
GCSE

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 2 Writers' Viewpoints and Perspectives
Report on the Examination

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General Comments

The November 2017 series was sat by a relatively small number of students, approximately 25,000. Most students were re-sit students, the majority of whom were among the first cohort to sit the new specification in June 2017. While the full range of ability was in evidence, there were fewer students performing at the upper end of the ability range. There was widespread evidence that students were well-prepared for the demands of the questions and very few examples of students misunderstanding the focus of each question or failing to respond to individual questions.

It has been very positive to see how well students have responded to the stimulus of the source material in this second series. Few students appear to favour the more modern text over the 19th century text in the way they engage with the sources. The two sources were based on the theme of education. Both sources focused on a single school, providing an insight into the area and the community surrounding the school, the behaviour and attitudes of pupils, the actions and motivations of teachers, the support (or not) of parents, and the school environment itself. The focus on pupils, teachers and parents, as well as on reading, writing and behaving, provided students with a reassuringly comfortable setting for these texts, despite the difference in the historical time periods.

Source A was an extract from Gervase Phinn's autobiographical account of his experiences as a school inspector. In a first person account, he guides the reader through his visit to the primary school in Crompton, introducing the head teacher Sister Brendan and giving us an insight into the behaviour and work of the pupils he witnessed. The account is accessible and engaging, allowing students to respond to the different layers of meaning within the text, according to their ability.

Source B was an extract from the diary of a teacher at a London ragged school in 1875. Although a 19th century text, it was written in a very accessible style. There was widespread evidence of students engaging sympathetically with the seemingly depressed but determined teacher, and condemning unequivocally the violent and rebellious pupils. There were both superficial and more subtle meanings here too, with more perceptive students picking up on the idea of class differences between teacher and pupils, and others engaging with the religious undertones of the text.

As a pair of texts, there was a range of obvious connections to make between the two, but there were also opportunities to develop more perceptive responses to the ideas.

Question 1

This question presented students with eight unambiguous statements relating to information from the first few lines of Source A. This question is intended to provide a gateway for students into the exam, easing them into writing longer questions by assessing their understanding of both explicit and implicit ideas in the text without the need for writing a response. As such, it was successful, as 78% of students scored full marks by identifying the four correct statements from the possible eight and 98% were able to identify at least three correct statements.

There was little evidence of students failing to use the correct process for indicating their answers on the question paper, which is a very positive sign and suggests that students were well prepared for what was required of them. Centres would be well-advised to ensure that the same level of preparedness is established prior to the June 2018 series.

Question 2

This question focused specifically on the behaviour of the children in the two texts. This question is designed to have a relatively narrow focus, distinct from the focus on attitudes in Question 4, in order to avoid any overlap. There were several examples of behaviour to be identified in both sources, and some very clear and accessible connections to be made between them. The mean mark for Question 2 was 3.87 marks in November, suggesting that many students were able to attempt some connections, and were also able to offer some inferential understanding of one or both texts, and thereby meet all the criteria for Level 2.

This reflects the growing confidence of students in bringing together ideas and interpreting textual details from both texts. The best responses for Question 2 demonstrated the ability to make clear or perceptive inferences about the children's behaviour in Source A, such as their self-motivation and independence in collaborating so industriously to solve problems, and their eagerness to show the Inspector just how proud they were of their achievements in reading. Likewise, in Source B, students inferred how the children showed violence not just to their teachers but also towards each other, and how they appeared to behave in such an unruly way because they were not subject to any obvious discipline from their teacher. Connecting the students' behaviour to outside influences was a common route to making clear and perceptive inferences.

However, too many students failed to achieve the marks they might have hoped for because they mistook the focus of the task to be the teachers' feelings about the school, or the school as a whole, rather than the behaviour of the children. It is imperative that students are able to identify and rigorously adhere to the focus of each task rather than make inferences and explore differences between the texts in vague or general terms.

Another common pitfall was the lack of detail in explaining the inference or the connection. In order to be awarded marks in Level 3, a clear inference or difference needs to be sufficiently detailed to be judged unarguable, or unquestionable, therefore an inference such as 'The children were well-behaved as it says they arrived "one after the other",' leaves the reader with the question 'What sort of good behaviour did this show?' However, if the student were to write: 'The children were well-behaved, taking turns to read to the Inspector in the library "one after the other",' there is a detail and precision to the response which would merit a mark in Level 3 for a clear inference, rather than the first example which would be awarded a mark in Level 2 for an attempted inference.

