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FOREWORD

This booklet contains reports written by Examiners on the work of candidates in certain papers. **Its contents are primarily for the information of the subject teachers concerned.**

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

GCE Ordinary Level

Papers 1115/01, 1120/01, 1123/01 and 1124/01

Composition

General comments

The choice of topics in this component of the syllabus met with confident and enthusiastic responses from candidates across the whole ability range and across the different geographical regions. It was obvious that many teachers and candidates had worked hard in preparation for the examination and Examiners commented again this year on a slightly improved level of communication achieved. The overall standard of written English appeared to be similar to that seen in previous years. Whilst there were relatively few scripts at the highest level, very poor or irrelevant scripts were rarely seen. Familiarity with the nature of the paper over the years meant that candidates were well versed in what to expect and what was required, so very few rubric offences, such as writing more than one essay for **Part 1** or omitting a response to **Part 2**, were seen. The paper presented candidates with a range of topics which allowed all the candidates to do their best, whilst providing a proper degree of differentiation. Many candidates showed their ability to write interesting, well-planned essays, which engaged and held the reader's interest, with original, thoughtful material, generally clearly expressed. Many candidates developed their essays at some length, sustaining a fair level of accurate writing and relevant content, although some candidates wrote at too great a length; long answers often deteriorated in accuracy and presentation. Lengthy compositions in **Part 1** were more frequently seen from some regions this year; candidates should beware that quality is not sacrificed to quantity and that time spent on long **Part 1** essays does not result in short, hurried or unfinished responses in **Part 2**, forfeiting marks that would have been gained with better planning and use of the time available.

Questions 1, 2 and 3 could all be rooted in personal experience and were the most popular on the paper. **Question 4** demanded more organisational skill and perhaps a more specialised vocabulary. **Question 5** was the least popular, perhaps because candidates were put off by the idea of writing about the elderly or were confused by the term 'rivalry', but those who chose it wrote some of the most successful essays in the examination. Meaning was rarely in doubt, even where candidates struggled with verb forms and tense sequences, idioms and sentence structures, pronouns and prepositions, punctuation and paragraphing, which are the aspects of English that appear to present most difficulty to candidates in this examination. Linguistic inaccuracy sometimes prevented candidates from achieving the high marks that their ideas and planning might suggest.

Some worrying trends were so frequently seen across the whole range of Centres as to merit special mention:

- the failure to indicate or paragraph direct speech or, equally confusing for the reader, the tendency to preface the spoken words with 'that' (He said that 'Where are you going?')
- strange word-order that could produce very un-English expressions ('My all family and neighbours agree.' 'Last night at about ten past half...')
- vital omission of 'NOT' when the negative was intended
- 'Me and' instead of '...and I', and finally, the use of the comma splice, which seemed endemic in some candidates' work.

It was pleasing to note that the use of e-mail/text message symbols was rarely seen this year, perhaps indicating that teachers have warned candidates against this practice after reading the most recent reports on the examination. It is to be hoped that teachers will point out the other deficiencies mentioned above to future candidates for this examination.

Whilst candidates in most Centres produced neatly presented scripts in clear, precise handwriting, in some cases presentation was untidy, crossing out was frequent and handwriting was extremely difficult to read, which was not helpful to Examiners. Candidates should also note that the use of correction fluid or the eraser pen may affect whole phrases on the reverse side of the paper and their use is specifically forbidden in the instructions on the question paper.

Comments on specific questions

Part 1

Question 1

Describe a great celebration that you took part in.

This was the most popular question on **Part 1** of the paper. Candidates tackled it with confidence and enthusiasm, encouraged by the element of personal experience implied by individual participation in the event. National and religious celebrations were very interesting to Examiners, the more so when the candidate had taken some part directly, either in the preparation or in the event itself. New Year (especially the Millennium), Independence Day, Founder's Day, Hari Raya, Eid and Besant (the kite-flying celebration), the SEA Games, the Sultan's Birthday and the Caribbean Carnival all provided candidates with plenty to write about and an easy chronological structure. In events of a more personal nature, which were 'great celebrations' within the family context, weddings and grandparents' birthday parties were described with great verve and detail.

In some essays, a rather repetitive account of food preparation, decoration and clothing outweighed the description of the celebration itself but this was usually because the candidate had taken part in the preparation rather than the event. Sometimes tense weaknesses confused the sequence of events a little but nearly all the candidates managed to convey a strong sense of the atmosphere and importance of the occasion. There was much effective use of vocabulary: 'A cloud of multicoloured kites gave some expression to an otherwise bland sky.' The success of this topic lay in the fact that candidates could call on personal experience, but the liveliness of the content outstripped the accuracy of the language in some cases.

