GCSE EXAMINERS' REPORTS

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

SUMMER 2017

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EDUQAS
ENGLISH LANGUAGE

GCSE (NEW)

Summer 2017

COMPONENT 1

These were the first papers for this specification and therefore perhaps a source of some apprehension for all concerned. However, in some ways they were a return to a familiar examination structure with reading and writing in both papers and some familiar question types.

The length of the papers also removed some of the pressure on time management and, although it remains important to organise the available time sensibly, there was more opportunity to pause and reflect than there has been in the recent past.

Section A

The reading material had to engage the full range of ability and provide a fair test for all candidates. This is not an easy task but this passage seemed to work well enough as it had a strong narrative thread with plenty of action and excitement and some interesting and well-drawn characters.

Question 0.1

The first question addressed the requirement to identify explicit and implicit ideas and information and five marks were available for a straightforward selection of relevant points. The question asked for a list of what was learned about the main character, Ruby, and the candidates could simply locate facts or make inferences. The intention here was to allow the whole range of candidates to get started and build some confidence in dealing with the text. There was a need to be **selective**, and some able candidates perhaps looked for more complexity here than was required, but there were no traps in this question and it focused on a short section of the text.

Ruby gave the pets a lot of attention in various ways and she talked to the parrot. She had decided to follow in her father's footsteps and run a pet shop and she thought it was her destiny. We learned that, ironically, she was not allowed to have a pet but she dreamed of having all the pets one day. Some candidates came up with valid alternatives and they were rewarded.

Question 0.2

This question required the candidates to read a longer section of the text but it was important to remember that it was only worth five marks. The rubric instructed the candidates to refer to language to support their answer and to use subject terminology <u>where appropriate</u>. However, examiners had to have realistic expectations here and the focus of the question was on impressions of the various members of the Lennox family and on them as a family unit. Those candidates who offered a concise and **sensible range of impressions with appropriate evidence** to support their ideas did the job effectively.

It was fairly clear that the Lennox family lived rather separate lives and the girls kept to themselves. Patricia seemed particularly isolated, hiding herself away in her room, but Ruby also played alone in her room with only her teddy for company. The father seemed to absent himself frequently. He went out 'as usual' and returned 'tripping' and 'cursing' his way upstairs. Most candidates understood why. The mother struggled to cope with life. She was not presented as an accomplished cook and she was stuck with piles of ironing which she 'abandoned' before taking a double dose of sleeping pills and dropping into 'oblivion'. Overall, it was clear enough they were not exactly the perfect or 'model' family. Some candidates described them as dysfunctional and it was difficult to argue with that assessment, despite the author's humorous presentation of the Lennox family.

Those candidates who supported their comments with some well-chosen examples of the writer's language choices and made some reference to relevant subject terminology could get full marks here. Weaker responses tried to argue that the Lennox family were caring and normal.

Question 0.3

Although this question covered a relatively short section of the text, it focused sharply on authorial method. The relevant assessment objective requires the candidates to analyse how writers use language to achieve effects and it also mentions using 'relevant subject terminology' to support their views. My anxiety was that this would encourage an aimless hunt for devices, a completely pointless, and often pretentious, exercise in feature spotting. The key point in the assessment objective is that the use of subject terminology should be **'relevant'** and in support of the candidates' views. The identification of devices should not be seen as an end in itself nor should it distract the candidates from engaging with the text and the writer. I am pleased to be able to report that most candidates seemed to approach this hurdle in a very sensible way. There are still those who have faith in the mystical power of short, or long, sentences but overwhelmingly the candidates focused on the use of personification and identified some adverbs and adjectives. Subject terminology is a very dangerous weapon in the wrong hands but most candidates handled it carefully and sparingly, keeping the focus on the actual text.

The obvious point to make about this section of the text was that the writer did not present the situation as moving instantly from normality to total conflagration. Instead, she described the gradual build-up of the fire in a series of increasingly devastating steps.

The writer's use of the comparative 'hotter and hotter' was cleverly juxtaposed with the picture of Ruby's mother snoring in her bed under the influence of rather too many sleeping pills. The first sign of what would follow was the 'scorching' of the cloth on the ironing board until the pad underneath began to 'sizzle' and 'burn'. The fire spread to the wood of the ironing board and was described as being 'happy for a time'. In one sense, this phrase suggested a pause as the flames devoured the wood but the writer also personified the fire as if it were a mischievous, inquisitive child, momentarily occupied before moving on to more interesting targets.

Some candidates noticed the very precise sequence of details with which the writer described the gradual development of the fire. There was a frightening and inexorable sequence and a melting lead fell to the carpet and set it alight. The thread of personification continued as the flame which spread the fire to the curtains was described as being 'particularly energetic'. At this point in the narrative the fire was described as being out of control as there was 'no stopping it'. It now 'gobbled' everything in its path, including the kitchen wallpaper, and a lot of candidates on the use of that particular verb. However, the adverb 'greedily' also reinforced the powerful sense of the fire as a voracious being.

The writer then described the fire 'popping its head' into the shop where there were 'wonderful things to play with' such as paraffin and sawdust. The seriousness of the fire spreading to the shop was somehow at odds with the light, ironic tone employed by the writer. The personification of the fire almost as an excited child rushing to 'play' with the 'whispering, rustling noise of fear' was incongruous and horrible. Most candidates grasped the danger to the animals in the shop and, although only a minority could express effectively and clearly what they felt, I suspect that more of the candidates did sense the deliberate incongruity of tone and content in these lines.

The question was challenging but it allowed the candidates to show what they could do and many of them grasped the opportunity.

Question 0.4

The weighting on AO2 is particularly heavy in this component and this question also addressed this assessment objective. The section of text was not too long but it was packed with action as the girls tried to escape the fire. Language and structure featured importantly here but so too did the action and those who focused on the narrative details did make decent progress, not least because the sequence of events is an integral part of structure.

The first thing to notice in this section of the narrative was the switch from past to present tense as the writer attempted to create a sense of immediacy. Very few grasped the change of tense and this was unfortunate as it was a deliberate technique used to engage the reader.