There was also concern about the length of some responses to Question 2. Students do not need to make a large number of points; quality is more important than quantity. It is the depth and detail of comments which is rewarded rather than the breadth and range of comments. Some students wrote more than the two sides available within the answer booklet, continuing onto an additional page, but rarely achieved a higher mark as a result of their extended answer. The negative impact however, was felt later on in the exam when some of these students inevitably ran out of time to write an extended response to Question 4, where there are 16 marks available, as opposed to the 8 marks available for Question 2.

In summary

- Most students demonstrated confidence in both inferring and synthesising
- It is imperative that students adhere to the focus of the task
- Improving the detailed explanation of a small number of inferences is more beneficial than making a larger number of questionable or less precise inferences.

Question 3

This question invited students to respond to the language choices of the writer in describing the head teacher Sister Brendan. There was a wide variety of language examples to choose from, with the image of the blackbird out for the early worm one of the most popular. Although some students chose to interpret this literally, as Sister Brendan being variously under-weight, starving or an early riser, others were able to explore the metaphorical idea of the Inspector as the 'worm' and how she was angling for the best inspection report she could persuade him to produce.

There were some interesting comments about Sister Brendan's actions: 'fluttering', 'chuckling' and 'chattering,' and how these suggested her confidence and pride, or alternatively her anxiety and desperation. Some of the best responses were to the image of the school as a hive and Sister Brendan as the Queen Bee, enabling students to explore the image of the head teacher as a dominant and controlling female force at the centre of this harmonious and productive school community. In this series only a few students selected examples of language from outside the lines indicated by the question.

However, some students chose language examples which were more difficult for them to analyse, such as the descriptions of Sister Brendan's eyes. Some students struggled to make comments about the use of adjectives such as 'tiny, dark, darting' beyond finding synonyms such as 'small' and 'black' to explain their effect. A minority of students did explore words such as 'darting' to a greater depth and drew out connotations of a vigilant, alert and highly observant teacher on the one hand, or a suspicious, conniving and slightly manipulative host on the other, depending on their interpretation of the enigmatic Sister Brendan. This ability to drill down and explore the impact and effect of individual words and phrases is well-rewarded within the scope of the mark scheme.

However, Question 3 also saw some weaker responses to the sources, with too many students commenting on the character of Sister Brendan rather than focusing specifically on the language used to describe her and the effect of those language choices. This resulted in students demonstrating inferential understanding rather than language analysis, which is not the assessment objective of this question. Some students were tempted by the focus of the question being on a character, rather than a setting or an object, to write comments on content rather than method, and were rewarded with appropriately low marks as a result. It cannot be over-stated that the main thrust of this question is for students to select interesting language choices and analyse the effects of the language used.

There was increased evidence of students demonstrating an appropriate use of a range of language terms to support their responses. It is both useful and appropriate, for example, for students to identify an example of a simile or a metaphor, acknowledging that this means a comparison of images and so proceed to explore the imagery. By the same token, students should recognise that alliteration is a technique relating to sound and the correct example will therefore be followed by a comment on the aural effect of the selected words. This exemplifies how subject terminology enhances the response instead of being used as a labelling device which contributes little to the explanation of effects.

In summary

- Students' choices of language examples have an impact on the success of their analysis
- Regardless of the focus on a character, inferential comments on content are not appropriate
- Writing about the effect of language is the single most important and rewardable skill
- Students should be encouraged to use subject terms to shine a light on the language analysis, and not for the subject terms to be the star of the show themselves.

Question 4

This question invited students to engage directly with the writers' attitudes to the schools they portray. Question 4 is a more open question than any of the previous three reading questions, allowing students to engage with the whole of both sources and to extract whatever they choose to illustrate their response. There was a wealth of possibility for responses to this particular question, with students variously focusing on the school community, the moral climate, the geographical location, the parents, the pupils, the teachers, the resources and the school environment itself. Any or all of these were appropriate as a focus of this task, as they are all incorporated in the idea of the 'school'.

The skills required are to demonstrate an understanding of ideas and attitudes in both texts, as well as a comparison of those ideas and attitudes across the two texts. Integral to this question is the consideration of how the writers have conveyed their ideas and attitudes, involving an exploration of the different methods used by the writers. This question builds on the inferential understanding and the synthesis of ideas required by Question 2 (the 'what'), and the exploration of language methods required by Question 3 (the 'how'). The majority of students rose to the challenges of the question and accessed both texts successfully, at their own level.

The best responses were those where students made clear comparisons, for example between the impact of the local community on the two schools, and how the writer of Source A portrays the pupils at the primary school as succeeding despite the 'wasteland' around them, whereas the writer of Source B describes the school as simply an extension of the 'dismal' community it serves. Other students compared the perspective of the Inspector as being one where he is likely to be shown a false or staged view of the school because of his position, whereas the writer of Source B as the teacher is able to demonstrate the school in a more realistic way because he is an integral part of it.

