Course Report 2016

Subject	English
Level	Higher

Section 1: Comments on the Assessment

Summary of the Course assessment

Component 1: question paper: reading for understanding, analysis and evaluation

This question paper comprises two non-fiction, unseen passages, with questions on passage one and one question on both passages. Candidates apply their reading skills in understanding, analysis and evaluation when tackling the questions on passage one. In the question on both passages, candidates identify three key ideas shared by the two passages and provide evidence from the passages to support their choices.

Component 1 is worth 30 marks, and candidates have one hour and a half to complete it.

In 2016, the two passages provided appropriate challenge in terms of content and language. They dealt with abstract concepts such as responsibility and relative capacity of young people and adults to vote in elections. The questions on passage one provided opportunities for candidates to apply a range of skills, for example analysis of language, including tone and contrast; explanation of key ideas; and the use made by the writer of an important example. The final question, on both passages, required candidates to identify three key areas on which the passages disagreed and to support their choices with evidence from the passages.

This component performed as expected. There were no specific questions that did not perform as expected.

Component 2: question paper: critical reading

Component 2 is Critical Reading. This question paper comprises two sections: Scottish textual analysis and Critical Essay. In the Scottish text section, candidates apply understanding, analysis and evaluation skills to questions on a previously-studied Scottish text, or extract from a longer text, and link this to the wider text or collection of Scottish set texts studied. In the Critical Essay section, candidates write an extended response to a further previously-studied text from one of the following contexts: Drama, Prose Fiction, Prose Non-fiction, Poetry, Film and Television Drama or Language.

Component 2 is worth 40 marks: 20 marks for the Scottish textual analysis, 20 marks for Critical Essay. Candidates have one hour and a half to complete this component.

In 2016, an amendment was made to the marking of the final 10-mark question in the Scottish textual analysis section. In 2015, up to 3 marks could be awarded for appropriate quotations/references from the wider text or other texts. In 2016, no marks were awarded for quotations/references alone: the marks were awarded for analytical comments about aspects of the wider text or other texts. This is consistent with the marking guidance for the rest of the course assessment. In addition, care was taken to ensure that the marking instruction emphasised the skill of analysis for all appropriate questions and that the final 10-mark question provided an appropriate level of challenge.

Performance was largely consistent across the fourteen options in the Scottish textual analysis section and across the three genres of drama, poetry and prose. Options in this section proved to be of very similar demand. In the Scottish textual analysis, the final question in each option is worth 10 marks, and the demand and nature of these questions was consistent across the options, tending to focus on character, theme or technique as appropriate. In terms of uptake in this section, the most popular genre was poetry.

The most popular option, overall, was Duffy, followed by MacCaig and *The Cone Gatherers* and then *Men Should Weep*.

In poetry, after Duffy and MacCaig, the more popular choices were Lochhead, then Paterson and Burns. Fewer candidates chose MacLean.

In prose, after *The Cone Gatherers*, the more popular options were *Sunset Song* and Crichton Smith short stories, followed by *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* and Mackay Brown short stories.

In drama, after *Men Should Weep*, the more popular choice was *The Slab Boys*. Fewer candidates chose *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*. All options were chosen by some candidates.

Candidates chose a wide range of texts for their essays, mainly literature. A relatively small number opted to write their critical essay on a text from the SQA Scottish text list. Performance was similar across the different questions and genres. In drama, Shakespeare was popular, especially *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*. Other popular playwrights included Arthur Miller for example *A View from the Bridge*, *Death of a Salesman*, *All My Sons* and *The Crucible* and Tennessee Williams, especially *A Streetcar Named Desire* and also *The Glass Menagerie*.

In prose, popular choices included *The Great Gatsby* and *Lord of the Flies*. A number of candidates opted for Prose non-fiction: the essays of George Orwell were most frequently chosen here, especially *A Hanging*.

As most candidates chose poetry for the Scottish textual analysis, relatively few chose this genre for their essay. For those who did, the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Seamus Heaney, John Keats and Robert Browning were popular choices. Some candidates chose a media text for their critical essay, for example, the films *Psycho*, *The Godfather* and *Bladerunner*. A small number of candidates chose to write on Language. All options were chosen by some candidates.

This component performed as expected. There were no specific questions which did not perform as expected.

Component 3: portfolio: writing

The Portfolio: writing is made up of two pieces of writing which are submitted by candidates for marking by SQA.

The portfolio is worth 30 marks: 15 marks for each piece. Candidates submit two pieces of writing in different genres: one broadly creative, either personal or imaginative; and one broadly discursive, based on research individually undertaken by candidates.

This component performed as expected. The average mark for creative and discursive pieces was virtually identical.

Section 2: Comments on candidate performance

Areas in which candidates performed well

Component 1: question paper: reading for understanding, analysis and evaluation

Candidates engaged well with the passages, which considered the question of whether 16-year-olds should be allowed to vote. Markers reported a high level of interest in this topic. Candidates approached the task conscientiously and many performed well. The majority of candidates had time to complete the paper, including spending sufficient time on the final question on both passages. Most candidates answered all questions.