Ruby was woken suddenly by an unnamed voice and the adverb 'quickly' was used to suggest the sense of urgency. The room was full of smoke and Patricia was 'veiled' by it. The writer used the simile 'like burnt sausages' to convey the smell of burning and the adverb 'urgently' reinforced the sense of panic as Patricia pulled back the covers and started 'tugging' at her sister. Ruby did not immediately understand the situation and the writer created a sense of confusion and unease. Patricia doubled up in a fit of coughing and spluttering and explained that it was a fire. They walked 'unsteadily' and Patricia expressed the fear that they could be trapped. The tension was clearly building and what appeared to be Patricia whispering was in fact the effect of the smoke. The harsh language such as 'rasping' showed how hoarse she was.

They opened the door 'cautiously' and the simile 'as if all the fires of Hell were behind it' was a vivid image of the intensity of the fire and their fear. Verbs such as 'choke' and 'stagger' and 'gasping' and 'retching' clearly suggested that the smoke was thick and dangerous. The description of the girls as 'human chimneys' was an arresting metaphor and it is worth stressing that those who were comfortable with straightforward notions such as verbs, adverbs, metaphors and similes were easily able to fulfil the requirement for 'subject terminology' without resorting to the esoteric.

The action developed as the girls were trapped in the bedroom and Patricia tried to stop the smoke and protect them by using blouses. The window, which was the only obvious means of escape, was described as being 'hopelessly stuck' and Ruby was described as becoming 'hysterical'. She dropped to her knees and began to pray 'frantically', which some might argue was a sign of desperation. The girls were faced with 'incineration' at the end of this section and it would have been difficult to contradict the premise of the question which was that these lines were exciting and dramatic.

There were some fairly obvious things to say about the writer's method here and it really was not necessary to plunge into fanciful assertions about the mystical power of punctuation or sentence length. Those who saw sentence length as the key could not agree on whether it was long or short sentences which made the difference here. The change of tense, the sense of developing and real danger and the language choices provided more than enough material for the candidates to explore.

Question 0.5

This type of question, asking for **critical evaluation of a text** assesses AO4 and should not have been unexpected. The question focused on the development of Patricia as a character but, as the bullet points made clear, it involved the passage as a whole and also some evaluation of the authorial method.

Some candidates did not get beyond a simple personal response to the character at the conclusion of the passage. Better responses attempted to comment on the development of the character in the passage as a whole and provide some textual support. However, the candidates at the top of the range showed not only critical awareness and clear engagement with the text but also a willingness to explore how the writer had created particular effects and how these had shaped their response to Patricia.

At the beginning of the passage Patricia had seemed rather detached from the family and some candidates noticed that she did not appear in the narrative at this point but emerged as a character entirely through the comments of Ruby and her mother. The writer then used the fire to develop the character and show what she was really like through her actions in the crisis. For example, it was Patricia who rescued the sleeping Ruby. She took control of the situation by pulling the covers off the bed to stop the smoke and using blouses as protective masks. Patricia was practical and sensible, smashing the window and using the rug to shield them from the broken glass. The writer also showed Patricia being sensitive and considerate to Ruby by trying to reassure and comfort her. Her feelings about the animals were also made clear by the writer as Patricia was horrified when she thinks about the pets and her face was 'convulsed' by a 'spasm of pain.' Her bravery was shown when she climbed out of the window and down the drainpipe. She emerged as 'truly heroic' and the writer expressed Ruby's confidence by using phrases such as 'I believe her' and 'You can trust Patricia.'

When she witnessed the fate of the animals, and the horror was made clear by the writer's description of 'the unforgettable smell of toasted fur and feathers', Patricia was distraught and 'weeping uncontrollably'. However, the 'miracle' happened and Rags appeared, changing Patricia's tears to uncontrollable sobs of happiness.

Most candidates argued that the rather withdrawn character emerged as admirable and sympathetic, showing courage and sensitivity. The writer used action and language to show the development of the character and to shape the reader's response. There was more 'show' than 'tell' in the narrative technique and it was difficult to argue against the suggestion in the question that Patricia emerged as a real heroine. However, some observant candidates did notice that she put the animals before her parents and did weep uncontrollably at the end, arguing that this was not necessarily evidence of heroism.

As I said at the beginning of this report, there is a natural anxiety when a specification changes but this passage did exactly what I wanted it to do and most of the candidates responded to it well.

Section B

It has been several years since candidates in England have been asked to write creative prose in examinations and, although there were some who showed control and imagination in their narrative technique, the overall standard of narrative writing was disappointing.

This section gave the candidates a choice of narrative titles and there were opportunities to write from personal experience or to create imaginative fiction. Sadly, too few wrote from experience and too many lacked imagination. An imaginative narrative can be very impressive, particularly if it is not taken from the latest movie blockbuster or the internet, but there is a need for a story to pay attention to plot and characterisation and to be coherent, or at least consistent and convincing on its own terms.

There is a difference between the genuinely imaginative and the far-fetched and some of the stories on display really did strain the willing suspension of disbelief. Some candidates got so caught up in fanciful, unconvincing action that they completely ignored the needs of their readers. Some were simply incoherent.

It seems a fairly obvious thing to say but those who are not lucky enough to be naturally imaginative storytellers might be better advised to write from personal experience and give their narratives some authenticity. The mark-scheme for writing mentions 'convincing detail' and 'purposeful development' but both were in very short supply.

However, even more worrying was the large number of 'prepared' narratives which had little or no relation to the specified titles. It is difficult to give much credit for communication and organisation to this type of response and candidates need to be reminded that the titles are not there just to be ignored if they choose. Some responses show only the most tenuous, or forced, links to the titles but those which make no attempt whatsoever to fit a story to a title do themselves no favours and I am very concerned by the number of candidates who indulge in this practice. Sometimes it was impossible to work out which option was being attempted.

The irony is that the people who suffer most from a lack of spontaneity are the most able as their flair and imagination are constrained.

Question 1.1

(a)   A Memorable Weekend.

This was an option often chosen by those who had no intention of writing anything other than the 'prepared' response and it was glaringly obvious when that was the case. Some made only a token gesture at the title and then just got on with writing what they had clearly prepared in advance. Many candidates struggled with the notion of a weekend and the action often took place in a narrow time-frame such as an hour or two or sprawled across years, if not decades. There were some genuine attempts to write about a memorable weekend but too many were unconvincing. The candidate who wrote about going to the festival at Glastonbury provided a rare moment of authenticity.

