

FIRST LANGUAGE ENGLISH

Paper 0990/11
Reading 11

Key messages

Candidates did well when they:

- worked through the three texts and questions in the order set, attempting all parts of all questions
- had planned their responses for higher tariff tasks in advance of writing – considering both the ideas to be used and a logical route through their answer
- after reading questions, returned to the text to clarify or check their understanding of key details and the main ideas in the material
- followed task instructions and references carefully, responding appropriately to the command words in the question to base their answers on the correct text and/or section of text
- used only the material and ideas most appropriate to the task as set
- focused on the particular evidence of skills and understanding they needed to demonstrate for each of the three extended response questions
- considered the marks allocated to each question and targeted their response time accordingly
- paid attention to the guidance offered in tasks – for example, explaining three examples from each of the two paragraphs identified in **2(d)**, indicating clearly the one example from the text extract they were using in **2(c)** and identifying a word/phrase (not a sentence) in each part of **2(a)**
- identified and used relevant ideas, opinions and details from the text in the response to reading task rather than inventing untethered material
- used their own words where instructed to do so, avoiding unselective copying and/or lifting from the text
- avoided repetition
- checked and edited their responses to correct any incomplete ideas or unclear points.

General comments

Candidates' responses indicated familiarity with the format of the Reading paper and understanding of the general demands of the three tasks, though there were still some candidates who did not pay attention to the guidance in the task instructions and missed opportunities to evidence skills and understanding as a consequence. Instances where whole tasks had not been attempted were rare, though there were occasions where responses to part questions were incomplete or missing, limiting opportunities to score higher marks.

Responses to the questions set indicated that candidates had found all three texts equally accessible and engaging. Occasionally, a failure to complete all aspects of a task and/or a loss of focus on the rubric limited the evidence of understanding and skills offered or resulted in redundant material. For example, a few candidates attempted to choose and explain three choices from paragraphs other than the two identified in **Question 2(d)** whilst others selected from only one. Similarly, there were some less well-focused responses to higher tariff tasks from candidates who had scored well in smaller sub questions – for example, some candidates wrote more than the maximum 120 words advised for the selective summary **Question 1(f)**.

In **Question 1**, candidates scoring highly had worked through the tasks in the order presented and usually made efficient use of their time, for example by paying attention in **Questions 1 (a)–(e)** to the marks and space available as a helpful indicator of the length and detail they needed to offer in each response. They did not add further unnecessary material and focused on answering each question as set. Most candidates followed the line or paragraph references in the questions carefully to help them to move down **Text A** in order and to direct their attention. Almost all remembered that in a test of comprehension their responses to these initial short answer questions needed to be derived from the text in order to evidence their Reading skills and are not based on personal opinion or experience.

Less successful responses sometimes offered circular answers, repeating the language of the question where own words were specified as being required; such responses provided no evidence of understanding as a consequence – for example, in **1(b)(i)** suggesting that ‘this means their limits were challenged’. In **Question 1(f)** a few candidates relied heavily on the language of the text and/or copied whole sections of text, limiting the available evidence of their own skills and understanding as a result.

In **Question 2** candidates needed first to identify **(2(a))** and explain **(2(b))** words and phrases from the final text, moving towards an explanation of how language was being used by the writer via **Question 2(c)** and on to the language task, **Question 2(d)**. Stronger answers were careful to refer back to Text C to locate specific relevant choices and consider meaning in context. Opportunities for marks were missed by some candidates in **Question 2(c)** who did not clearly identify one example from the text extract to explain and in **Question 2(a)** by those who copied out whole sentences from the text rather than identifying the exact word/phrase that matched the sense of just the underlined word/phrase in the question. To aim for higher levels in **Question 2(d)**, candidates should ensure that they explore and explain the meaning of each of the words chosen in some detail before moving on to consider associations and connotations or suggest effects. Most were able to suggest six potentially useful examples for analysis – three in each half – for the **2(d)** task and offer basic effect/meaning in context, though a number of candidates were not sufficiently clear, careful or detailed in the examination of their choices. In less successful responses, generalised comment, repetition of the language of the text or labelling of devices without explanation of how these were working meant opportunities to target higher levels were missed. A small number of candidates offered few or no choices in **Question 2(d)**.

In **Question 3** responses for the most part had attempted to include ideas relevant to all three bullets of the task, though a few lost sight of the text – for example, writing creatively about their own experience of sports training or trying to include details related to Tough Mudder (Text B) which were not relevant. Most candidates had remembered to write from Sam’s perspective, with the best focused on interpreting the evidence in the text throughout. Less successful responses either offered only brief reference to the passage, included evidence of misreading and/or repeated sections from the text with minimal modification. Along with unselective copying, reliance on the language of the text to communicate ideas is an indicator of less secure understanding and to be avoided.

Paper 1 is primarily a test of Reading, though 15 of the 80 marks available are for Writing – divided between **Question 1(f)** and **Question 3**. In these questions, it is important that candidates consider the clarity and register of their writing. It is advisable to plan and review responses to avoid inconsistencies of style, serious errors that impede communication of ideas and awkward expression. Candidates should be aware that unclear writing is likely to limit their achievement, as will over-reliance on the language of the passages. Leaving sufficient time to edit and correct responses is advisable.

Comments on specific questions

Question 1 Comprehension and summary task

Questions 1 (a)–(e)

Short answer **Questions 1(a)–(e)** required candidates to read and respond to Text A. Strong responses paid careful attention to the command words and paragraph references in the instructions to demonstrate effectively and efficiently the evidence of understanding required. Some mid-range responses missed opportunities to target higher marks, for example through overlong explanations, striving to offer own word answers where these were not needed and/or repeating language of the text where own words were required. Candidates should note that where use of own words is necessary to evidence understanding task guidance makes that clear. Less well focused answers on occasion clouded the evidence of understanding by including additional unnecessary material and/or extra guesses – an inefficient use of examination time.

Successful responses provided evidence that candidates had understood the need to interpret and use details in the text carefully to answer each of the comprehension questions to show what they could do and understand. They followed the order of the sub questions to work through the text from the beginning.

- (a) Give the two examples of types of endurance events, other than ultra-marathons, according to the text.

In **Question 1(a)**, almost all candidates had identified from the beginning of the text the two examples of endurance events ‘other than ultra-marathons’ (triathlons and adventure races) though a very small number tried to offer ultra-marathons as one of their examples. Some candidates made use of the question stem to help focus their answer, whilst others simply wrote the key words of their answer alongside each bullet – either approach was acceptable. Some candidates added extra unnecessary challenge to this one-mark selection task by deciding to answer this question using material from later in the text – offering the specific examples of Ironman and Tough Mudder.

- (b) Using your own words, explain what the text means by:
(i) ‘challenge the limits’ (line 3):
(ii) ‘mythical beast’ (line 4):

In **Question 1(b)** task guidance made it clear that use of own words was required to evidence understanding. Where answers failed to score both marks it was sometimes the result of having explained just one aspect of the phrase, for example in **Question 1(b)(i)** attempting to explain ‘limits’ only and repeating the word challenge/challeng[ing]. More effective answers were able to indicate that they had securely understood the meaning of both aspects of the question in the context of the text – for example, in **1(b)(i)** that ‘challenge the limits’ meant competitors pushing themselves/being pushed to the extremes of their abilities.

- (c) Re-read paragraph 3 (‘Somewhere ... you?’).
Identify two ways in which Tough Mudder always differs from other extreme events.

In **Question 1(c)** most candidates were able to identify two distinct ways in which Tough Mudder always differs – that it is short/shorter and involves getting hurt. A few candidates had not read closely and based their answer solely on the examples of how competitors might sometimes get hurt.

- (d) Re-read paragraphs 4 and 5 (‘I’ve no idea ... with life.’).
(i) Give two reasons why the writer decided to drop their ‘habitual laziness’ and take up running.
(ii) Explain why extreme sports are growing in popularity according to the text.

Candidates who paid attention to command/key words in the question were best placed to offer creditworthy responses and make efficient use of their time. For example, in **part (i)** they were careful to offer the two reasons the writer cited as prompting them personally to take up running as distinct from the reasons they suggested for the general growth in popularity of extreme sports. Candidates who were less focused on the details of the task sometimes missed opportunities to target both marks in **part (i)** for example, by going past the remit of the question to talk about the writer’s experience once they had already taken up running and how their ‘obsession escalated’. Similarly, in **part (ii)** a few candidates did not remain focused on paragraphs 4 and 5, moving on instead to offer ideas about the appeal of pop music and crowds (attempting to base their answer on paragraph 6). Many successful answers to **part (ii)** tended to centre around the growth in popularity of extreme sports as a consequence of people seeking excitement/fulfilment to escape monotonous daily routines and/or risk-averse lifestyles.

- (e) Re-read paragraph 6 (‘After completing ... achievement.’).
Using your own words, explain why some Ironman competitors might still like to compete in marathons.

In **Question 1(e)** the most successful explanations showed that candidates were able to derive three distinct reasons of the four available in the specified paragraph. Candidates who recast the relevant information using their own words as instructed were best able to demonstrate that they had teased out and understood the implied reasons marathons may still appeal to Ironman competitors – with many offering all four ideas by considering both the similarities between the two types of races (equal thrill, same sense of achievement) and the differences (nostalgia/quieter and calmer experience). Occasionally, less focused responses did not distinguish between the two types of events and suggested incorrectly that marathons appealed because of the music, lights and crowds at the finish.

(f) **According to Text B, why did Jayden Dee want to take part in this particular event?**

You must use continuous writing (not note form) and use your own words as far as possible.
Your summary should not be more than 120 words.

In their responses to **Question 1(f)** most candidates were able to demonstrate at least a general understanding of some relevant ideas from Text B and some understanding of the requirements of the task. There were fewer examples of wholesale copying or lifting than in previous sessions. All points on the mark scheme were covered over the range of answers seen, though repetition of the same idea and/or misreading of details meant opportunities were missed by many candidates to target higher marks.

Where responses were most effective, candidates had made a consistent attempt to use their own words and to keep their explanations concise. Many had recognised the opportunity to demonstrate their writing skills by adapting the relaxed, informal register of Dee's responses to the reporter's questions to a more formal style suitable for a written summary, whereas less assured responses had often missed this chance – for example echoing the text with reference to 'kids' or the 'Redmond Guy'. Some mid-range answers did not immediately direct their response towards the focus of the task, offering a redundant introduction to their response to set the scene (often referencing Jayden Dee's age and career).

