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# GCSE

# ENGLISH LITERATURE

Paper 2 Modern texts and poetry  
Report on the Examination

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8702  
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## **Lead Examiner's Report 2017: GCSE English Literature 8702/2**

This report should be read in conjunction with the report for 8702/1.

The design of our new GCSE English Literature assessment focused on enabling students of all abilities to demonstrate their skills within the context of the level of demand created by a closed book, un-tiered paper. It has been a genuine pleasure to see firm and consistent evidence of students' engagement with this qualification and how well they have demonstrated their skills when given a new level of challenge. Students not only coped successfully with the demands of the paper, but seemed to be liberated in many ways.

The aim of this report is to provide feedback on the 2017 exam for teachers. It has been compiled from the views of the entire examination team and will:

- Provide a general overview of the examination with some key 'headline' messages
- Exemplify some strengths and key points for each specific section of the exam
- Provide clarification of the assessment objectives (AOs) and how they are assessed
- Suggest some advice for students moving forward.

### **General Overview**

The overwhelming impression was that students coped very well with the demands of the paper. The majority of responses indicated few issues with access. Time management was largely unproblematic; relatively small numbers of students failed to complete all sections of the paper. Responses across the ability range were seen, some of which were of exceptionally high quality, maybe suggesting that, for some students, the closed book element was actually an advantage. One senior examiner commented that she was 'very impressed with the engagement of the students and their working knowledge of the texts. The design of the mark scheme allowed for a fair and just awarding of marks that exemplified the students' intellectual abilities and engagement with the subject.'

The overall ethos of the qualification is to enable students to demonstrate their engagement with the text they have read in terms of its ideas, the varying contextual factors that influence its creation and reception, and how the writer has consciously constructed the text in order to communicate meaning(s). Therefore, knowing the text was always and by far the best preparation for answering the question. Students who knew the text were able to move around and within it in order to respond to the specifics of the task. One member of the team commented that his future teaching strategy will be to 'free up all my lessons and really focus on the 'big ideas' in texts after the experience of examining this year'.

The closed book nature of the exam did not hinder students' responses. One member of the senior team noted that, 'If anything, it may be a positive move: students choose shorter, more pithy quotations; students don't use as many [sometimes unnecessary] quotations; the comment / quote approach may well be avoided; students focus more on their response /their ideas, and references supplement, rather than drive, those ideas'. Another member of the team reported that 'students who knew their text well had no problems with incorporating relevant references and quite often these fell into the category of 'apt, integrated'. Allusions to events, descriptions of actions and paraphrases of dialogue/statements were the main references apart from actual quotations.'

Students who answered the question generally did better than those who were confined by formulaic, AO-driven responses. Those who had been taught to deal with the text through the lens of the actual question generally produced more effective responses. The use of structures such as PEE / PEA and its variants worked in the sense that they allowed students working at the lower levels to access Level 3 in the mark scheme. However less rigid structures worked better for those working at higher levels. The flexibility of AO1 in allowing students to reference the text in a variety of ways liberated them to use the text as illustration of their response in whichever way they saw fit.

The overwhelming majority of students had internalised the requirements of the task and focused clearly on the key elements of the question they had selected. Where students miss an essential element of the task, such as the focus on a particular character, this is managed via a rubric infringement mechanism which protects the candidature as a whole by ensuring equity of assessment in terms of the requirements of each particular question. For example, some students misread the focus on Mrs Birling for Q1 and instead wrote about Mr Birling. All such responses were marked positively, rewarding students for the quality of their response, but it is appropriate to acknowledge when a candidate has not responded to the task. Therefore, in the case of this particular question in this particular series, we operated an AO1 'task' adjustment only. The adjustment in this particular case reflected the fact that there are two characters with the same surname referred to in *An Inspector Calls*.

Students made huge efforts to use subject terminology and many did so with accuracy. However, at times students were more concerned with the use of technical terms than the effect. Students should remember that critical terms should be used judiciously and must always be linked to effect on the reader/audience.

Students who answered the question did better on AO3 than those who tried to include biographical and / or historical information, which is difficult to credit.

