

# GCSE

# English Language

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**8700/2: Writers' viewpoints and perspectives**

Report on the exam

November 2023

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## Summary

### Overall performance compared to last year

Performance this November has continued to show a strengthening of students' skills. The trend in students' achievements is upwards, with evidence of a gradual return to the levels of achievement last seen in November 2019. The mean mark for this series was 33 marks, which is one mark higher than last November and closer to the mean mark of 36 marks recorded in November 2019. This reassuring trend suggests that students are slowly recovering from any impact felt by a period of disruption in their education.

### Question paper and source texts

The source texts used in this series were based on the theme of the environment. They represented very similar views despite the time difference between their publication dates. In Source A, the writer, a young Northern Irish naturalist, reflects on a trip to London and his own feelings about the lack of urgent action from government and the public, and in Source B, the writer also bemoans the lack of concern shown by consumers and government in addressing growing concerns about the way Nature and the environment are being exploited. The texts were accessible and the theme familiar. The similarities invited a natural synthesis and comparison of views and attitudes. There were very few misunderstandings of either source.

## Assessment objectives

AO	Common student errors
<p><b>AO1</b></p> <p>Identify and interpret explicit and implicit information and ideas. Select and synthesise evidence from different texts.</p>	<p>Students often identified but failed to infer meaning from the ideas they selected and overlooked the need to synthesise like for like ideas.</p>
<p><b>AO2</b></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>	<p>Students named a range of language features but tended to comment on their effects without explaining how and why the writer had chosen that particular image or word to create that effect.</p>
<p><b>AO3</b></p> <p>Compare writers' ideas and perspectives, as well as how these are conveyed, across two or more texts</p>	<p>Comparisons tended to be straight-forward as the texts were very similar, but identifying differences could lead students to make clear or even perceptive points.</p>
<p><b>AO5</b></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>	<p>Many students demonstrated a range of rhetorical writing skills without having a solid foundation of ideas on which to base their speech. The generation of ideas must be the precursor to starting to write a response.</p>
<p><b>AO6</b></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>	<p>Careful proofreading to check punctuation would ensure that demarcation is secure and provide evidence of a range of punctuation marks, particularly where a variety of sentence forms is attempted.</p>

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## Question 1

Performance on Question 1 varies significantly from one series to the next. The percentage of students achieving 4 marks out of a possible 4 rose to 75% which is higher than the 40% of students who achieved 4 marks in November 2022 and similar to the 76% of students achieving full marks in November 2021.

The reason for the variation in marks across different series is to do with the nature of the statements and the possibility of students misunderstanding the specific vocabulary or phrasing in the text. It is not easy to predict exactly which individual words, phrases or ideas students will understand, or which pieces of information they will find challenging to retrieve accurately. The question is written with the whole range of ability in mind and is intended to discriminate between those who read carefully and accurately and those whose reading skills are less advanced or who have a less sophisticated understanding of the ideas and vocabulary in the text. There was a combination of explicit information and implicit ideas in the designated section of text in Source A, as has been the case in previous series.

### Common strengths

The students who scored full marks were able to identify the information accurately; they made effective inferences regarding the narrator's experience and were able to track the information in the eight statements chronologically through the given extract. The most effective way to secure the four marks was also to colour in the lozenge in the answer booklet to identify the four true statements correctly. There was a far higher incidence of correctly completed answers in this series, which is a positive sign of improvement.

### Common misunderstandings

The statement most likely to be incorrectly selected as 'true' was B, where students misread the explicit information that the writer had returned from London and was now in Mount Stewart, rather than having returned from Mount Stewart. This information requires careful reading to select the correct statement. The two statements most likely to be overlooked as 'true' by students were D and H. The first of these required students to understand that the word 'processing' means to make sense of something by thinking it through. The second statement expected students to understand that the word 'eroding' means that nature stops him feeling 'worn down'. However, the majority of students understood these two words, possibly using the clues from other contextual factors to support their understanding, and selected the appropriate statements as true.

There were more than 160 different combinations of answers offered by students, but only one combination resulted in full marks. Many of these alternative combinations included the selection of five, six, seven or even eight statements as true. Selecting more than four statements will result in an automatic reduction in the student's final mark for this question.

The same advice for students is relevant in this series as in previous series: they should read through all the statements before selecting any. Remember the statements are in chronological order and should be read again and matched against the text extract in order. Once the four statements have been selected as 'true', they should be read again to check that they are correct.

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## Question 2

The question focused on how nature can help people. It was a more abstract focus than some of the more recent tasks in Question 2, but most students were able to extract this information and relevant ideas from the two texts. The task was to synthesise the similarities rather than the differences, which could potentially have thrown some students who were expecting to find differences, but in fact the closeness of the content and themes in the two texts made it a very intuitive task. Very few students offered a summary of differences without reference to any similarities.

