



GCSE

English Language

8700/2: Writers' viewpoints and perspectives

Report on the examination

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Summary

Overall performance compared to last year

Performance this November has demonstrated that the level of students' skills as exemplified in the exam is stable. The mean mark for this series was 32.8 marks, which is very close to the mean mark in November 2023 of 33.3 marks. This suggests that, despite a rise in the number of students sitting the exam this November – an increase from 38,000 entries in November 2023 to 48,000 entries in November 2024 – the level of performance has been maintained.

Question paper and source texts

The source texts used in this series were based on travelling to Egypt and exploring the ancient culture of the Egyptians. Source A was Howard Carter's first-person account of his discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun in the Valley of the Kings in 1923. The text introduced students to the nervous anticipation of the discovery and the sensation of awe and wonder at finding such untold riches in the tomb, three thousand years after it had been sealed. This was paired with a nineteenth century source text, a letter sent in 1844 by tourist Sophia Poole to a friend, describing her visit with her brother, Edward, a British archaeologist, to see the pyramids. Both texts encapsulate the amazement and astonishment felt at the prospect of encountering architecture and treasure from an ancient civilisation. The question paper focuses on both similarities and differences in the two texts, engaging students in a world many are likely to have encountered earlier in their education.

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>	<p>Students often found it difficult to interpret the ideas they retrieved from the texts, offering direct paraphrase rather than inferential understanding.</p>
<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>	<p>Students were able to name and select a number of different language features, but often struggled to analyse the writer's choice of words or phrases, choosing instead to infer the meaning of the quotation.</p>
<p>AO3</p> <p>Compare writers' ideas and perspectives, as well as how these are conveyed, across two or more texts</p>	<p>Students offered understanding and comparison of perspectives, but a worrying proportion were unable to comment on the methods used by either of the writers.</p>
<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>	<p>Many students adopted a more generalised approach to the task, responding to the abstract ideas in the statement without offering a range of concrete examples to substantiate their argument.</p>
<p>AO6</p> <p>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>	<p>The most common errors were those of demarcation and agreement; many students found it difficult to control the agreement of their sentences and demarcate them securely with full stops or other appropriate punctuation</p>

Individual questions

Question 1

Performance on Question 1 was at the lower end of the range of achievement, with 40% of students awarded the full four marks. This compares with 76% in November 2023 and 40% in November 2022. The cohort of students sitting the exam in November is usually skewed towards the lower end of the ability range and therefore the levels of literacy are likely to be slightly weaker. Q1 assesses the careful reading of a short section of text from the beginning of Source A and requires students to retrieve explicit information and ideas and make occasional inferences. Particularly for those students for whom English is not their first language, this can offer real challenges.

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 a straight-forward task to predict which words, phrases or ideas students will find challenging to retrieve accurately. 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; 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. Students were able to process the eight statements methodically and make their choices systematically, recording their answers clearly and efficiently.

Common misunderstandings

There was no single statement which students struggled to understand. Some students failed to appreciate that the fact this was the last season Carter was intending to spend looking for treasure in Egypt meant they had already planned to leave, which was assessed in Statement A. Likewise, some students mistook the discovery of the staircase in the text to mean that a wooden staircase had been found, which was false, as the text states that the staircase was 'cut into the rock'. Careful reading was also required to discriminate between the fact that Carter was certain this was a significant discovery and the subsequent comment in the text that Carter was worried the tomb had already been plundered. There are always pitfalls for those students who have a tendency to rush through Q1 in order to move on to the longer questions, and those who fail to think carefully about each of the eight statements.

There are other ways in which students can fail to achieve full marks on Q1. Selecting more than four statements results in an automatic reduction in the student's final mark for this question. Students who select five, six, seven or even eight statements as true lose one mark for each additional choice beyond the required four, significantly impacting their overall score. This should be avoided at all costs.

Question 2

The question focused on the appearance in both texts of robbers. In both sources, the protagonist encounters either a group or a lone robber and is involved in preventing a theft. The material relating to these potential robberies came from relatively discrete sections of text which made it slightly easier for students to retrieve and synthesise the relevant information from each text. There was some confusion in the responses of some students who overlooked the presence of the thieves in each text and chose to interpret the actions of the writers themselves as robbery.