Overview was evidenced in some of the most successful answers where relevant ideas had been carefully selected from different parts of the text and then re-organised more efficiently for their reader. Less well-focused responses copied from the text, with minimal or no rewording or reorganisation of the original, often resulting in redundancy. Whilst candidates are not expected to change all key words or terms in their prose response, they should not rely on lifting whole phrases and/or sentences from the text. Indiscriminate copying of the passage, repetition and adding comment or example should all be avoided as these do not allow candidates to successfully address the selective summary task.

The strongest responses to the selective summary task showed evidence of candidates having planned a route through the content of their answer before writing their response. There were some extremely effective and well-crafted responses that focused specifically on the appeal of Dee's reasons for wanting to take part in Tough Mudder as presented by Text B, demonstrating both concision and precise understanding of a wide range of relevant ideas.

Most candidates appeared to be aware of the need to try to use their own vocabulary where feasible without changing or blurring the original idea and to organise points helpfully for their reader. On occasion, candidates overlooked the need for concision in a selective summary task and significant excess arose as a result of lengthy explanation, with some candidates continuing to write far more than the maximum of 120 words advised in the task guidance. Others adhered to the advised length of the response but took far too long to explain just a few ideas. Candidates producing effective answers were able to demonstrate that they had understood a fairly wide range of relevant ideas, communicating these accurately and concisely in their own words.

The majority of candidates showed at least some awareness of the need to avoid excess, though not all were able to select ideas efficiently to navigate around more obviously redundant material – for example, Dee's references to being in Hawaii and needing a break (both more likely to be reasons why he would not want, or be able, to compete in Tough Mudder).

More effective responses were not dependant on the structure or language of Text B to communicate their ideas and were able to offer more concise explanations as a result. Less effective responses sometimes relied on trying to offer a précis of the whole text in the order it was presented. Many of these answers simply tracked through and replayed the text, substituting occasional own words – an approach that diluted evidence that the text and/or task had been understood. For example, less focused responses spent time unwisely citing long lists of various obstacles and challenges involved in Tough Mudder. Many of these least effective responses also tended to have misread key details – for example, some suggested that Dee had become seriously ill after Ironman (a misreading of 'got the bug again').

Length was often an indicator of the relative success of a response. Some responses were far too short with only a small number of relevant ideas identified, and others very long and wordy due to the inclusion of unnecessary information, comments or quotations. The least effective responses were overly-reliant on the language of the original. Candidates are reminded that lifting sections of text and splicing them together is unlikely to evidence understanding of either the ideas in the passage or requirements of the task.

Advice to candidates on **Question 1(f)**:

- after reading the task instructions, re-read the text to identify only those potentially relevant ideas you can use in your answer
- identify and discard any ideas or extra details which are not relevant to the focus of the question – for example, where a question asks you to focus only on the ‘reasons why’, you should not include ‘reasons why not’
- reflect on the ideas you have highlighted in your plan, checking that they are distinct and complete – for example, whether there are repeated ideas which could be combined or ideas which might need further explanation
- return to the text to ‘sense check’ any ideas you are unsure of before you try to use them
- plan the ideas you are going to include ahead of writing your response – draw a neat line through your planning afterwards
- organise and sequence your ideas to make them clear to your reader – do not rely on repeating ideas in the order of the original text
- explain ideas in a way that someone who had not read the text themselves would understand
- write informatively and accurately in your own words, avoiding errors which affect meaning
- do not add details, examples or comment to the content of the passage
- check back to ensure that you have included all of the ideas you planned to
- though it is not necessary to count every word, you should keep in mind the guidance to write ‘no more than 120 words’ and aim for concision.

Question 2

- (a) **Identify a word or phrase from the text which suggests the same idea as the words underlined:**

- (ii) The writer was slightly unsure that it was a good idea to publish their blog entry.
- (iii) Her husband’s training had little effect on the daily life of the family to begin with.
- (iv) Fitting in bike rides to the family’s weekend schedule was perfectly manageable.
- (v) The writer accepted grumpily that they hadn’t changed their mind about Sam competing in the Ironman

Focused responses to **Question 2(a)** clearly identified in each part the correct word or phrase from Text C to correspond with the meaning of the underlined example – simply and efficiently just giving the word or phrase as their answer. Other responses added unnecessary time pressure by copying out the entire sentence in each case, substituting the word or phrase and then bracketing or underlining their answer. Marks were sometimes missed where answers were incomplete (for example, giving ‘hesitant’ without ‘little’). Others lacked focus (for example, copying out whole sentences, extra words or longer sections of text that went beyond the sense of the underlined word(s)) or suggested misreading (for example, writing agreed ‘suddenly’ rather than ‘sullenly’).

- (b) **Using your own words, explain what the writer means by the words underlined:**

- (i) Endless
- (ii) technically
- (iii) desperate

In **Question 2(b)**, successful answers had considered carefully the precise meaning in the context of each of the words underlined. Less successful responses simply repeated the word in their explanation – for example, ‘endless means they do not end’ – or did not offer sufficiently precise explanation for understanding of the individual word specified to be credited – for example, ‘wanted’ on its own suggested none of the urgency/extreme nature of the feeling being described by the word ‘desperate’.

- (c) **Use one example from the text below to explain how the writer suggests their feelings about Sam’s approach to training for the Ironman event.**

**There was so much laundry ('different road conditions') so much extra food ('fuel') and so much gear (multiple pairs of goggles with different tints 'because you never know...')!
Smiling understandingly, Sam assured me the next one will be cheaper. Next one?**

In **Question 2(c)**, where candidates had focused clearly on using just one example taken from the text extract they were best placed to demonstrate their understanding – often beginning with an explanation of meaning in context, ahead of going on to explain what that suggested in relation to the writer’s feelings. Those making efficient use of time often identified their example, by underlining it in the text of the question

or simply used it as a subheading for their answer. Successful responses often centred around one of Sam's reported explanations and were able to exploit their chosen example to good effect to suggest something of the implied (for example, unimpressed/dismayed) tone of the writer. Other strong responses focused on the repetition of 'so much' as indicating a build-up of frustration/tension, whilst many chose the short question 'Next one?' in reactions to Sam's assurance that the next Ironman would be cheaper and were able to comment usefully on the shock/dismay this suggested.

Most successful responses had carefully noted the number of marks available and focused their response to make three distinct points in relation to their one chosen example. Less successful responses often attempted to discuss more than one example – time that might have been more profitably spent in **Question 2(d)** where there were up to 15 marks available. Some weaker responses did not pay careful attention to the instruction to select from the given extract and attempted unwisely to paraphrase the whole extract and/or discuss it in very general terms. On occasion, opportunities were missed due to the misreading of details/ implied meaning not being carefully considered – for example, a few candidates assumed incorrectly that it was the writer who was 'smiling understandingly' and/or that Sam's assurance meant only that the next pair of goggles would be cheaper.

(d) **Re-read paragraphs 10 and 12.**

- **Paragraph 10 begins 'Because it's there ...' and is about the writer's reactions to other people's views.**
- **Paragraph 12 begins 'Having said all that ...' and is about the writer's feelings at the end of the race.**

Explain how the writer uses language to convey meaning and to create effect in these paragraphs. Choose three examples of words or phrases from each paragraph to support your answer. Your choices should include the use of imagery.

Successful responses to **Question 2(d)** offered clear analysis of six relevant selections – three from each paragraph – often starting by explaining literal meaning in context and then moving on to consider effect (for example, discussing connotations and suggesting the impacts created by the writer's language choices). Such responses demonstrated understanding of how the writer was using language in each case through detailed discussion of sharply focused choices. Where candidates considered all of the key words in slightly longer choices they were able to avoid those more generalised comments of less effective responses. Candidates responding in note form and/or relying on repeating the language of the text within their explanation were less well placed to demonstrate understanding fully and often offered only partially effective or thin explanation as a result. The strongest responses considered words within their choices individually, as well as suggesting how they worked within the longer phrase and/or in the context of the description as a whole. Rather than selecting the first three choices in each half they came across, or the most 'obvious' literary devices, successful responses often set out to identify those relevant selections that they felt best able to explain. Some of the strongest responses explored how their judiciously selected choices worked both individually and together to influence the reader's impression, building to an overview. Responses at level 5 frequently showed imagination and precision when discussing images, for example in relation to the writer 'snarl[ing]' at anyone questioning the decision to take on an Ironman and Sam 'emerging god-like from the water'.

When dealing with paragraph 10, many answers had identified 'beam with immeasurable pride' as a potentially interesting example to discuss, with most able to offer at least a basic explanation of the extent of the emotion it indicated, though not all taking the opportunity to target higher marks by finding their own words to explain 'pride' and/or consider what 'beam' added to the image. Some mid-range answers offered more careful selection and explanation in one half of the answer than the other – often failing to target higher levels by repeating words such as 'power'(ful) and 'perfect(ion)' when discussing paragraph 12 rather than finding synonyms to evidence understanding of meaning. Some candidates who wrote more general comments around the feelings of euphoria once the race was completed missed opportunities to consider the distinct meanings of each word in 'rare pinnacles of perfection' and 'utterly incredible and intoxicating' which might have resulted in higher marks. Many candidates offered basic effects – for example, suggesting that 'rocket' exaggerated the speed at which Sam was travelling, whilst those offering evidence of understanding at higher levels were often able to go on to consider how the image of a rocket in particular might add to the sense of his superhuman achievement and/or focused approach.

Some candidates had misread details of the text and their explanations were limited as a result – for example some suggested that it was the children who had their ‘head(s) held high’, some that the writer snarled at Sam. The least successful answers to **Question 2(d)** offered inappropriate comments such as ‘The writer uses images that make us imagine what it was like to be there.’ – such empty, generic comments are unlikely to be a useful starting point for discussion of how language is working. Candidates working at higher levels were often able to visualise images, using explanation of precise meaning/what you could ‘see/hear happening’ in context as the starting point for their explanation of effect.

In **Question 2(d)**, answers which simply list literary devices used and/or copy from each paragraph without careful consideration of the examples to be discussed are not likely to evidence the skills and understanding necessary to target higher marks. It is the quality of the analysis which attracts marks in a language question. Selections in **Question 2(d)** need to be clear and deliberate, helping to focus the analysis which follows. Long quotations with only the first and last words identified are less likely to be useful and often result in very thin general comments at best. Opportunities were missed in some answers where choices were from one paragraph only. Some of the least successful answers to **Question 2(d)** appeared to have been answered last and were very brief, generalised and/or incomplete. The most successful answers were often able to ‘talk their reader through’ their understanding of words within relevant choices, considering different possibilities of meaning, associations and connotations, ahead of arriving at an understanding of how and why these particular words might have been used by the writer in this context.

