AQA

GCSE
ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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

8700
November 2018

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General comments

This was the second November series for the 8700 examination, set in line with the accredited specification and the previous live papers, and it was well received. The source, taken from 'A Sound of Thunder' by Ray Bradbury, was accessible to all, written in a way that less able students could grasp but also containing more subtle elements that challenged the more able. There were fewer students performing at the upper end of the ability range than in the June series. However, the full range of ability was in evidence, and all abilities seemed to engage well with the reading material and also respond with interest to the thematically linked writing questions.

Question 1

It is now widely understood that the purpose of this question is to ease students into the examination, with the expectation that most will achieve 3 or 4 marks, and this proved to be the case as the mean mark was nearly 3.9 out of the 4 marks available.

There were many points about this jungle for students to list – the jungle was high; the jungle was broad; it was misty; it was full of twitterings; etc - and many students sensibly retrieved information rather than risk misinterpreting the source. A minor point of confusion for less able students was that it was this jungle that contained the 'tiger, wild boar, buffalo and elephant', rather than these being animals that Eckels had encountered on previous hunts. In addition to this, some students interpreted the 'flying tents' in a literal way, not appreciating that this was a metaphor to describe the pterodactyls in the sky. Similarly, the metaphorical use of Royal Majesty when referring to the T-Rex caused some misreading. However, many of the students who misunderstood these images offered more than four points about this jungle, and therefore still achieved 4 marks overall. Very few students selected from the incorrect lines and many began their selection with 'this jungle', thus ensuring the correct focus of the question was addressed.

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: very few commented on language from outside the correct lines. The bullet points continue to be helpful in guiding the majority of student responses, although there is still confusion for some as to their function. There is no requirement to cover all the bullet points, which is why the question includes the words 'you could include' rather than 'you must include'. Typically, students who insisted on trying to make a relevant point about sentence forms struggled because sentence forms were not a particular feature of the given lines in this source, although they may be in another source. Students who focused on the most relevant bullet points for this source and then explored the effects of their selected examples of language in depth were more successful.

Within the given lines, there was a wealth of rich language employed by Bradbury to describe the T-Rex. One of the most popular choices to analyse was the phrase 'great oiled, resilient, striding legs', mainly because it was in the opening sentence of the given lines, and this worked well for the students who concentrated on the use of 'oiled' and suggested the T-Rex was a smoothly

functioning machine designed to kill. It worked less well, however, for those who had little idea of the meaning of 'resilient'. The simile 'pebbled skin like the armour of a terrible warrior' was frequently selected, with the effect of conveying how this mighty, ruthless soldier had a protective shield that was completely impenetrable, suggesting it was impossible to beat in battle. There was also successful analysis of 'great evil god' from the most able students, who were able to examine the paradox of worshipping and revering an omnipotent, all-powerful being but also being fearful of it.

The 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. Some offered a basic, generic comment, for example, 'it creates a picture in our heads', which could apply to any example of language in the given lines. Others looked at connotations of words without consideration of context, for example, they chose the phrase 'delicate arms' and said this suggested the T-Rex was dainty. There were also students who selected very lengthy examples rather than focusing on individual words or phrases, and this frequently led to paraphrasing and discussion of ideas rather than analysis of language.

However, on the whole, students made appropriate selections of language to analyse; they employed subject terminology to enhance; they did not write at unnecessary length; and they focused on the effects of the writer's choice of specific words and phrases and analysed to the best of their ability.

Question 3

Increasingly, students have taken on board the demands of Question 3, and most now understand that the key skill, the analysis of structure, is a matter of looking at what happens where and why, and what impact this has on the reader's understanding of the text as a whole.

This was a source that was structured in a different way from those in previous series: there was no flashback or flash forward or obvious circular structure. Instead, the writer established a setting, introduced characters into that setting, alternated throughout between the description of the T-Rex and the dialogue of the characters, and gradually built up to a climax at the end when the T-Rex fell. Students across the ability range were able to understand the structural patterns that were apparent and examine the sequencing, structural shifts and movement through the text.

The majority of students found the bullet points effective as a framework for their responses. Some recognised that the effect of describing the jungle as peaceful and natural at the beginning was a deliberate ploy by the writer to lull the reader into a false sense of security. Others identified the anticipation created by the sequencing of 'Suddenly', followed by 'Silence', followed by 'A sound of thunder', and that we, as readers, and also the characters, do not find out until the next line that the cause of this is the T-Rex. Others examined the gradual change in Eckels' attitude, from the early confidence of boasting about his hunting exploits to being scared when the T-Rex then sees them and increasingly petrified as the source develops. Better students were able to explain how the writer used description to build up the T-Rex into an unbeatable, invincible machine so that the ending is completely unexpected because no one anticipates that the humans will be the victors. There was evidence from this series that students are beginning to recognise structural patterns that are significant to the development of the plot and link them together effectively.

