



# GCSE

# English Language

**8700/1**

Report on the Examination

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# Summary

## Overall performance compared to last year

Students responded well to the extract and to many of the questions. The relationship between Mary and Dick and the unbearable heat appeared to be easily accessible to the majority of students.

## Areas where students excelled

- The extract from 'The Grass is Singing' by Doris Lessing enabled students across the ability range to comment. The relationship between the characters interested students and they were able to find sympathy with both Mary and Dick, as well as many seeing more of the nuances of their situation. Examiners reported that Questions 2 and 4 were opportunities for some rich analysis and also evaluation.
- The idea of Dick's 'unfairness' drew some extended discussion and many students really sympathised with Mary and the unbearable heat. Examiners reported that many students felt that Mary was beyond rational thought because they had engaged so much with Lessing's descriptions of the heat. Others read Dick's anger as frustration and this then meant that they were able to see the economic impact of wasting water, as well as how sorry he had been by the end.
- Question 5 prompted excellent narratives, with many students thinking beyond everyday conflicts that we might encounter and instead seeing these within a more imaginative setting such as cowboys in disagreement over a horse, archaeologists in conflict over an ancient find. The descriptions benefited from a sense of atmosphere, and many chose to describe mirages, wildlife, lost explorers and ever-circling vultures.

## Areas where students struggled

- Question 3 was where many students appeared to struggle to see structural features. Those that saw the structural features, often struggled to make comments on the effects of structure. 'Why this event' and 'why now in the text?' can be useful questions for students to ask themselves, but many students seemed uncertain on what to select from the passage and how the passage developed by the end.
- Fewer students seemed able to draw on themes and concepts. The theme of power and powerlessness was present in Question 4, but not many students explored this as a theme. By extension, this could then have been explored as nature vs humanity.
- For the descriptive option, students who described a torturous environment often hampered themselves by staying in an environment that was empty of anything but sand. Although this is a desert environment, responses which added something else – such as a cave, an animal carcass, the setting of the sun – tended to be more successful.
- Vocabulary is still an aspect which appears to hinder some students. There were some extremely complicated words included this year such as 'lypophrenia' (a feeling of sadness) and 'megalohydrothalassophobia' (a fear of large objects under water) which are examples of words which cannot add to a piece of writing in any meaningful way. Although such words seem impressive, students can hinder the clarity of their ideas. It should be remembered that sophisticated, extensive vocabulary needs to match the tone, style and purpose. As always, showing the atmosphere, setting and/or characters' experiences, rather than telling, tends to be more successful.

# Assessment objectives

AO	Common student errors
<p><b>A01</b> Identify and interpret explicit and implicit information and ideas. Select and synthesise evidence from different texts.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using the introductory information: setting the scene, identifying the text from which the extract was taken for Q1 responses</li> <li>Selecting information from elsewhere in the passage than from the given lines</li> </ul>
<p><b>A02</b> 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"> <li>Using long phrases or whole sentences for Question 2, negating the discussion of the effects of individual words. Writing about whole sentences is writing about the content not the specific language.</li> <li>Not including comments on the effects of structure – why this and why now? Why has the writer chosen to focus on that detail at that point in the text?</li> <li>Focus on subject terminology but without any comment – feature spotting</li> </ul>
<p><b>A04</b> Evaluate texts critically and support this with appropriate textual references.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drifting into contextual information such as the patriarchy or toxic relationships. Although some students were able to use this as a brief lens for analysis, many drifted into lengthy contextual sections which are not credited on this paper.</li> <li>Some responses were too polarized – Dick is abusive and cruel; Mary is lazy and doesn't care about the environment.</li> </ul>
<p><b>A05</b> 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"> <li>Including unnecessary amounts of direct speech continues to be problematic. A disagreement lends itself to argument – but dominated by direct speech it can hinder characterisation, mood, setting, structural features and vocabulary choices.</li> <li>Endings which rushed to tie up all loose ends.</li> <li>Staying unnecessarily close to the image for the descriptive option without</li> </ul>

	<p>making some of the details the student's 'own'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lengthy, uncontrolled responses where the control over structure, description, characterisation had been lost</li> <li>• Students missing the purpose and audience which is appropriate for 8700/2 instead</li> <li>• Images lifted directly from Literature texts</li> <li>• 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</li> </ul>
<p><b>AO6</b> Students 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"> <li>• Narrow range of punctuation</li> <li>• Insecure direct speech punctuation</li> <li>• Contrived vocabulary</li> <li>• A lack of cohesion across paragraphs</li> <li>• A lack of sentence variety so that ideas became like lists</li> </ul>

# Individual questions

## Question 1

Read again the first part of the source, from **lines 1 to 6**.