Advice to candidates on Question 2:

- make sure that the quotations you select from the text are precise and accurate – do not copy out lines or chunks of text, miss out key words or include only part of the choice
- in each part of **2(a)** make sure that your selection from the text is clearly identified – remember you are looking for a word or phrase, not a whole sentence
- in **2(b)** be careful not to include extra incorrect guesses that might detract from the evidence that you understand the meaning of the word you are explaining
- in **2(c)** clearly identify the one example from the text excerpt you are going to explain
- in **2(d)**, choose three examples from each of the two specified paragraphs (six choices in total)
- where you are trying to explain meaning check that your explanation makes sense
- when explaining how language is working avoid empty comments such as saying that ‘the writer helps us to imagine the scene’ – you need to say how your chosen example does this to show understanding
- make sure your explanations deal with each of the key words within an identified choice separately as well as how they work together
- when you are trying to suggest effect and are unsure, start by explaining the precise meaning in context of the word(s) in the choice
- when you are trying to explore and explain images, consider the connotations and associations of the words within choices to help you to suggest the effect the writer might have wanted to create
- allow time to edit your answers – for example, to add in further detail and/or correct errors to help show you have read carefully and understood.

Question 3

You are Sam. After completing the race you are interviewed for a podcast about your experience and the advice you would offer to anyone thinking of entering an Ironman.

The interviewer asks you three questions only:

- How exactly do you need to prepare for a challenge like Ironman and why is each aspect of that preparation important?
- How do you think preparing for Ironman affected other areas of your life and what advice would you offer anyone considering entering an Ironman for the first time?
- What were the rewards of completing an Ironman for you and your family?

Having worked through **Question 2** and already familiarised themselves with Text C, candidates following the order of tasks as set were best placed to think their way into the attitude, opinions and memories of Sam, as distinct from those of the narrator. Where candidates had chosen to attempt tasks out of order and begun with task 3, there were some examples of misreading – for example, that Sam was the narrator and/or that Sam was married to his business partner. A few candidates who appeared unwisely to have left **Question 2** until last tried to include details from Text B and/or based most of their **Question 3** answer on Text B, limiting the evidence of understanding and skills they could offer.

Almost all candidates chose to answer the interviewer's questions in the order set. Most kept in mind the advice that these were the only questions the interviewer had asked and did not risk losing focus on key ideas by introducing other questions that might offer fewer opportunities to evidence close reading. Some successful answers did begin by dealing with the third bullet first – adding expressions of amazement from the interviewer on behalf of their audience (who might be wondering why anyone 'sane' should want to take on such a challenge). Where candidates had kept in mind that this task was a test of their Reading and woven in useful details from the passage in any extra speech from the interviewer this did work well, but there were other less successful responses that drifted too far from Text C as a consequence of building the interviewer's role.

The first bullet of the question invited candidates to revisit details in the text related to Sam's training and most candidates were able to offer a number of relevant explicit ideas, with answers aiming at higher marks dealing successfully with both parts of the interviewer's question to offer relevant development. Almost all mentioned more straightforward explicit ideas – the time required to dedicate to training, the need for an expert coach and for monthly training plans. Many explained the need to train for all three aspects of the race – running, riding and swimming – though fewer reworked the details of all the kit, food and sleep required to extend the range of Sam's advice further. The very best answers often evidenced close reading by creating a consistent and convincing voice for Sam – weaving in and extending some of his excuses (as presented by the writer) to become explanations/justifications (developments of his implied perspective) for example the different road conditions that meant special goggles were necessary to keep you safe. Candidates who had planned their response beforehand – identifying details and ideas from the passage that they could use for each bullet – were best able to exploit the opportunities offered by bullet one and there were some excellent answers offering a variety of different (equally relevant) versions of Sam's persona based on details, hints and suggestions in the text.

Most answers to bullet two presented a sympathetic interpretation of Sam – aware (now) of the strain his training had put on family life and appreciative of the support afforded him throughout. Some chose a less self-aware version of Sam which worked equally well, especially where details had been carefully integrated. Mid-range and better answers had often dealt with some of the detail of the impact of training on others – citing for example the effect on family holidays and leisure time. Fewer answers included reference to the implied upset of Sam's business partner and/or picked up on the negative reactions of those questioning his decision to take part in an Ironman. However, answers operating at higher levels often included these and other implicit ideas such as the financial impact of preparing for the race. In the weakest responses, ideas relevant to bullet two were often only hit upon in passing – with sections of text replayed or even copied – limiting the evidence of skills and understanding.

Almost all answers to bullet three expressed Sam's own pride at his achievement and/or referenced that of his family, with better answers looking to offer a full response to this final question. Many candidates who missed the problems at work/negative reactions of others beforehand were able nevertheless to include reference to the benefits for Sam's business because of the publicity the race offered. Some losing focus on Text C suggested Sam had won a substantial cash prize and was now going on holiday (for example to Hawaii) though answers in the mid-range or better were often able to make use of the writer's suggestions they might be participating next year and/or that Sam offered a positive role model for his son/children.

On occasion, having returned to the text to find useful details, some candidates then undermined their own efforts by reading less carefully than they needed to – for example, suggesting that Sam had bought his son an Ironman toy (at odds with the detail of the text) or that Sam missed his father (Dad) at weekends. Other candidates during planning had apparently made use of strategies such as simple diagrams to establish clearly the relationships between events and /or personas and had put these to good use to help them offer a consistent and accurate perspective.

On the whole, candidates seemed familiar with the requirements of an interview, and many were able to use an appropriate register, drawing on a range of suitable vocabulary to express their ideas. Where candidates relied too heavily on the structure and/or language of the original text to communicate, expression often became awkward and/or lost clarity. Simple paraphrasing of the text sometimes also meant opportunities to develop were limited since the text was not written from Sam's point of view. Some candidates producing answers in the mid-range showed some awareness of appropriate register though would have benefitted from checking back through their work to ensure that their meaning was clear throughout in order to offer more secure evidence of their Writing and Reading skills.

The least successful responses to **Question 3** copied sections of text with minimal modification and rarely adequately addressed bullets two and/or three. A few of the weakest answers had attempted to answer question 3 without reference to Text C – writing for example about their own experience training for an event

or getting fit and/or attempting to use Text B. The most convincing answers had recognised the evidently more positive attitude of the narrator by the end of the piece and had clearly revisited the passage to examine carefully the details of the narrator's account of events leading up to that change.

Advice to candidates on Question 3:

- remember to base your answer on the ideas and details you find in Text C
- keep the audience and purpose for your response in mind throughout your answer
- decide on the voice and style you want to create and maintain that in your answer
- do not invent information and details beyond the scope of the passage; look for the clues and evidence in the text to help you make judgements about characters and situations
- give equal attention to each of the three bullet points: the bullet points are designed to help you to identify a wide range of relevant ideas you can use in your answer so make sure you have covered all aspects of each bullet
- do not copy directly from the text: use your own words as far as you can to express ideas
- try to do more than just repeat details of what happened: developing ideas allows you to better show your understanding, for example by explaining feelings or commenting from the point of view of the character you are writing as
- leave sufficient time to edit and correct your response.

FIRST LANGUAGE ENGLISH

Paper 0990/12
Reading 12

Key messages

Candidates did well when they:

- followed instructions carefully, responding appropriately to the command words in the question
- considered the marks allocated to each question and developed their response accordingly
- read the introductions to the texts carefully
- understood the different requirements of the extended response questions
- paid attention to the guidance offered to help them focus their answers – for example, writing no more than 120 words in the summary and using just one example from the given text extract in 2(c)
- avoided unselective copying and/or lifting from the text where appropriate
- used their own words where specified in the question
- planned the ideas to be used and the route through extended responses before writing
- selected only the material that was most appropriate for the response to the question
- avoided repetition in all questions
- checked and edited their responses to correct any careless errors, incomplete ideas, or unclear points.

General comments

Candidates' responses indicated familiarity with the format of the reading paper. The texts proved to be accessible to nearly all candidates and they responded positively to both texts and questions. There were relatively few examples of misunderstanding in terms of task requirements, and time-management was generally good with very few candidates not attempting every question. Occasionally a failure to follow the rubric or complete a task fully limited opportunities to demonstrate understanding. This was most common in **Question 1(e)** where some candidates did not attempt to find three points, in **Question 1(f)** where some candidates included a limited range of ideas in their responses, in **Question 2(c)** where a number of candidates did not select a clear example from the text provided, or in **Question 2(d)** where some candidates offered three choices of language in total rather than three choices from each paragraph as specified in the task, although significantly fewer candidates failed to offer six choices in this session.

In **Question 1**, the most successful approach taken by candidates was to work through the questions in the order presented carefully noting the number of marks allocated and the space provided for their responses as helpful indicators of how detailed their answers needed to be. They also referred carefully to the lines or paragraph specified in each question moving carefully through the text as directed. Less successful responses to **Question 1** tended to lack focus on the text or lacked relevance to the question. At times candidates used the language of the text where they had been asked to use own words – for example in **Question 1(b)(ii)** by explaining 'pragmatic' but using the word 'way' instead of offering an alternative. This was sometimes an issue in **Question 1(f)** where some candidates copied phrases (or whole chunks of text) rather than remodelling the language of the text in their response. Copying should be avoided in **Question 1(f)** to demonstrate evidence of full understanding for the Reading mark and produce an effective response to the task.

In **Question 2** candidates were required to explain carefully selected words or phrases from specified sections of the text. **Question 2(c)** supplied a short section of the text to select from, preparing candidates for the longer response in **Question 2(d)**. Stronger answers were able to consider meanings in context, as well as the effects of the powerful language identified, demonstrating understanding of the writer's purpose in a clear overview of the featured paragraphs. Mid-range answers tended to focus on the meanings of the language choices showing mostly clear understanding, although at times they tended to be literal rather than considered within the context of the whole text. Weaker responses struggled to develop viable explanations, sometimes repeating the language of the text in their explanations. These answers did not always choose appropriate language to discuss or only selected three examples in total.

In **Question 3** most responses addressed all three bullets in the question, although some candidates found it challenging to develop the ideas from the text. Most candidates wrote as a journalist, writing for a teenage magazine, with the best responses producing a convincing article adopting a lively tone suitable for teenage readers keen to read about the extraordinary achievements of Audrey Sutherland. Stronger responses developed the ideas and details in the text selectively to work through the bullets logically. They were able to comment on the remarkable nature of Audrey's plan to paddle Alaska considering how her employer, publisher, family, friends and also complete strangers reacted, offering carefully selected details and developments, as well as documenting her careful preparations outlining the importance of these in not only ensuring her safety but also the practical realities of the trip, then moving on to consider why Audrey Sutherland wanted to set herself such an enormous goal through exploring the rewards the trip offered her. Responses in the mid-range tended to use the text rather mechanically, often paraphrasing closely rather than selecting ideas and details to use in their own writing to demonstrate understanding. This was particularly apparent in responses to bullet 2 where often a closely paraphrased list of her preparations was offered that remained very close to the original text. Weaker responses tended to lack focus, covering only the main ideas and sometimes inventing material that moved too far away from the text itself. Some responses copied unselectively thus providing little evidence of understanding.