Q 1: most candidates accurately analysed one way in which the writer attempted to engage the reader's interest in the opening paragraph. Some readers managed to select a second technique and analyse this.

Q 2 (a): most candidates managed to explain at least one reason why some people think teenagers should not be allowed to vote, by referring to either the writer's viewpoint or scientific research.

Q 3: most candidates correctly explained how the writer used the example of Malala to develop her argument.

Q 5: many candidates correctly explained at least one reason why those who emphasised the negative effects of social media on young people may have 'got it all wrong'.

Q8: many candidates managed to identify two key areas on which the passages disagreed, and provided evidence from the passages to justify their choices. Some candidates accurately identified three key areas and fewer managed to provide insightful comments on the evidence they selected.

Component 2: question paper: critical reading

Candidates were thoroughly prepared for the Critical Reading Component. In both the Scottish textual analysis and the Critical Essay, candidates displayed detailed knowledge and understanding of texts. Many markers commented on the high standard of performance.

Many candidates performed well in the shorter analysis questions on the extracts or texts in the Scottish textual analysis. Most candidates devoted sufficient time to answering the final, 10-mark question, and made successful links between the extract or text on the page and the wider work. Many candidates were able to make perceptive comments on these references. Most opted to answer this question in a series of bullet points, an approach that worked well.

In the Critical Essay, most candidates found a suitable question and managed to structure their essays effectively, demonstrating thorough knowledge of the texts they had studied, for example through use of quotation and direct references to areas of content.

Component 3: portfolio: writing

It was evident that the vast majority of candidates had worked hard on their portfolio and submitted two pieces of writing which clearly addressed the requirement for one 'broadly creative' and one 'broadly discursive' writing piece. In the portfolio, candidates have the opportunity to re-draft and improve pieces, and the standard of written English in their finished work was often high.

In creative writing, many candidates chose to write about personal experience. This was often handled with maturity and insight, with a strong sense of the writer's personality coming through. Many candidates who chose to submit imaginative writing showed awareness of genre requirements such as character and plot. Many achieved a high standard of writing in creation of atmosphere and setting and in the use of structure. There was an increase in the number of drama and poetry submissions, and these were often of a high standard. A small number of candidates wrote in Scots, including some drama scripts and poems in Scots, and some of these displayed a high level of performance.

In discursive writing, it was clear that most candidates chose a subject which interested them. Many candidates conducted appropriate research and structured their essays effectively to convey meaning. Some candidates showed impressive engagement with current national and international affairs and wrote with enthusiasm and commitment. Some candidates chose local topics: these were often tackled well. Some candidates managed to address their chosen subject with wit and humour.

Consistent technical accuracy was achieved by the vast majority of candidates.

The overwhelming majority of candidates chose to word process their pieces, and the standard of presentation was high. Most managed to use and to identify any sources used.

Areas which candidates found demanding

Component 1: question paper: reading for understanding, analysis and evaluation

Q 2(b): Many candidates scored one mark each for two basic comments on language, rather than two marks for detailed/insightful comments. Some candidates clearly understood that language was being used to suggest that young people are not capable of voting. However, they asserted that language features such as the word choice of 'clueless' or the use of a list

achieved this, rather than showing how it was done. Some candidates included only two points in their answers, and so lost potential marks.

Q 4: Many candidates scored one mark each for two basic comments on language, rather than two marks for detailed/insightful comments. The requirement to comment on sentence structure increased the challenge of this question, with many candidates selecting a list but not managing to analyse how it created a negative impression of adults. A number of candidates focused on a possible negative impression of teenagers, rather than adults, and so lost potential marks.

Q 7: Many candidates found the requirement to comment on both tone and contrast challenging. Some candidates managed to comment on the contrast between old (who can vote) and young (who cannot). Fewer tackled tone successfully: some candidates identified a tone but did not manage to analyse how it was created.

Component 2: question paper: critical reading

Markers reported that some candidates tended to assert rather than analyse in the shorter questions on the Scottish textual analysis. However, many candidates answered these questions well.

In the final 10-mark question of the Scottish textual analysis, some candidates did not concentrate on the question's key focus fully. For example, in the Duffy question, some candidates answered on 'life-changing situations' rather than 'attempts of characters **to cope with** life-changing situations'. In the MacCaig question, some candidates answered on 'suffering' rather than 'reaction to suffering'. Some candidates did not address the idea of commonality fully and lost potential marks. Some candidates struggled to organise their answers effectively.

In Critical Essay, some candidates showed understanding of their chosen texts, but did not focus sufficiently on the requirements of the question. Answers were therefore less relevant. Some candidates spent too long on re-telling the narrative or describing characters in a basic way, rather than focusing on analysis and evaluation of the text.

A small number of candidates had difficulty in choosing an appropriate Critical Essay question and struggled to match the text they knew to the question chosen. In some instances, candidates' knowledge and understanding would have been better directed in response to another question.

Time management was an issue for a small number of candidates.