(b)   Write about a time when you had to make a difficult choice or decision.

This was quite a popular option but it was not always clear where the notion of a difficult choice or decision was located in the narrative. It should have been fairly straightforward to write convincingly from personal experience here and the wording of the question made it absolutely clear that this was an opportunity to write a first-person narrative. Most of the better responses had chosen this option, probably because it offered a clear direction for the writing.

(c)   Write a story which begins: "You are not staying here on your own. Get in the car now," my mum said in that voice which did not allow any argument.

This option offered the candidates a way into a narrative but very few managed to find a clear line of development. Most abandoned the implications of the opening as quickly as possible but some wrote about reluctant visits to relatives or family holidays or shopping trips which developed in a sensible way.

(d)   Write a story which ends: I feared the worst but the teacher could not stop herself from laughing.

To construct a narrative which leads neatly to a specific conclusion is not easy but very few of the candidates who chose this option managed to avoid a 'crash landing'. Very often the ending was just added as a token gesture and had little or nothing to do with what had gone before. There were some impressive stories but in most the ending was incongruous, or indeed a total surprise.

Technical accuracy counts for a significant proportion of the available marks in writing and it is a weakness for too many candidates with too many basic errors on display. One of the most alarming issues in narrative writing is the widespread inability to control tenses but problems in spelling, punctuation and sentence construction are still very much in evidence.

There were exceptions of course, but the overall standard of narrative writing could have been better; both in terms of communication and organisation and technical accuracy.

Section A

The reading material in this component has to include texts from both the nineteenth and twenty-first century and those chosen focused on the subject of prisons and in particular the use of solitary confinement as a method of punishment. One of the texts was by Charles Dickens and the other was a newspaper article looking at 'America's toughest prison'. The texts seemed to be accessible to candidates of all abilities and provided opportunities to test the range of reading skills required in the specification. Most candidates seemed to be engaged by the material and on occasions offered their own views about the effectiveness of the solitary confinement regimes discussed in the two texts.

Question 1.1

The first question, on the text by Mark Binelli, required the candidates to **identify explicit information** and there were three marks available for the location and selection of the appropriate details. This was a straightforward 'search and find' task but candidates' responses indicated the real importance of reading the question carefully. The first part of the question asked for one example of how the worst prisoners were punished in the past. This presented few problems to most candidates and there were a number of possible points that they could select from, all mentioned in the opening paragraph. Working in silence in chain gangs, being physically isolated from others on Alcatraz Island were two of the possible responses but Binelli also discussed corporal punishment as well as solitary confinement as methods of punishment. However, some candidates failed to read the question carefully enough and wrote about the current punishment regime in Florence Prison.

The second part of the question asked candidates to note the number of prisoners on roll at the time of the article and again, most had no difficulty in finding the correct number: 439, although some gave the number of beds in the prison rather than how many prisoners were housed there. The final part of the question asked for one example of the privileges that could be earned in the prison for good behaviour and few failed to select one of those mentioned: mirrors, radio, televisions that would be allowed in a cell, additional 'outside' time from the cell and the possibility of transfer back to a less-secure prison. As an opening question, the intention was to allow candidates to settle into the text and when carefully read, this provided a useful foundation for the following question.

Question 1.2

This question required candidates to now tackle the whole of the Binelli text, inviting them to explore how the article showed that prisoners lived in conditions he described as 'harsh'. This type of question assesses AO2 and the two bullet points asked candidates to explore what he told his readers about the conditions in which prisoners were contained, along with the way language, tone and structure were used to emphasise these conditions.

Additionally, many candidates recognised that in exploring 'how', Binelli had made use of the views of others, for example, the warden of Florence, who offered his view of the conditions.

Although the demands made on candidates in this type of question have increased, many candidates who **tracked the text methodically** found they had plenty of material upon which to base their answer. Many began with Binelli's own view that the prison is 'known for its harsh conditions' which then led on to some specific details of the conditions that prisoners were kept in. Most saw that keeping prisoners in a cell on their own for 23 hours a day would be regarded as harsh, especially as the cell itself was 'incredibly small'. The whole of the fourth and the following three paragraphs offered very specific details of the tough conditions prisoners found themselves in and some candidates took the opportunity to note Binelli's use of adjectives that emphasised the harshness of their incarceration, or the list-like approach to giving information which showed how many restrictions prisoners faced.

Some candidates focused their attention on the sense of physical isolation the prisoners faced, using details such as the cell doors that prevented prisoners seeing others, the limitations of the 'tiny' windows, the way parts of the prison were designed to prevent prisoners knowing where they were or the absolute lack of contact with other prisoners for the first three years. These were all rightly seen as examples of the harsh regime; as further evidence, some then used these details to explain how these conditions led to some struggling with mental problems.

There was plenty of information in the article upon which to base an answer and decent reward could be gained just by exploring this. However, by looking at Binelli's use of language, tone and structure, the best candidates were able to push into the higher marks, although as in Component 1, the best responses began by focusing on the content and not on feature-spotting. As indicated above, many saw that his descriptions of the 'tiny' window, the 'concrete slabs' or the 'tiny' mattresses all emphasised the harshness of the conditions and perhaps reflected Binelli's own view of the regime, despite what appeared to be a rather detached tone dealing with much factual information. Others explored the way that structurally the article began with the historical perspective that 'the worst of the worst' prisoners had always been punished especially harshly and that Florence was merely a continuation of that tradition. Having given details of the conditions faced by prisoners, Binelli then moved on to how the regime was viewed by those outside and then inside the system itself. It was perhaps telling that Binelli chose to quote the director of the American Civil Liberties Union and many candidates noted his view that the conditions were 'extraordinarily harsh' and were 'shattering' for some inmates. Some candidates then went on to explore the way the article concluded with the views of the warden, Robert Hood, who described the prison as a 'clean version of hell', and a place 'not designed for humanity', and some saw this as another way in which Binelli made clear to his readers that Florence was like no other prison. Those prepared to explore the way Binelli structured the article sometimes commented that the final paragraph offers a view from Hood that perhaps the conditions seen in Florence are more appropriate to a bygone era and that those in charge of prisons might reflect that, in the 20 years that Florence has existed, 'the world has changed'. In using this to conclude the article, some candidates commented that there seemed to be the clear implication that there may be better solutions available than the 'harsh conditions' faced by those incarcerated in Florence.