Paper 1 is primarily an assessment of Reading, however 15 of the 80 marks available are for Writing – 5 marks in **Question 1(f)** and 10 marks in **Question 3**. In these questions, candidates need to pay attention to the quality and clarity of their writing to maximise their achievement. Candidates are advised to plan and review their responses to avoid inconsistencies of style and to correct errors that may impede communication.

Comments on specific questions

Question 1

Questions 1(a) – (e)

In response to Text A candidates were asked to answer a series of short answer questions. Stronger responses paid careful attention to the command words in the instructions as well as the number of marks allocated to individual questions. These responses demonstrated sound understanding by selecting appropriate details and evidence from the text in concise, focused answers. Weaker responses tended to write too much or failed to follow the instruction to use own words. Some candidates offered several possible answers, thus using time inefficiently and on occasion diluting evidence of understanding.

(a) What piece of equipment is used to move a kayak through the water according to the text?

The vast majority of candidates identified a paddle to get the mark for this question with most offering the phrase 'a double-bladed paddle'.

(b) Using your own words, explain what the text means by:

- (i) 'buoyant vessel' (line 2)**
- (ii) 'pragmatic way' (line 6)**

In **Question 1(b)** candidates were instructed to use their own words to evidence understanding of the phrases in the question. Where answers failed to achieve both of the marks available for each phrase it was usually due to the candidate's partial use of the words from the text. For example, in **Question 1(b)(i)** a number of candidates used the word 'vessel' in their explanation of 'buoyant' thus partially addressing the task. In some responses the explanation of 'vessel' simply said 'object' or 'container' thereby ignoring the context in which it is used in the text where it clearly conveys that it carries a human on water. In **Question**

1(b)(ii) several candidates lifted the word ‘way’ from the question and therefore only explained ‘pragmatic’. This was a common weakness: candidates should be aware that to target the 2 marks offered for each subsection of **question 1(b)** both parts of the phrase need to be explained clearly.

- (c) **Re-read paragraph 3 (‘Nowadays waters.’).**
Give the two examples of ‘open water’ that can be explored in a kayak according to the text.

To achieve both marks for this question candidates were required to offer two examples of open water – ‘lakes’ and ‘rivers’.

- (d) (i) **Re-read paragraph 3 (‘Nowadays ... waters.’).**

Identify two reasons why combining kayaking with other outdoor activities might appeal to some people.

To answer **Question 1(d)(i)** candidates needed to identify and select two reasons for people finding combining kayaking with other outdoor activities appealing. Most candidates were able to identify the extra level of challenge posed and accessing remote regions to gain both marks. Occasionally marks were lost due to misreading the question’s focus and offering appealing examples of outdoor activities such as ‘camping and fishing’ or ‘ski-touring and rock-climbing’.

- (ii) **Re-read paragraphs 4 and 5 (‘Kayaking can be ... toy.’).**

Explain why sit-on-top kayaks may not be suitable for some paddlers according to the text.

In **Question 1(d)(ii)** many candidates were successful at gaining all three marks available by referring clearly to the problems of using a sit-on-top kayak as being less sheltered from wind, more likely to get wet, and more likely to be considered a toy or for children.

- (e) **Re-read paragraph 6 (‘Sleek and noiseless ... another.’).**

Using your own words, explain why some people might think that kayaking is better for the environment than other forms of water-based transport.

This question required candidates to show both explicit and implicit understanding from their reading of paragraph 6. Most candidates were able to achieve one mark, a reasonable number gained two-marks, but fewer gained all three. The most common correct inference was that kayaking does not produce pollutants or burn fuel. Fewer candidates were able to explain that kayaks don’t produce noise pollution or avoid harming animals due to their slow speed. Some candidates were able to offer the responsible nature of kayaking where water is emptied to avoid carrying species from one waterway to another.

- (f) **According to Text B, what are the benefits of taking up kayaking as a hobby?**
You must use continuous writing (not note form) and use your own words as far as possible.
Your summary should not be more than 120 words.

This question was based on Text B and required candidates to select relevant ideas from the text and organise them into a focused summary which addressed the task. The majority of candidates were able to demonstrate at least a general understanding of the text and offer some relevant ideas about the benefits of taking up kayaking as a hobby. The most successful responses were carefully planned and coherent, focusing sharply on the task by referring to a wide range of benefits, reordering the material where necessary to aid fluency and achieve logical progression. These responses avoided repetition and re-modelled the wording of the text to use own words successfully. Successful responses were often preceded by a bullet-pointed plan in which ideas from the text were noted briefly before being included in a fluent own-words response. Responses in the mid-range tended to include a more limited range of benefits, the most common being the physical and mental benefits such as working out, developing muscle strength, aiding a healthy heart and improved breathing, and becoming less stressed and happier as a result. A number of candidates failed to spot similar ideas such as relaxing and de-stressing, or becoming happier and having your mood lifted, often leading to repetition and inclusion of excess material even where a good range of ideas had been considered. Candidates at this level of performance often missed the more subtle reading points: for example, kayaking being easy to learn, or the new experiences gained from kayaking. Some less successful responses closely paraphrased the whole text resulting in repetition as outlined above but also the inclusion

of irrelevant material, most commonly Brad's recommendations for a wide boat that can be flipped back over easily, or warnings about watching the weather to avoid unexpected storms.

Length was often an indicator of the relative success of the response. Some responses were far too short with only a small number of relevant ideas identified, and others very long and wordy due to unnecessary information and comments or quotations. The strongest responses tended to adhere to the advised length through adopting a concise and focused approach to the task. Weaker responses were either very brief due to a very limited number of ideas being considered or were excessively long and unselective. Occasionally weaker responses adhered to the advised word count but took far too long to consider a few ideas. In most responses there was an attempt to use own words although a surprisingly large number of candidates did rely on lifting phrases from the text. The most commonly lifted phrases were 'a serious workout', 'sweaty gym', 'builds muscle strength', 'can burn over 350 calories', 'get your heart beating', 'lifting moods', 'great way to make new friends', 'vitamin D intake', 'build confidence and positive self-image', and 'learn new things every day'.

Advice to candidates on Question 1(f)

- re-read Text B after reading the question to identify potentially relevant ideas
- plan the response using brief notes to ensure a wide range of ideas from the text are selected
- avoid including unnecessary details which do not address the question
- organise the ideas, grouping them where relevant, to ensure that your response is coherent
- avoid repeating ideas
- avoid including a general introduction or summative conclusion
- use your plan rather than the text as you write your answer to avoid lifting
- write clearly and make sure you express yourself fluently using your own words – avoid lifting phrases
- do not add comments or your own views
- use a neutral writing style
- try to keep to the guidance to 'write no more than 120 words'.

Question 2

- (a) **Identify a word or phrase from the text which suggests the same idea as the words underlined:**

- (i) The bear's mouth and nose were huge.
- (ii) The towns in southern Alaska were spread out at different points a long way away from each other.
- (iii) Audrey would go on paddling trips when she could manage to find any time for a holiday.
- (iv) She knew before setting off that her kayak was in a good enough condition to sail on the sea.

The most successful answers to **Question 2(a)** focused on the underlined word or phrase, located the correct version in the text and gave it as the answer. Other responses copied the whole sentence from the question inserting the correct phrase from the text to replace the underlined phrase in the question. This was acceptable but wasted examination time. Answers that used the text more widely than in the equivalent phrase/sentence could not be rewarded even if the correct word/phrase was included. Most candidates were familiar with the demands of this question but a few seemed confused about how to respond offering own words equivalents of the underlined words instead of locating them in the text. Where marks were lost, it was usually due to partially explaining the underlined phrase, for example 'muzzle' or 'dotted', or including too much of the text and therefore moving beyond explaining just the underlined phrase, for example 'enormous muzzle visible' or 'I'd paddled enough rough seas in it to know it was seaworthy'.

(b) **Using your own words, explain what the writer means by each of the words underlined:**

- (i) reinforced
- (ii) arrived
- (iii) incongruous

In **Question 2(b)** the most successful answers considered the meaning of each word taking account of its context as used in the text - for example, recognising that the word 'arrived' referred to a parcel reaching her/its destination rather than it simply 'appearing' or 'landing'. Many candidates were able to explain 'reinforced' as 'strengthened' or 'backed-up' and the best responses were able to explain 'incongruous' as 'absurd' or 'weird/odd'.

(c) **Use one example from the text below to explain how the writer suggests other boats might be better suited to the planned journey.**

Use your own words in your explanation.

My inflatable kayak would be the smallest boat to attempt this distance, an impertinent toy compared to the crafted cedar-log-dugout canoes paddled for centuries along these misty shores, or sturdy modern fibreglass canoes.

In **Question 2(c)** candidates were required to select one example of language from the specified section of the text and explain how it suggested that other boats might be better suited for the planned journey. A significant number of candidates did not follow these instructions but instead offered a very general response with no focus on the writer's language. The most successful responses offered a concise quotation then considered how the writer was able to convey the contrast through the language used. The most popular example was 'an impertinent toy' and many responses explored the connotations of 'toy' as suggesting her kayak was flimsy, poorly made or designed to have fun with rather than undertake serious journeys. The best responses also tackled 'impertinent' as suggesting she was arrogant or presumptuous to even believe it could. Where candidates only selected the word 'toy', it was unlikely that they could make three separate suggestions to gain all the marks available. Many candidates selected 'the smallest boat to attempt' but then struggled to offer any explanations except repeating the question and saying that it was less suitable than other boats. Candidates were more successful when explaining 'crafted cedar-log-dugout canoes paddled for centuries' with some excellent explanations of the implications of 'crafted' showing skill and attention, 'cedar-log' implying durable, natural materials and 'paddled for centuries' indicating their success and reliability as well as sense of tradition. Responses choosing 'sturdy modern fiberglass canoes' were also more successful at breaking down the language choice to comment on the reliability and strength suggested by 'sturdy', the technological advantages and superior materials suggested by 'modern fibreglass'. Some weaker responses tried to do too much, selecting several examples. Only one example could be rewarded so offering more was a waste of valuable examination time that could have been spent on Question 2(d) where more developed responses are expected. A number of responses simply paraphrased the whole paragraph without selecting a language choice at all.

(d) **Re-read paragraphs 4 and 8.**

- Paragraph 4 begins 'Looking at ...' and is about the choice of route for the journey.
- Paragraph 8 begins 'He sneered ...' and gives a description of the kayak.

