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GCSE (9–1)

Examiners' report

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

J351
For first teaching in 2015

J351/02 Autumn 2020 series

Version 1

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Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

> ⓘ Reports for the Autumn 2020 series will provide a broad commentary about candidate performance, with the aim for them to be useful future teaching tools. As an exception for this series they will not contain any questions from the question paper nor examples of candidate answers.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

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Paper 2 series overview

J351/02 is one of two examined components for GCSE (9-1) English Language which was first assessed in June 2017. Each of the components follows a similar structure and tests the same assessment objectives but J351/02 assesses candidates' response to fiction texts whereas J351/01 assesses their response to non-fiction texts. The other difference is that in Question 2 of J351/01 candidates must synthesise information from two texts, a skill which is not tested in this paper.

Candidates should prepare for this exam by practising how to read unseen literary texts with confidence and understanding. Candidates should learn how to select and interpret relevant details from the text and identify and explain features of language and structure. They must be able to identify similarities and contrasts between the texts and evaluate the impact of each text on a reader.

This session was something of a 'one off' due to the Covid 19 pandemic. There was no session in June 2020 when most candidates had been awarded and had accepted the grades assessed by their teachers. Candidates in this series were therefore students who did not accept the centre assessed grade or had not been able to be assessed at that time. In any event, the paper produced the full range of performance levels and a familiar spread of marks which was more reminiscent of a November sitting (this would have been the fourth such session) than of a normal June assessment.

Candidates' responses showed a clear understanding of the demands of each question. In previous sessions candidates' responses to Questions 2 and 3 have shown some uncertainty about the requirements of each task in terms of what constitutes language and structure. In this session, on the other hand, most candidates organised their responses to these questions with a similar range of effectiveness. This is a suggestion of the ability range of the candidates rather than any comment on the teaching which must been of heroic proportions in simply getting the candidates prepared.

This component worked well in terms of differentiation although candidates in the range of Level 1-3 perhaps found both reading passages rather more challenging. Most of the candidates had been thoroughly prepared for the exam and knew and could demonstrate what they had to do. Centres should be congratulated on the continuing confidence and ability candidates show with Question 4. They could still score more heavily on Question 2 and Question 3.

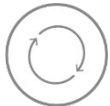The examiners' team enjoyed reading some lively and thoughtful writing in Section B.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally did the following:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally did the following:
• Allotted sufficient time to read and consider the passages carefully and thoughtfully. • Located key moments and language points as they did so. • Considered both differences and similarities between the two texts. • Planned each answer so that they were sure to cover sufficient ground when they started to write. • And in particular, remained conscious of and sensitive to the very important differences between 'War Games' and 'War'War'. • Took time and care to plan their writing task so that it was original and came from a considered choice of the alternatives. • Ensured that there was a clearly defined shape and structure to the writing with a discernible beginning, middle and end.	• Did not read the passages with sufficient thoroughness and insight. • Did not read each passage consecutively and did not consider the similarities and differences between them. • Struggled to locate and differentiate language and structure in one or both passages. • Used much less of the space in the answer booklet to respond to the tasks. • Made no distinction in their reading and answering between 'War Games' and 'War', assuming that the two activities were interchangeable in their answers. • Went for the first writing scenario without considering which task would best suit them. • Did not finish or wrote at far too great a length to sustain focus and accuracy.

Section overview

Reading

Questions 1: a, b, and c were almost all correctly answered. We allowed any sensible amalgamation of the examples given in the mark scheme. Over long quotations which showed that the question had not been understood were not allowed. In b and c, the only responses which were not credited were those which simply quoted without any suggestion of inference or explanation.

Question 2 required examples of language and structure which reflected the 'excitement of playing war-games'. Some candidates went outside the specifically set lines (13-23) and used material that could not be credited. The essential point which some candidates saw clearly and others sensed and worked towards is the way the sentence structures create a layering effect. Short sentences for Stephen (and Elaine when she's on his level) who is totally immersed in his 'war game' influenced imaginative world; and longer, complex sentences for Elaine's commentary which sees the fantasy for what it is but still joins in enthusiastically (and despite significant physical discomfort) for other reasons. The bossiness of the former and amused, benign tolerance of the latter are conveyed. Other answers saw very little of this, which is language and structure rolled into one, but managed to make solid points about the list of weaponry (structure and presentation of 'military' jargon) and the significance of 'sneak' suggesting the enjoyable complicity between the siblings as their parents got on with 'grown up' matters. Either way, the key reading point was to see the contrast between the world of the adults and the different layers of childhood clarity/ opacity in each of Stephen and Elaine.

	AfL	Encourage students to focus on the use and effects of language and structure in a specific section of a longer passage.
		The AO2 questions require candidates to look at particular lines of the passage. Any comments to areas of the passage outside of the given lines cannot be credited.

Question 3 offered a famous and much anthologised passage from 'Empire of the Sun'. Again, candidates needed to be careful to restrict their responses to the set lines which deal with Ballard's third-party description of the former battlefield and the inferences about Jim's reaction to it. The essential link back to the first text was a contrasting presentation of further degrees of juvenile imagination and evanescent consciousness but this time in dangerous and dreadful circumstances.

