



GCSE English Language

8700/1

Report on the Examination

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Summary

Overall performance compared to last year

The extract was taken from John Wyndham's 'The Midwich Cuckoos.' Students responded well to the extract and its mysterious and dystopian atmosphere. The focus on technology for Q5 prompted enthusiastic answers and the image of the town was accessible and enabled descriptions to be set both in the past and the present.

Areas where students excelled

- More students have been able to identify explicit information without aiming to make the details over-complicated. This enabled better time management, as well as more straightforward answers.
- Question 3 showed that there has been increased confidence with writing about the effects of structure. This was well answered this year with students more able to comment on the sequence of events and the developing mystery. Juxtaposition was identified and explained well by all abilities of students. More successful responses could identify the cyclical structure with the use of the telephone to explain that the events happening in Midwich were likely to happen again. It was evident that students were more confident using structural features, but importantly, explaining the effects of these e.g. why it was effective to begin with a specific temporal marker of 10.17pm and then subsequent mysterious events.
- The narrative option for Question 5 was immediately engaging for many students, showing a real sense of horror that there might be an event where technology stopped. There were humorous answers narrating events where teachers were panicking when their interactive whiteboards would not work, a patient gleefully escaping the dentist's surgery when the drill was broken and a common satirical belief that teenagers might melt down without the latest reels and influencer updates. Those students who had a clear grasp of dystopian fiction were able to utilise their imagination exploring ideas such as AI taking over the world and reeking revenge on the selfishness and entitlement of the human race. There were many enjoyable responses where humanity tried to curb its desire for more technology – fearing, and sometimes experiencing, an apocalypse. Other successful responses were secure writing about an episode, an event, rather than trying to write an entire narrative.

Areas where students struggled

- There were increased numbers of answers where students wrote outside of the given lines. This affected Questions 1, 2 and 4. The questions state the lines from where the ideas should be selected, but some students did not remind themselves of these key lines.
- There was a glossary definition provided for the word '*slatternly*' in Question 2 and some students chose to write out the explanation as their own comment on the effect of the language. However, it is important to note that they need to bring some of their own understanding to the language item. The glossary information is there to clarify the meaning of the word itself, not to influence the direction of a comment on effect.
- Question 5 continues to challenge those writers who attempt to write a whole narrative rather than an episode or an event. The difficulty with a whole narrative is that the writing tends to be superficial as it is often rushed.
- Some students chose to copy the extract as their response to Q5. Some copied the extract but changed a few details, such as the tense or the names.
- The descriptive option on Question 5 led to many students struggling to find details beyond those in the image. Imagining what might lay behind a door, in the shadows of a passageway, or hidden under an arch could have offered more successful ideas.

Assessment objectives

Assessment Objective (AO)	Common student errors
A01 Identify and interpret explicit and implicit information and ideas. Select and synthesise evidence from different texts.	• Selecting incomplete information, leading to misunderstanding • Selecting details from outside of the given lines
A02 Explain, comment on, and analyse how writers use language and structure to achieve effects and influence readers, using relevant subject terminology to support their views.	• Repeating the glossary definition as the comment on the effect of language • Responding to imagery literally instead of figuratively • Linking unrelated themes to the language and extract, such as the brutality of nature, social division
A04 Evaluate texts critically and support this with appropriate textual references.	• Writing solely outside of the given lines • Forcing points of disagreement where there is little/no evidence • Writing without specific reference to the text. Details may be indirect – but unfocused ideas drifted into vague responses to the statement
A05 Communicate clearly, effectively, and imaginatively, selecting and adapting tone, style and register for different forms, purposes, and audiences. Organise information and ideas, using structural and grammatical features to support coherence and cohesion of texts.	• Over reliance on personification and pathetic fallacy meaning that the effect was lessened and more contrived. • The use of the senses, especially with smell, led to some unlikely and unpleasant details • Using quotations from poetry or plays as though original imagery • Aiming to complete an entire narrative, which leads to a lack of detail and clarity • Unexplained and harsh shifts in mood and setting e.g. a beautiful, peaceful town then derelict and full of misery • Waking up and it was a dream, or the electricity came back on, so the disaster was forgotten • Handwriting continues to be a concern. Some students would have benefited from access arrangements, such as use of a word processor. The most challenging handwriting was a significant barrier even to the most senior examiners to whom their work was escalated.

