

GCSE

English Language

8700/1: Explorations in creative reading and writing

Report on the exam

November 2023

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Summary

Overall performance compared to last year

The entry for this November series was the highest seen since before the pandemic, with 39 832 students entering for the exam compared with 33 596 in November 2022. Overall performance, however, was very similar. The mean mark was 33, just one mark lower than in 2022. Mean marks on Questions 3 and 4 were slightly lower than in previous series, but students compensated with a slightly better performance in Section B.

Question paper and source texts

The extract from 'Possession' by A.S Byatt enabled students to respond with confidence to the setting of a library and the growing excitement of the main character Roland. The fact that Roland was compelled to act uncharacteristically was something that many students were able to understand, as well as drawing textual references together to show the change in his behaviour.

Areas where students excelled

Question 1 was even more successful this year, with many students gaining the full four marks in their first statements.

Question 4 engaged students quickly with the importance of Roland's discovery being something 'special' and their feelings about Roland stealing the letters at the end of the extract. There were many students who were able to explore the idea that Roland had been 'seized' by an 'impulse' and were then able to explore these words and their effects. Some students were able to discuss the nature of the letters themselves and unpicked why they might have been unsigned. The questions that Roland asks himself at the end of the passage led some students to explain why Roland therefore had to steal the letters: time had run out in the library but Roland had not been able to complete his enquiry, and the details were tantalizingly incomplete.

There was a lot of sympathy for Roland being hungry but still having to work, the passing of time and the fact that Roland was working for someone else, not himself, and consideration for his own reputation as a scholar also prompted understanding for his later actions.

The selection of textual references was often appropriate and enabled many students to explain their ideas accurately.

In Question 5, the narrative option, writing about the discovery of a hidden object, appeared to be the more popular. There were many interesting ideas, from finding a ring on the beach to discovering a photograph assumed lost and even the Holy Grail. Some students chose to write in the style of an adventure story; others borrowed from myth or fantasy. These students had an awareness of atmosphere and how unpacking the event could be more successful than a fast-paced action scene. A few students took a more metaphorical approach, where what was found was an idea or a quality, such as bravery. These were far fewer in number, but this approach led to some well written pieces.

Areas where students struggled

Question 3 presented students with some difficulty because they appeared to be less confident with structural shifts and the effects of those shifts. Moving from inside the library to outside the window, albeit a limited view, is a structural shift that can suggest how the character is feeling and provide a contrast in atmosphere. Explaining how the character changes across the extract and why can provide some interesting comments on why he or she behaves as they do at the end, when at the beginning they appeared to be something else.

Temporal markers were noticed by many students, but few saw that time was passing slowly.

There were common misunderstandings of the extract, for example not realising that the letters inside the book, not the book itself were the surprising find, or misunderstanding of the characters and their relationship to one another, which led some students to struggle with Question 4.

Assessment objectives

AO	Common student errors
<p>AO1</p> <p>Identify and interpret explicit and implicit information and ideas. Select and synthesise evidence from different texts.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selecting details from outside of the given lines • Misunderstanding the passage, the characters mentioned and their role in the extract.
<p>AO2</p> <p>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.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selection of whole phrases or sentences without isolating a specific linguistic item for analysis • Identifying features without discussing the effect of the feature • Focusing on the literal meaning of words rather than their more figurative use, eg Victorian, leaves • Identifying structural features but misunderstanding their use, eg the temporal markers in the text showed that time was dragging not that time was moving quickly • Identifying the beginning, middle and end but without any comment on the effect of those details at that point in the text • Lack of comment on the changes across the whole extract, eg the ending developing from/different to the beginning.
<p>AO4</p> <p>Evaluate texts critically and support this with appropriate textual references.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of analysing the writer's use of methods • Misreading of the extract and not realising that the letters were the surprising find inside the book, not the book itself • Misunderstanding of the characters and their relationship to one another: professor, librarian, researcher, poet, intended reader of the (unsent) letters • A tendency to make reference to line numbers but without reference to the detail/s on that line to which they were referring

<p>AO5</p> <p>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.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over-reliance on the extract – writing the extract again with a slightly different character • Over-reliance on the image, listing details as seen • Over-reliance on literature texts as though original ideas • Use of weather which did not link to the setting or the events • Difficulties with structuring responses, eg very separate details with little apparent link; contradictory ideas
<p>AO6</p> <p>Candidates must use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation. (This requirement must constitute 20% of the marks for each specification as a whole)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited use of punctuation • A lack of paragraphing • Poor handwriting which suggested that the use of a word processor would have been beneficial

Question 1

Students responded very well to this question and as a result 98% of students attained 4 marks. Most students had attained four marks from the first and second responses they wrote, such was the detail that they had selected from the given lines.