### **Section A: The Modern Text**

It is perhaps not surprising that *An Inspector Calls* was the most prevalent choice for Section A with over 60% of students answering on this text. The second group of popular texts included *Lord of the Flies*, *Blood Brothers*, *Animal Farm* and *DNA*. There was no particular 'ability pattern' to these text choices and responses across the ability range were seen, perhaps suggesting that their respective selection could have been driven by teacher preference and knowledge of their students. Of the new texts, *Pigeon English* generated some particularly vibrant and engaged responses from students. Where 'Telling Tales' was used, there were some excellent responses, although it is worth mentioning here that there is no requirement to compare the two stories being covered. Responses across all levels were fresh and genuine in the most part.

Where students knew the texts well, the questions were answered fully with details carefully selected. There was very little evidence of prepared answers but a lot of evidence of well-prepared students who knew the texts and had ideas about them. Those who knew their text were able to refer to different points in it and demonstrate their understanding that way. There were a number of very impressive responses where the student had taken a more holistic view of the text as a whole. The overwhelming view from the examining team was that connection with the whole text by the student is vital in allowing them to explore the ideas raised by the steer of a task.

Students who rooted their response in their selected task put themselves in a stronger position. The key words in each question point students toward the three AOs being assessed, so those who took this approach naturally gave themselves a firmer foundation from which to develop an appropriate response. Where students didn't focus on the task itself, they tended to self-penalise.

For example, some responses to Q2 on *An Inspector Calls* forgot to write about how Priestley was using the Inspector to explore how society could be improved and gave a more narrative answer simply looking at how the Inspector forced the family to confront their wrong doings, or recounting the action of the play.

Students who dealt with AO2 most successfully were the ones who had not been too restricted by subject terminology. Some students became tied up in the confusion and found themselves wrongly identifying parts of speech without actually saying anything about meaning, let alone effects. There were however some very successful treatments of AO2 that concentrated on why and how a writer has crafted a character / moment / exchange of dialogue / point of tension. For example, in response to Q2 about society, one student wrote about the significance of dramatic irony in *An Inspector Calls*. They focused on unpicking Mr. Birling's speech about the Titanic, 'absolutely unsinkable'. A short quotation such as this, alongside the acknowledgment that this is dramatic irony, followed by a consideration of why Priestley chooses to present Birling in this way, is a good example of how AO2 can be addressed. Sometimes, too much terminology impeded responses and seemed to constrict liberation of ideas and expression.

Some students moved into Level 6 for AO2 via a thread that ran throughout their response explaining how the writer was working to present ideas rather than focusing solely on analysis of techniques, words or phrases. In *An Inspector Calls*, much good use was made of stage directions, lighting and structure to comment on AO2. Students who had used character development / purpose as their focus for AO2 produced some very effective responses as they were explicitly focusing on writer as maker of the text. For example, in response to Q2 on *An Inspector Calls*, the most able students often used the task as a vehicle by which to demonstrate their perceptive understanding of Goole's function. There was much discussion of the tensions between capitalism and socialism, and how Goole is Priestley's agent to re-set the social equilibrium. Students of some of the best responses to *Lord of the Flies* were able to synthesise their confident conceptual grasp of Golding's ideas with a forensic analysis of how they are made manifest in the novel because of the methods that he deploys. One particularly impressive response sensitively debated whether the shattering of the conch was in fact an image of hope, reflecting Golding's own sense of the world post-WWII, that had been shattered, but would re-emerge from the 'fragments' of its destruction. This was by no means untypical: many students wrote with real imagination about Golding's symbolism and what this might mean in terms of how society reconfigures itself in the aftermath of untold horror.

Students across the ability range were largely able to demonstrate awareness of a writer behind the text and make comments on some of the things that the writer had done on purpose to make meaning. It was interesting that often students working at the lower end seemed to have less of an issue with naming of parts and accessed AO2 via phrases such as 'Russell does this to show that' or 'Priestley put this in so the audience can'... and so on. However, one slight word of caution would be to ensure that students are not focusing too much on scenes / moments from screen versions if these don't appear in the text itself. The BBC *An Inspector Calls* created a few issues here, in particular the scene with Sheila's hat.

The broader definition of AO3 has been liberating for the candidature in terms of encouraging a much more fluid, interesting approach. Students who did this most successfully were those who created a flow between context and text/task that enabled them to explore the task effectively. Where there were factual references such as Golding being a teacher, most students were considering contextual impact / relevance effectively and were able to integrate relevant contextual ideas in order to appreciate how these factors cast a light on the events and characters in the texts. However, there were a number of scripts with long and extended information pieces; this was particularly apparent with responses to *Animal Farm* and *Lord of the Flies*. The better responses on these texts again connected this information to ideas about power and human

nature, steering away from 'locking the text' into a particular historical window. The examining team noted that the flexible approach to context meant that whilst there were examples of bolt-on context, such responses often went on (eventually) to tie the context to ideas in the text so that it was possible to ignore the isolated history excerpts and award the marks elsewhere. The best students integrated contextual ideas seamlessly - in other words, they answered the question.