Whilst it is possible to see that Carter was a ‘thief’ in terms of cultural and/or colonial appropriation, for the vast majority of students this was not the point they were making; they simply mistook the actions of Carter breaking into the tomb and Poole creeping into the pyramid as the actions of robbers. This was rewarded at Level 1 and Level 2, but not at Level 3 or 4 as the interpretation was not a clear reading of the text. This did not impact many students, as the vast majority were providing a quality of comment which was likely to be rewarded at Level 2 regardless of the interpretation. Performance in this question was slightly lower than November 2023 with the mean mark falling below 3 marks to 2.98.

There was sufficient material to draw on across the two texts, with the robbers in Source A demonstrating a level of organisation, experience, local knowledge, pragmatism and rational decision-making, whereas in Source B the lone robber appeared to be less organised and perhaps more opportunistic; more reluctant to listen to warnings; more audacious in setting out during the day to make his raid, but ultimately as easily deterred by a show of force.

Common strengths in responses

The strongest responses were those where the students made clear interpretations about the actions or attitudes of the robbers, and explained clearly, for example, not just that they travelled to a remote region to carry out the robbery, but that this showed they had detailed local knowledge of the area, or that they were cunning and devious in wanting to evade capture. Either of these interpretations (or similar), which were plausible in light of the details in the text, were rewarded at Level 3 where they were clearly explained. Students were also required to synthesise their ideas, at Level 3 offering a ‘like for like’ synthesis, for example, the level of organisation and preparedness of the robbers, or the speed with which they reacted to being caught.

To achieve Level 4, students needed to extend their understanding in detail or to be perceptive. Such responses were rare but there were some students who, for instance, challenged whether the reader could be sure that the robber in Source B was indeed intent on theft and whether their evasive behaviour was the result of belligerence and violent intent or in fact innocence.

Common misunderstandings

There were many weaker responses where students struggled to do more than select quotations and paraphrase the information themselves. Many students identified, for example, that in one source there were eight robbers and in the other just one robber. Where this simple difference was identified, it was rewarded at Level 1 as no attempt was made to indicate what the student understood or could explain about the difference in numbers. Where students offered some understanding (but without full explanation), such as that the

eight robbers were safer in a group or that the lone robber was braver, these were rewarded at Level 2 as ‘some difference’ as they provided some incomplete, partial understanding of the ideas. Students who mistook the identity of the robbers were rewarded at either Level 1 or Level 2.

Question 3

The task in Q3 was to explain how the writer in Source A uses language to describe their discovery. As last year, the same lines in Source B also refer to the discovery of a tomb and a minority of students chose to write about the wrong source. Where their comments were about the correct focus – the discovery – they were rewarded at the same level but towards the bottom of the level, depending on the quality of their comment. This is in line with the rubric as set out in the mark scheme and attempts to offer some reward for students despite their error.

There was a wide range of different language features to choose from, but students tended to opt for the same few: the excitement ‘burning like a fever’, the ‘glint of gold’, ‘struck dumb’ and the light which ‘pierced the darkness’. Many students demonstrated that they were able to select these details appropriately and identify them using the right subject terms but were unable to comment clearly on their effects. This is the key skill and determines the level. Naming language features and selecting details are supporting skills and cannot determine the student’s overall level.

Common strengths in responses

Students rewarded at Level 3 offered clear explanations, for example, of how the writer felt the physical effects of the excitement of discovering the tomb, as if he were ‘burning like the heat of a fever’. They were able to drill down into the image and explain the connotations of a fever being a high temperature; or a physical weakness; a shivering, shaking, out of body experience where the sufferer is almost hallucinating, thus emphasising the intensity of his excitement and anticipation. Students working at Level 3 tended to avoid writing about simple adjectives or adverbs, rightly recognising that they would be difficult to explore in sufficient detail.

Responses at Level 4 were rare. Students working at this level were often drawn to examples of language features which offered richer rewards, such as ‘For the moment – an eternity –’. The abstract concept of time and the deliberate juxtaposition of an instant being compared to infinity allowed some students the opportunity to describe how the writer uses the contrast to encapsulate the momentous nature of the discovery and to emphasise a sense of time elapsing.

Common misunderstandings

At Level 1, students tended to select examples of language and identify language techniques with more or less accuracy but offered a generic or generalised comment, such as ‘...which shows us how he feels.’ Students at this level often selected unsuitable phrases which left them with no opportunity to do anything other than paraphrase what they understood, such as the adjective ‘bewildering’ showing how bewildered he felt. To move into Level 2, students need to at least find a synonym for the words they select, such as ‘confusing’ or ‘disorientating’.