Common misunderstandings

There were very few difficulties with this question. Where marks were lost, details were selected from outside of the given lines. Occasionally students wrote answers which did not make sense, for example, writing 'table' instead of indicating that Roland had a table 'which he liked the best'. There needs to be enough information to show that details have been selected in response to the question.

Question 2

This question asked students to discuss the writer's use of language to describe the book. There were a number of quotations that proved popular used many times across the cohort. These included, 'undisturbed for a long time', 'black, thick, tenacious Victorian dust', 'the book sprang apart, like a box' and 'faded paper... covered with rusty writing'. The idea of the book being old and damaged from the word 'bandaged' led some students to explore its mistreatment, but also that it had been well cared for and someone had tried to mend it for further use. For a few students, this led them to explore the simile 'sprang apart like a box' and to focus upon the word 'sprang', suggesting energy, urgency, hidden secrets desperate to be discovered. Exploring the image from its effect as a simile but also with an aspect of personification, enabled a few students to attain more highly by unpacking a well-chosen reference.

Students who selected the details that the book's 'spine was missing' and that the 'covers were bowed and creaking' were able to discuss the poor condition of the book and then explain the use of 'bandages' to keep it together. Although very few discussed semantic fields, some students were able to discuss the poor condition of the book and the idea that it appeared to be a relic of something long forgotten, or of secrets that had been deliberately buried.

Common misunderstandings

Many students wrote about the word 'exhumed' and were able to explain that the book had been brought back into the world. Students often became focused on the literal interpretation of words such as being 'Victorian' meant that the book was very old or that the 'dust composed with fog and smoke particles' meant that the book was smoking or smelt of fires. Students could be guided to selecting more helpful words or phrases from the extract in order to support their analysis.

Many students focused on identifying the language features, but did not comment on the effect of the word or feature that they had chosen. Students could be reminded that marks are awarded for the quality of their comments and their analysis of the effects of language.

Some students paraphrased their chosen quotation as their comment on the effect. Explaining their understanding should be their focus rather than rewriting the quotation. Examiners reported that some students chose references but forgot to contextualise them as part of the extract. This meant

that some students explained that fog does not come out of books, that the book was 'rusty' where it was the writing or the ink that was being described, or that the book was like a tree with leaves.

Students continue to struggle with comments about sentence types. Often the comments about the writer's use of specific sentence types leads to spurious assertions. For example, students often write that a short, simple sentence suggests tension or speed while a long, complex sentence suggests boredom or a slow pace. This is not always the case. Students tend to write more successfully about the semantics of the extract. More successful comments about sentence types tend to come from a secure understanding of the writer's description of the book (in this extract) and how a phrase 'tied in a neat bow' contrasts with the previous phrase 'with dirty white tape'. This contrast indicates that, although the book is damaged and soiled, it has been carefully and deliberately closed to keep the contents inside. By explaining the effect of the phrases, and the semantics in those phrases, students are more likely to be successful than attempting to link the length of a sentence to the atmosphere or character's feelings.

Question 3

There were a number of structural features that students were able to comment on and those who were able to write about the effects of these features were more successful. There was an interesting contrast between the inside of the library and the leaves on the trees in St James' Square. Roland's request for permission to study the book from the safe is contrasted with his decision to steal the letters at the end.

There were some students who were able to comment on the change in Roland, from experiencing a 'shock of excitement' to feeling the 'tiresome and bewitching endlessness of the quest for knowledge' to feeling 'thrilled', and were able to explain how these highs and lows led to an 'uncharacteristic impulse', a somewhat distracted research assistant noticing the slow passage of time becoming a thief at the end of the extract. There were some who were able to show that, even after Roland decides to hide the letters in his own book, he goes back to researching to suggest that nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Students who were able to look across the piece and see the structural shifts as a sequence, rather than as individual features, were often able to move up the levels. Many students expressed concern that Roland was hungry but did not always comment on why he forgot his hunger at the end of the extract.

There were a few answers that explored the 'exhumation' of the book, its springing open and the discovery of its secret letters in the first half of the extract leading to the shift in Roland's reaction to becoming more animated and deceptive. These students saw the effect of the letters as bewitching Roland, as though there was an inexplicable force at work. In these answers, students linked the 'creaking' to the 'rustling and shifting' across the first paragraphs and explored both how this built the tension, but also how it led to Roland's reluctance to return 'living words' back to a place of 'rest'.

Common misunderstandings

There were many answers which confused Ash, Roland and the professor and this then resulted in a number of difficulties for the students. Seeing temporal markers prompted many students to misunderstand their use in the passage, assuming that it meant that time was passing quickly for Roland, when in fact, the opposite was true.

Focusing only on the beginning, middle and end – as a recount merely of what happens in that order, limited what many students would achieve. There needs to be some comment on why the writer uses these features in a specific part of the text to move through the mark scheme.