List **four** things about Mary from this part of the source.

## Common misunderstandings

Students used the context of the extract beginning, ‘This extract is taken from the middle of a novel...’ as the source for their answers. Selecting information from elsewhere in the passage outside of the given lines also meant that there was an impact on the marks which could be awarded to some responses. Some students changed the meaning of their answers by miscopying details from the text, eg Mary **wondered** on the veranda. Some students were looking to make inferences from the subject when the text does not offer evidence, eg Mary gets sunburnt easily, Mary likes sewing.

## Question 2

How does the writer use language here to describe the effects of the heat?

## Common misunderstandings

Many students chose the word ‘obsession’ but mistook this to be a positive, irresistible feeling rather than an overbearing fixation on the torturous temperatures. This led them to interpret other language items through a positive lens.

The ‘heat lizards’ and their ‘darting’ movements were also popular choices from the given lines. Many students took the whole simile, ‘heat lizards, vivid red, blue, and emerald, darted over the rocks like flames’ and misinterpreted it as the lizards were on fire or their rock was alight. By taking the simile as a whole, it led those students to misunderstand, whereas, had they taken the simile apart they may have understood the effects of the image.

‘Lukewarm water’ was misinterpreted as a positive rather than a negative effect of the heat. Some students saw this as much better, less shocking to the body, than having ice cold water thrown over Mary. Here the common misunderstanding is to take a word out of the context of the extract and to interpret it as an individual item.

Animals are often a popular choice, and the plight of the dogs interested many students. The dogs were ‘panting softly or whining with exasperation.’ There are four words in this image that could have been unpacked, but many students were more general with ‘unhappy.’ The flies were the source of the dogs’ irritation, flies brought out by the heat. Many students missed this idea that came at the end of the image.

The most common misunderstanding came from the word ‘hissed.’ The line, ‘The scattering drops fell on the porous brick, which hissed with dryness,’ led many students to write about the animalistic, snakelike heat. The heat does not make a hissing sound. The water evaporates when it hits the hot bricks and so the violent reaction comes from the intensity of the heat affecting the water. Many students went into the imagery of snakes, even referencing Edward Hyde, in their discussion of this word.

## Question 3

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

This text is taken from the middle of a novel.

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

### Common misunderstandings

Students who focused on sentence length and paragraph length struggled to make any structural comments. ‘Why is [insert structural feature here] in that place in the text – what does it tell the reader or make the reader think?’ leads to a comment on the effects of structure. Writing about a complex sentence slowing down the pace does not lead easily to a comment about structure.

A focus solely on the beginning, middle and the end, without any comment about why those events were in that order or what developed across the sections limited many responses.

There seemed to be far fewer subject terms used in responses this year, although many of the structural features in this year’s extract have been found in extracts used in previous series.

## Question 4

Focus this part of your answer on the second part of the source, from **line 18 to the end**.

A student said, “Dick’s anger towards Mary is really unfair. The writer makes it clear that Mary is totally powerless in this relationship.”

To what extent do you agree?

### Common misunderstandings

Some students applied the wrong example to the wrong character: eg Mary isn't exasperated; Dick doesn't comfort Mary.

Some responses lost their way and made bold claims about gender roles in the 1940s: Dick being the embodiment of patriarchal oppression, Mary being oppressed and so on. Sweeping context (which was being assumed) rarely aided the quality of responses.

There were many references to coercive control and toxic masculinity. Although such topics are very important, they were mismatched here, and the labels led many students to miss the details of the extract and the relationship.

Some weaker responses started focusing on the text, but then drifted away into very generalised points, having left the text behind.

## Question 5

Descriptive option: Write a description of a very hot place as suggested by this picture: a desert scene (please see exam paper for picture).

### Strongest responses

The description responses were generally much more successful with the strongest combining a clear structure with movement, pertinent vocabulary and evocative figurative language. The more concise responses were usually very engaging, and some students were ambitious in balancing internal monologue with action and sensory language. More memorable responses often combined the setting with a specific genre which gave the writing purpose and form, eg war (Middle East), science fiction (alien planet), fantasy (desert quest), adventure (archaeological expedition). There were some very engaging westerns, as well as post-apocalyptic scenarios.

