
GCSE

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 2 Writers' Viewpoints and Perspectives
Report on the Examination

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General Comments

June 2017 was the first series of the new specification GCSE English Language, with an unprecedented entry of approximately 478,000 students. The entry covered a very wide range of ability, as the first un-tiered assessment of English Language at GCSE for many years. The spread of marks corroborates the range of ability, with evidence of students scoring both at the very bottom and at the very top of the mark range. A handful of students scored full marks on this component, which is particularly pleasing to see.

The entries came from a wide variety of centres: from comprehensives, academies, free schools, independent schools and further education colleges, as well as a range of smaller education centres, which suggests a truly representative sample of students entered for this assessment.

Students across the board appeared to have been extremely well-prepared for the exam. There was considerable evidence that centres had prepared students for the demands of each individual question, with very few examples of students misunderstanding the nature of the question or confusing the purpose of the task. There was also significant evidence that students had been given strategies to address the challenge of the timing of this exam. There were concerns prior to the first live series that students would find it difficult to meet the reading demand of two substantial sources, as well as responding to four reading questions and an extended writing task. In practice, however, the number of students who failed to respond to Questions 2, 3 or 5 was approximately 1% per question, with just over 2% failing to respond to Question 4.

The high degree of preparedness is possibly the result of the wealth of specimen material made available to centres prior to the first live exam, including four sets of papers and a variety of support meetings for teachers. There must certainly be credit due, however, to the thousands of teachers who have dedicated themselves to the preparation of their students so effectively.

Sources

Despite the inclusion of a 19th century non-fiction text in an un-tiered assessment, the overwhelming impression from scripts was that the sources were accessible and enjoyable to students of all abilities. The sources were selected to provide students with the opportunity to engage with the texts at their own level, and they appear to have performed that function really well. The two sources offered sufficient depth and detail for the most able students to excel, but also allowed the less able to find something interesting to say.

Source A provided students with a clear perspective conveyed by the writer on the growth and development of his one year old son. The family-friendly topic meant there was an almost universal familiarity with the subject matter, and there were obvious references to growing up and child development which resonated with all students. There were also more challenging and abstract ideas such as the natural ageing process, the paradox of generational continuity and even time itself, which provided the most able students with the stimulus to write perceptively and exploratively about these more conceptual ideas.

Even as a 19th century text, Source B provided students with a gentle start to this new specification. The writer's perspective was similarly overt, and the vast majority of students were able to engage with the mother's feelings of nostalgia and regret. There were some less able students who misinterpreted the central statement: 'It is a long while now since he disappeared,' believing that the woman's son had literally rather than metaphorically 'disappeared', and assuming he had been kidnapped, was lost somewhere or had died. This did not, however, have a

huge impact on their ability to respond to the questions as most focused on the boy's childhood. Other than this, there were very few misapprehensions about either of the two texts.

The links between the two texts were apparent on first reading, which allowed many students to make the necessary connections and comparisons for Question 2 and Question 4. The thematic correlation between the texts – of parents and their different perspectives on their children growing up – provided students with a solid foundation for their response to the writing task in Section B, which drew on similar ideas of parents and their attitudes towards protecting their children.

Questions

The questions were very much in line with the specimen materials previously published and there were no surprises for students in terms of the tasks. It was clear to students exactly what they had to do, so they were able to concentrate on the specific focus of the task as opposed to working out what was expected of them in each question. This level of continuity and consistency is clearly something which works for both teachers and students, allowing the former to make detailed preparations and for the latter to perform effectively.

Question 1

This question is intended to assess AO1: to identify and interpret explicit and implicit information and ideas. As such, it appears to have been a successful vehicle for the assessment of reading comprehension skills, avoiding the need for students to use the medium of language to demonstrate their understanding. It is pleasing to see that so many students were freed from the potential inaccuracies of written expression to achieve full marks for their understanding.

The eight statements were all phrased in positive terms, with students expected to identify the four true statements from a choice of eight. As expected, the vast majority of students (almost 88%) were able to identify the four statements correctly, with 99% achieving either 3 or 4 marks. This question offered students a gateway to the remaining questions. It was intended to provide a boost of confidence at the start of the exam and certainly appears to have achieved that purpose.