The vast majority of students were rewarded with marks in Level 2, indicating that they were able to make some attempt to comment on the effects, but they did not fully explain how or why the writer had chosen that particular word, phrase or image, often providing inferential understanding instead of analysis of language. Students typically offered comments that the alliteration in ‘glint of gold’ showed that there was so much gold shining in the tomb. To move into Level 3, students would be advised to focus on the word ‘glint’ and explain why this word has been chosen – because it suggests a hint or flash of light, like a reflection which flashes and then disappears – to describe how the treasure shone in the light of the torch through the spyhole. Why did the writer use the word ‘glint’ and not ‘gleam’ or ‘glow’ or ‘sparkle’ which would each create slightly different effects?

Question 4

The task in Question 4 was to compare the writers’ attitudes and feelings about their experiences in Egypt. The narrow, discrete focus of Q2 ensured that fewer students were tempted to reproduce their response to Q2 in their response to Q4 and encouraged students to start from scratch with their answers. The focus of the question was on the similarities of the writers’ feelings, as it was in November 2023. This focus tends to encourage students to make more ‘like for like’ comparisons as they see the parallels rather than the differences. Certainly, most students were able to comment on how both writers were amazed and overwhelmed by their experiences and thereby reach a mark of 5 or 6 in Level 2. It was clear that students occasionally struggled to find words to describe the writer’s feelings beyond those used by the writers themselves. Students need to be aware that paraphrase is a Level 1 skill and they should seek to use as wide a range of vocabulary as possible, of their own words, to explain the feelings in the text.

There was much to say about Howard Carter’s feelings and attitudes as the source text offered a plethora of possibilities, ranging from tremulous excitement to dogged determination and philosophical entrancement. Students tended to favour Source A, finding it more challenging to discern Sophia Poole’s feelings other than her admiration for the grandeur of the pyramids. Some students may have found this slightly more nuanced text more difficult to access, in part because the writer’s attitude appears to shift once she enters the pyramid and finds it empty.

Common strengths in responses

Students in Level 3 were able to explain, for example, how Carter’s use of the phrase ‘struck dumb’ showed the intensity of his delight at discovering the ancient tomb, using the word ‘struck’ to reinforce the sudden, shocking impact of the sight, as if he had been hit by lightning; or how Poole’s use of facts and statistics demonstrated in a measured but equally awestruck way just how impressive the dimensions and scale of the pyramids appeared to her.

The best responses were where students identified how both writers are transfixed by the passing of time and were able to see the similarities in their reflections on how three thousand years has passed as if it were the blink of an eye. Students used the quotation ‘for a moment – an eternity’ to analyse Carter’s sense of time collapsing, the juxtaposition of ‘moment’ and ‘eternity’ playing with the concept of time passing - both past and future. They compared this to Poole’s sense of the ‘freshness’ of the pyramids, as she similarly considers

how the passing of millennia appears to have happened without affecting the brightness and immediacy of the ancient monuments.

Common misunderstandings

At Level 2, many students compared the writers' feelings as both 'amazed' and 'excited' but found little else to offer to extend their response and provide a clear explanation of their attitudes. Some reverted to material they had already produced in response to Q2 and re-introduced the robbers, but this provided limited opportunity to explore attitudes as it wasn't entirely clear how either writer felt about these encounters and students were left to speculate. Too many students did not comment on methods at all, and thereby limited themselves to the bottom half of the level. The weakest responses were those where students simply paraphrased or recounted the events of both sources and reused the same words used by the writers themselves to describe their feelings. Developing students' ability to use synonyms is one way of ensuring they can move from Level 1 to Level 2.

Question 5

The task in Q5 invited students to write an article for their centre's website arguing their point of view on the idea that the past is a waste of time and we should focus on the future instead. The thematic link to the reading sources is clear, with the focus on history and many students responded with enthusiasm to the proposed binary opposition with some more balanced arguments. Some students appeared to struggle with words in the statement such as 'innovation' and 'irrelevant', which resulted in fewer students than expected engaging in discussion of the future and focusing instead on our relationship with the past.