Explain how the writer uses language to convey meaning and to create effect in these paragraphs. Choose three examples of words or phrases from each paragraph to support your answer. Your choices should include the use of imagery.

The most successful responses to **Question 2(d)** offered clear analysis of three appropriate language choices from each of the two paragraphs indicated in the question, considering meanings in the context of the text, discussing connotations and suggesting the impacts created by the writer's language choices. These responses often offered a clear overview of the writer's intentions in each paragraph. Less successful responses were sometimes written in note form and offered less developed analysis or repeated the same ideas about effects, often making rather generalised assertions rather than considering specific words more closely. Middle range responses were usually more successful when explaining meanings but struggled to explore the effects, and the weakest responses tended to offer quotations (sometimes rather unselectively) but struggled to find anything relevant to say about them. A significant number of candidates chose three

language choices in total rather than six (three from each paragraph as clearly stated in the question). This led to some under-developed responses.

The strongest responses selected phrases but also considered the individual words within them suggesting how they worked within the context of the whole language choice. Rather than simply identifying literary devices they engaged fully with the language. In paragraph 4 many were able to explore their individual choices within the context of the adventurous nature of Audrey's route and her determination to explore and experience as much as possible. They considered her choice of route in phrases such as 'paddle direct along established routes' and "go gunkholing" as boaters say' as evidence of Audrey's knowledge and expertise and the contrast between the safer, more sensible option as compared to the more adventurous implications of 'prowling' and the sense of discovery in 'tiny coves'. Her decision not to follow a straighter path but explore fully in 'meandering' and 'connecting a roundabout route' was noted with many candidates observing the more relaxed and organic nature of her journey implicated in these phrases. Many also appreciated the suggestions of living and surviving in the wilderness of Alaska in 'foraging natural delicacies' and 'communicating with endearing animals' as well as Audrey's determination to savour every moment of her trip and appreciate all the opportunities to immerse herself in the natural surroundings. These choices could all be linked successfully yet considered independently.

In paragraph 8 many responses were able to appreciate the rather comical and self-deprecating nature of the descriptions of Audrey's kayak and its ability to complete the adventurous journey as described in paragraph 4. A popular choice was 'sneering' with candidates exploring the mocking reaction from the man on the beach as dismissing Audrey's hopes and ambitions. The descriptions of the deflated kayak, such as 'limp, shapeless roll of plastic' and 'squirmed slowly and reluctantly out of its wrinkles' were explained well with many candidates citing its rather unattractive appearance and the suggestions of uselessness implied in 'limp' as well as the notion that the kayak itself is embarrassed and awkward about the voyage in 'squirmed reluctantly'. Some candidates used the 'wonky banana shape', 'boat-shaped doughnut' and 'ridiculously optimistic red-and-white racing stripes' to suggest an element of self-mockery created in the humorous descriptions of the kayak which sounds more like a beach toy than a vessel fit for travelling 800 miles in Alaska.

Where effects were less successfully explained, this was often due to offering the same idea for all three language choices in the paragraph. In paragraph 4 this tended to be through repeating the idea of the route being adventurous, and in paragraph 8 by repeating the idea of creating humour or the kayak being useless. There was very little evidence of misreading in the two paragraphs specified in the question, but some candidates misread 'coves' for 'caves' and thought that 'squirming' was a high-pitched sound rather than a movement. Some candidates thought that 'prowling' automatically implied that it was sinister even though this was clearly not a relevant interpretation in the context of the text. Some weaker responses also included very long quotations with general explanations rather than engaging closely with specific words. Very rarely no quotations were included at all with a brief description of the paragraphs offered instead. Such responses did not address the question. Candidates are reminded that it is the quality of their language analysis which can be credited. Listing of literary devices or the selection of plain language from the text is unlikely to lead to a successful response.

Advice to candidates on Question 2:

- select three precise and accurate language choices from *both* of the specified paragraphs
- make sure explanations of meanings make sense within the context of the text
- avoid very general explanations such as 'this helps the reader imagine it', 'this makes us want to read on' or 'this makes the reader feel part of the story'
- try to engage with the language at word level by considering connotations/associations of words and why the writer has selected these words in particular
- start with the contextualised meaning then move on to the effect created by the language in terms of how it helps our understanding of the events, characters, atmosphere etc.
- avoid repeating the same explanations of effects for each language choice: try to be more specific about analysing at word-level.

Question 3

You are a journalist writing for a teenage magazine some years after the events described in the text. You decide to write a feature article about Audrey Sutherland and her first attempt to paddle Alaska.

In your article you should explain:

- the opinions and reactions of other people to Audrey's plan to paddle Alaska for the first time and what was remarkable about the journey
- the preparations she made for this first Alaskan journey and why these preparations were necessary
- why she wanted to paddle Alaska and the rewards of the trip.

This question required candidates to write a feature article for a teenage magazine looking back at Audrey Sutherland's first attempt to paddle Alaska. The three bullet points in the question offered guidance to candidates to help them identify relevant ideas for their article. The first and second bullets required candidates to retrieve relevant information from the text and adapt it to fit the requirements of an article for young people. The third bullet required candidates to infer what Audrey's motives for the trip were and what rewards she gained from it.

The majority of candidates were able to show general understanding of the text, addressing the task by using some of the main ideas in the text to support their response. Many of the responses were also able to develop the ideas by writing in a credible style for a feature article, evaluating the ideas in the text and adapting them accordingly. Where candidates had followed the bullets carefully, they were often able to develop explicit and implicit ideas effectively to write a lively and informative article about Audrey's adventure in Alaska. Most candidates addressed the bullet points in chronological order using them to structure the response coherently. Less successful responses tended to be unselective or closely paraphrase the text without adapting the style therefore offering a rather plain narrative account with little sense of the teenage readers. The least successful responses used the ideas in the text thinly, often offering very general ideas about people's reactions in response to the first bullet, listing some of the preparations in responses to the second bullet and offering a vague response to the third bullet without offering any further details or trying to develop the ideas in any way.

The first bullet of the question invited candidates to outline how people reacted to Audrey's plan and what was remarkable about her journey. This offered opportunities to look at the range of different people's varying reactions mentioned in the text, including encouragement from her publisher, excitement from her friends, concern from her family, negativity from her employer, and mockery by a random stranger. The best responses included each of those reactions using details from the text but also some development about the feelings behind the reactions, for example linking the concern of her family to her decision to give them copies of her route so they could use them in an emergency, or her employer's refusal to give her the two-months leave requested leading to her resignation and determination to change the course of her life. In terms of the remarkable nature of her plans the best responses considered the distance, isolation and potential danger in the route chosen. These responses tended to adopt a lively, admiring tone inviting the young readers to also admire Sutherland's courage and determination. In responses where candidates just listed people's reactions without offering supporting details, this bullet tended to be addressed very thinly. Some responses attributed the reaction of the man on the beach to everyone, claiming that everyone thought she was mad, ignoring the information in the text that makes it clear that reactions were very varied. There was little evidence of misreading in response to the first bullet, but some responses didn't select and use material from different parts of the text to develop this section of the answer fully.

The second bullet offered many opportunities to identify and explain what preparations Audrey needed to undertake and why they were necessary. The best responses selected carefully and were able to remodel the material and extend the ideas. These focused sharply on each aspect of her preparation evaluating the ideas fully to explain why it was necessary. For example, her purchasing of wet-weather clothing was linked to potentially bad weather, or her sending camping equipment to friends was explained as avoiding carrying heavy equipment on the flight. Many good responses also explored why she decided to attempt the route in her trusted inflatable kayak, citing its flexibility and the fact that she had used it many times before. Her decision to send dried food packages to post offices along the route was developed with consideration of her need to have food supplies without carrying them, as well as the limitations of foraging in the wild for that length of time. All these preparations could be linked to her sensible approach where her health and safety was considered paramount. Many cited her previous experiences of kayaking around Hawaii as evidence of her ability to plan ahead and understand the priorities. Some weaker responses simply lifted all the details of her preparations, sometimes closely paraphrasing or even copying from one paragraph in the text without

modifying the material to suit the demands of the question or to link it clearly to the necessity of such preparations to ensure a smooth and safe trip.

When responding to bullet 3 the most successful responses clearly organised the material into her reasons for the trip and rewards she gained, developing ideas and details throughout the text to support the assertions. There were some highly successful responses to this bullet which outlined Audrey's dissatisfaction with her current job as a careers advisor in a school, noting the decades spent doing the same desk job and her frustrations that while advising young people about their futures, she had neglected her own. Many cited her bucket list as well as her desire to regain her fitness and good humour. These responses also developed ideas about the rewards, such as the varying experiences of living in the wilderness, relying on local food supplies, seeing marine animals such as whales and otters and the magnificent landscape mentioned at the beginning of the text. The most successful responses also considered her success as an author and developed her story as one which should inspire the readers to do something equally adventurous and challenging. Less successful answers tended to lack range in response to this bullet, often simply lifting the fact that 'Alaska was top of [her] 25-morale-building-things-to-do-list' and phrases such as 'trace excerpts of historic voyages' or 'forage natural delicacies' as rewards with little evidence of understanding.

Candidates seemed comfortable and familiar with the format of a feature article aimed at teenage readers with most adopting an appropriately lively and enthusiastic tone and register. The less successful responses tended to be written as a rather plain narrative, relying heavily on the sequencing of the original text and sometimes written by Audrey herself. Generally, accuracy was good with some skilfully written responses. Others struggled to maintain fluency resulting in some awkward expression, often caused by errors in grammar and punctuation. Candidates are advised to check through their work carefully to correct errors where possible. There were few instances of wholesale lifting from the passage but some weaker responses were over-reliant on lifted phrases and sentences throughout the response.

Advice to on Question 3:

- read Text C carefully, more than once, to ensure sound understanding
- pay careful attention to the written style adopted – for example, the register required for the purpose and audience of the task
- do not invent information and material that is not clearly linked to the details and events in the text
- give equal attention to all three bullet points
- briefly plan your response to ensure that you are selecting ideas relevant to all three bullets
- avoid copying from the text: use your own words as far as possible
- remember to use ideas and details from the text but to adapt and develop them appropriately to create a convincing voice and new perspective
- leave some time to check through your response
- do not waste time counting the words: the suggested word length is a guide, not a limit.

FIRST LANGUAGE ENGLISH

Paper 0990/21
Directed Writing and Composition 21

Key messages

This paper was mainly assessed for writing, although there were fifteen marks available for reading in **Question 1**.