There were a few technical issues arising from the marking which were caused by a minority of students who did not follow the instructions on the question paper for how to identify the correct statements. Although the instructions are intended to be simple and clear, more than 66,000 students were unable to follow them. It may be worth centres taking time to ensure that, for future series, students are very clear about how to respond to Question 1. While every effort was made to ensure that students were correctly rewarded, they need to be aware that writing T and F next to each of the statements rather than shading the circles as instructed, for example, means they risk not getting the marks they deserve.

In summary

- Most students found Q1 a very accessible and helpful start to the paper
- The majority of students were awarded full marks
- Centres should ensure students understand how to shade the circles correctly for Question 1.

Question 2

This question assesses a new skill: to write a summary by synthesising evidence from both sources. The evidence can be either ideas or textual details but, crucially, they need to be brought

together or synthesised. The mark scheme rewards students for their ability to explore these connections between the two texts and to infer meaning in response to a given focus. Most students were clearly well-prepared for the demands of the question, with only limited evidence of students struggling to meet those demands.

At the lower end of the ability range, students tended to paraphrase and select textual detail arbitrarily, without any attempt to infer meaning, whereas at the upper end of the range students were able to explore the differences in terms of the levels of social interaction and the relative maturity suggested by the different activities of the two boys. More than a quarter of students were awarded marks in Level 3 or Level 4, but the mean score for this question was 3.5 marks, suggesting many students would benefit from improving their ability to identify clear differences between the texts and make clear inferences from the textual details they select.

Source B offered a rich variety of toys for students to write about and gave them ample opportunity to interpret ideas about the activities of the boy. However, there were few equivalent references to toys in Source A, which meant students were forced to interpret the word ‘activities’ in the task to mean something broader than games or toys. There were a number of activities performed by the boy in Source A: eating porridge, tasting new foods, barking gibberish etc. It was for students to interpret the question appropriately in order to identify the differences. In practice, there was little evidence of students struggling to find things that the boy in Source A did.

It is worth reminding students that the focus for Question 2 will always be content-based and is likely to have a very narrow, discrete focus. Therefore, they should not necessarily expect to find a wealth of material to use in response to this task. They will need to look for the information and ideas relevant to the task. There are two reasons why the focus of the task is deliberately narrow. Firstly, it enforces the need for students to select specific information and ideas from the wider text, allowing the assessment of those retrieval skills enshrined in AO1. Secondly, it ensures that there is no crossover with the comparative task set in Question 4, which has a wider focus.

While most students responded well to Question 2, a minority missed the specific focus of the task and, rather than find differences between the boys and their activities, chose instead to explore the differences in the parental attitudes towards their children. This illustrates the importance of having a very different focus for Question 2 to Question 4. A further small group confused the task with Question 3 and wrote about the language effects, but these were few and far between.

Good responses included those where students identified a difference between the activities, selected appropriate textual detail from one text and inferred some meaning, before turning to the other text, selecting another textual detail and inferring something about the difference between both texts. Where this approach was repeated with a second difference, students were well-rewarded, according to the level of detail they offered and whether the quality of their comments was an attempt, clear or perceptive.

Finally, referring to the time periods when the sources were written is not of itself a valid difference to identify, and is by no means necessary. Students who do reference the historical differences, however, need to do more than just point out that one is 19th century and the other is 21st century.

In summary

- The ability to infer and to make connections is key to success in Question 2
- Students should be prepared to respond to the precise focus of the task
- The focus for Question 2 will always be content-based, and is likely to be narrow.

Question 3

This question assesses the same language skills as previous GCSE English exams, making it a very familiar and straight-forward question for students. As such, there was limited evidence of students failing to engage with the language in Source A in their response to this question. That in itself is impressive, given the number of students in previous series who have failed to move beyond a discussion of content and ideas to engage with the language per se.

However, 1 in 5 students was awarded a mark in Level 1, suggesting they were unable to make more than simple, generic comments on the language used by the writer. Some of these will have been students who were distracted by the content at the expense of language analysis, but others were students who may have made some selection of examples and even identified the language feature used, but were unable to comment on what effect that choice of language might have. This is the essential skill in Question 3: analysing the *effect* of the language. It cannot be over-stated how important it is that centres focus their teaching on developing the students' ability to identify the effect of language in unseen texts in preparation for future series. An encouraging 31% achieved Level 3 or above by demonstrating a clear or perceptive explanation of effect.