Question 1.3

This question moved the focus on to the Dickens' text, and whilst some candidates struggled a little, most were able to use the question as a starting point for the more detailed exploration of the text that would come in the following question. As with the first question, the focus was on identifying explicit information but additionally interpreting implicit information in the text. The question was in two parts, the first asking what Dickens described as 'awful' when he visited the prison. Most found the information easily, and often simply quoted the line from the third paragraph, that he found the quiet – or the silence – in the prison to be awful. Some weaker readers misread the sentence, suggesting it was the passages in the prison he found to be awful, but most moved on to the second part of the question with no difficulty. The second part of the question asked for details that suggested prisoners were in the prison for a long time and here details such as the punishment was 'prolonged for years', they stayed 'in the same cell for ten weary years' they were 'led to the cell from which he never again emerges...' or they 'count the seasons' and 'grow old' were sufficient to gain the marks.

Question 1.4

As the report for Component 1 makes clear, this question, asking for critical evaluation and personal response to a text is somewhat different from what has been set in past specifications. In this paper, in order for candidates to answer this question, they needed to have a clear understanding of what Dickens' views were of solitary confinement, and how he made those views clear to his readers before they could effectively respond to those views. That said, many candidates who tracked the text carefully found it possible to explain Dickens' views of the punishment and then offer a personal response based on what they had read and understood. It is worth emphasising, once again, **the importance of reading the question carefully**; some candidates wanted to write about the prison in more general terms, losing the focus on solitary confinement and leaving examiners with little to reward.

Where candidates had focused their response on the question, most found they had plenty of material to explore and it was easy to see that Dickens completely disapproved of this form of punishment. From the very beginning, candidates were able to note that he gives his opinion unequivocally – "I believe it to be cruel and wrong". Whilst some concerned themselves merely with 'spotting' that Dickens had used 'the rule of three'/'tripling' in his description of the punishment as 'rigid, strict and hopeless', there was more fertile territory in exploring his absolute condemnation of the practice. Good candidates were able to consider the way Dickens referred to solitary confinement as 'torture and agony', using the word 'dreadful' to describe it and explaining that, in Dickens' view, few are able to understand its effects. Many recognised that Dickens believes solitary confinement to be so 'cruel' that no-one had the right to inflict it upon others. His implication, that it leads to mental illness, was picked up by lots of candidates, as was his view that because it was 'daily tampering ...with the brain', it was 'immeasurably worse than any torture of the body'. Some candidates were rewarded when they chose to look at the impact of the language Dickens used in his condemnation of the punishment, saying that words as powerful as 'torture' and expressions such as 'ghastly signs' or 'terrible endurance' were evidence of his very strong feelings.

Other candidates thought that Dickens' first-hand visit and description of what he found in the prison, gave power to his viewpoint, particularly the examples he offered of the prisoner who, because of his incarceration, 'never hears of his wife and children; home or friends' until he is released. The concluding image used in the third paragraph that he is 'a man buried alive and dead to everything...' was frequently quoted in support of Dickens' view that solitary confinement was an inhumane way of treating prisoners. Good candidates focused on the way Dickens emphasised not just the mental isolation caused by solitary confinement but also the sense of physical isolation; they often selected details from the penultimate paragraph where Dickens gives the example of one prisoner who is unaware of anything beyond his cell in its 'lonely corner' of the jail, seeing this as a way in which Dickens tried to influence readers to feel sympathy with those he called 'the sufferers' of this punishment. Similarly, the long, complex sentence that builds and develops the details of his physical isolation in this paragraph also attempts to create some sympathy for those subjected to solitary confinement.

Where candidates moved into their thoughts and feelings on Dickens' views, opinion was free but the best responses derived from careful consideration of the text. Whilst some felt that solitary confinement was indeed inhumane because of the effect on prisoners' mental health, others believed that without knowledge of the prisoners' actual crimes, it was difficult to feel sympathy for them – or agreement with Dickens' views. Some candidates offered no personal response or offered a view that took little account of the text, but where candidates were able to articulate how Dickens viewed solitary confinement, explored how he made his views clear and were able to offer their own thoughts on them, they were able to gain very good marks.

Question 1.5

This question, asking for the ability to select and synthesise materials from the two texts, invited candidates to consider how the writers showed that the cells in the prisons added to the prisoners' sense of isolation. From previous examinations we know candidates find dealing with two texts demanding, but here **the key was to focus on the question and select appropriate details.** For some candidates, the focus on 'the cells' was lost and they sometimes launched into writing responses that included anything except a reference to the cells. Others struggled to identify what one or both writers said. For example, some candidates insisted that both writers included details of the small cells, though only Binelli did this; others wrote about the cells having concrete walls, though there is no mention of this in the Dickens text.

However, there were details of the cells that both writers did focus on, and many candidates focused on how both writers explained how the cell doors increased the sense of isolation for the prisoners. Binelli told readers that the cells in Florence had, "double sets of sliding metal doors (with solid exteriors, so prisoners can't see one another)", whilst Dickens described the cells as having, "double doors: the outer one of sturdy oak, the other of iron." Other candidates used the examples in which both writers explained that food was delivered to prisoners through a "small slot" or a "trap" in the doors – in neither prison was there a communal food hall. In both texts too, the cells denied prisoners any sense of their whereabouts, Dickens saying they had no idea about which "lonely corner" of the jail they were in and Binelli saying the exercise cell was deliberately "designed to prevent the prisoners from knowing where they are". In Binelli's text there were other details about the cell that would have added to the prisoner's sense of isolation, such as the size of the cell, the small windows allowing "just a glimpse of the sky" and so on, and in Dickens' text, he writes of the way the prisoner "never again emerges" from the same cell. Where candidates focused clearly on the question it was possible for them to gain full marks quickly and effectively but rather too many drifted from the question and wrote about more general details of the prison rather than specifically about the cells.