The structure is a series of contrasts between Jim's boyish imagination, the gruesome reality of the killing of the army and the western visitors who consider that the show has 'been arranged for them by a passing demolition squad', representing the indecent voyeuristic complacency of a class and sect who, ironically, thought of war as a sideshow. Structure lies principally in the scale of these almost surreal juxtapositions in which 'limousines' and 'silk dresses' are contrasted with (for example) the complete wreck of the canal, an important artery of the commerce they profited from, which is linked to and developed by the later reference to the corpses 'jammed together around the pillars of the bridges'.

The critical language points are the ones which modulate and differentiate Jim's response to all this. 'Jim could remember'/ 'To Jim the battlefield seemed'/ 'as if they had fallen asleep together' / etc. The adult voice of the narrator highlights the horrors of war and the ways in which an (almost) complete innocent processes it all. Much was successfully made of:

'futile stands'

'burial mounds' (we allowed a very wide range of interpretations of this)

'dangerous rubbish tip'

'rifles stacked like matchwood'

'venemous snakes' (again, many interpretations of this to reward)

'torn earth'

'rusting barbed wire' and so on.

Question 4 was clear in its purpose and requirements. 'Both texts present war as exciting for children'. However, as became rapidly obvious to the stronger candidates, it required a different mode of response to past Questions 4. The answer is plainly that it does not present war as exciting for children, or anyone else for that matter. War is hell as Ballard's images unequivocally show. What might be exciting are the childhood games that have imagined (bur completely fantastic) elements of war in them. So, the strongest answers started with and developed a powerful demolition of the prompt. It is fair to say that while stronger candidates appeared to greatly enjoy putting the passages and the task in their place, more modest and less confident candidates found this challenging. The main problem was the confusion between enjoying 'war games' and 'war'. Most candidates worked their way through this challenge and wrote perfectly satisfactory answers which developed into linking and comparison between the passages, seeing the differences in being miles away from the war (Elaine and her family are in the Canadian wilderness) and being presented with it at close quarters. Fewer candidates than we anticipated made much of the plane with 'the paper torn from its wings, but the frame … still intact'. A clear sense of childhood opacity and innocence still underpinned the strongest responses.

As almost always in this paper, a weaker answer to Question 2 or 3 did not mean that the response to Question 4 was also. The point is made in every sitting: when the passages are read and considered for the second time they are better understood.

Option overview

The writing section consisted of two very accessible tasks both of which seem to have steered candidates away from derivation of all kinds: computer games, TV shows, melodrama of all sorts and into the re-creation of childhood memories and experiences. This was very pleasing and most candidates chose suitable topics to work on.

'The playground' was generally either the school playground or a local recreational playground, often in a local park. At the time of writing, we have not seen anything which made a completely non-literal interpretation.

Memories of playing childhood games almost all focused on exactly that and stories about winning the football world (or any other) cup have not been seen so far.

There were some charming recollections of childhood, often of primary school days with nostalgic sentimentality and warm thoughts about the lasting friendships that were forged at that time.

For both tasks, the best work had a clear and convincing narrative line, very appropriate tone and register: an engaging narrative voice; and powerfully evocative imagery (which avoided ludicrous hyperbole).

Many candidates used a popular genre: ghost stories, horror stories and so on as a basis to enshrine personal experience. Centres should note that while all three bullets on the level descriptors are the key

platforms for judgement, the one which might most often be improved is the third, which refers to levels of coherence and cohesion. The most striking differential in this series was that between work that was well shaped and convincingly developed and that which was partial or incomplete.

While we realise that some candidates struggle with spelling, especially when they are using ambitious vocabulary, misspelling can sometimes betray a lack of understanding or nuance of the chosen words.

Themes in candidate responses

Many of the essay followed the themes of childhood innocence and evanescent consciousness which feature so heavily in the reading passages. One candidate felt so sorry for his younger siblings because they spent lockdown playing computer games, whereas at their age he had enjoyed the park, the playground and his friends.

Other themes were family unity (playing games together): or family dislocation, bereavement and its causes, accidents and learning to take personal responsibility.

Key teaching and learning points – comments on improving performance

Learning and practising to manage time successfully still remains an issue. Candidates need to understand roughly how long they will take to read the passages and prepare themselves for the reading tasks. The key, as always, to gaining more marks is to engage with the passages more thoroughly.

Similarly, time spent considering the precise point of the tasks is never time wasted.

In this paper candidates are well advised and encouraged to evaluate and validate their own thoughts and experiences as the platform to develop written responses, rather than genres that are outside their scope or received experiences that they have only at second hand.

Guidance on using this paper as a mock

Centres may want to use their own knowledge of their students and judgement of how they may react to the picture of death on the battlefield in the second text, not least in current circumstances. The first passage and the writing prompts are very satisfactory and provide excellent exemplar material for mock preparation.

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