Many students focused on the abstract ideas of 'past', 'present' and 'future' and offered generalised responses which explained their preference, but provided very few ideas of what it is from history, for example, what we learn and how do we ensure that history doesn't repeat itself, as many were keen to suggest. Students fared better when they were able to draw on specific examples from the past – World War 2; the suffragette movement; race relations protests; Covid-19; the bubonic plague etc – and drew on these events to extrapolate from them lessons which could be learned. This did not require GCSE History as many of these events are covered in other areas of the curriculum and are very much general knowledge. Similarly, those students who wrote about the future were more successful where they could point to specific advances – in medicine, artificial intelligence, transport, alternative power supplies, environmental initiatives etc – and explored how these should be a priority. General, abstract 'big ideas' are welcome, but they need to be substantiated by specific examples and granular explanation. The reverse is also true: personal anecdotes and experience are also welcome but need to be expanded to take in the bigger picture and the big ideas.

There was widespread evidence that students are structuring their responses more carefully and adopting a more coherent perspective. There are fewer examples of arguments which flip back and forth, agreeing and disagreeing randomly with the statement. There are more examples where students offer an introduction at the start, a series of more or less connected paragraphs and a conclusion, which has not always been the case. This suggests that students are increasingly well-prepared for the writing task and is a credit to both them and their teachers.

Common strengths

The best responses were those where the student presented a coherent response to the statement which included some clear ideas about the past, such as the importance of remembering the sacrifice of those who gave their lives in war so that we might live in peace, or the value to women in particular of the bravery and commitment of those who fought for equal rights, including the right to vote and how this should never be forgotten. Students working at Level 3 developed their ideas within paragraphs, clearly explaining what lessons were learnt, how we have benefited from learning about them and how we should continue to appreciate their sacrifice. These clear connected ideas were expressed using a range of vocabulary clearly chosen for effect, with a scattering of linguistic devices used to engage their readers. Technically, responses at Level 3 were characterised by the word 'mostly' in that their range of punctuation, sentence control and spelling were mostly accurate, with a variety of sentence forms deployed for impact.

The very best responses were, as expected, few and far between in the November series, but there were some examples of compelling arguments. Students working at Level 4 were able to provide cogent, inventive, highly engaging perspectives on the statement. It is often the confident tone of these responses and the assured style of their writing which create the first strong impression of the quality of response, with students often adopting an original perspective, such as the proposal to replace history lessons in centres with future lessons and a detailed account of the curriculum. Others drew on events from the history of their own culture and countries, arguing passionately for leaders to learn from the mistakes of the past. Yet others took inspiration from the US election (which took place the day before the exam) to explore the implications of voting a second time for Donald Trump as President and what this teaches us about not repeating the past. These responses are always detailed and offer more complex ideas, reflecting the critical thinking and conscious crafting of the students in presenting their points of view. Technically, these responses were not by any means flawless; some students achieved marks for AO5 in Level 4 and marks for AO6 in Level 3 and vice versa. The separation of the content and accuracy marks allows examiners to reward students for the quality of their ideas, regardless of the technical inaccuracies, as the AO6 mark is a completely independent judgement.

Common misunderstandings

There were some responses which met the criteria for Level 1 but did not move into Level 2. These tended to be brief and limited in scope. They were often characterised by a pedestrian or informal register which was not suitable for the centre's website and offered little by way of variation in vocabulary. Few students at Level 1 are using paragraphs or extending their ideas beyond a repetition of the same basic premise. To move into Level 2, students needed to expand their vocabulary; structure their writing with paragraphs and begin to build their sentences so each one picks up on the previous one and looks ahead to the next.

At Level 2, students typically offered generalised responses; those who were able to offer a more interesting variety of relevant ideas were likely to be rewarded at the upper end of the level. Some students focused their answer on presenting a point of view about history lessons in centres and how boring they were, with personal anecdotes of their tedium, expert opinions from history teachers and spurious statistics from supposed student surveys on the popularity of history as a GCSE choice. This tended to restrict students unless they were able to use these points to extrapolate a wider perspective on educational priorities and the

potential value of learning about the future. Other students working at this level offered arguments about how we must learn from history without taking into account the self-evident facts that war has not been consigned to the past, people are still dying from diseases we cannot cure, and our society may well not be a model of harmony diversity and equality. There was some evidence at Level 2 of an intent to demonstrate variety of sentence structures and, as a consequence, of punctuation too. Poor control of agreement continues to be frequently seen as students find syntax, use of tenses and use of prepositions challenging. Basic sentence demarcation was missing at the lower end of the ability range and is something which perhaps students could be encouraged to check after they have finished writing, if they have time.

Further support

Mark ranges and award of grades

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

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