Question 1.6

The comparison of texts has always presented a challenge to candidates and in this specification there is the requirement to identify what the writers say about a specific aspect of the text but additionally to explore the ways in which writers get their message or viewpoint across. As a consequence, **it requires candidates to be absolutely clear about the focus of the question** and in this paper, they were asked to compare what the writers say about the effects of solitary confinement on prisoners and then to explain the methods they employ to make those effects clear to readers. Many candidates noted that Binelli makes it clear that prisoners left alone for very long periods suffer from "hallucinations and memory loss". They saw that he goes on to report the view that reformers believe that, over time, the effect of solitary confinement "can be shattering" and that it can subsequently "lead to more violent behaviour". When candidates turned to the other text they were able to see that Dickens, too, explores the effect that solitary confinement has on prisoners' mental health, writing about the way it creates an "immense amount of torture and agony" because of "tampering with the mysteries of the brain". He writes of the way prisoners suffer "torturing anxieties and horrible despair", some candidates using Dickens' words to show that the effect of solitary confinement was to make them feel "buried alive and dead to everything". Some candidates explored the way each text focused the prisoners' sense of isolation in more general terms and there was some reward for this, as there was for candidates who looked at how the writers captured the disorientation felt by prisoners as a result of their incarceration.

In looking at the methods employed by the writers, many saw that Dickens presented a very personal viewpoint, as a result of his first-hand experience of the visit to the Eastern Penitentiary. His emotional condemnation was seen in the strong language he employed; candidates selected many examples of phrases or words that showed his views, some recognising that in using the example of a specific prisoner and the powerful description of the deprivation he suffered, his message was particularly hard-hitting. In dealing with the Binelli text, some candidates struggled to explain how his message about the effects of solitary confinement was made clear, some talking of his 'laid back tone' or making sweeping assertions that the article showed his support for this form of punishment. More careful readers saw that he placed the Florence regime within a historical perspective and that dealing with "the worst of the worst" had always resulted in a harshness that, in retrospect, allowed little opportunity for prisoner reform. Some wrote about the detachment with which Binelli explained the prison regime or noted the list-like way he told readers of the day-to-day existence prisoners faced but more careful readers also saw that he had chosen to draw upon the views of prison reformers and particularly the views of a previous warden at the prison, these views making it clear that in pursuing a policy of solitary confinement Florence was a prison like no other, and ultimately would be regarded as having outlived its usefulness.

Section B

The types of writing task in Section B invite candidates to write transactional and/or persuasive responses. In this specification candidates have to tackle two tasks, spending roughly 30 minutes on each, and with the expectation that each response will be about 300-400 words. In the event, most candidates seemed able to complete both tasks, although some struggled to manage their time effectively, with the result that the second task was sometimes much briefer or lacked development.

Question 2.1

This task was to write what candidates would say when asked to give a talk to older people who may not be using modern technology because of their fear or lack of understanding of it. The task included some suggestions of areas that might be included in the talk, although it was perfectly possible to focus on just a single area. In the event, most candidates did try to range fairly widely across the suggestions offered, although briefer responses inevitably lacked depth and development.

To tackle the task effectively, it was important for candidates to have a clear sense of the intended audience and then shape the material accordingly. In some cases, candidates gave only a cursory nod at the idea that the talk was for those unfamiliar or fearful of modern technology before launching into quite detailed discussions of apps, statuses and all manner of technical details that would have some of the audience scratching their heads in bewilderment. At the other extreme, some candidates appeared to think it necessary to explain how to switch on a computer. Better responses managed to combine some straightforward information about the power of the internet with practical details about ordering shopping – or a new pension book online – often with some recognition that dealing with new technology could be viewed as tricky at first but was actually easy to manage given a little help or practice. There were some neat touches in some responses that showed that candidates had kept their target audience firmly in mind, although at times this seemed to be limited to just opportunities for online bingo or knitting patterns, searching for pensioner holidays or replacement bus passes. Although some candidates tended to look at the advantages of the internet and social media from the perspective of a teenager anxious to play the latest games or download the latest rap music, others provided advice more suitable to the intended audience, giving examples of how useful it was to regularly see and talk to grandchildren living in foreign parts through Facebook or being able to download novels and reading material on to a tablet when going on holidays. Although there were some very brief responses that lacked detail or development, most candidates recognised the need to be re-assuring their audience that technology presented new opportunities for older people just as much as younger generations and good responses gave effective examples of exactly how older users could benefit from social media, tablets or smart phones along with suggestions that would encourage them to try it for themselves.

Question 2.2

The second task was to write a letter to a newspaper, responding to one that had appeared in a previous edition, in which the writer had suggested that pet ownership had so many drawbacks that he/she could not understand why anyone should want to have a pet. The task was in the form of a letter and therefore the layout of a formal letter was expected, along with a suitable salutation and sign-off. Most managed some attempt at this, although there were too many examples where candidates had ignored this, either entirely or in part.

In letters of this kind, the audience is the readership of the newspaper, but many appeared to think the editor of the newspaper had written the original letter, most offering a strong condemnation of the views expressed. One approach, taken by lots of candidates, was to take each of the points expressed in the original letter and deal with them in turn. Sometimes the points were dealt with in a rather cursory manner that failed to develop an alternative or supporting view in any detail but good responses often used a separate paragraph to deal with each point, building and developing an alternative, or in some cases, supporting the original view, with some telling examples that gave weight to their point. In some cases candidates were desperate to pepper their responses with statistics that proved that they were right, whilst others provided anecdotes about their own family pets that were usually much more convincing. It was perfectly possible to sit on either side of this particular viewpoint and build a strong case and there were good examples to be found of each. As

ever, those who had taken a little time **to plan and structure their response**, with some clear points that were then well-developed, produced engaging and often persuasively convincing letters.