A06 Students must use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose, and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.	• Using complex vocabulary that had no relation to the atmosphere or the events • Lists of unrelated vocabulary – often in a list of three. Lists of related vocabulary is also unhelpful in creating detail and clarity • Narrow range of punctuation • Incomplete sentences used as an effect, but not presenting meaning
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Individual questions

Question 1

Read again the first part of the source, from lines 1 to 8.

List four things which happened that night from this part of the source.

What students did well

There were shorter, more concise statements this year, which suggests that students are more confident with their selection of evidence and do not feel the need to make their answers more complicated.

Common misunderstandings

Some answers were taken entirely outside of the given lines.

A common error was to state that 'Midwich became episodic.'

Question 2

Look in detail at this extract from lines 9 to 18:

How does the writer use language here to describe the early morning?

What students did well

Most focused on the morning, though some seemed to see the focus of the question as the town of Midwich. Good answers explored several layers of meaning – for example – the impact on nature and animals and how this added to the strangeness of the morning. The best answers dealt with the contrast between the two villages and how this was conveyed. Some answers explored the 'pocket of silence' and developed ideas about the pocket suggesting dark secrets hidden away, or how a pocket is self-contained and sealed off from the rest of the garment i.e the rest of the world.

Common misunderstandings

Less successful answers explained how an example makes the reader want to read on which is a Level 1 comment – but is still used frequently. Terminology was often not secure for example, adverb and adjective were often confused. Semantic fields were often used by students who didn't really understand its meaning properly. There was some misreading of dishwasher/dishwater and occasional over-analysis of that grey sky leading to unhelpful links such as the theme of man versus nature or the town being under a deep depression. There were more opinions in the answers to this question than seen previously. Some answers felt that the people of Midwich were simply idle, lazy, happy to live in a dirty town, didn't do their washing very often and did not like bird song. Sometimes, opinions can support

less able students in showing what they understand about language, but when the view is so narrow, it often leads to misunderstanding.

Some students confused the two villages. There were still some answers which ‘feature spotted,’ using complex terminology but failing to make effective comments on effect. Feature spotting is problematic as there is no real purpose – the effect of the feature is where students need to be focusing. Some students picked out long quotations and made generalised comments on the effect. Long quotations are unhelpful as they do not pinpoint an aspect of language. Features such as similes and metaphors need to be unpacked – often by discussing individual words within the longer image.

Question 3

You now need to think about the whole of the source.

This text is taken from near the beginning of a novel.

How has the writer structured the text to interest you as a reader?

What students did well

Better answers looked at the whole structure and specific foci at different points in the text. They looked at the use of contrast, changes of focus and the way tension was built as the mystery was created. It was good to see students analysing a wider range of ideas, such as foreshadowing, cliff hangers and use of contrast. More successful students explained clearly the link between the disappearances and the effect of having them revealed later in the extract, as well as the dramatic collapse of the mail van worker and the urgency with which the driver sped off.

Many of these successful answers discussed the building sense of anticipation, tension, and mystery. Some students successfully identified foreshadowing as an effective structural technique, and the use of a cliff hanger to build anticipation for the rest of the novel. Level 3 and 4 responses explored the cinematic effect of the extract analysing how readers are given different aspects of the same phenomena in episodic moments, building up to an overall effect of brooding menace and imminent escalation and danger; some of these answers made the third person narrative perspective extremely pertinent.

Common misunderstandings

There was quite a lot of unnecessary language analysis seen in answers instead of structural features. The constant reference to no more than ‘beginning, middle, end’ made some responses formulaic and simply a recount of the events due to the lack of analysis. Although the characters were few and only briefly included, some answers showed confusion between them.

Question 4

Focus this part of your answer on the second part of the source, from line 19 to the end. A student said, "It is hard to understand what has happened to all the vehicles and people that approached Midwich. The writer makes it clear that it is a very mysterious situation." To what extent do you agree?

