
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 live paper for the new 8700 examination, set in line with the accredited specification and the previously published specimen materials, and it was very well received. The source, taken from 'The Tiredness of Rosabel' by Katherine Mansfield, was accessible to all: written in a way that less able students could track the overall narrative and begin to draw meaning, but also containing subtleties and nuances that challenged the most able. This resulted in students of all abilities genuinely engaging with the reading material and responding positively and confidently to the thematically linked writing stimuli.

Question 1

This question was intended to ease students into the examination, with the expectation that most would achieve well. This proved to be the case as the mean mark was 3.75 out of the 4 marks available. There were many points about Rosabel for students to list – she worked in a hat shop; she bought a bunch of violets; she swung onto the step of the bus; etc – and those who simply retrieved information sometimes did better than those who tried to interpret it. There is no requirement for students to write in full sentences but, as the focus was Rosabel, students who began their points with 'She...' or 'Rosabel...' tended to produce more relevant, and therefore credit-worthy, answers. The few who offered incorrect points either selected from the wrong lines or misinterpreted the text at a basic level, eg by saying Rosabel lived in Oxford or that the circus was of the Big Top variety. 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 lines 6 to 14 in the question paper certainly enabled students to focus 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 the use of the word 'could' needs to be emphasised: there is no requirement to cover all of these aspects. In fact, students who narrowed their choice and then explored the effects of their selected examples in depth were frequently more successful.

Within the given lines, there were many rich examples of language employed by Mansfield to describe Rosabel's bus journey home. Some students selected well, eg the 'fairy palaces' metaphor for the jewellers' shops, and were able to examine the effect of the writer's choice of language successfully, commensurate with their ability: typically, Level 2 students attempted to comment on the image creating a shiny and sparkling effect; Level 3 students explained clearly that it suggested a magical, fairy-tale world outside of the bus; and Level 4 students perceptively explored the contrast between the language used to describe Rosabel's stuffy, claustrophobic reality inside the bus and the 'other-worldliness' of the 'fairy palaces' outside, and how it symbolised her fantasy of the unobtainable dream. However, some students selected words and phrases that they really did not understand, eg 'the sickening smell of warm humanity', and therefore were unable to analyse or say anything meaningful about them.

Students who performed less well on this question often 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' or 'it makes us feel like Rosabel feels', 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. Some students looked for the connotations of words without a consideration of context, eg claiming that the word 'black' in Rosabel's petticoat being 'coated in black, greasy mud' was associated with death, darkness or disease, or that the use of sibilance in the bus passengers 'sitting so still, staring in front of them' sounded like a snake hissing so it meant there was evil on the bus. Students need to understand that their comments have to be precise and contextualised in order to achieve Level 3 or above.

The use of subject terminology is a new requirement in the 8700 specification, but in the specimen materials and training meetings, much emphasis was placed on how it should be used to enhance a response: it is what the student does with the subject terminology that is credited, rather than the mention of an obscure term that the student does not understand and does nothing with. Many students were armed with complex subject terminology and were determined to find examples of these techniques in the source whether they existed or not. Frequently, the terminology was used incorrectly, and comments such as: 'The writer has used adjectives and this creates synaesthesia', with no examples or mention of Rosabel or the bus journey, were unhelpful. Although there were students who used subject terminology accurately and effectively as a tool to aid their analysis, less reliance on it as the driving force of the response would be beneficial to students.

Overall, some students struggled to address the task of selecting appropriate examples of language and analysing what the effects were in context. A significant number wrote at great length, which is neither necessary nor recommended: it is entirely possible to display clear or perceptive qualities without resorting to using additional sheets. The best students were able to demonstrate understanding of Mansfield's language choices and explore what they revealed about Rosabel's character and her world within a couple of pages.

Question 3

The key skill for Question 3 is the analysis of structure. 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?' However, this was the least well-handled of the reading questions, possibly because it assesses a new skill and is therefore challenging, possibly because it necessitates reference to the whole of the source, but also because students overcomplicated the question.

As with Question 2 there was an over-reliance on subject terminology, and also high level literary/narrative theory, which many students did not understand and could not apply. Whilst it is entirely possible to deconstruct the text using advanced theories and terminology, it is not necessary. Terminology may enhance the response by providing the tools to express understanding of structure, but the effects themselves have to come from the students, and those who concentrated on the reasons behind Mansfield's sequencing, structural shifts and movement through the text, on the whole, produced more thoughtful responses.