As highlighted in the report on Component 1, technical accuracy often made a significant difference to the overall mark and all too frequently the mark for VSSPS (vocabulary, sentence structure, punctuation and spelling) was in a lower band than that for communication and organisation. In trying to appear sophisticated writers, too many candidates continue to use semi-colons inappropriately, whilst struggling to use full stops and commas correctly and there were many basic spelling errors and weaknesses in sentence construction. Given the weighting of technical accuracy in this examination, it is a focus that would repay time and effort in making improvements.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

GCSE (NEW)

Summer 2017

COMPONENT 3

Monitoring Process

Each centre was required to record and submit for monitoring a sample of their candidates' individual presentations by the deadline of May 5th. For most centres, this involved preparing a sample of 30 candidates' work, including, where possible, 10 at each grade: Pass; Merit; Distinction. Smaller centres with entries under 30 had to record and submit all their candidates' presentations.

The samples were posted directly by centres to their designated monitors who watched examples of the candidates' presentations at each grade, using the on-line marksheet (IAMIS) to select an appropriate sub-sample.

In judging each centre's sample, the monitors had two chief concerns:

- Checking that the candidates' work **met the requirements** understood by the term 'presentation'

- Ensuring that the centre had **applied the assessment criteria appropriately** and that their judgements of their candidates' presentations were in line with agreed standards set out in the inter-board standardising material.

In the vast majority of cases the monitors were able to confirm that the centre's assessment was secure. Whereas in the legacy specification, centres received individual reports following a Speaking and Listening visit by their moderator and submission of their sample of records, monitors were not required to report on the centre's sample for Spoken Language. If centres received no communication about their sample, they could assume that their assessment of their candidates had been generally agreed by the monitor.

Administration

Most centres adapted successfully to the new requirements for monitoring standards, using the guidance on the Eduqas website. However, as this was the first year of the new specification, there were understandably some teething problems with the administration and submission of the samples of candidates' work.

Unfortunately, all monitors encountered some **difficulties viewing the candidates' work** which caused significant frustration and made the process much more time-consuming. The most serious problems were caused when:

- Centres submitted their presentations on **storage media which meant that monitors could not easily access the work.** This meant that monitors had to return the inaccessible, corrupted or damaged samples to centres or post them to technicians at WJEC/EDUQAS, which slowed the process considerably.
  - Some centres sent **encrypted work which required a password** so that the monitor had to wait for it to arrive under separate cover or contact the school directly.
  - Some files could **only be opened using particular applications** or programmes which meant that not all monitors had the necessary software to open and view the files, or the IT knowledge to devise work-arounds.
  - Some centres' work could not be accessed because the memory stick had been **damaged in transit or the files were corrupted.**

- Even when it was possible to view the work, there were often **problems identifying the individual candidates' presentations** because they had **not been clearly labelled.**
  - In some cases, presentations were all stored on the **same file** without any indication of the order in which they appeared making it very difficult for monitors to locate individual candidates' work.
  - Some centres submitted their presentations on **several DVDs or memory sticks**, as many as 5 or 6 in some cases, again with no indication to the monitor of where to find the individuals' presentations.
  - Many **candidates did not introduce themselves** and were only labelled by their first names which was obviously problematic. In some cases, candidates' names used on the labels or announced at the start of the recording did not match the official name on the on-line marksheet and without the accurate and consistent use of candidate numbers it wasn't always easy to identify them.
  - **Some candidates' presentations appeared more than once**, even three times, on different devices, which was very confusing, as was the separate recording of the question and answer section without any guidance to the monitor about where or how to find the different components.
  - Some candidates' files were labelled with their grades, which was helpful and a requirement of the file naming process. However, when the **grades had been altered following internal moderation**, files hadn't been renamed and this caused confusion for monitors

- Even when the work could be accessed, there were often **technical problems** with the actual recording:
  - Not all the work had been tested for **sound quality** at the centre which meant that it was not always possible to hear what the candidates were saying. In some cases, the candidates' voices were not synchronised with the visual performance and in others there was no sound at all!
  - Sometimes the teachers were closer to the recording device so that they could be heard perfectly whereas the **candidates' voices were muted and barely audible**.
  - **Background noise** was also a problem in some cases. Monitors realise that schools are often noisy places but recording work at lunch or break times meant that the candidates' voices were often drowned out by their peers

While all of this might seem trivial, it made the process unnecessarily time-consuming and onerous for monitors.

However, some centres were a **model of good practice**, adopting a very professional and efficient approach to the submission of the work. Monitors fully understand that this is a time-consuming process for hard-pressed English departments, and not their highest priority given the unweighted status of Spoken Language. However, as professionals, most departments would surely wish to do the best job possible by taking these small but important steps to make the process as user-friendly and straightforward as possible for the monitor:

- Using a **multi-platform format** for the recording of their candidates' work, such as Windows Media Player, which meant that monitors did not have to download new software to access the work.

- Checking that all the presentations were **audible and not corrupted** before posting.

- Ensuring that the device was **carefully packaged** to guard against breakage and that all DVDs or USB sticks were **clearly labelled** with the centre's name and number.

- Organising the presentations into **three separate folders** labelled PASS, MERIT and DISTINCTION, containing a **separate electronic file for each candidate.**

- **Labelling each presentation clearly** with the candidate's name and number.

- Reminding candidates to **announce their name and number** clearly at the start of their presentation.

- Drawing the monitor's attention to any anomalies or issues relating to the candidates' work via a **brief covering note.**

Although there was no requirement to send any paperwork with the sample, some centres included a school or college **complimentary slip** with a departmental contact name and number in case of difficulties and a **printout of the IAMIS sample** with candidates' names, numbers and grades, both of which were very helpful. Monitors were very grateful to those centres where the sample had obviously been prepared with care and consideration for the fellow-teacher who would be standardising their candidates' work.

Task setting

As always, this was a *crucial* element in the candidates' success. In those centres where teachers had given some thought to setting tasks which were appropriate and interesting for their cohort, the candidates tended to give much more engaging and successful presentations and to achieve their full potential: it was as simple as that. Unfortunately, in some centres, the task setting was not carefully considered or helpful and the candidates often gave lacklustre presentations and underachieved as a result.

Monitors were agreed that the **following approaches to task setting did not help the candidates** achieve the best grade possible:

- **Inflicting the same task on all candidates** with very little choice. This made it very difficult to communicate any enthusiasm to the audience and to achieve the criteria for even a Merit grade, let alone a Distinction. In one centre, all the candidates in one class spoke on the same topic to the same, almost soporific audience of their classmates who, understandably, found it very difficult to think of challenging questions which would inspire 'perceptive' responses from the speaker.