What students did well

Supported perhaps by improved analysis for Question 3, more successful answers showed clear understanding of the increase in tension and mystery as the latter half of the extract built to a climax. There was some careful reading leading to detailed analysis when students considered the strange positioning of the vehicles and the continuing eerie silence. Answers which developed their analysis of the fate of the mail man at the end, who was 'quietly folded up' were able to develop some convincing ideas about how this, like the vehicles, was 'neat', but also incredibly menacing. The reaction of his colleague, who was so terrified he did not get out to see to his colleague's state, also drew more developed discussion. Students who had a more confident approach to themes such as fear, power, mystery and the supernatural were able to extend their discussion with success. Answers where a range of shorter textual references were used meant that there were finer details to weave together into clear or perceptive evaluation.

Common misunderstandings

Some students wrote at length about how the events were mysterious, but without much, or any, reference to specific details from the text. This was also seen in answers where students were repeatedly using the statement but not adding any reasons why they agreed or disagreed.

Some students felt that the events were not mysterious because the vehicles were found and so were the people. This is valid but does show that smaller details need to be taken into account. The 'heads of the passengers' led some students to think that the passengers had been killed by a murderer and meant that they drifted away from the context of the extract.

There were more answers focused on the section before the given lines, which creates a rubric infringement, as shown in the mark scheme. There were many details inside of the given lines with which to respond to the statement. If an answer needs to lean on details outside of the given lines, the main analysis needs to be grounded within the given lines. For example, the beginning of the extract mentions that 'the telephones remained dead.' This mysterious isolation is then developed further with the Post Office Telephones van pausing at Stouch telephone box to discover that Midwich remained cut off. Finally, this van succumbs to the same fate as the mysterious pile of vehicles blocking the road. This takes a detail from earlier in the passage and then links it to details within the given lines. More successful answers were able to explore the fact that even those attempting to reconnect Midwich were silenced – along with the phones. Every attempt to bring Midwich back to the rest of the world ends with further inexplicable events. If a student felt that they had found a detail outside of the given lines, links across the text had to be created to gain above Level 2. Other links could

have been about the repeated references to silence and the hapless Constable Gobby found later in a ditch, and how this foreshadows the fate of other people later in the text. Less successful answers, which chose details outside of the lines, did not make links across the text.

The statement offered many opportunities for agreement. Some answers were focused upon disagreement. It is not necessary to disagree with the statement unless there are reasons to do so. Creating disagreement where there is little evidence for such can be limiting.

Question 5

Either

Write a description of a town or village, as suggested by this picture:



Or

Write a story about a day when technology stopped.

What students did well

- Students with a focus on the kind of technology and the context/setting where this occurred tended to have more control over their narratives.
- Answers where an event or specific period were introduced to the description were able to develop a more detailed style.
- Students' enjoyment of post-apocalyptic or dystopian fiction was evident in many answers, as well as alternative lifestyles being – or not being – problematic. There were some very engaging answers that showed the disconnection of an older generation or the frightening, almost symbiotic relationship that a younger generation might have with technology.
- There was a range of different types of technology in more successful answers such as the International Space Station, a sniper's rifle, a dialysis machine, an electronic tag on an offender and the collar on a navy-trained dolphin. The range of ideas provided by this question showed that many students had been more thoughtful in their planning for this question.

Common misunderstandings

- The town in the image could have led to a number of countries, real or imagined and also to different periods in history. Many responses stayed entirely within the image and struggled to develop engagement.
- Focusing on the senses led to a repeated focus on nostrils which was difficult to blend into description successfully. Not all scents need to be unpleasant to be interesting.
- Many answers did not move away from a narrow focus when describing the town. There tended to be a bakery alongside the clock, but many struggled to imagine what else might be there.
- The stopping or pausing of technology often led to riots and other kinds of violence but without any development. The loss of WIFI or a blank phone screen prompted immediate and extreme measures such as looting or criminal damage. The return of technology led to everyone being happy. Taking the idea in such a generalised way meant that these narratives were less successful.
- The ending of a narrative or description does not need to have all of the details resolved. An event or episode can end effectively as a moment in time.

Further support

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