Some 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; any other structural features that interest you) effective as a framework for their responses. However, at times, although they used phrases such as 'at the beginning', 'in the middle' and 'at the end', which was perfectly valid, they just discussed the content of what was happening in the story at those points, or they analysed the language features instead. This question requires students to think about *why* something is placed at the beginning, middle or end of the source, not just what. Others identified features such as tone, setting, narrative perspective

and dialogue, without explaining any shifts or changes in these features as the source developed or the significance of their placement, which again led to a lack of focus on structure.

The most successful students understood that the story was a construct. They offered an overview of the structure of the whole source before breaking it down into its constituent parts and analysing the shifts in perspective and focus in a way that explored their significance. They recognised that the first half, where the reader journeys with Rosabel, is largely descriptive whereas her recollection of the earlier part of the day, which comes later in the text, was predominantly dialogue. They focused on this lack of chronology, and explored why Mansfield chose to start with the scene on the bus and then re-tell the encounter with the red-haired girl – how it enabled us to see for ourselves why Rosabel had had such ‘a hard day’s work’ as mentioned in the opening paragraph – and they discussed the smooth transition between time shifts as it switched to Rosabel’s thoughts with the key sentence, ‘She began to think of all that had happened during the day.’ They also examined the cyclical nature of the source through the motif of food – Rosabel’s simple meal and hunger at the beginning compared with the casual lunch mentioned by the red-haired girl in the final line – and also contrasted the means of transport, with the effect of highlighting the difference in their lifestyles and social classes. Having read the second half of the text, the most able students re-evaluated Rosabel’s decision in the opening paragraph to buy violets rather than food, suggesting it may have been some sort of psychological compensation for the hat that suited her beautifully but she would never be able to afford, something equally indulgent and frivolous but within her means.

Fundamentally, this question exposes how independent and interactive students are as readers. A resource that centres may find helpful in promoting this is [‘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

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. It should therefore be the most challenging of all the reading questions. However, there is possibly more freedom to interpret it in a personal way than in Questions 2 and 3, and students of all abilities responded in a manner that was both lively and engaging. Responses ranged from a few heart-felt comments about poor, downtrodden Rosabel to those who understood the subtleties of the characters and their interaction arguably as well as Katherine Mansfield did.

As with previous questions, the bullet points (You could consider your own impressions of the red-haired girl; evaluate how the writer conveys Rosabel’s reactions to the red-haired girl; 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 agreed that the girl had many advantages in life, but opinions varied as to whether Rosabel was right to be angry. Some students considered Rosabel was justified because the girl had so much whilst she had so little, a perfectly valid evaluation. More able students offered a more considered response, suggesting that she wasn’t right to be angry because the red-haired girl was perfectly nice to her, although it was understandable because the girl had so much whilst Rosabel had so little. Others suggested Rosabel’s anger was fuelled by jealousy, or even that it wasn’t really anger she was experiencing but indignation at being treated like a mannequin, an inanimate object devoid of feelings. Many of the most able students thought the anger was justifiable but misdirected, and also somewhat futile: it should have

been aimed at Harry, who ‘demanded the impossible’, or even at an unjust society that allowed such social inequality and division to exist, rather than the girl who was merely a product of her upbringing in much the same way as Rosabel. All evaluations and interpretations were valid, as long as they were rooted in the text.

The key skill for Question 4 is evaluation, both of the ideas in the source in relation to the given statement, and also the methods used by the writer to convey these ideas. However, the biggest error made by students was that many of them failed to address methods; they dealt with the ‘what’ but not the ‘how’, which limited how far they could move into a given level. Those who did consider methods tended to focus on language, eg the use of imperatives and the red-haired girl’s choice of diction, or occasionally structure, often at the expense of narrative voice or form or use of contrast within the given lines. Students need to understand that it is imperative to evaluate the ‘how’ as well as the ‘what’: indeed, those whose responses led with methods, which then naturally and seamlessly became evaluative of ideas, fared well and were able to access the full range of marks. There were also a couple of basic misinterpretations: many students thought the description of the girl’s eyes being ‘the colour of that green ribbon shot with gold they had got from Paris last week’ meant she had been on holiday to France, whilst others believed that Harry was her butler. Some interpreted the girl’s behaviour as being deliberately patronising and vindictive, although there is no evidence in the text to suggest that she was anything but polite or, at worst, indifferent to Rosabel. However, those who explored the possibility that the red-haired girl’s comments could have been misconstrued by Rosabel, who automatically felt inadequate by comparison, or that she was unwittingly demanding and flaunting her wealth because it wouldn’t occur to her to consider how a lowly shop girl might feel in this situation, were well-rewarded.