- Many centres chose to use the presentation as a way of **supporting the candidates' English Literature studies,** which was a perfectly valid approach. However, narrowing the choice to one of two vague tasks on 'A Christmas Carol' or 'Macbeth' meant that the same material was churned out with very little enthusiasm or investment from the candidate, again making it difficult to meet the criteria for the higher grades. There are only so many points to be made about 'How Scrooge changes' or 'Which ghost was most important' and the same material was churned out again and again. As one candidate put it at the start of his presentation: *'I'm doing the one about the ghosts'.*

- **Paired or group work tasks did not always serve candidates well**. Working with a partner might be a helpful way to encourage very shy candidates to participate but when adopted as a whole-centre approach, it seemed to be mainly used as a way of covering as many candidates' presentations at one time as possible. This may well be a centre's decision but not if they would like to give their candidates a chance of achieving the higher grades. In one case, groups of three or four candidates shared a presentation on an issue in which none seemed especially interested. Their contributions were brief and under-developed with little opportunity to demonstrate the 'effective range of strategies to engage the audience' needed for the Distinction grade.

- **Many candidates simply read aloud written speeches**, often in a monotone and without inflection or intonation which would allow them to 'meet the needs of the audience' for a Merit grade. While notes are allowed, and can be an invaluable aid, candidates who simply lower their head and read are unlikely to 'engage the audience'. At times, the reading was very halting and, while monitors would make some allowance for understandable nerves, there was often the sense the candidates were reading the material for the first time, stumbling over obviously unfamiliar words and details. With prepared speeches, it can be difficult to tell whose words we're hearing and there was the distinct impression at times that candidates had downloaded material wholesale from the internet and had limited knowledge of, or interest in, what they were reading. In one instance, a group of three candidates passed the same piece of paper from one to another when it was their turn to read their part, which made the centre's awarding of Distinction grades difficult to uphold.

- A lot of candidates clearly felt more comfortable **using PowerPoint slides** but these could be a distinct hindrance to the candidate. Some printed the whole speech on slides and then turned to the side – or even fully around – to read the words from the screen. Even less successful was the use of a monitor in front of the candidate or on the desk next to them which they turned towards to read from. Inevitably, the use of technology meant that there were some glitches which tended to undermine the candidates' confidence as they tried to find the right slide.

- **Allowing candidates a completely free rein** when it came to their topics was not a successful strategy. As the guidance for centres makes clear, there was an expectation that teachers would help candidates decide on their subject and prepare their presentations. Most students cannot really be relied on to select suitable topics any more than they could set their own exam questions and many naturally chose self-limiting or reductive subject matter such as describing a holiday, favourite group or celebrity, pets or hobbies. While this 'straightforward' material can be appropriate and helpful for Pass candidates, those aiming at Merit and Distinction grades need to tackle 'challenging' or 'sophisticated' ideas or material respectively.

Monitors did see some excellent work in centres where teachers had decided to make the best of the situation and use the Spoken Language presentations as a way to vary and enhance learning. There had clearly been some excellent guidance on selecting challenging topics which would allow candidates to demonstrate sophistication and presentation skills. In some centres, teachers had made excellent use of the cross-over between the presentation and Component 2 writing, in the planning and organisation of relevant material and using rhetorical techniques to engage and persuade the audience.

It was generally agreed that **the most successful presentations** were from centres where teachers:

- **allowed candidates some autonomy** in the choice of topic, so that it was something which genuinely interested them, rather than having a narrow range of ideas imposed on them.

- **guided those aiming at Merit and Distinction grades towards challenging subject matter**, giving advice on research and organisation of their material. There were some memorably stimulating and even moving presentations on a wide range of serious and demanding topics, including issues relating to Brexit, Donald Trump's presidency, the importance of feminism, the rise of masculinism, LGBT rights, mental health problems among young people, the refugee crisis, knife crime, legal highs, university fees, NHS funding, etc. Others chose topics closer to home, such as local issues or school/college developments while quite a lot opted for more light-hearted themes, such as why *Game of Thrones* should be adopted as part of the school curriculum!

- **helped candidates refine their tasks** so as to avoid a show-and-tell approach. This more simple format can be perfectly appropriate for those aiming at Pass grades where straightforward material and delivery are acceptable. For those aiming higher, however, having a **clear purpose or intention**, such as persuading the audience, rather than simply relaying information, made it easier to meet the Merit criteria. For instance, in one centre, candidates went beyond just giving an account of their favourite poem from the Literature anthology or explaining which are the five most important quotations in *Macbeth*. There were excellent presentations from candidates who actually taught their chosen poem to their classmates or persuaded them that Lady Macbeth did not deserve to be denounced as a 'fiend-like queen', thereby meeting the purpose of their presentation.

- helped candidates who wanted to **use powerpoint do so effectively** by advising them against printing their speeches on the slides in favour of using intriguing one-word headings or visual images as a stimulus.

- **gave advice on presentation skills**, such as using notes as prompts rather than simply reading, making eye contact, using inflection and intonation, standing and projecting, facing the audience, etc.

There is guidance on task setting available on the [Eduqas website](#).

Responding to questions

As a whole strand of the assessment criteria relates to this skill, it is absolutely vital that **all** candidates are given an opportunity to respond to questions on their presentations. **If candidates do not respond to questions, they have not met all the criteria for even a Pass grade** and, using a competency model for assessment, this means that they must be awarded a Not Classified grade.

Monitors reported instances when **candidates awarded all grades, including Distinction, were not asked any questions** and therefore did not meet even Pass grade criteria. These candidates should have been awarded a N grade instead. Sadly, this sometimes affected all the candidates in a centre where the requirement for a Question and Answer session following the presentation had been overlooked.

Monitors expressed **several key concerns** about the Q and A section:

- **This was often the most engaging part of the presentation,** when candidates who had lowered their heads and read from scripts suddenly came to life and demonstrated real enthusiasm for, and knowledge about, their topics. When it was not often clear how much material those candidates reading from pieces of paper had simply downloaded from the internet, **the Q and A session was often a key indicator**, helping teachers and monitors to gauge how well – and how independently - the candidates had organised their material and used strategies to engage.

