
GCSE

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 1 Explorations in Creative Reading and Writing
Report on the Examination

8700
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General Comments

This was the first November series for the new 8700 examination, set in line with the accredited specification and the June 2017 paper, and it was very well received. The source, taken from 'Labyrinth' by Kate Mosse, was both engaging and enabling for students, allowing all abilities to access and challenge themselves: there was evidence of strong personal engagement with the reading material and, in some cases, a precise demonstration of the skills required. However, whilst the full range of ability was in evidence, there were fewer students performing at the upper end of the ability range than in the June series.

Question 1

This question is intended to ease students into the examination, with the expectation that most will achieve well, and this proved to be the case as the mean mark was 3.53 out of the 4 marks available. There were many points about Alice and her surroundings for students to list – she drinks water in great gulps; the sky is an endless blue; the grass is dry; etc – and those who simply retrieved information sometimes did better than those who tried to interpret it. The few who offered incorrect points either selected from the wrong lines or misread the text, especially the clause 'It's warm'. In the source this follows Alice unscrewing the top of her water bottle and is clearly in reference to the temperature of the water rather than the weather, which is considerably more than warm as the tarmac on the road is melting. However, overwhelmingly, students did well on Question 1 and gained confidence at the start of the examination.

Question 2

The key skill for Question 2 is the analysis of language, and reproducing the relevant lines in the question paper once again assisted students in focusing their initial selection appropriately. Students also found the bullet points (You could include the writer's choice of words and phrases, language features and techniques, and sentence forms) helpful in guiding their response, although, as noted previously, the use of the word 'could' needs to be emphasised: there is no requirement to cover all of these aspects and students who narrowed their choice and then explored the effects of their selected examples in depth frequently were more successful.

Within the given lines, there were many rich examples of language employed by Mosse to describe the mountain area. Typically, students were able to examine the effect of the writer's choice of 'delicate flowers of pink and mauve and white peep out from their hiding places', in particular, the word 'delicate' to suggest the fragility of the flowers in early spring, and also 'peep' to indicate the flowers were slowly emerging, hoping that winter was over. There was also successful analysis of the area being 'a place of secrets, one that has seen too much and concealed too much to be at peace with itself'; and also the sun that 'flattened the land into submission'. An example of a response at Level 4 was one that noted how this implies the aggressive, almost military way, in which the heat oppressed the land, and that even the word 'submission' gives the reader the idea that the land tried to fight against this obvious violence but had to yield to the sun's overwhelming power. Subject terminology was used to enhance responses, and words like personification were used correctly and with understanding.

However, some students who did less well on this question identified and labelled language features but failed to comment on the effect on the reader or explain a reason behind the writer's choices. At times, they offered a basic, generic comment, eg 'it creates a picture in our heads',

which could apply to most examples of language in the given lines and is merely a ‘simple comment on the effect of language,’ worthy of a mark in Level 1, and at other times, they selected very lengthy examples rather than focusing on individual words or phrases, which frequently led to paraphrasing and discussion of ideas rather than analysis of language.

Question 3

The key skill for Question 3 is the analysis of structure and, as noted previously, in its simplest terms, students are required to examine what happens where and why, usefully asking themselves the question ‘How does reading about this at this point add to my understanding of the text as a whole?’ Many students were confident in their approach: they did not over-complicate the question and there was no over-reliance on subject terminology or high level literary/narrative theory.

The majority of students found the bullet points (You could write about what the writer focuses your attention on at the beginning of the source; how and why the writer changes the focus as the source develops; and any other structural features that interest you) effective as a framework for their responses. More able students recognised the cyclical structure of the text and commented on the effect of the same focus – Alice and the water bottle, the heat and the insects – being used at the beginning and the end: they could see that structurally, this highlighted Alice’s determination to find the object because the challenging conditions encountered initially had not improved several hours later and, in fact, had become more intense. The very best students dealt with the tense change on line 34: ‘In the days and weeks to come, Alice will look back to this moment,’ and understood this meant that Alice was about to discover something of significance. Some even contemplated the ambiguity of whether the discovery was necessarily going to be favourable for Alice: an example of a response at Level 4 was one that recognised how the writer’s use of the omniscient third person narrator in these few lines meant that the reader knew more than Alice did at this point – the fact that she would ‘wonder at how different things might have been had she made the choice to go and not stay. If she had played by the rules’ suggested Alice’s decision to stay was a mistake, and this knowledge impacted the reader’s understanding of her actions in the rest of the source.

Students who did not do so well narrated too much of the story or did not focus sufficiently on the effects of the writer’s choices. Many now can recognise where the structural shifts in a text occur and are able to track them, leading to a mark in Level 2, but greater consideration of why the writer has made a particular choice at a particular moment and how that impacts the reader’s understanding of the whole is needed. Another unhelpful trait was writing about the construction of sentences, as per Question 2, rather than the position of key sentences and the significance of their placement.

Responses to Question 3 this November series have been encouraging, although in order to help students further, attention is once again drawn to [‘How structure is assessed in Paper 1 Question 3’](#), produced as part of the Further Insight series and located on the GCSE English Language teaching resources area of the website. It gives details of what a student needs to do for this question, explains the Indicative Standards comments in the Mark Scheme, offers some ideas on structural features for students to analyse and includes example responses with commentaries.