### **Section B: Taught Poetry**

The two poetry clusters were designed to enable students to make a variety of connections and groupings between the poems, and also to interpret the respective ideas of 'conflict / power' and 'love / relationships' in broad ways. The assessment strategy was developed to enable students to connect with some of the poems more deeply in order to develop a bank of favourites that they might choose from in the exam itself. It is perhaps worth reiterating the point here that this is a shift in approach to previous specifications and is designed to be a reflection of the closed-book nature of the poetry element of the qualification. Approaching the study of each poem in the same way, almost in the sense of 'ticking off' each poem, is less likely to be effective for this specification. For example, Q26 focused on effects of war in 'Bayonet Charge' and those students who had created a 'group' of poems that have a similar theme: ('Exposure' / 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' / 'War Photographer' / 'Poppies' / 'Remains' / 'Kamikaze') were in a good position to focus their response on the question. Similarly, Q25 focused on growing up in 'Mother, Any Distance' so those students who selected from 'Follower', 'Walking Away' and 'Before You Were Mine' gave themselves an immediate foundation to use their selection in conjunction with the named poem to form their response. There were some lovely interpretations of 'growing up' for this question, with some students using 'Singh Song' very effectively to talk how an adult was going through a process of growing up.

The selection of the second poem is one of the keys to success as this gives the student the material to construct a holistic response. There were some excellent treatments of the use of nature in 'Bayonet Charge' and 'Exposure' for example, or the difference between the perspective of the individual and the outsider when used with 'Charge of the Light Brigade', or the similarities in first-person traumatic experience when used with 'Remains'. However, some students selected 'Ozymandias' or 'London' and found it much more difficult to construct a coherent response unless they were using a metaphorical interpretation of 'effects of war', which is certainly creditable but requires a certain level of ability in order to manage effectively.

Rather than being a discrete AO, comparison is now viewed more holistically as one of the ways that students approach the task. The lack of a requirement to adhere to a rigid comparative structure enabled students to illustrate how two poems deal with the same theme in a variety of organisational ways. Section B responses were most successful when students established a point of comparison through an idea/attitude. This usually led to them being able to make effective, detailed comparisons within the response. Some students had clearly been taught to approach Section B via a comparative mechanism and this worked well for those who were able to manage it. However, even those who were more discrete in their comparative approach were able to demonstrate a comparative understanding. Examiners are looking to reward the level at which the student has connected the two poems in the light of the focus of the question. They may present this connection via a variety of methodologies / approaches. The key message here is to enable and guide students to form a comparison relative to their level of ability. Those who find it difficult to construct intrinsic, integrated comparisons might find a reflective comparative structure to be more useful. Because the assessment does not ascribe value to a particular approach, it is perhaps more useful for students to be enabled to develop a treatment of the two poems that they can most effectively manage. One examiner commented that one of their key teaching points for next year will be that 'comparison comes in a variety of shapes and does not have to be formulaic'.

Some responses set out to identify poetic techniques and employ as much terminology as possible before engaging with the poems themselves. These responses hampered the progression of any point of view / line of argument. In the more successful cases, students considered the effect on meanings / ideas of particular word choices, or structural elements such as beginnings and endings, or the implications of titles (seen particularly effectively with 'Remains' and 'Follower'). The best responses pursued a line of argument in response to the question and the analysis of presentation grew out of the response as an illustration of the ideas expressed by the poets.

Students who recognised where the voice was a construct were more successful than those who regurgitated biographical information about the poet that they then attempted to link to the poetic voice. Many examiners commented that there was a prevalence of biographical details about the poets, some of this material dominating responses. It is very hard to credit this information as the task is about the text not the poet, and therefore students were disadvantaged by the inclusion of this material. Again, if students focus on the task they will naturally address AO3; the best responses to Q25 focused on the implications of 'growing up' and what that means in terms of the nature of the parent / child relationship, and the most successful Q26 responses were those that rooted their focus in concepts such as guilt, despair and patriotism without having to give a synopsis of the particular wars being referenced.