Students had been taught a very wide range of subject terms with which to identify and name the features they found. Features such as zoomorphism, monosyllabic syndetic listing and anaphora were bandied about by many students, with varying degrees of accuracy. Without exception, the ability to name the language features was not by itself the means by which students moved up through the levels. Indeed, students who were able to comment on the effect of verbs and metaphors were much more likely to reach the higher levels than those correctly identifying anadiplosis, for example, but having nothing to say about it. The clear message for centres is that the subject terms can only ever enhance the language analysis and cannot replace it.

Question 3 required students to select examples of language use from a specified section of the text. The vast majority of students were able to follow the instructions and chose examples from the given lines. A few did not, although in these cases the majority of those students managed to choose some examples from the given lines, which meant the whole range of marks was available to them. The purpose of restricting the lines is not to penalise students, but to support their choices by offering them the richest and best material for their language study. To choose examples outside the lines is never a wise option.

The best responses to Question 3 were not necessarily responses to the most obvious similes, such as the reference to the twanging of lips like a ruler or 'like he's trying to shove the noise up a hill'. Students often struggled to find the nub of those images. However, there were some excellent comments on the effect of the metaphor of 'a sleepy ball of scrunched-up flesh': for example, that it dehumanised the tiny baby and reflected the unexpected ugliness of the new born child.

Also proving fruitful were the images of war and a military campaign between parent and child which were created by the use of words such as 'ambush' and 'confronted,' emphasising the element of surprise and conflict in family relationships. Students were particularly successful when they zoomed in on the use of individual words and phrases and explored the connotations and effects of words like 'blasting', analysing the speed and momentum of the boy's development, the unstoppable rocket force with which he was progressing, and how he was disappearing into outer space, increasingly distant from his father.

In summary

- The key to success in Question 3 is to focus on comments on the *effects* of language

- The best responses explored in detail the effect of specific words and phrases
- Elaborate subject terms were often over-used and frequently misunderstood
- Giving students a specific extract to select language examples gave them a useful focus.

Question 4

The mean mark on Question 4 was 7.3 marks, towards the top of Level 2, and an impressive 37.5% of students were awarded marks in Level 3 or Level 4. This confirms the evidence seen in the scripts: that this type of question, which requires students to juggle the need to compare and comment on ideas and perspectives as well as methods, is accessible to students of all abilities, and that students can, and did, respond very well to this type of question.

Students were indeed able to access this question at their own level, and were rewarded accordingly by the mark scheme. The explicit perspectives expressed by the writers guided even the least able to engage with issues of growing up in both texts, and they were able to write simply, for example, about the mother in Source B's sadness about the loss of her son and how she misses his childhood. Typical at Level 1 was a simple comparison that this is different to the writer in Source A who thinks it is 'ok' for his son to grow up.

More able students were able to mine the rich material to be found in both texts and compare the different perspectives of the two writers. However, the most disappointing aspect of responses to this question was the tendency of some students to ignore the reference to methods in the task entirely. This omission left students offering a more two dimensional comparison which engaged exclusively with the 'what' and not the 'how', which was always intended as an integral part of this question.

It was pleasing to note that there was limited evidence of an overly mechanistic approach to structuring responses to Question 4, suggesting students were finding their own way intuitively through the task and, in many cases, producing coherent extended answers. It appears that, where students tracked their way through the disparate elements of the task step by step, they were able to meet the criteria for success. For instance, students would make a point about the father's acceptance of his son growing up, support this with a quotation and link the quotation to a comment on the method exemplified in the textual detail. They could then switch to compare this attitude to the mother's refusal to accept her son's 'disappearance', support this with a quote from Source B and link it to a comment on a method used by the other writer, and so on.

Such a means of structuring the response may appear loose, but is sufficiently flexible to be applied to any comparative task such as Question 4. It is a method which is relatively easy to teach, and is appropriate for students of all abilities. It also allows students to incorporate methods as an integral part of their response. This need to address methods as well as perspectives should be the focus for centres as they consider preparing students for future series. Methods such as shifts in tone, narrative perspective and structural features made occasional appearances in some responses, but the majority relied upon language features as their method of choice to explore. An increased focus on a wider range of methods in future would only be welcomed.