In order to achieve high marks, candidates were required to:

- use an appropriate form, style and register in both questions
- structure ideas and organise responses effectively to persuade, discuss ideas and engage the reader
- produce detailed and evocative descriptions and engaging, credible narratives
- adapt their style and structure for different audiences, purposes and genres
- construct varied sentences accurately, with a clear attempt to influence and interest the reader
- use precise and wide-ranging vocabulary, appropriate for the task and style required

General comments

Almost all candidates understood and responded appropriately to both questions, Directed Writing and Composition. Instructions for the examination were also widely understood and most candidates attempted **Question 1** and either a descriptive or narrative writing task, although a few candidates only responded to one question on the paper. Some responses to descriptive questions were more narrative in intent than descriptive, usually **Question 3**, and although Examiners credited description wherever possible, some responses showed misunderstanding of how descriptive writing differs from narrative. **Question 1** responses were written mostly in candidates' own words, but a number were mostly or wholly copied from the texts in the Reading Booklet Insert. This seriously limited the marks that could be awarded for both Reading and Writing, resulting in significant under-achievement in some cases where candidates were able to achieve reasonable marks in the Composition question.

Nearly all responses showed a clear understanding of and some engagement with the topic of the reading texts in **Question 1**. Most responses were written in an appropriate style and format for a letter written to a family member known to the writer and many candidates reflected this informal relationship in the style and register of their letter, as well as in some of the content. Lapses in expression, sometimes due to a lack of audience awareness, missing valedictions or sentences copied from the texts were characteristic of less effective responses, as well as inconsistent accuracy.

Most candidates approached the topic using their own words rather than lifting or copying the words in the passages, although many included short phrases from the texts, usually 'cultured, worldly and intelligent' and the sentence describing how bilingual people were more 'marketable for employers' in a 'more globalised economy'. More effective answers here also tended to structure responses independently, selecting and commenting on the details in the texts in a coherent response in which the writer knew at the outset what their arguments for or against moving to another country would be. Effective responses showed some ability to probe and challenge the views given in the texts as well as give the candidate's own opinion about the efficacy of such a move.

In the middle of the mark range, responses tended to reproduce the points made in the texts, sometimes with a little personal opinion given at the end, with some beginning to evaluate. Many at this level made suggestions such as the idea that weekly phone calls to family and friends could be instigated to protect young people's proficiency in their native language. Some, though not all of these solutions showed a thoughtful grasp of the conflicting ideas in the texts while others were less evaluative, such as the suggestion that teenagers should attend international school and be educated in their first language which rather contradicted other ideas in the texts.

Less effective responses tended to repeat the ideas in the texts, rather than selecting points and commenting on them. In some responses at this level, this resulted in a contradictory response in which the evidence in favour or against learning a new language was given in the same sequence as it appeared in the texts, without real comment. Others produced summaries of what each text said with less secure understanding of how to select ideas to create a reasoned argument.

For the Writing mark, there was often a clear attempt made to adapt the style and register to reflect the relationship between writer and recipient of the letter. In most responses, a clear understanding was shown of how letters are structured and how ideas are presented in them. In some, the careful use of rhetoric such as questioning or exclamations helped to convince and persuade, while many included humour and more personal details to reflect the more informal relationship between members of families. The most effective responses paid specific attention to the audience and style required for the task. These were lively and persuasive but consistently appropriate in tone. Most in the middle range of marks wrote in a more straightforward style and there was less focus on scrutinising the ideas in the texts. Less effective responses relied more on the sequence of the points made in the texts with less selection and reordering of ideas from the originals. This sometimes resulted in the presentation of contradictory ideas alongside each other, weak paragraphing and less cohesive responses.

In **Section B**, descriptive writing at the highest level was evocative and subtle and most responses gave a range of descriptive detail without resorting to narrative. Many responses to the descriptive writing questions were very engaging and sustained, especially for the first description in which the idea of a ‘nest’ was interpreted in various ways. Birds, bees and even dragons featured most often though workplaces, rooms in family homes and hotels named ‘The Nest’ were also represented descriptively. Many effective responses described more conventional forest scenes but evoked a strong sense of place and an atmosphere which suited the location. In the second task, the ‘important journeys’ being prepared for varied, with the most successful often involving leaving a familiar home for a new period in the narrator’s life with all the attendant fears and excitement evoked by the prospect. Effective description of these scenes often focused on the thoughts and feelings of the narrator as well as details of the surroundings. Some less successful responses to this question were limited to the listing of various items being packed into suitcases or, in some responses, were intended more as a guide for how to prepare for selecting accommodation, means of travel and items to take. Examiners sometimes found only limited descriptive content to reward in such responses. Less effective responses to the first question tended to become dominated by events or lengthy narrative preambles about how the nest was spotted or what happened in the vicinity rather than description. In both questions, descriptions were more effective when there was specific detail and where the description created an atmosphere which evoked the scene credibly and engagingly. Less effective responses to both descriptive writing questions were characterised by a lack of descriptive detail and a tendency to narrate or list rather than describe.

The best narrative writing engaged the reader with well-drawn and interesting characters and scenarios which were well-prepared. Both narrative questions elicited a very wide range of approaches and Examiners awarded marks in all Levels here. Effective and engaging responses to the first question included a very wide range of ‘injustices’, from slights and betrayals between friends to more expansive stories about unjust convictions for crimes not committed. Less effective responses focused on rather ordinary series of events in which there was limited sense of drama or jeopardy. The second narrative question saw many varied interpretations of the idea of ‘Cancelled’ including social media posts resulting in ostracisation, many cancelled flights and many different forms of betrayal. Less effective narratives tended to become a series of events which, while relevant to the task, were not developed, engaging narratives. Occasionally, responses focused on explaining to the reader what the concept of being ‘cancelled’, usually on social media, meant rather than building a narrative which used the idea.

In this series, there were very few prepared stories which seemed imposed on the task or irrelevant to it.

Comments on specific questions

Section A

Question 1

A relative is considering moving to another country where they and their teenage children will have to learn a new language.

Write a letter to your relative giving your views about whether or not this is a good idea.

In your letter you should:

- **evaluate the ideas, opinions and attitudes in both texts**
- **explain how successful you think the move will be for the adults and their children.**

Base your letter on what you have read in both texts, but be careful to use your own words. Address both of the bullet points

The task required candidates to consider and evaluate the ideas in both texts and to explore the effects that moving countries and learning a new language might have on different members of the family, both children and adults. Examiners were able to award high marks for Reading where there was some probing and evaluation of the ideas in the reading material, rather than a straightforward listing and reproduction of the points in the texts.

More effective responses here focused carefully on the arguments in the texts, with the highest marks awarded for those which addressed and evaluated the most salient ideas about how young people and adults might benefit from being bilingual, whether true bilingualism was even possible and whether the supposed advantages would outweigh some concerns expressed in the texts.

The extent to which the implicit ideas and opinions contained in the texts were probed and scrutinised determined the Level and mark awarded for Reading. These implicit ideas often involved, for example, the idea that an individual's personality might change when a new language is learned, with some seeing this as an opportunity to express more of the 'real person' that would otherwise not emerge while others considered the risk involved in developing unknown and potentially unwelcome character traits. In responses given marks in Level 5 and 6 for Reading, Examiners often rewarded some thoughtful consideration of the importance of nuance and humour in communicating with others, especially for young people, and many responses discussed the importance of increased empathy which might compensate for weaker language skills in terms of integration and making friends. In Text A, for example, the idea that adults might never achieve true bilingualism was explored and there was some careful discrimination between language competence in school compared with that which would be needed for working life, with the suggestion that being bilingual might not actually afford the professional benefits suggested in Text B. Other responses focused on the possible loss of one's first language and the potential for identity confusion this might cause, as well as rifts between family members who spoke only the first language.

The evidence given in Text A for both the benefits and drawbacks to learning a new language were scrutinised critically in the most successful responses. Some candidates cast doubt on the claims made for bilingualism as improving the flexibility of minds, suggesting that young people depend on humour and slang to make friends and that while they were still learning a new language, much damage might be done to their social integration. Accepting that one would have reduced proficiency in both languages was thought by some to be a serious weakness in the argument in favour of learning a new language, potentially locking them out of some professions, whereas others regarded 95% proficiency as more than enough and probably reflected what most people speaking just one language would need in the course of their day-to-day lives. The idea of potential personality changes could be interpreted in a number of evaluative ways to support an argument either for or against moving to another country and learning a new language.

In Text B, more effective responses explored the rather more nuanced tone used by the writer here to discuss the difficulties and dangers posed by adding a new language to one's repertoire. The assumption made here that bilingual people give an impression of being more cultured or intelligent was sometimes challenged as being superficial or the suggestion that more mistakes were made by bilingual people was used to undermine it. Some tackled the implication that being bilingual in one context might not guarantee fluency in a different context by observing that this is equally true of monolingual young people who move from school to working life. The potential for losing proficiency in one's first language was often considered a

serious drawback and while some candidates suggested various methods to ensure this did not happen, one thoughtful response included discussion about how a young person might grow up ‘belonging nowhere, estranged from their original culture while having to focus on acquiring skills to fit in to another culture to which they might never truly belong’.

The examples of the potential benefits of learning a new language in Text A required some probing, rather than summarising, for marks in the higher Levels. For example, the more recently superseded research showing that a child’s development could be impeded by speaking different languages at home and school suggested to some candidates that the evidence changed over time and could not necessarily be trusted. Attributes such as empathy could not make up for poor communication skills and seeing the world from different perspectives did not necessarily make a young person more tolerant or more confident, especially when subject to mockery or bullying in a language they did not properly understand. The inference that only rarely did new language learners achieve real eloquence and that adults could not really hope to become bilingual made the move less attractive to some.

These kinds of explanations and extensions of the ideas in the texts were more evaluative than a simple opinion or summary and warranted marks in Level 5 or above. However, responses in which a range of such evaluations were made, or ideas in the texts were assimilated to create a highly evaluative critique were less common and there were relatively few Level 6 responses for Reading.

Responses given marks in the middle range – in Level 4 and lower Level 5 – tended to be more straightforward, with some reflection and comment on the evidence for and against learning a new language in Text A and often some opinion about employability in Text B. Marks in Level 5 were given where some comments amounted to ‘some successful evaluation’. Most common here, where there was just enough evaluation for 10, were comments which weighed up both sides of the argument, acknowledging both the risks and benefits involved but arriving at a reasoned view. In some responses, these kinds of comments were enough for Examiners to award a mark in Level 5, providing there was some specific focus rather than generalisations about whether learning a new language was desirable or not.