Question 2

Write about an occasion when a special family meal produced unexpected results.

This was another very popular question, offering every opportunity for the narrative approach. Like **Question 1**, it was easy to plan and nearly all candidates addressed the key words, 'special', 'family' and 'unexpected' to produce a well-balanced, relevant story. In many cases, the meal was followed by sudden gastronomic consequences caused by food poisoning, salt instead of sugar or too many chillies. In others, the sparking of a family quarrel, a surprise announcement of a new job, an engagement for an arranged marriage, a surprise pregnancy or the arrival of a long-lost relative provided the unexpected element.

Dialogue was more frequently used in this topic, adding to the liveliness of the account but bringing its own linguistic problems of punctuation and paragraphing. Many of the best responses introduced humour here; in the work of weaker candidates, it was sometimes of the unintentional kind, for example attendance at 'a special family meal composed of all family members'....! However, in all cases this topic provided interesting insights into extended family life.

Question 3

One day you made a bad mistake which upset other people. Write about how you tried to put things right.

This was the second most popular question, varying in content from tales of tragic, comic or trivial errors, most seemingly based on genuine personal experience. The best candidates planned the sequence of events in such a way as to provide an appropriate balance between the mistake and putting it right. Many involved the betrayal of a friend, being led astray by bad company or letting down parents' trust and expectations. Incidents of taking a relative's car and damaging it in a crash, or of mistakes made in cooking with disastrous effects similar to those seen in **Question 2**, were not uncommon. There were some contrived attempts to show remorse such as replacing the smashed car very quickly with contributions from pocket-money or earnings from a weekend job. Making amends in some regions involved formal apologies to parents for drinking alcohol, staying out late, smoking or taking drugs. In other areas, a formal apology had to be made to the religious leader in front of the assembled congregation.

Often the focus was on the mistake rather than on putting things right and only a rushed final paragraph provided a somewhat unconvincing and unsatisfactory conclusion. In some cases there was no description at all of any attempt to remedy affairs, although this was the actual point of emphasis demanded by the question. A frequent error that arose in this topic was the incorrect idiom 'to do a mistake', although 'made a bad mistake' is given in the question. Nevertheless, this topic produced some amusing and some sensitively written, heartfelt narratives and was generally very successful.

Question 4

Should we worry so much about endangered species? What is your view?

This was the least popular topic. It was favoured in a few Centres where the candidates seemed knowledgeable on the subject, perhaps having studied it at school and thus able to produce a balanced discussion with appropriate technical vocabulary. The best responses were cogently argued and supported by effective and interesting detail. The difficulties caused by deforestation, water-shortage and loss of habitat were carefully stated points. A few candidates were prepared to suggest that we should worry more about human poverty and deprivation.

Most attempts at this topic, however, were very similar in both repetitive content and predictable line of argument, involving the food-chain, the preservation of the world's beauty and conservation for future generations. Some digressed towards other environmental issues such as global warming. A number of candidates misread or misunderstood 'endangered', reading it as 'dangerous' and so producing limited and confused responses discussing the futures of sharks, lions or alligators. Sadly, the question was sometimes attempted by those with strong views but without the linguistic ability to cope.

Question 5

Write about the rivalry between two elderly people.

This topic was also a minority choice but many of the essays were a delight to read when the element of competition and the scope of the word 'elderly' were fully recognised. Rivalry centred around land-ownership, business enterprises, pride in the achievement of offspring, sporting prowess and affairs of the heart. Some candidates interpreted 'rivalry' merely as conflict or enmity and wrote about people who hated each other or had a physical fight. Nevertheless, dialogue was often effective, with some lively, heated arguments, characterisation was sharp and amusing and the narrative was well-paced. Some of the very best scripts seen in the examination were in response to this topic.

Part 2

The directed writing task in this part of the paper aims to assess different skills from those tested in the continuous free writing of **Part 1**. Here the rubric suggests an audience to address, a purpose to be served and some specific information to be conveyed. As well as carrying out the instructions clearly and accurately in the required format, candidates are expected to adopt a style and tone appropriate to the task.

These aims were seldom fully accomplished by the candidates this year. This task proved a better discriminator than those in past years where virtually all candidates scored the five marks awarded for content. Failure to read the question with sufficient care and to construct the event described clearly in their own minds before beginning to write, led to many candidates missing some of the required content points.