The strongest responses were deftly structured, used words / phrases / techniques to serve the story rather than to showcase skills and had a strong sense of describing the smaller 'hidden' details brought out from their imagination.

### Weakest responses

Weaker responses relied upon the listing of ideas without any apparent links between them, other than the fact that they were in a desert.

Although the idea of a mirage is a useful opportunity to explore contrast and disappointment, not many students were able to maintain the detail moving from reality to vision. eg description of heat and dehydration, sudden oasis, water, trees, birds, animals (usually listed) and then sand, death. Where students could have sustained their skills at a particular level, this is often where they appeared to struggle to keep their skills consistent.

The effects of heat tended to become gruesome – with skin cracking open, insects eating one's eyeballs, eating rotten flesh. Although this enabled some students to use more conscious vocabulary, those who were hoping to reach Level 3 struggled to engage the reader because these details were over-used. Using graphic imagery can be an appropriate feature of description, but like all discourse markers, the most successful writing uses this sparingly.

Some students seemed to have pre-learned vocabulary which wasn't always appropriate, and this resulted in some examples of confusing and incoherent responses. 'Plethora,' 'lackadaisical,' 'myriad,' 'discombobulated' still engage some students, but do not add to the response as they do not match the scenes or the atmosphere in which they are used.

Some responses showed a lack of understanding of the task on a purpose and audience level. There were some discursive responses where the environment and the effects of mankind were debated, or why it is hot in the desert. Students could be reminded of or could practice the key elements of the different papers for 8700. For both options, responses where the student had aimed to plan the structure of their work, tended to be more successful.

Narrative option: Write a story about a disagreement.

## Strongest responses

Many Question 5 responses were well-written: students have been able to communicate clearly and utilise a range of linguistic and structural devices in their work. The strongest answers exhibited a genuine interest in their topic and really conveyed an emotional understanding of disagreements and how these might be shown. Stronger responses sometimes dealt with the aftermath of a disagreement so that they were able to focus on describing its effects. This then led to some very skilful use of personification and development of atmosphere.

The most successful responses were able to find a specific situation for their disagreement such as mutiny on board a pirate ship, quarrelling politicians, prospectors arguing about their claim, explorers lost in the rainforest, Robin annoyed by Batman. These enabled more engaging disagreements as there was a clear frame for their ideas. It also enabled wider use of discourse markers and less reliance on direct speech.

Responses that were more secure with how to end a narrative also tended to be more successful. These responses did not need to finish the whole story, but rather completed the episode into which the reader had been placed. Not all threads need to be tied up and these students understood this narrative feature.

As is often the case, really skilful responses understood different genres and so were able to lean into science fiction, crime, dystopia – but judiciously – using this as a frame for their idea. Being able to select generic features to create the setting was a feature that impressed examiners.

## Weakest responses

Many weaker responses hinged on repeated formulae such as a triple, ‘Scorching. Melting. Painful.’ This was later repeated arbitrarily throughout the response. These do little to set a scene unless they are then explored individually – but without listing the words again.

Disagreements that were poorly anchored in specific events were common in the weaker responses. X ‘really hates’ Y and then they argue about who said what to whom, often struggled to move out of Lower Level 2 in the mark scheme.

## AO6 – both options

Technical accuracy appeared to be more secure this year, with more students attaining more highly in Level 2. There were many ‘desserts’ rather than ‘deserts’ and other errors where proofreading might have provided more success.

Responses which were secure with sentence demarcation, control of agreement and punctuation, without trying to over-complicate sentences, were often awarded marks in Level 3. There were fewer concerns about general technical accuracy this year, but the semi-colon and the apostrophe do still appear to pose challenges for many. Incomplete sentences when aiming for sentence variety did hinder some responses.

The main concern that affected AO6 was the poor quality of handwriting. This appears to be in decline and although this is not solely confined to 8700, it is something that centres might consider as a barrier to some students. Scripts deemed to have legibility issues are examined as carefully as possible and escalated to the most senior examiners. Despite this, some handwriting was a significant barrier. The use of a word processor could assist many of these students and could be pursued across a student's subjects.

# 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.

# Contact us

Our friendly team will be happy to support you between 8am and 5pm, Monday to Friday.

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