increase in these responses, with tragedies such as *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *King Lear* very much in evidence.

Essays on Williams, Plath and Duffy continued to be very common. There was also evidence of candidates writing about interesting combinations of texts, including essays which analysed *The Road* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, for example.

The ability of high-scoring candidates to construct complex and original essays under the pressure of time and exam conditions was also noted.

## **Component 2: Question paper (Textual Analysis)**

Markers reported that the paper allowed candidates to apply skills acquired during the course and that there were some very insightful responses which showed genuine independent thinking.

Some markers said that the poetry question was done relatively well, probably because candidates had been taught to deconstruct poems methodically and could apply this process to *The Phantom Horsewoman*. Candidates who treated the text holistically rather than merely analysing each 'quote' tended to do well.

Markers also reported that most candidates had at least a competent grasp of the meaning of the text they chose to write about. The Perabo short story was deemed to be accessible, and allowed those with good analytical skills to flourish. The Prose Non-fiction text, *His for Hawk*, produced some high quality responses.

## **Component 3: Portfolio-writing**

Reflective writing that went beyond the merely personal was well received by markers. There were also some well-crafted examples of genre fiction. Markers felt that, where poetry had clearly been supported by effective teaching, results were often impressive.

Markers reported that some candidates produced good examples of drama — where candidates made use of appropriate structural features and conventions this provided an effective framework to which dialogue could be added.

A number of candidates responded positively to the opportunity to write persuasive pieces, the best of which displayed sophistication and wit.

## **Component 4: Project-dissertation**

Markers reported that candidates did well in the dissertation when there was a task with a clear focus, and the texts chosen for study were sufficiently complex to allow candidates to display the understanding, analysis and evaluation demanded at this level. Candidates also did well when they made use of reputable academic secondary sources.

The best dissertations were very well presented with appropriate footnotes and bibliographies. Markers noted some intriguing choices of texts and authors which seemed to display a genuine interest by the candidate.

Some excellent dissertations were written on selections of short stories and poetry. Dystopian fiction and texts which formed the basis of studies of the role of women in society remained very popular choices. There seemed to be an increase in dissertations which looked at themes relating to mental health (*The Bell Jar*, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*). There were some very sophisticated responses on single texts (eg *Hamlet*).

## **Areas which candidates found demanding**

### **Component 1: Question paper (Literary Study)**

Markers reported that candidates who scored poorly had often made a strange choice of question and could, in fact, have chosen a more appropriate one for the texts they had studied. This was the case for a number of responses on Dickens.

There were some misunderstandings (Wilde's plays for D 22 on female characters in tragedy; William Blake as a love poet). There were a number of essays that relied on overly biographical interpretations (eg Keats' Odes interpreted solely as a response to his coming death).

### **Component 2: Question paper (Textual Analysis)**

Markers reported that a few candidates failed to understand the central concerns of their chosen text. There were also instances of responses that clearly showed the candidate did understand the text but then failed to provide sufficient analysis. Those who attempted the drama question often spotted the more obvious aspects of tension evident in the first part of the extract but then failed to comment satisfactorily on the remainder of the material.

### **Component 3: Portfolio-writing**

Some candidates were hampered by poorly chosen discursive topics/tasks which often looked like they had been replicated from folio work at lower levels. Weaker poems often ignored any attempt to make use of poetic techniques and were really just pieces of prose laid out as verse. While it is recognised that ambiguity is an essential part of poetry, some of the submitted poems simply lacked any kind of clarity.

Markers continued to note that some dramatic monologues fail to offer anything other than a first person narrative account of events and lack any real sense of drama.

### **Component 4: Project-dissertation**

Markers noted that candidates struggled with this component if the texts selected for study lacked sufficient depth and complexity. Candidates found it difficult to deal in a meaningful way with two texts that were too disparate in subject matter, style or theme.

Some candidates were limited by their choices of texts, which were too often accompanied by recycled commentaries rather than meaningful analysis (eg *Lord of the Flies*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*). There was also evidence of many candidates ignoring the requirements for footnotes/referencing and bibliographies in their dissertations.