There was plenty of relevant material to draw on, with the writer in Source A recounting a number of different ways that nature helps people by calming and soothing them, by guiding them towards a more harmonious sense of community, by restoring positive emotions and by providing an escape from the stresses of daily life. The writer in Source B listed a similar range of ideas about the impact on people, with a focus on nature's restorative power.

Performance on this question was slightly higher than last November, with a mean mark of 3, which is at the lower end of Level 2. This suggests that many students struggled to make inferences about the ways nature helps people **as well as** to identify similarities between the two texts and usually succeeded in providing evidence of one or the other of these two key skills.

### Common strengths in responses

The strongest responses were those where the students made clear interpretations about the ways nature helps people, and explained clearly, for example, not just that it helped them to relax, but how it helped them to relax through the beauty of trees, or why it was important for people to feel a sense of relaxation as a relief from the vicissitudes of everyday stresses. To achieve Level 3, students were also invited to offer an interpretation of the similarities, for example indicating that the melody of birdsong both writers refer to is a timeless means of achieving peace and quiet, despite the difference in time between when the texts were written.

To achieve the highest levels, students needed to extend their understanding in detail or to be perceptive. Such responses were rare but there were some students who identified nature as a healer, with nature's blessings almost like medication to strengthen the mental health of those who cared to stop and engage. These perceptive comments were rewarded with marks in Level 4.

### Common misunderstandings

Weaker responses were characterised by paraphrase rather than interpretation. Many students provided an account of the ways nature helps people, with textual detail to support the response, but without any attempt to interpret the information and ideas. Other students were inclined to write in a very generalised way about nature and focus instead on the damage and destruction which humans have wrought on nature rather than offering ideas about how nature can help. This is perhaps inevitable when the topic is such a familiar one which students have substantial knowledge and experience of from other subjects on the curriculum such as Science, PRS and Geography. However, students should be reminded that, in an English Language exam, their own understanding of environmental issues needs to be grounded in the text and they should not be distracted by everything else they know about nature which is extraneous to the texts.

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## Question 3

The task in Question 3 was to explain how the writer in Source A uses language to describe their visit to London. It was an unfortunate coincidence that both source texts included a section which mentioned London and that the same lines in Source B referenced the smoky, coal-infused streets of London. This meant that a slightly higher proportion of students than usual wrote about the wrong source. This rubric infringement is accounted for in the mark scheme so that any student who chose the wrong text but did indeed write about London was rewarded at the appropriate level for the quality of their comments but at the lower end of that level.

There were many examples of language to comment on, with the image of the 'hollow hat-tip' and the 'hearts, beating on a platter' particularly popular with students. Few seemed to be sure about the meaning of the 'hollow hat-tip' but the majority were able to meet the criteria for 'some comment' in Level 2 by identifying that the effect was to show his visit was disappointing, empty or a waste of time. To move into Level 3, students need to unfold and explain the image clearly and indicate **how** the image of a hollow hat suggests a waste of time, for example.

### Common strengths in responses

Students rewarded at Level 3 offered clear explanations, for example, of how the writer was disappointed by the response of the Minister because his words 'shapeshifted'. They typically commented on how the image of shapeshifting creates an effect of the words transforming into something other than what was intended. Similarly, some students commented on how the connotations of shapeshifters are linked to lies and deceit and that this shows the Minister was untrustworthy and his words were unreliable. It is the explanation of the link between the image and the effect which is crucial for achieving Level 3. How and why has this particular word been chosen, and what effect does it create?

Responses at Level 4 were often detailed, extending their comments on the metaphorical idea of the 'hearts, beating on a platter', for example, to incorporate a sense of the vulnerability and evisceration of the writer in sharing his heart – a vital organ associated with his most precious feelings – 'for nothing' in return. The stark simplicity of the words reinforces the writer's sense of disillusionment. However, such high-level answers were few and far between this November.

### Common misunderstandings

At Level 1, students tended to select examples of language and identify language techniques with more or less accuracy but failed to comment on what effect they created beyond a generic comment. Feature spotting is not rewarded with any marks unless there is a comment on the effect, which remains the key skill for this Assessment Objective. Students seemed often to select words which they didn't understand, such as 'tangible' or 'grandiose', and this inevitably made commenting on their effects more difficult.

Students are reminded that this task is analytical and they are required to explain in as much detail as they can the function of an image and explain how and why specific words are chosen. It is not enough to identify that 'hearts, beating on a platter' shows how much the writer cares. That is rewarded at Level 2 with some comment on effect. To reach Level 3, a student needs to explain why the word 'heart' was chosen by the writer and not 'liver' for example, why the heart was 'beating' and not 'bleeding', and why the heart was presented on a 'platter' and not on a 'plate'.

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## Question 4

The task in Question 4 was to compare the writers' attitudes to the environment. Again, the students' wide-ranging knowledge of issues related to climate change and its impact on our planet were occasionally a distraction from the specific issues raised in the two texts. Some students were inclined to write more generally about the environment without embedding their comments in the texts and referring directly to the concerns of the two writers. These ideas cannot be judged 'clear understanding of perspectives' in Level 3 as they are not linked to the writers' views.