### **Section C: Unseen Poetry**

The vast majority of students managed their time effectively and therefore responded to both Section C tasks. One factor that might be useful for future reference is that some students actually spent more time on Q27.2 than Q27.1, which was a shame as the balance of marks across the two tasks meant that they self-penalised on 27.1.

Some students came into their own in Section C, demonstrating skills that they might not have shown earlier in the paper. There were insightful, thoughtful and sometimes perceptive responses to the two poems, and all levels of ability were able to access these at their own level. A number of students focused on the writer's ideas that lay behind the poem and these responses generated the highest marks. Focusing on a handful of well-selected details to illustrate the student's view led to a more productive use of time but this requires the student to have allowed themselves the space to read the poem and have an overview of the ideas. Often in Q27.2 there were more thoughtful ideas about 'Autumn' presented than in Q27.1, which might suggest that students need to pause and reflect before beginning their response to Q27.1.

Some students struggled a little to focus on AO2 for Q27.2, and therefore were unable to access many marks as the sole focus of this task is comparison of methods. Vocabulary choices served some students well here: for example, comparing the use of colour in both poems: the contrast between 'glows red' and 'blue and white' for example. There were lots of 'negative / positive' comments, which was entirely appropriate, and the better responses to Q27.2 highlighted why and how the student had deciphered that one poem presented the season negatively and one positively. Fluency and articulation of ideas is vital in moving through the levels in Q27.2 and those students who could express their ideas more lucidly about each poem in a succinct way, often achieved Level 4.

### **Assessment Objectives**

The holistic mark scheme across the taught components of the paper reflects the fact that in order to respond effectively to a literary text, students will interweave elements of the AOs. This approach is acknowledged in how examiners annotate and award student responses. For example, an AO1 'reference' might be used to illustrate an AO3 comment, and therefore the examiner might annotate with 'L4 AO1 REF / AO3' to acknowledge this.

With this in mind, it is perhaps even more important to stress that the most significant teaching and learning point that can come from this assessment methodology is to encourage students to respond to what the task has asked of them. The questions aim to elicit a response to all of the assessed skills (AO1, AO2 and AO3), therefore if students focus on answering the question, they are putting themselves into the strongest position to do well. The question format was designed in tandem with the assessment strategy; in other words the mark scheme is set up to reward students who answer the question rather than produce a formulaic response to assessment objectives in isolation.

**AO1 Response to task and text** - Most students responded to the text and task. It was evident that some responses were following a version of a formula – this has been referred to previously in the report. The best responses were less formulaic in the manner in which the student structured their paragraphs and made consistent clear links back to the task. Some students used the focus of the question to structure their response: using topic sentences directly linked back to the focus of the question. The word ‘response’ refers to the student’s response to the task, and to the ideas in the text. It refers to ideas and meanings – both those in the text, and the student’s ideas about the text. There is a misconception amongst some students that the word ‘response’ is asking them to comment on an emotional and even personal level. The emotional impact and power of a literary text is a vital part of experiencing and engaging with it, however a more effective approach in terms of avoiding generalised comments might be to link to writer’s intention or to take a more reflective perspective. Phrases such as ‘this makes the reader feel’ can have a limiting effect on more able students, whereas those who consider the intention behind the eliciting of an emotional response are generally more successful. For example, Orwell’s inclusion of Boxer’s death is designed to do more than ‘make the reader feel sad’; it is perhaps to create a sense of anger at the unjust treatment of the loyal by a powerful and corrupt regime.

**AO1 References** - The second element of AO1 is ‘use of references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations’. Across the board, students were making reference to the texts; they were using the text to support and to illustrate their interpretation, which is what they are rewarded for. A direct quotation is only one way of making a reference, as this examination is not a test of recall. Students who knew their text were able to use it in a variety of ways to support and illustrate their answer to the question. Those who had planned and focused carefully on the task were more successful as they consciously selected references to support their viewpoint. Examiners reward the ways the student uses a reference as illustration of their point. One member of the senior team reported that ‘references took many forms. It was clear that students had been encouraged to learn [short] quotations but we saw very little evidence of students forcing these in inappropriately. Largely they were used well – often exceptionally well – and also their integration of quotations was well evidenced. Other students referred / pointed to specific moments in the texts in order to support their points. Some students generalised but most made specific references in whatever form.’