The purpose of the directed writing this year was to make a report. Many candidates recognised this and produced an acceptable, though sometimes only partial, report format or a letter. It was clear that in some Centres suitable report tone, layout and format had been carefully taught and in some cases the candidates used sub-headings in the formal report, corresponding to the five areas of information to be given, thus reminding themselves of the exact requirements, including the 'double' points, as they organised their reports. Others became carried away by the story of events that they were creating and lapsed into a purely narrative style, especially towards the end of the piece, so that the police involvement had already taken place and was now described to those who had actually taken the action.

Many candidates failed to notice that both the time and location of the incident were required for the first point; if both were not given or either was unacceptably vague, the point was withheld. Frequently locations such as 'behind my house' or 'in my neighbour's yard' were given but were inadequate if the writer's own address was not provided, as the police would not have been able to locate the place. There was little problem in describing those involved or precisely what was happening, as according to the scenario, the event had been seen by the reporter although some candidates forgot that the scenario also dictated that the incident must be a source of noise and also something that could occur over five nights - thus serial kidnapping, robbery and murder were unlikely to be the cause of the problem. Sources of the noises suggested included music boxes, car or motor bike racing, strange cult rituals, partying, wife-beating, organised dog-fighting, building construction or demolition and DIY activities. Some candidates missed the instruction that the report should give the reason for both family and neighbours being upset; again, both details were required for the point. Finally, as already mentioned, the stated purpose of the report was to inform the police and ask for their help, not remind them of what they had already done.

Careful paragraphing and a suitably crisp, factual tone were seldom found in this **Part 2**, which lacked the detailed planning given to the **Part 1** essays, yet needed it even more. Some common errors specific to this task from candidates in all regions were in expressions of time: 'The noises have been occurring since the last five nights'; 'From the last five days...'; 'I've been living here from fifteen years ago'; 'The noise lasted till an hour or so'. There was confusion between 'listened/heard'; 'saw/watched/looked/peeked'; 'said/told/asked'; 'shifted/moved' e.g., 'A newly married couple shifted behind our house.' The word 'unusually' was very frequently spelt incorrectly although given on the question paper.

Guidance for teachers preparing candidates for future examinations

There was much evidence of careful teaching and practice to be found in the scripts from all Centres. The more sensible choice of topic; evidence of writing from personal experience; fewer obviously 'prepared' essays; less use of obtrusive and inappropriate vocabulary used to impress; more careful checking and correction of completed work - all these factors were evidence that the advice given in previous reports had been heeded. Spelling was generally more accurate, even in the work of weaker candidates. There was some improvement in the use of punctuation and paragraphing to organise the text for the reader. However, sentence separation faults and the use of the comma splice still mar the coherence of many scripts and the failure to indicate, punctuate and paragraph direct speech adds to the confusion. Examiners found it necessary to re-read such scripts to establish communication.

Candidates should be warned that, whilst slang, colloquial contractions and regional 'patois' may add to characterisation when used in direct speech, they are entirely inappropriate in the more formal style and register of English prose composition. The tendency to use 'fillers', such as 'like' or 'well', which can be seen as another characteristic of this type of language, was more evident this year e.g.

'I was like smyling(sic) then the policeman just warnned me....'

'I was like crying and apologising to him...'

'Well, my teacher was very nice...'

'Eventually we agreed and, well, we became friends again....'

No doubt, teachers will warn future candidates about these and the other common errors mentioned in the first section of this report.

It is vital also that candidates be reminded of the importance of reading the scenario and requirements of **Part 2**, with very great care. This section of their work must be planned and organised precisely before they begin to write it and, even more importantly, it must be checked carefully when it has been completed.

Final comment

Examiners commented again on how much they enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity to mark scripts written by such hard-working, well-intentioned candidates, ambitious to succeed and eager to follow advice for improvement.

Papers 1115/02, 1120/02, 1123/02 and 1124/02

Comprehension

General comments

Candidates seem to have responded enthusiastically, on the whole, to the 'outdoor adventure' atmosphere of the passage, although only the most sophisticated answers saw the underlying contrast between the author/narrator's 'heroic' wish to own an elephant and travel with her through India, and the distinctly un-heroic problems faced by Mark, Aditya and Salim. As always, some more straightforward questions, **1, 2, 3** and **5 (a)** were interlaced with more difficult ones **5 (b), 6 (a), 6 (b), 8 (a)** and **8 (b)**. Similarly, whereas **Questions 7 (a)** and **7 (b)** invited short, simple answers, **8 (a)**, a much more difficult question, asked candidates to differentiate between the different qualities of the silence of the forest. Where the simple narrative sequence of the passage proved particularly helpful to candidates was in the summary, where the obvious division of problems and difficulties may well have made some contribution to the success of this paper.