Question 4

Students appeared to be enthusiastic about the statement, ‘It is clear that the letters Roland finds within the book must be something special. The writer shows us that it is not surprising that Roland steals them.’ There were lengthy and/or decisive responses to both halves of the statement. Students were able to select a variety of textual references from within the given lines and found a range of ideas in agreement or disagreement. Many students sympathised with Roland being in the library for a professor whose work Roland was ‘doing’ for him, so they then felt he was justified in keeping the discovery to himself. Most students were unsurprised that he stole the letters, but there were answers that argued equally well for Roland behaving oddly, especially for someone who respects books and libraries.

Common misunderstandings

The fact that letters were found inside the book confused many students. It was commonly misread that the book itself was the remarkable discovery, not the letters. This meant that some students confused themselves, knowing that Roland was studying books in the library but commenting that this book did not seem that interesting after all. Some students thought that the librarian was the intended recipient of the letters, or that the professor had written the letters.

Methods were often missed in responses to this question. Students could be reminded that commenting on the writer’s use of language, structure, setting etc can also gain marks. Some students find it supportive to address the statement directly in relation to the use of methods, for example, ‘The adverb, ‘delicately’ shows that Roland takes great care with the letters. To hold them ‘delicately’ shows that he sees that they are fragile, but also precious. This word highlights that the letters are special, as he treats them with such respect.’

Question 5

Write a description of a library as suggested by this picture.

Strongest responses

Students appeared to engage readily with the setting of a library and many were able to describe a relevant atmosphere and the studious use of a library by different types of people. Many students used the image as a guide, as is intended, but were able to extend beyond the limitations of the image and added their own imaginative ideas. Some students imagined a labyrinthine library, with sections taking on the features of their books, or that the books themselves were speaking to the scholars, sharing their knowledge. The previous borrowers of the books also appeared in some manner in a few responses, and examiners enjoyed the notion that a library could be a collection shared over generations.

The strongest responses are often those that are planned in some manner, although some students appeared to plan in such depth that it must take valuable time from elsewhere.

Responses which focus on a narrower range of ideas are often more successful; giving more detail to fewer ideas enables students to write more engaging descriptions.

Weakest responses

Answers which moved from detail to detail as shown in the image often became more like lists than descriptions. Although the image is a prompt, students could be invited to extend the features seen with a few sentences from their own imagination.

There were responses where students had decided to add features such as pathetic fallacy or contrasts when the setting in their answer did not lend itself to descriptions of weather, or of dramatic shifts in time or the condition of the library.

There were a few answers that leant so heavily on the extract, or on published works, that the student's own skills and ideas were difficult to identify.

Write a story about discovering a hidden object.

Strongest responses

As is often the case, some students blended the two tasks, but successful answers showed control over their narrative so that the discovery was the focus. There were many stories about discovering a hidden object in a library and many followed the idea of the source where the hidden object was in a book in some way. Some of the very best of the narratives were completely away from the library and set in distant lands, planets or dystopian futures. Secret doors in a library were popular, with keys found in books. Narratives that borrowed from adventure stories in finding ancient relics or treasure were also popular.

Responses that narrowed their story to the moment of discovery or where the realisation that something which had been found had more than monetary value were often popular with examiners. Stories that are able to guide the reader through a few carefully explained events tend to be much more successful than thinly described, fast-paced narratives. Often students attempt a entire narrative arc, when an episode would be more engaging and more easily controlled within the time available.

Weakest responses

As has been mentioned in previous reports, a pre-prepared vocabulary list and a list of linguistic features can lead to students using details that are ill-fitting to the task. Students who select a few features and match them to their own ideas and setting rather than being determined to include each of the features usually lead to much more success. Linguistic devices are not ticked off by examiners; it is the effectiveness of those features that attracts marks.

Some students were distracted from a discovery by explaining the events that led up to the discovery, including lengthy travel and having a good breakfast. Students who imagine stories more like a film tend to include details that suggest they have unlimited time to reach the most important events. Students could be guided to start – and end – their narratives in the action.

Using speech can lead some students to rely on dialogue to tell the story for them. Students could be advised to keep speech to a minimum, as explanation and description are often forgotten as a result.

A06

Examiners reported that there appeared to be a significant increase in responses that were very challenging to read. Although all efforts are made to read scripts, there are some obvious barriers to awarding marks for accuracy in spelling when, for example, the writing cannot be deciphered. Centres are reminded that the use of word processing can be arranged through the appropriate channels and this could support a number of students.

Confidence with paragraphing seemed to be lacking in this series, along with punctuation. Full stops and capital letters at the start of sentences appeared to be more problematic than seen previously.

Further support

Mark ranges and award of grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [results statistics](#) page of our website.

Enhanced Results Analysis (ERA)

Use our exam results analysis tool to create and customise as many different reports for comparison as you like.

Professional development

Attend one of our feedback [courses](#) where you can review example responses from students and commentaries from our examiners.

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