Question 4

Question 4 was generally well-answered across the ability range. Although this question has the highest tariff – at 20 marks, it is half the marks available in Section A and 25% of the marks available for the whole paper – and it should therefore be the most challenging of all the Reading questions, students once again seemed to enjoy the freedom to write in a more personal way than in Questions 2 and 3, and therefore responded at their own level.

As with previous questions, the bullet points (You could consider the reasons why Alice decides to continue digging; evaluate how the writer creates a sense of mystery; and support your response with references to the text) guided students on the focus of their evaluation, but there were no right or wrong answers. Most students were able to recognise some of the reasons why Alice decided to continue digging, such as she didn't want to lose her momentum, whilst typical Level 2 responses also considered some of the disadvantages of continuing, eg, Alice was tired and aching and tempted to give in and join her friends. Students who explored Alice's internal dilemma further and offered some interpretation of why she continued, ie because of her grit and determination, or because she had an expectation of finding something significant, or because she seemed to be drawn by an almost supernatural power, moved into the higher ranges of the mark scheme. The most able students suggested that the glinting object had been placed there for her and her alone to find, and several evaluated the notion of Alice being 'the chosen one' or that it appeared to be her destiny or fate to find it, perceptive comments that placed them in Level 4.

The key skill for Question 4 is evaluation, both of the ideas in the source in relation to the given statement, and of the methods used by the writer to convey these ideas. 'Evaluate how the writer creates a sense of mystery' seemed to invite even the least able to discuss, for example, the lack of detail assigned to the object, whilst better students evaluated the effect of ending on a cliff-hanger and the most able analysed more complex methods, such as the religious imagery and the role of God in 'almost as if it had been placed there by a giant hand'. There is still the need to broaden what constitutes methods, however. Whilst students can, and did, make insightful comments about the writer's use of language and structure, they should not limit themselves to these two aspects of the writer's craft. Sometimes a method can be specific to the particular text and this, too, is worthy of consideration, eg evaluation of the shift in narrative voice on line 34, as explained in Question 3.

There were differing opinions as to whether Alice's discovery was going to be life-changing. However, there did seem to be an increase in speculation rather than interpretation. Some students went far beyond the scope of the text, writing about Alice becoming a famous archaeologist, appearing on television and travelling around the world conducting book signings, etc, and it is worth remembering that although all evaluations and interpretations can be valid, they must be rooted in the text.

Question 5

Both Writing questions proved to be accessible to students. The first option, write a story set in a mountainous area as suggested by the picture, was a slightly more popular choice, and lent itself to a number of different genres: post-apocalyptic scenarios; fantasy stories of sorcerers controlling the waves; mythical sea creatures and supernatural beasts emerging out of the depths; spiritual enlightenment and mystical reflections; and also a person merely sitting in silence, contemplating the meaning of life. Many of the narratives included elements of description, sometimes with a

rather 'thin' narrative thread or back story, but that did not negate the quality of students' writing and they were rewarded accordingly.

The picture was used as a springboard for students' imaginations, whilst still adhering to the given focus of being set in a mountainous area. Sometimes the picture was the starting point for the hooded figure to then venture off and explore, and occasionally it featured in the conclusion: the narrative happened in nearby mountains and the sudden discovery of the lake was so profound that the hooded figure could do nothing but sit and stare. The seagull perched on the post played a significant part in several stories: it was sent from God to watch over a troubled soul, or the story was told from the viewpoint of the seagull soaring through the mountains. There was also the more surreal: killer mermaids, vampire rocks, several Bear Grylls-type survival scenarios, a Stephen King-esque killer lake, a few accidental gusts of wind that caused untold misery and a good few talking seagulls.

A story with the title 'Discovery' was chosen by fewer students. Most commonly, they made a literal discovery of something either positive like treasure or negative such as a mangled corpse in an axe man's cottage, but others opted for a metaphorical discovery: self-purpose or the meaning of life. Sometimes students discovered something interesting in their everyday lives such as the beauty of nature, the magnificence of the universe or the real importance of family and friends. A few decided that 'Discovery' was the name of a boat or plane, and wrote an adventure story of their choice that way.

The quality of responses ranged mostly across Level 2 and Level 3, with very few students in Level 1 and a significant minority achieving Level 4. In the main, both Writing options inspired students to write introspective, reflective stories, rather than those featuring over-the-top action or extensive dialogue. They used descriptive detail to create character or setting to make the narrative engaging, rather than focusing on a complex plot, meaning fewer responses were unnecessarily lengthy and lost cohesion and coherence as they continued.

However, a new and rather alarming trend this series was a virtual re-writing of the source material – some students 'borrowed' extensively, either incorporating phrases, sentences or whole paragraphs into their work, or replicating Mosse's entire story word for word, just changing the name Alice to something else. This approach severely limits the marks available to a student when so little is their own work, and should be discouraged at all costs.

Two further areas where students were less successful were formulaic responses with a contrived use of senses: I can see/I can hear/I can smell; and the inclusion of over-ambitious vocabulary that was misused and obscured meaning. Writing skills obviously need to be taught, but there is also an argument for not over-preparing students, especially for creative writing.

In terms of AO6, centres continue to be mindful of the increased Technical Accuracy mark and had emphasised the importance of varying sentence forms and encouraged students to use a variety of punctuation. Comma splicing, punctuation of dialogue and the use of apostrophes continue to be areas on which to focus.

Use of statistics

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.