While overall, most candidates showed sound understanding of their chosen texts, analysis was often cursory or assertive. Candidates who attempted sociological or psychological evaluation of characters rather than analysing them as literary constructs tended to do less well.

## **Section 3: Advice for the preparation of future candidates**

Advice offered to centres in past years remains valid for the new version of this qualification.

### **Component 1: Question paper (Literary Study)**

For Literary Study, teachers/lecturers should ensure that candidates are:

- ◆ offered an experience of literary study of sufficient depth and breadth to allow reasonable choice in the context of an unseen examination
- ◆ thoroughly prepared in the art of critical essay writing
- ◆ given ample practice in making effective use of the time available (1.5 hours)
- ◆ provided with strategies for addressing the terms of the question and for appropriate planning of their responses
- ◆ equipped with a precise and extensive critical vocabulary
- ◆ reminded that 'analysis' need not always be 'inserted' (often inappropriately) in the form of extensive quotation that is then subjected to micro-analytical comment on individual words and phrases
- ◆ shown how valid analysis may well reside (often by implication) in a permeating thread of relevant critical comment that informs an emerging argument

### **Component 2: Question paper (Textual Analysis)**

For Textual Analysis, it is recommended that candidates should:

- ◆ through guided reading, develop close and essential familiarity with the conventions of a range of literary genres
- ◆ through focused teaching and extensive practice, acquire the critical apparatus necessary for the analysis and evaluation of complex texts

### **Component 3: Portfolio-writing**

For the Portfolio-writing, it is recommended that:

- ◆ candidates should enrich their own experience by reading extensively in the work of other writers (including their peers) to familiarise themselves with genre conventions and the range of approaches that might be taken in their own writing
- ◆ skills for the portfolio could usefully be taught alongside the Textual Analysis component of the course
- ◆ the submission of groups of unrelated (or loosely related) poems should be avoided

### **Component 4: Project-dissertation**

For the dissertation, teachers/lecturers should ensure that:

- ◆ texts of appropriate substance and quality are selected
- ◆ groupings of disparate texts are avoided

- ◆ specific and manageable topics are constructed
- ◆ the analytical thrust of each study is incorporated into the statement of intent and title
- ◆ length is within the limits set by SQA
- ◆ mandatory footnotes and bibliographies are provided
- ◆ dissertations are free from plagiarism
- ◆ candidates are acquainted with **all** of the advice and regulations provided by SQA

The importance of the topic to be pursued in the dissertation cannot be overstated. In specifying topics, candidates and centres should be aware that they are effectively selecting and defining their own individual instruments of assessment. It should be emphasised, therefore, that vague, generalised and unfocused topics are unlikely to enable candidates to demonstrate attainment of the standards against which their dissertations will be assessed.

## Grade Boundary and Statistical information:

### Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2015	0
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Number of resulted entries in 2016	2303
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### Statistical information: Performance of candidates

#### Distribution of Course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of Course awards	%	Cum. %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark -				
A	25.7%	25.7%	591	66
B	27.0%	52.7%	622	57
C	28.2%	80.9%	650	48
D	10.2%	91.1%	234	43
No award	8.9%	-	206	0

## General commentary on grade boundaries

- ◆ While SQA aims to set examinations and create marking instructions which will allow a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional C boundary) and a well prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional A boundary), it is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject at every level.
- ◆ Each year, SQA therefore holds a grade boundary meeting for each subject at each level where it brings together all the information available (statistical and judgemental). The Principal Assessor and SQA Qualifications Manager meet with the relevant SQA Business Manager and Statistician to discuss the evidence and make decisions. The meetings are chaired by members of the management team at SQA.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the exam is more challenging than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the exam is less challenging than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance.
- ◆ Where standards are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.
- ◆ An exam paper at a particular level in a subject in one year tends to have a marginally different set of grade boundaries from exam papers in that subject at that level in other years. This is because the particular questions, and the mix of questions, are different. This is also the case for exams set in centres. If SQA has already altered a boundary in a particular year in, say, Higher Chemistry, this does not mean that centres should necessarily alter boundaries in their prelim exam in Higher Chemistry. The two are not that closely related, as they do not contain identical questions.
- ◆ SQA's main aim is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and all levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.