The general performance of candidates seemed better than in recent years, and all Examiners were impressed by the neatness and care shown in most of the Centres they marked. Some scripts were most impressive, showing an excellent understanding of the nuances of the set passage, faultless English syntax and expression, and an enviably sophisticated use of own words in **Question 10**. But others showed considerable improvement, and there has evidently been some good teaching and some hard work going on. Since the good and the better scripts were such a delight to mark, it may seem invidious to single out errors in candidates' work. Examiners foreground them here in the hope that this will help teachers to concentrate on various areas of weakness. These include wrong verb forms and tense errors, distorted syntax, omission or obvious misuse of prepositions, serious errors of agreement (a singular subject and a plural verb, or vice-versa), and ingrained weaknesses of punctuation: e.g. the habitual comma replacing the necessary colon, semi-colon or full stop.

Comments on specific questions

Question 1

Many candidates gave the correct answer here: that Aditya 'did not believe' the writer or thought that he was 'mad/crazy'. Weaker answers offered 'amazed/astonished', and some confused Aditya with the writer/narrator, their answers further entangled with 'the hiss and crackle of the telephone'.

Question 2

Most answers to this question, that Salim was 'an expert on elephants', were acceptable even though many candidates offered the excess information that he had 'a deep knowledge of wildlife', since this was not penalised.

Question 3

The correct answers here demanded an exact reading of the passage, and the candidates who failed to score one or both of the marks offered for the question had paid insufficient attention to detail. Many omitted 'the zoo director', as the source of the information about no elephants being for sale, and others were vague about 'the heat', omitting the 'intense' heat or ignoring the monsoon.

Question 4

What had initially seemed a simple question, proved, in Examiners' experience of it, considerably more problematic. Many candidates saw the narrator as seduced by Queen's gender, or by her catching his eye, with no mention of her looking 'good-natured'.

Question 5

- (a) This question was well-answered.
- (b) This was a difficult question, where candidates had to unravel two complex metaphors. 'Nerves' defeated all but a tiny minority: 'He was nervous' was a popular response, where any attempt at explanation was made. Some answers suggested that the writer was mentally disturbed. 'Drain on my pocket' seemed to baffle even the more able candidates: some answers suggested that the 'cascading river' from the wrecked tea-stall had soaked the writer's trousers.

Question 6

- (a) As in many 'own words' questions over the past few years, the key words, 'din' and 'thieving' did not seem to be important to the candidates: almost no answers attempted to gloss 'din', and many references to 'Queen's thieving' suggested that out in the countryside there would be fewer people who would try to steal Queen.
- (b) Most candidates noted the threatened delay to the journey, but surprisingly few (in this ecological age) made any reference to Queen's pain or suffering.

Question 7

- (a) This was usually answered correctly, that 'Aditya reached for his camera-bag', tried to take a photograph, etc. Candidates who failed to score on this question often added 'with a downward gesture...' conflating Aditya with Salim, and ignoring the text's clearly-delineated stop.
- (b) There were three possible answers here, and most candidates were able to select one or more of them.

Question 8

- (a) This was a demanding question, since it asked candidates to analyse the nature of the two different silences of the forest: here the key-words were 'tranquil' and 'threatening'. Many unsuccessful answers contrasted the silence of the forest (without commenting on its nature) with the noise caused by bombs, trumpeting and departure of elephants.
- (b) Few problems here: many answers commented accurately on the 'ghost-like' appearances of the three female elephants.

Question 9

Candidates scored well on this question: marks of 4 and 5 were quite frequent. Reasons for failure to score were: insufficient attention to the rubric (glossing more than only five words or writing more than seven words in a phrase answer); giving more than one alternative to the word to be glossed (introduced by 'or' or a comma); or using the selected word in a sentence of the candidate's own invention. It is understood that this may well be an excellent way to familiarise overseas candidates with the contextual meanings of English vocabulary, but it is not appropriate where this question is concerned.

Question 10

This passage helped the candidates in their summary writing, since there was a clear advance of the action in three distinct stages: the problems in the village with the destroyed tea-stall and the stolen cakes; Queen's limping, ulcer and infection, and their treatment; and the encounters with the wild elephants in the forest. There were many excellent answers which showed clear understanding, well-expressed in own words. Weaknesses were concentrated on points 11, 12, 13 and 14 (the doctor's diagnosis and prescription and Mark's two attempts to inject Queen with antibiotics). Another weak area was centred on the 'bombs'; point 22 where the first bomb failed to explode, and point 24 where the second was made to explode by Salim (hitting it with his stick).