**AO2 Writer’s methods** - AO2 assesses the student’s ability to ‘analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate’. This specification focuses on writers’ methods in the widest sense, and a helpful paraphrase might be to consider ‘anything that the writer does on purpose to make meaning’. Students who demonstrated that the text is a construct via, for example, characterisation methods, or theme, or structure, or tone, accessed AO2 very effectively. There were many responses that demonstrated a real focus on decisions made by the writer and the intended meaning of the text. Engaging with the task through the structure of the text also enabled students to access AO2. For example, demonstrating knowledge about the progression and development of a character throughout the text allowed some students to show their understanding of the writer’s intentions whilst implicitly demonstrating knowledge about the structure and form of the text. One



examiner said that their teaching had been really informed by the experience of examining this year and that the key point they were taking back to their students is that ‘the writer behind the text is key to accessing Level 4 and above’.

There are two important points to raise about subject terminology. Firstly, this term refers to ‘the language of the subject’ and there is absolutely no specific hierarchy of terminology. Literary terminology is included under the broad umbrella of ‘the language of the subject’, which can legitimately refer to characterisation / plot / setting / theme / irony just as effectively as volta / caesura / asyndetic list / alliteration / oxymoron / metaphor. Subject terminology can also include terms students use to explore authorial methods, such as implies / suggests / highlights and so on. It was a new experience for those marking GCSE English Literature to see so many identifications of word class, which often had little bearing on their point and even created difficulty for some students. Where examiners found it harder to reward AO2 was where students were ‘tagging on’ the naming of parts of speech such as ‘the noun...x’ or the ‘verb choice...y’. This ‘spotting the method’ approach without any understanding or connection to the ideas or function of the method in relation to the task was generally found to impede students. One examiner fed back that: ‘some students are still method-spotting and trying to use the subject terminology that they have been taught: often the terms were used incorrectly and did not add anything to the focus of the question.’

Secondly, students are rewarded for their appropriate use of the language of the subject in terms of how they use it to help them to craft a response to a literary text. In other words, what they say about the craft of the writer is far more significant than how many technical terms they include. The specific mention of subject terminology in the mark scheme is there to reflect that students are being assessed on their ability to deal with aspects of craft. A balanced and well-illustrated response to the question will eventually lead students to explore the methods used to present those ideas, feelings and attitudes. Subject terminology is not given any particular weight in isolation; on the contrary, naming of parts can actively impede students, who are being rewarded for their focus on the how an element of writer’s craft affects meaning. As referred to under AO1, students who frame these responses to a particular aspect of craft with ‘this makes the reader feel’ tend to struggle to move beyond generalised comments. It might be more useful to develop students’ ability to take a more measured, critical stance when talking about effects.

**AO3 Relationship between texts and their contexts** - The key word here is *relationship*, as it highlights the fact that a text is neither created nor received in a vacuum. Each task provides a contextual idea and if students focus their answer on this, they will naturally be able to access AO3. Much of the specifics of this has been dealt with earlier in the report, however one further comment from a member of the team that has relevance here is: ‘I was (pleasantly) surprised at how successfully students managed to incorporate, and deal with, AO3 in their responses. A large number of students achieved credit for AO3 through a demonstration of their understanding of the ideas explored within the text, which often assisted with their demonstration of the skills required for AO1.’

### Advice for students

- Know the text. If you know the text well you will be able to demonstrate this knowledge and understanding in the exam. The text should be the focus.
- Answer the question. Perhaps underline the key foci before you start. Make sure you’ve read the question accurately.
- Demonstrate your knowledge of the text by ‘pointing’ to particular moments. If you use a direct reference, make sure it’s relevant to your answer, and that you can say something useful about it. You don’t get extra marks for more quotations, but you do get more marks for making plenty of interesting comments about the references you have selected.

- Focus on the range of things that the writer might have done on purpose during the process of putting the text together.
- Using the writer's name can help you to think about the text as a conscious construct and will keep reminding you that the author deliberately put the text together.
- Link your comments on contextual factors / ideas to the text. Remember that context informs, but should never dominate, your reading of the text. The text comes first.
- Read the unseen poem and make sure you get a sense of the overall point first. Select three or four key things to focus your attention on.
- Manage your time effectively. Don't spend too much time on the final question as it is only worth 8 marks. Remember that this task asks you to compare methods, so make sure you focus your attention on the similarities / differences between what the two poets have done to make meaning.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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