However, there were significant flaws in some of the responses to this question. One of these is that some students failed to make the distinction between the attitudes of the writer and the attitudes of the characters presented within the text. This was most often seen in response to Source A, where students ascribed the views of Sister Brendan to the writer himself, rather than making it clear that there was a difference between how she felt about the school and how the writer felt about it. The question is explicitly about the attitudes of the writers. It is important that centres prepare students to address texts which include more than one point of view, and to identify the point of view of the writer as the force which shapes, selects and presents the views of the characters within the text. Those who wrote about the attitudes of Sister Brendan, the pupils or the parents were credited with some understanding of ideas in Level 2, but to be rewarded with a mark in Level 3, they needed to make the distinction between the attitudes of the writer and the attitudes of other characters, in at least one text.

The other significant flaw noted in some responses was failing to comment on the methods used by the writers, as well as their ideas and attitudes. There was much to say, for example, about the tone of Source B where the writer appears 'forlorn' and yet determined, or about the structure of both sources, where the writers initially establish the area around the school in order to either reinforce the mood within the school or to present a stark contrast. Whilst it is understandable that students might get carried away writing about the ideas and overlook the need to write about methods too, they are missing out on a whole range of marks as a result and centres would be well-advised to ensure that students are reminded of the requirements of the assessment objective (AO3) covered by this question: to compare writers ideas and perspectives, as well as how these are conveyed, across two or more texts.

In summary

- Students responded well to the broad range of ideas and attitudes presented in both texts
- It is important to distinguish between ideas in a text and the writer's attitudes towards them
- Students should be prepared for the demands of texts with multiple points of view
- It is crucial that students engage with the 'how' as well as the 'what'.

Question 5

In many cases, this question provoked better responses than the reading questions, with students responding with confidence and skill to the relatively familiar task of writing a school or college Leavers' Day speech. Almost all students adopted an appropriate form and register for their speech, and the vast majority both understood the purpose and had a good sense of the audience. This provided an excellent starting point for most students and a solid foundation for their writing.

The question was intended to provoke a wide range of responses, with students invited to explain how their various experiences outside of school contributed to their education and served to complement the formal education they received in school or college. In practice, there were very few students who chose to write about their experiences outside school, either in the arts, or in sport, or even in work. Many students struggled to deal with the abstract nature of what constitutes 'a good education' and resorted to explaining the concept as a combination of good teaching, good resources and a good attitude, which resulted in many very similar and rather pedestrian responses. Very few students responded to the prompts offered in the statement, and there was only limited evidence of students engaging with ideas about different types of schools, for example.

The best responses established a clearly identifiable point of view from the start, and followed this through with a coherent series of points to support their central argument. A few high performing students offered a critique of the punitive exam system they felt they were trapped in and expressed contempt for the value society places on paper certification at the expense of other 'soft skills', which were felt by the student to be more valuable in the long term. There were some who took a more motivational approach to the task but, rather than explaining their view on what makes a good education, sought instead to persuade or advise their audience not to waste their time and opportunities at school as they themselves had done and now bitterly regretted.

The most common weaknesses were seen where students failed to provide clarity in their argument and simply strung together, with more or less success, a series of random points about what might loosely be called 'education'. This lack of coherence and structure, linked with a general paucity of detailed ideas, led to a significant number of students being awarded marks in the middle of Level 2, with a mean mark of 10.89 for Content and Organisation (AO5). There was

little evidence of students over-using linguistic devices in this series, which was very welcome. The criterion for success in terms of using linguistic devices is to do with the appropriateness of the device for the purpose and audience. Therefore, rhetorical questions, direct address and lists of three were directly relevant to this task, whereas similes, statistics and alliteration were less so.

A number of responses were seen where the spelling and range of vocabulary were very good but the precise use of vocabulary was flawed. Likewise there were many instances of students attempting complex grammatical structures but demonstrating weaknesses in basic syntax and sentence agreement. This inconsistency led inevitably to a lack of clarity in written expression and, as a result, students were frequently being awarded marks in Level 2 and not higher. Overall, the mean mark for Technical Accuracy was 7.5 marks.

There was evidence of a wide range of punctuation being used. The difference between a mark in Level 2 and a mark in Level 3 is often dependent on the success of the punctuation, or of the vocabulary or sentence forms used. Semi-colons, for example, are only successful when placed correctly, and vocabulary can only be judged to be sophisticated when it is used accurately and precisely. It is the lack of accuracy and precision which was often the downfall of students in this series.

In summary

- Students responded well to the task in terms of form, purpose, audience and register
- Students should focus on establishing a clear, central, identifiable point of view
- It is crucial to focus on accuracy and precision of technical skills to improve marks.

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.