Responses given marks in Level 4 often showed an understanding of the main ideas in the texts and offered a straightforward summary of the ideas in them without examining some of them more closely to address the question. Examiners also noted that the focus of the comments was more general and missed some of the implications of the ideas in the texts. In Text A, for example, some responses missed the fact that some evidence had been superseded and offered a rather contradictory list as a result. In Text B, the more light-hearted tone of the discussion about being bilingual tended to mask more serious concerns which were missed. Where candidates reproduced the points made in both texts, there was less critical awareness of the writers’ arguments and points of view.

Less effective responses, given marks in lower Level 4 or below, showed some understanding of the ideas in the passage but there was reference to a narrow range of points or there was some misunderstanding of the details. Some responses focused more on the move to another country than the learning of a new language, suggesting that the letter’s recipient would miss their homes and families but not really using the ideas in the texts. Weaknesses in organising ideas coherently were characteristic of responses in the lower Levels. The sequence and organisation of ideas often reflected closely the order of ideas in the texts and this resulted in contradictory or disconnected responses. Responses at this level were also poorly adapted for a letter with awkward references to ‘Text A’ or ‘Text B’ which showed some lack of awareness of the audience and purpose of the letter. Ideas were sometimes summarised with very limited conclusions or comments on them which made it difficult for Examiners to award marks above Level 4. Some misreadings appeared at this level, such as the assertions that bilingual people were more likely to contract dementia or would succumb to it earlier than monolinguals.

A small number of weaker responses, given marks below Level 4, were almost totally reliant on lifting or copying from the texts, where there was little of the candidate’s own words in the response and the task was not understood. This inevitably resulted in low marks for both Reading and Writing.

Marks for writing

25 marks were available for style and register, the structure of the answer and the technical accuracy of spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Style and audience

Across the ability range, an appropriate, informal but standard English allowed Examiners to consider marks for Level 4 and above where a ‘sometimes effective style’ was required. Although not always sustained, many letters began with an opening paragraph introducing the writer as a close relative with family connections to the recipient. Some enlivened their style with anecdotal content which established an appropriate register for the task. Many letters, for example, began with an engaging introduction which showed a clear understanding of audience: *‘I can’t believe you’re considering going overseas and leaving your favourite niece behind. How will I cope without my closest friend to grumble to about the rest of the family?’* This tone was successfully used at Level 4 and above, though not always consistently. In some cases, an intimate knowledge of the characters who would be moving and learning a new language elicited some focused comment: ‘Little Tom will probably learn quite quickly but you know what Sarah’s like – at fifteen she’s already self-conscious and desperate to fit in with her friends. How will she cope with the isolation she’s bound to feel at first while she’s still learning? Imagine if her classmates mocked her – I dread to imagine it’.

In the middle range of marks, Examiners could sometimes award marks in Level 4 even where more technical writing skills were lacking and suggested a Level 3 mark, if the style and register adopted were appropriate for the task and the audience. A clear, consistent attempt to engage the specific audience rather than summarise the content of the texts in a straightforward way could sometimes compensate for other elements of style such as weak spelling or insecure grammar. Conversely, there were many responses which were accurate in the main but showed limited adaptation of style from the original texts to suit the style, context and register of a letter to a family member, reducing the effectiveness of the response. References made to ‘Text A’ and ‘Text B’ showed a limited grasp of what the letter’s recipient knew and understood and damaged the register of the letter.

Level 3 marks were usually awarded where the reading material was largely reproduced so that the organisation and sequence of sentences and paragraphs reflected the original and were not adapted to create a coherent letter. Less effective responses tended to show less awareness of how letters are constructed and how make a coherent argument.

Structure

Responses awarded high marks for Writing handled the material confidently and presented their arguments cogently. The issues addressed were combined so that the judgements which emerged were clearly derived from the ideas in the texts, but the response was not dependent on them for its structure and sequence. At the highest level, the conflicting points made in the texts were addressed but the whole response was made cohesive by a persuasive argument. The central debate about whether the difficulties and risks involved in learning a new language were outweighed by the benefits to a person’s prospects, personality and outlook was addressed consistently. The argument being pursued determined the sequence of ideas in these responses rather than the sequence of the original texts.

Responses given Level 5 marks for Writing tended to reflect a range of points made in each text but were reordered in a response which was sensibly structured and paragraphed. This often avoided the clashing of contradictory points from each text. Many used the bullet points in the question to help structure their responses, with an introduction and a conclusion and valediction which reflected the informality of the relationship between writer and recipient. Expressions of affection, support and often humour were appropriate and quite common at the end of the letter although some struck a more jarring notes with ‘Yours sincerely’ and some were overly formal in tone throughout. An overall coherence and structure were required for this Level which was usually less evident in responses below Level 5.

Less effective responses sometimes struggled to provide a coherent argument and were more tied to the sequencing of the texts. In most cases the information given in the texts was offered with some rewording or some phrases were lifted from the texts. Letters often began appropriately but lost the register and form of a letter before the end.

Accuracy

Accomplished writing which was accurate and controlled as well as appropriate in tone and register was given a writing mark in Level 6 for Writing. These responses were often engaging and showed a strong awareness of audience but were also fluent and virtually free of error. There was a range of precisely selected and complex vocabulary and varied sentence structures were consciously used, often rhetorically, to engage the reader. Some complex sentence structures were chosen which conveyed with some subtlety the contending views in the texts and complex clauses were controlled by careful punctuation.

Level 5 responses were usually purposeful and clear, though perhaps not as ambitious and wide ranging in vocabulary or as precise in register or style as those given higher marks. Level 4 responses were ‘sometimes effective’ but not consistently so. Although the style was usually plain and unsophisticated, the language used was apt and generally accurate. A range of quite basic errors was made at this level which limited the effectiveness of the style but did not affect clarity of meaning. Common misspellings at this level included some words from the texts, such as ‘language’, ‘bilingual’ and ‘personality’ and there was some copying of phrases and sentences which could not be credited as the candidate’s own style. Other errors such as the incorrect use of homophones and the omission of definite and indefinite articles tended to affect fluency in Level 4 and below. ‘Children’ was sometimes written as ‘childrens’ or ‘childs’ and grammar errors in verb and pronoun agreements were also a little more common.

Faulty sentence structures, fluctuating tense use or too much lifted or copied material often kept writing marks for **Question 1** below Level 4. These responses often showed reasonable clarity in conveying meaning but there was a wide range of quite basic punctuation and grammar errors which meant that Examiners could not award marks in Level 4. Tense and agreement errors were more frequent and more damaging to meaning at this level. In rare cases, material from the texts was so extensively copied that responses could not be given many marks for Writing or for Reading because neither the content nor the style of the response was the candidate’s own.

Ways in which this type of answer could be improved:

- Be prepared to challenge the ideas in the reading texts and to consider the impact of them on the groups identified in the task.
- Make sure the ideas you use are derived from the passage.
- Aim for breadth of coverage of the ideas in the passage as well some depth in evaluating them.
- Think carefully about the kind of style which suits your task and the audience.
- Check your writing for basic punctuation errors, such as missing definite or indefinite articles, weaknesses in grammar or misspellings of key words which are in the texts.

Section B

Descriptive Writing

Question 2 – Write a description with the title, ‘The nest’.

Question 3 – Describe the preparations you make for an important journey.

Both descriptive writing questions were popular choices for candidates and were interpreted in a wide variety of ways. In the first task, many kinds of nests were described. While the majority were birds’ nests, other creatures were represented such as bees, ants, termites, dragons and there were some which took a more metaphorical view and described their room, bed or another specific room in their home, school or grandparents’ houses as having the characteristics of a nest. All these interpretations were acceptable and valid and most widened their lens to allow for a range of descriptive detail of the location. Occasionally, the preamble to the description of the nest, the journey to it and the surrounding area tended to outweigh with narrative the description of the nest itself or the response was largely a description of how the nest was constructed and which materials were used. However, in many responses where the focus on detail was consistent, Examiners awarded some very high marks for this question.

This tendency to narrative or to listing and a lack of specific detail was also evident in some responses to the second question, more frequently seen here by Examiners than in the first question. Sometimes a focus on mental preparation rather than the packing of items in a suitcase kept this tendency to narrate or list in check and elicited more engaging responses for the reader.

Some effective responses to the first question created an engaging atmosphere from the start as the narrator observed their surroundings. Forests and parkland were frequent locations at all levels of achievement though the most successful responses focused on detail and described it with striking images and ideas. In some highly effective responses, small details enlivened the description with images, such as the roots of a tall tree '*rippling the surface of the ground like writing snakes*' or the mass of a tree described as '*imperial, impervious to time and weather and all of the petty squabbles of humankind beneath it*'. Some complex and ambivalent emotions were sometimes evoked with subtlety in these pieces, often a sense of wonder at the intricate design of nests or revulsion at the predation of nests by bigger creatures or violent weather. The precariousness of nests and the eggs or tiny creatures within them was also a common theme: in one response, the nest plummeted to the ground in a storm, causing the mother bird to '*screech with a deafening sound of distress that would crush the heart of a grown man as the nest and its contents smashed and disintegrated on the ground before me*'. In other responses, candidates attempted to describe the nest from the point of view of a newly hatched bird, sometimes with some success: '*A great looming shadow appeared above our heads as we shivered and squeaked with terror*'. There were responses in which trees were climbed to observe nests or the fledglings observed from below, teetering on the edge and flapping tiny wings. As usual in descriptive writing, the choice of details and closely observed images helped to conjure a sense of place. In one effective description, the writer's thoughts and feelings were described as they left the forest, aware of a sense of intrusion on a process usually unseen: '*My footsteps rang through the trees, leaving the tiny creatures in the nest to live or die, terrifying unseen millions of creatures whose lives hung by a thread every day in this green, silent place of mystery*'. These effective responses were characterised by a focus on detail and the conscious creation of a clear, though sometimes subtle atmosphere which evoked a strong sense of place.

The second question was less often selected than the first and there were more instances where the specific requirements of descriptive writing were less well understood. In better responses, the range of different scenarios in which characters prepared for important journeys was quite wide, often involving leaving home for college or undertaking some trip which was more significant than a holiday. There was often more insight into the writer's thoughts and feelings – a sense of nostalgia about the place being left or an overwhelming nervousness about the journey or its destination. In one highly effective and frightening description, the panic induced by having to leave a home village before advancing hostile soldiers arrived was evoked with considerable skill: '*My mother scooped up the sleeping baby in a blanket, swung the blanket on her back and tied its corners at her waist. The hurrying footsteps of a hundred villagers running for their lives and the stifled panic of a hundred terrified human beings hung in the air of the dark night*'. Other scenarios where journeys were being prepared for offered opportunities for nostalgia, as in the case of one narrator who re-read school reports from long ago as they prepared for college: '*The headmaster's unmistakable handwriting jumped off the page at me, accusing my eight-year-old self of indolence and making me smile at what he would think of me now, packing my books and my laptop for tomorrow's journey to the most prestigious university in my country*'. The focus on the thoughts and feelings of the writer was clearly descriptive and effective in evoking a specific atmosphere and engaging the reader effectively.