In summary

- All students have accessed and performed at the appropriate level on Question 4
- Too many students failed to comment on methods and consequently lost marks
- Many students structured their responses loosely but effectively
- Students should be encouraged to engage with a wider variety of methods

Question 5

This question inspired some of the most engaging and entertaining responses on the paper. The familiarity of the subject matter meant that the vast majority of students were able to engage with the theme of protective parenting and provide an argument on one side or the other, or in some cases, unhelpfully, both. There was a balance of opinion on both sides, with strong voices raised for and against the idea that parents should allow their children to participate in risky activities. The nature and context for the task were very conventional and can have come as no surprise to students, allowing them to focus immediately on what to write.

Students demonstrated a wide range of writing skills; there were still signs of familiar mnemonics to remind students to cover the whole range of linguistic devices, regardless of how appropriate they were to the task. Of particular note as being often out of place were the ubiquitous statistics and spurious surveys, alongside the fake experts and fictitious anecdotes, none of which were very effective in supporting a clear argument. It is rare for a student who introduces the opinion of a made-up scientist to be rewarded for a convincing argument at Level 4. They would be better advised to consider an inventive structure to their argument – cyclical for example – or to develop more complex ideas by drawing on concepts such as the irony of so-called internet security or the idea of a parent's innate selfishness in wanting to protect their children, as some of the most able students did.

The increase in marks available for technical accuracy ensured that many students, even those who ran out of time and wrote shorter responses, were able to pick up a considerable number of marks for the skills they demonstrated. Indeed, it was often those students who wrote at great length who suffered as they were unable to sustain their skills over the course of four or five sides of writing. This is one reason why students are advised to consider carefully the length of their response. Another reason is that too many students failed to sustain the thrust of their argument over so many pages. Too often they ran out of ideas and simply filled the time and space with an incoherent series of random empty paragraphs. Planning is, of course, the solution to this problem, but there was precious little evidence of students using their time wisely to consider how they would structure a sequence of points to convey their argument. To write less and to craft it more would be useful advice for all.

Almost 40% of students were awarded a mark in Level 2 for their technical accuracy skills. Level 2 is awarded to students who know how to vary their sentence forms, how to control their verbs and pronouns to ensure they agree, how to spell a range of complex words, and how to use a wide range of punctuation. Crucially, however, they are awarded a mark in Level 2 and not in Level 3 because they are unable to sustain this technical accuracy consistently throughout their writing. It is the leap from 'sometimes' to 'mostly' that so many students need to make. Evidence suggests that it would be wiser for students to spend less time writing longer responses and more time checking, proofreading and improving what they have already written, unpopular as that may be.

The writing skills and the quality of communication assessed on Paper 2 are identical to the skills and quality assessed on Paper 1, although the tasks have a very different purpose and context. The performance of students on Question 5 on Paper 2 was very much in line with their performance on Paper 1, with a very close correlation between the percentages of students achieving marks at a particular level. This applies to both AO5 and AO6. This confirms not only the consistency of marking across both papers, but also that both writing tasks inspired and rewarded students similarly, regardless of whether they were writing a creative piece or an argument.

Over 50% of students were awarded marks in Level 3 or Level 4, with the mean mark for both AO5 and AO6 on the cusp between Level 2 and Level 3. This means students are performing slightly better on Section B than Section A, which is a pattern perpetuated throughout the lifetime of the previous specification. However, pleasingly, the imbalance is not as stark as it has been, which offers hope that, with an improvement in performance on some of the reading questions, there will be a more reasonable balance between the two sections sooner rather than later.

In summary

- Performance on the writing task was promising and matched performance on Paper 1
- Over-long responses disadvantaged students as they failed to sustain their level of skill
- Avoid formulaic use of linguistic devices and an over-dependency on fake experts/statistics
- Students should be encouraged to plan and incorporate more structural features.

Conclusion

GCSE English Language Paper 2 has proved to be a highly successful assessment of English, serving a huge cohort of candidates well. The exam discriminated effectively across the full ability range, neither alienating the less able candidates nor disenfranchising the more able by offering them material with too little challenge or insufficient substance. Instead, the exam invited candidates to engage with two rich and nuanced sources which engaged and inspired them, and it provided tasks which enabled them to perform well, each according to their ability, at the simplest, most limited level and at the highest, most erudite level, and at all points in between.

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.