A small number of candidates had difficulty with following the genre requirements of the paper. Examples include using a drama text to answer on prose, or vice versa, or mixing up non-fiction and fiction texts. A very small number did not follow the instruction for Critical Essay that 'Your essay must be on a different genre from that chosen in Section 1.' A very small number indeed answered on the same text for Scottish text and Critical Essay.

Component 3: portfolio: writing

Some candidates did not adhere to the published word limit for each piece of writing.

In imaginative writing, some candidates wrote over-complicated and unrealistic narratives, rather than concentrating on developing characters or atmosphere.

In discursive writing, some candidates asserted their views but did not provide sufficient argument or evidence to support these. For some candidates, there was evidence that research had been conducted, but it was not employed effectively to support the candidate's argument.

Section 3: Advice for the preparation of future candidates

Component 1: question paper: reading for understanding, analysis and evaluation

Reading good quality non-fiction, for example broadsheet journalism, will greatly assist candidates to prepare for this part of the course assessment.

It is very important that candidates attempt to adhere to the requirement for own words. This is indicated in the wording of the question where this is required. Direct lifts of words/expressions from the passage will gain no marks in these questions.

In questions that require the analysis of the writer's use of language, candidates should be aware that no marks are awarded at Higher level for references or quotations alone. No marks are awarded for assertion that an effect has been produced: candidates must analyse how this has been done. For example, if they choose to answer on a list, it is not enough to assert what the effect of the list is: they must analyse how this effect is achieved. In the case of a list, referring to the number or range of items in the list is a useful way forward.

Candidates should remember the '*2 marks for detailed/insightful comment; 1 mark for more basic comment*' division of marks in many Higher questions.

Candidates should attempt to explain their analytical comments as clearly and as fully as they can. In questions asking for a response on the writer's ideas, candidates should attempt to ensure that their full understanding is expressed.

Candidates should be aware that 'at least two examples' does not mean that they are restricted to giving two points in their answer. In four-mark analysis questions, providing four points is one effective strategy.

The use of bullet points, etc might assist candidates in the structuring of answers for high tariff questions.

There is evidence of good reparation for the final question on both passages, shown by the success of candidates in this question, and centres should continue to provide opportunities for candidates to develop their skills in this area.

Component 2: question paper: critical reading

Centres have focused effectively on the key areas of study in the texts taught to candidates, leading to high levels of knowledge and understanding. Most candidates showed genuine enthusiasm for their texts and sincere engagement with, for example, characters and themes. This conscientious and helpful approach should continue.

Candidates should be aware of the need to analyse when answering the shorter questions in the Scottish textual analysis.

Candidates should read the 10-mark question carefully and make sure that they use their textual knowledge to construct an answer which meets the demands of the question.

Candidates should continue to make appropriate links within a longer text or between shorter texts, for use in the final question in the Scottish textual analysis.

Candidates should be aware of the three-part requirement of the final question in the Scottish textual analysis: 2 marks for commonality (showing general understanding of how the question links to the text or texts), 2 marks for analysis of the extract or text given, 6 marks for commenting on the wider text or texts. Organising their answers in a series of bullet points within three sections may benefit candidates.

Candidates should be reminded of the requirements for choosing a question from the Critical Essay section of the paper. This must be from a different genre to the Scottish Textual Analysis. They should make sure that they have chosen the appropriate genre of question for their text.

Candidates should be careful to select an appropriate Critical Essay question. Some candidates were disadvantaged by choosing an inappropriate question.

Candidates should be reminded to stay relevant to the question in their responses to Critical Essay questions. They should try to avoid re-telling the story or repeating information which is not relevant to the question.

Component 3: portfolio: writing

It is evident that centres have provided candidates with appropriate guidance, enabling them to produce their best writing for the portfolio. This impressive work should continue.

Candidates are reminded to adhere to stated word limits, ie 1300 words maximum for each piece. A penalty will be applied to candidates who produce work that exceeds the word limit by more than 10%.

Clarity of structure should be encouraged in candidates' writing.

In personal writing, candidates should try to focus on conveying thoughts, feelings and personality rather than relating events.

In imaginative writing, candidates should try to focus on developing characters and atmosphere, rather than over-elaborate and/or unrealistic narrative.

Candidates are required to submit one piece of broadly creative writing. When submitting poetry it is acceptable to submit more than one poem, but, if doing so, these should be linked in some way, for example thematically or through the use of different narrative voices. A group of poems will be considered as one piece.

All sources used in preparation for pieces of writing must be declared. Time taken on the organisation and acknowledgement of sources improves presentation, assists markers, and helps to develop good study habits.

Encouraging personal choice can be beneficial when considering topics for discursive writing. Often local and current issues have powerful relevance for candidates.

In discursive writing, sufficient research should be undertaken in order that the candidate's argument can be fully explored.

Grade Boundary and Statistical information:

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2015	21147

Number of resulted entries in 2016	36356

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	26.0%	26.0%	9443	68
B	25.8%	51.8%	9378	59
C	27.1%	78.8%	9845	50
D	10.0%	88.8%	3631	45
No award	11.2%	-	4059	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.