Students who did not do so well frequently used phrases such as 'at the beginning', 'in the middle' and 'at the end' but then narrated too much of the story, rather than considering not only what is

happening where but the reasons why, and how reading about this at this point added to their understanding of the text as a whole. Some of the less able students dealt only with the opening few lines, even though the question instructs them to 'think about the **whole** of the source'. Students need to focus on the whole text in order to explore the development of character or events or themes and achieve Level 3 and above.

Question 4

The key skill for Question 4 is evaluation, both of the ideas in the source in relation to the given statement, and also of the methods used by the writer to convey these ideas. The question was generally answered well across the ability range. The given statement was 'This part of the story, where the men encounter the Tyrannosaurus Rex, shows Eckels is right to panic. The Monster is terrifying!' and as with previous questions, the bullet points – suggesting students consider their own impressions of Eckels' reaction to the T-Rex, evaluate how the writer describes the Monster, and support their response with references to the text – guided students on the focus of their evaluation. As always, there were no right or wrong answers. Some students thought Eckels was right to panic whilst others thought the opposite. Most did agree with 'The Monster was terrifying!' part of the statement, and many students produced their evaluation of methods in relation to this, most noticeably focusing on the writer's use of language and structure to create an increasingly gruesome effect.

Typically, Level 1 students were able to say that Eckels panicked at the sight of the T-Rex because anybody in that situation would. Level 2 students attempted to evaluate by recognising that Eckels regretted going on the safari when he saw the T-Rex, but they were unable to clarify their reasoning to explain why. Some students achieved Level 3 by linking together the idea that the reader already knew that Eckels was an experienced hunter with someone of his calibre then panicking so badly, thus leading the reader to believe that the T-Rex must have been truly terrifying. Another typical Level 3 evaluation was in relation to the creature having a 'stink of raw flesh', suggesting it had clearly killed before and could kill again, and therefore Eckels had every right to panic. Able students evaluated the concept of fight or flight, and recognised that Eckels' flight instinct had come to the fore because he had now seen the T-Rex in real life and was clearly not a match for it. Others evaluated the idea that Eckels was not right to panic as, ironically, it was this reaction that made the whole group more vulnerable and put them all in danger.

Some students adopted the approach of placing themselves in the action of the text, which was unhelpful. They substituted themselves for the character of Eckels and wrote about what they would do if they encountered a T-Rex. If students do this and their evaluation is rooted in the text, then it is obviously relevant, for example, explaining that they would not have run away like Eckels did because that was just being reckless and caused the T-Rex to pay even more attention to the hunters. However, saying that they would not have run away and instead they would have hidden behind the machine and then ambushed the T-Rex when it went past was not appropriate. This approach does not evaluate the ideas or the methods in the text, and therefore the focus of the question is not being addressed. It is worth reinforcing 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, and neither option was more popular than the other this series. Those who chose the narrative suggested by the picture of Grand

Central Station wrote about time travelling to both the past and the future. Quite a few students travelled through time by train, which was an obvious mode of transport given the picture, whilst others opted for a more traditional time machine. Some travelled back in time for specific personal reasons: to reconnect with lost loved ones and friends or to relive important occasions such as attending a prom or a birthday celebration. Others went back to specific times in history such as the Napoleonic wars, Renaissance Italy or the trenches of WW1. Some of the futuristic stories contained very clever ideas, for example, a time travelling detective, whose job was to pre-empt major terrorist threats by dashing back and forth through time, explaining mankind was not aware of the war with Russia because the assassination of Putin had been averted next Thursday. Many of the narratives included elements of description – the beams of light, the decorative windows, etc – again suggested by the picture, which effectively created an atmospheric backdrop to the narrative plot.

The second option of imagining life in 200 years' time also allowed students to explore and imagine in a creative way. There were many futuristic scenarios of flying cars, memory implants, virtual teachers, robots and technology taking over the world. Sometimes students placed themselves in the future and sometimes they imagined different aspects of a futuristic society in a more detached way. There were some very bleak prophesies: many post-apocalyptic descriptions depicting the end of mankind as we know it, and those who took present society as their starting point and described what life will be like if we continue to make such bad decisions had a ready-made structure to follow.

The quality of responses ranged mostly across Level 2 and Level 3, with very few students in Level 1, although a significant minority did achieve Level 4. Students are beginning to understand the need to plan their writing, meaning fewer responses were unnecessarily lengthy. There were also fewer formulaic descriptions this series, possibly due to the nature of the descriptive option, although some students still managed to include a contrived use of senses, describing what they could see, hear and smell the minute they arrived in a different time zone. Some of the less able students forgot to describe and listed what they thought the future would be like, but most engaged with the topic in an interesting and quite fresh way across both questions.

In terms of AO6, schools and colleges continue to emphasise the importance of varying sentence forms and encourage students to use a variety of punctuation. This is evidenced by the forms of punctuation listed by students before they start to write, and those who can employ these aspects accurately and, more importantly, seamlessly, continue to be the ones who are the most successful. Although comma splicing, punctuation of dialogue and the use of apostrophes continue to be matters of concern, the technical writing skills of the majority of students did not hamper meaning. The best responses were written with fluency and used sentence construction and punctuation for impact.

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.