Question 5

Both writing questions proved to be accessible to students, many of whom wrote with confidence and control. The first option, describing a journey by bus as suggested by the picture, was a slightly more popular choice, possibly because there was a physical image there to aid imaginations, or maybe because travelling on a bus is in the realm of students’ experience. There were many inventive viewpoints adopted: of the bus itself; of the stop button on the bus; of a bus ticket; of a lamp post or a bridge that the bus passed; usually, though, it was written from the perspective of a passenger, or sometimes of a driver. The journeys themselves varied between the literal and the metaphorical: a purgatory bus where passengers were dead but forever trapped; a prison bus; a bus ride through the countryside for an author with writer’s block looking for inspiration; and an elderly gentleman’s journey to heaven, using the bus metaphorically to reconnect him to his wife. Many, however, consisted of a drive through a rainy city centre at night, where students took their cue from Source A and described the reflection of the lights on the window panes.

Students who opted for the narrative, a story about two people from very different backgrounds, also covered wide ranging topics. Many focused on rich and poor; different religions or races; enemy soldiers; star-crossed lovers; although others were more inventive: human and elf; modern man encounters caveman through time travel; 1950’s detective meets an enigmatic femme fatale; feuding families at the court of Versailles; and an angel sacrificing her immortality to save a human friend.

The most able students wrote beautifully crafted imaginative responses, both descriptive and narrative, that were stunning in their accomplishment; original, engaging and delightful to read. The addition of a reading question focusing on structure had obviously encouraged some students to consider the shape of their own writing, and some of the more successful bus journeys consisted

of a mixture of sweeping atmospheric descriptions interspersed with a narrowing focus on the fine detail of individual passengers. Some students adopted a circular structure or an extended metaphor that ran throughout their narrative, often with convincing and compelling results. Unfortunately, there was also considerable evidence of a lack of planning. Occasionally, spider diagrams were used, which may generate ideas but do not help with organisation or cohesion, whilst other 'plans' consisted of mnemonics, usually linguistic techniques the student intended to include regardless, which may aid some of the less able students but tends to stifle the creativity of the most able. A lack of planning also resulted in unnecessarily lengthy responses, where the more a student wrote, the greater the deterioration in ideas, structure and accuracy. Many students would have benefitted from a quality rather than quantity approach: having the confidence to take time to plan, and then craft a shaped and structured response in two or three sides, with time at the end to revise and improve. This would certainly have helped those who started ambitious narratives but managed to get no further than establishing the two characters because they set out to achieve the impossible in the time given.

There were a further two areas where students were less successful. Firstly, a tendency to produce formulaic responses with a contrived use of senses: I can see/I can hear/I can smell, usually with reference to nostrils; and secondly, the inclusion of over-ambitious vocabulary that sounded sophisticated but was frequently misused and obscured meaning: lugubrious, jocular or bellicose buses driving past sycophantic streetlights, or crossing out the word 'phone' and replacing it with 'brick of technology', does not make for a fluent and engaging piece of writing. In terms of A06, it was obvious that centres were mindful of the increased technical accuracy mark and had emphasised the importance of varying sentence forms and encouraged students to use a wide range of punctuation. The majority of students were able to write with generally accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar. Some struggled when attempting to vary their sentences, most notably in the descriptive piece, where participle phrases were frequently used, at times to good effect but more often creating a sense of merely writing in note form. Others experimented with the placing of subordinate clauses and used fragments or minor sentences, as well as compound and complex sentences, very successfully. There were also students who, even when sentence demarcation was fairly accurate, were guilty of comma splicing, and many, of all abilities, who were unable to punctuate dialogue correctly or use apostrophes properly. However, the most able students used an impressive array of punctuation – colons, semi-colons, brackets and dashes – and integrated them seamlessly into their responses to enhance meaning.

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.