The similar themes and approaches of the two texts, with both writers reflecting on the environment and bemoaning the lack of action from those in power, provided rich pickings for students. In Source A, the writer expresses a quiet despair about the inevitability of climate disaster, whereas in Source B, the writer is at an earlier stage of awareness and is astonished at the ignorance of those who are exploiting the earth's resources without any regard for the future.

Many examiners were impressed by the responses of students to this task, with more free-ranging responses seen which encompassed both ideas and the methods used by the writers to convey their perspectives.

### Common strengths in responses

Students in Level 3 were able to clearly identify Source A's concerns about the treacherous response of the Minister to young people's anxiety about the environment and compare this to a similar frustration felt by the writer in Source B, who blamed the politicians for their inaction. To make a clear comparison, students need to interpret this similarity and many did by comparing how, despite the time passing between the source texts, politicians have always failed to fulfil the hopes and desires of the public for change. The thematic similarity of the texts made 'like for like' comparisons very straight-forward, as selecting the same aspect from each source to compare was relatively easier.

Some of the best responses in Level 4 focused in detail on the writers' use of methods to convey their attitudes. Some chose, for example, to write about the alliteration and/or onomatopoeia in 'ticking bomb to extinction' to echo the insistent sound of a clock reminding the reader of the inevitable destruction of the world, comparing it to the conventions of modern action movies where the bomb motif is repeatedly shown to symbolise the urgency of action. This was compared by some to the emotive language in Source B and how both writers use persuasive language to provoke an emotive response from readers to achieve their ultimate purpose – to change minds.

### Common misunderstandings

Weaker responses tended to revert to paraphrase. Level 1 responses recounted explicit ideas from the text and made basic cross references without any evidence of independent understanding. A comment from the student that the text showed the writer was distressed about the damage to the planet was sufficient understanding to move into Level 2. The majority of students fell into Level 2, showing some understanding of the two perspectives but their comparisons were more likely to be mismatched, comparing one aspect of one source with a different aspect of the other. Where there was a lack of comment on methods, students did not move any higher in Level 2 than 6 marks.

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## Question 5

The task in Question 5 invited students to write a speech for the leaders of the country expressing a view on the lack of young people's representation in decision-making as their voices were not given due seriousness. The task was open-ended in that students could answer in relation to any issues which engaged them and discuss how their ideas were being overlooked because of their age.

Too often however, students responded to the idea of the powerlessness of young people with generalised and vague speeches that failed to identify any single issue which they would like to raise. There was clearly a model in the two reading sources of the environment as an issue which young people might feel strongly about, but few chose to use the ideas contained in the sources for their answers. This led to a dearth of varied and interesting ideas which held many students at the top of Level 2. To achieve Level 3, students need to offer a clear argument with connected ideas, and these were often in short supply. Mean marks for both AO5/6 were towards the top of Level 2.

### Common strengths

The best responses were those where the student presented a coherent response to the statement which included some clear ideas such as reducing the voting age, harnessing the power of social media to instigate change, or how the student voice had impacted decisions within their own schools. These speeches were formal in style and tone, with an effective range of imagery and other linguistic devices deployed to persuade the readers/audience. They used varied sentence forms for different effect: to question, to demand, to exhort and to state facts, demonstrating a range of punctuation at the same time.

The highest performing students were able to develop their arguments beyond the need for those in power to take notice of young peoples' ideas and embrace a collaborative approach, for example, blending the strengths of youthful enthusiasm and energy with the experience of those much older and perhaps wiser. They tended to adopt a distinctive voice, taking a specific stance and following it through convincingly. They were often thoughtful and occasionally compelling. Technically, they used a wide variety of punctuation to support more complex grammatical structures and to shape sentences created specifically for effect.

### Common misunderstandings

There were a few weak responses which failed to meet the criteria for Level 2. These tended to be very short or offered few ideas. Some of these drew heavily on the material in the reading sources and duplicated ideas and phrasing at length, which did not enhance the students' responses. At Level 2, students typically presented their ideas with an overall sense of young people's frustration but no coherent series of ideas or proposals. Many students wrote at length and said very little. Planning a series of two or three core ideas is a commendable way to begin addressing the writing task as shaping and developing a series of points into a coherent argument is what is most likely to take a student into Level 3. Most students adopted an appropriate tone and style for a speech to political leaders, although there were a number of letters provided and some veered close to a barely controlled rant.

Weaker responses also demonstrated a lack of variety in the sentence structures attempted and a subsequent lack of punctuation. There was frequent evidence of poor control of agreement as students struggled to maintain secure syntax. Basic sentence demarcation was missing in some cases which detracted from some students quite promising ideas.

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## Further support

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