- Unfortunately, the **Q and A was often rushed or tagged on at the end** so that even impressive presentations were sometimes followed by a single, cursory question and a rushed response from the candidate. This often meant that the candidate had not responded with *appropriate formality and detail* for a Merit or *perceptively with some elaboration* for a Distinction and **the candidate was awarded a lower grade** as a result.

- **Problems arose in paired or group presentations** as not all candidates answered questions so did not meet even Pass criteria. It was difficult to ensure that all candidates in the group were given equal chance to respond to equally effective questions. Paired/group presentations are permitted but centres must ensure that all candidates are given the opportunity to present and answer questions of sufficient challenge to meet the appropriate grade.

- Even when there was enough time devoted to questions, **the quality was not always sufficiently thoughtful or challenging** to allow the candidate to demonstrate perceptive or even detailed responses. Having endured several presentations on the same topic, it was perhaps unsurprising that an audience of classmates, or even their teachers, could not always be relied upon to summon up interesting questions.

- In some centres, **candidates simply read out prepared answers** to rehearsed questions which was deadly and was not at all in the spirit of the exercise.

- As predicted in the advice to centres given in preparation for the new specification**, the onus was often on the teacher to ask stimulating questions,** especially of candidates aiming at Distinction grade. This was particularly true when a single teacher was the audience as the candidates had been released from lessons or had given their presentations at lunchtimes or in after school sessions. On the whole, the questions posed by teachers were challenging and gave opportunities for development but this was not always the case and candidates under achieved as a result.

The best results were seen when centres:

- **underlined the importance of this key criterion** to candidates working at all grades so that it was taken seriously, rather than viewed almost as an after thought.

- **gave candidates some opportunity to have an audience**, even if only a small, select number of classmates.

- **advised against prepared answers to rehearsed questions** which tended to stifle any spontaneity and mitigated against 'perceptive elaboration'.

- **included some discussion with students** in advance of the SL presentations about the difference between **open and closed questions** and how to listen carefully to pin-point key areas for further development (another useful area which can be overlapped with Component 2 as well as a useful life skill).

- **recognised the responsibility placed on the teacher** to step in and ask probing questions of candidates aiming at higher grades.

Assessment

In most centres the teachers had accurately placed their candidates in rank order and made fair, consistent assessments of their presentations. There were few instances of candidates being awarded Pass grades when their work was deserving of a higher grade, although there was some marked generosity in awarding higher grades when candidates had not met all the criteria as required by the competency assessment model.

Monitors mentioned the following issues which meant that centres' assessments were not secure:

- **Not all centres seemed familiar with the competency model** and the fundamental principle that candidates must meet *all* the criteria for a grade before they can be awarded that grade. It seemed that centres were still using a 'best-fit' approach as used for Speaking and Listening in the legacy specification.

- Monitors felt that **not all centres had used the standardising materials** to inform their assessment of their candidates. The twelve exemplar presentations, along with detailed commentaries prepared by the inter-board committee, have been available since early 2016 to help centres become more familiar with the competency model and to apply the relevant grade criteria appropriately. Without careful reference to the standardising materials, there was a tendency to over-reward candidates who had not met the higher grades because:
  - Their **material** was more straightforward than challenging or sophisticated
  - Their **vocabulary** was not sufficiently varied or sophisticated
  - They **read their speeches** without enough consideration for the needs of the audience, or failed to use strategies to engage their audience
  - As their task did not have a **clear outcome or function**, they did not fulfil the purpose of the presentation
  - The **questions** asked did not elicit detailed or perceptive responses

While no candidates' grades were adjusted this year, centres where assessment was not secure will be contacted by WJEC Eduqas and offered guidance on improving the accuracy of their grading. In some cases, this will involve a visit by a senior monitor to advise on task setting and internal standardisation procedures.

Recommendations

Monitors would offer centres the following recommendations when preparing this year's cohort for the Spoken Language endorsement:

- **Appoint one member of the department to oversee matters** relating to Spoken Language: task setting; assessment; preparation of the sample, etc.

- **Review departmental approaches to task setting**, making sure higher achieving candidates choose material and approaches which will allow them to meet Merit and Distinction criteria. Consult advice on the Eduqas website.

- **Review approaches to the Q and A section** and how to ensure Merit and Distinction candidates are sufficiently stretched.

- Make sure that, before they assess their candidates' work, **all teachers have watched and discussed the standardising presentations** which can also be used as a teaching tool with candidates.

- Check that **all teachers are fully familiar with the assessment criteria** and how to apply the competency model.

- **Plan carefully** for the recording of the presentations to be included in the sample needed for May 5th. Guidance on recording and labelling samples can be found on the Eduqas website.

- **Before posting, check the sample**, ensuring that the monitor will be able to access the presentations easily and that all the candidates' work is clearly labelled.

Conclusion

In these data-driven days, monitors fully acknowledge the pressures on English teachers to maximise all candidates' chances to fulfil potential in the written exams. We are realistic about the fact that Spoken Language no longer contributes to the overall GCSE grade and how this will inevitably affect the amount of time and energy teachers devote to it in precious lesson time. That said, it was discouraging to note that in some centres the candidates had not been enthused in any way about this endorsement but instead given the impression that it was simply an irritation, an obstacle to be overcome as quickly as possible. **It is worth remembering that the grade for the Spoken Language assessment appears on the candidates' certificates and is part of the overall qualification.**

However, some centres clearly adopted a more positive approach. Monitors were heartened to see that **in many centres teachers had recognised the importance of Spoken Language as a life skill and had encouraged candidates to take the exercise seriously, stressing the value of practice in engendering confidence.** It was a positive joy to see the obvious sense of achievement in some candidates when they'd finished; for some this might be one of the most memorable parts of their GCSE studies. At the end of an entertaining and surprisingly thought-provoking presentation on why Bart Simpson should replace Donald Trump, thoroughly deserving of the grade awarded, the candidate punched the air and cried, '*Yes! Totally aced it!'*

Eduqas GCSE English Language Report Summer 2017