Level 5 responses to this question used a wide range of details and were well-constructed, although were less consistently effective and cohesive overall. At the bottom of Level 5 and in Level 4, responses were sustained and competently organised but were usually a little more predictable, drifted into narrative or more typically described the items being packed. In the first descriptive writing question, long preambles about how the nest was noticed or discovered tended to over-balance descriptive detail while in the second question lists of outfits, their colours and textures, became somewhat repetitive and lacked interest for the reader.

For Content and Structure, responses given marks in Level 4 tended to become narrative or became lists quite quickly, especially in the second question. The descriptive content tended to be a little more stereotypical or general than responses given higher marks.

Less effective responses given marks in Level 3 or below often included less well organised lists of details briefly given rather than developed, especially in **Question 3**, or were simple narratives about coming across a nest of some sort and what happened around it.

High marks for Style and Accuracy reflected precise, sophisticated and varied vocabulary, used carefully to achieve specific effects, as well as the technical accuracy of the writing. In both descriptive tasks, highly rewarded responses had a much wider range of vocabulary, precisely deployed to evoke atmosphere and engage the reader. Highly effective responses showed an ability to use both simple and complex language and sentence structures to create subtle, complex atmospheres of, for example, tranquillity or chaos. In less effective responses, vocabulary was sometimes wide-ranging and complex but used with less precision. In a few cases, this insecure use of language resulted in a style which was difficult to follow and the credit which could be given for a wide-ranging vocabulary was lost by imprecise and inappropriate use. Cliched or repetitive vocabulary was often characteristic of Level 4 marks.

In less secure descriptive writing, tenses switched between past and present, sometimes within sentences. Incomplete or verbless sentences also affected marks given in the middle range, although this error was less persistent than seen in the past. Lapses in grammar, perhaps minor in isolation but more damaging when persistent, also kept responses out of Level 4 for Style and Accuracy.

Ways in which the writing of descriptions can be improved

- Try to avoid clichéd scenarios and consider a more individual and original selection of content. Choose a scenario which gives you a range of details on which to focus without telling a story.
- Keep your focus on details which will help you evoke a particular atmosphere.
- Write sentences with proper verbs and do not switch tenses.
- Use vocabulary precisely: complex words used incorrectly do not help your style.

Narrative writing

Question 4 – Write a story which involves an injustice.

Question 5 – Write a story with the title, ‘Cancelled’.

Both narrative writing questions were popular choices for candidates across the mark range and there was a very wide range of plotlines, characters and scenarios in these responses, based on valid, relevant interpretations of the questions. Effective responses given high marks by Examiners were well organised and often original interpretations of the questions which used engaging, credible ideas to create developed stories. An ability to shape the narrative, to produce moments of tension or drama, to vary the pace of the story and create well-rounded characters were elements of the ‘features of fiction writing’ credited by Examiners. In the first question, responses given higher marks for Content and Structure were often tightly structured, sometimes original interpretations of the title in the question. The ‘injustice’ suffered had many different backdrops. School friendships broken by being blamed for something perpetrated by someone else were quite common and often successful, with some effective characterisation and well observed detail. One story, for example, featured an exam cheat whose ‘easy charm and boyish good looks’ contrasted sharply with the narrator’s ‘awkward, acne-spotted looming presence at every gathering’, making the latter an easy victim of unjust accusations and taunting. Another wrongly accused character was the victim of prejudice in other ways, a convenient scapegoat for the murder of a girl from another racial group. Other interesting stories involved more expansive interpretations of the title but were nonetheless quite complex and credible portrayals of characters and settings. Fantasy or science fiction genres sometimes featured here, where the historic injustices of an enemy were avenged by battles and plots in stories which employed the style, ideas and features of the genre convincingly. In most effective, developed narratives the sense of injustice was built on skilful characterisation and relied less on a series of events to entertain the reader.

There were also some very effective narratives to address the alternative narrative question. The ideas generated by the title, 'Cancelled', also elicited some rounded and effective characterisations. Examiners could award high marks here where the narrative included convincing characters and developed plotlines. Most of these were chronologically organised stories though there was some more ambitious structuring of the narrative. There were, across the mark range, many cancelled flights though some effective ones involved more than a sense of jeopardy resulting in missing the flight for a holiday or other trip. In one story, for example, two rival budding sportspeople had been invited to join a selection camp if they could get there in time. The relationship between the two was carefully built up through small but significant actions and observations: '*Sahel and I had been friends for years since we kicked an old ball against the side of his house together until his mother came and chased us away. But just now, his eyes flashed pure venom and beneath that affable smile his teeth were clenched and his jaw set. This was war.*'

Characters 'cancelled' because of social media posts or some other issue considered unforgivable featured also in many stories, their success often determined by the convincing evocation of the impact on a character of being 'cancelled'. One young woman innocently became friendly with the boyfriend of a long-term friend and was ostracised by a large friendship group as a result, only to realise that the young man in question had orchestrated the sequence of events out of malice. Her attempts to rescue her former friend from his manipulation only led to more isolation and the story was given more impact by being structured as a recollection after time had elapsed and the hapless former friend had been murdered by her boyfriend.

Narratives given marks in Level 5 were usually a little more straightforward in structure and approach but cohesive and with some engaging features. Examiners could award marks in Level 5 for Content and Structure where the narrative was organised and there was a clear attempt to create a developed story, relevant to the task. Responses in this range were usually chronological accounts but were cohesive and balanced and contained a suitable ending depicting some resolution. There were many which involved fairly straightforward accounts of friends or classmates who became estranged but where credible characters and settings were created, Examiners could award marks in Level 5. Effective characterisation of the protagonist or narrator was often a factor in Examiners selecting a mark in Level 5 rather than Level 4. While some Level 5 narratives were a little predictable, stories needed to be well-managed with some conscious shaping of the narrative beyond a simple retelling of events. In responses to the first question, for example, some sense of jeopardy was created in most narratives at this Level, usually by some betrayal or accusation. In the second question, Level 5 responses were usually chronological accounts, but the main character or characters were credible and their actions and motivations were made clear and were relevant to the idea of being 'cancelled'.

Level 4 marks for Content and Structure were awarded for stories which were relevant to the task but were less developed and used fewer elements of developed narrative writing. At this level, stories were often more dependent on a series of events, without the preparation of setting and character to engage the reader. A simplicity of content or a lack of development rather than weaknesses in organisation were typical at this level. Similar plots and scenarios were often used as those in more effective narratives, such as missed flights or being accused of something unjustly but the narratives were less effective in engaging the reader. For Question 5, for example, cancelled flights were just as common but at Level 4 the characters were often named but not described and the story tended to end when some hurried journey to the airport for a holiday resulted in a cancelled flight and the family simply returned home disappointed. While most less effective narratives had some simple but clear sequence of events, there were fewer features of a developed narrative and the reader was less engaged as a result.

Responses given marks in Level 4 and lower were usually simple accounts of events and showed limited awareness of the reader or the features of narrative writing which elevate an account into a developed story. While there was usually some relevance to the task selected, the plot was either very simple or confusing and characters lacked substance, often appearing only as names. Dialogue was either used very little or, occasionally, too much, with limited storytelling to help the reader make sense of events. At this level, Question 5 responses were not really narratives but rather simple explanations of what is understood in modern life by being 'cancelled', sometimes with some examples of social media figures who had suffered this fate and why.

High marks for Style and Accuracy were given for responses where the writing was engaging and varied in vocabulary and where different sentence structures were controlled and used to create particular effects. The characteristics of Level 6 writing included a fluent and flexible use of language which was subtle enough to create a range of effects to engage the reader. Punctuation within sentences, especially in the use of dialogue, was secure in responses in Level 6 but increasingly rarely so below this level. A sophisticated and precise range of vocabulary allowed Examiners to consider the highest marks for Style and Accuracy. Responses awarded marks in Level 5 tended to be less ambitious and complex but still mostly accurate and

largely fluent whereas Level 4 responses were plain in style and lacked some range and precision in vocabulary. Quite common errors of grammar and expression appeared increasingly in responses given low Level 5 and Level 4 responses. The correct punctuation of speech was rare below Level 5. Errors in sentence control and separation, as well as lapses in tenses, limited otherwise competently told stories to Level 4, as did frequent errors in basic punctuation or grammar. The incorrect use of participles or errors in grammatical agreement contributed to a lack of fluency and accuracy which kept many responses out of Level 5. Similarly, basic punctuation errors and the mis-spelling of simple words and wrongly selected homophones sometimes appeared in otherwise competent writing, limiting the mark for Style and Accuracy. Weak demarcation of sentences, most commonly the use of commas where full stops were needed, was a common weakness in Level 4/low Level 5 writing, though the mixing of tenses and the use of incomplete sentences were perhaps more prevalent in the descriptive writing. Switching tenses from past to present was, however, quite common in narratives at this level, with a tendency to replicate in writing the common style of spoken story-telling in the present tense at moments of drama.

Ways in which the writing of narratives can be improved:

- Think about how to interest and intrigue the reader in shaping your narrative.
- Consider imaginative ways to structure your story, using time lapses or different narrators. These structures will need careful planning.
- Characters' thoughts and feelings help to engage your reader. Don't rely on events.
- Check your writing for errors which will badly affect your mark, such as basic spelling and punctuation mistakes.
- Choose your vocabulary with precision and consider the power of simple words and sentences to create particular effects.

ENGLISH FIRST LANGUAGE

Paper 0990/22
Directed Writing and Composition 22

Key messages

This paper was mainly assessed for writing, although there were fifteen marks available for reading in **Question 1**.

In order to achieve high marks, candidates were required to:

- use an appropriate form, style and register in both questions
- structure ideas and organise their writing effectively to persuade and engage the reader
- produce detailed and evocative descriptions and engaging, credible narratives
- understand how different audiences, purposes and genres should influence the style adopted
- construct varied sentences accurately, with a clear attempt to influence and interest the reader
- use precise and wide-ranging vocabulary, appropriate for the task and style required.

General comments

Examiners found that in a great majority of cases, candidates understood what was required in both questions, Directed Writing and Composition. Although there were few very brief scripts or responses which showed significant misunderstanding of tasks, some scripts showed a degree of confusion about the requirements of narrative and descriptive writing. Nearly all candidates understood the instructions for the examination and attempted **Question 1** and either a descriptive or narrative writing task, with very few rubric infringements seen by Examiners. In **Question 1**, most responses were written mostly in candidates' own words, with only a small number mostly or wholly copied from the texts in the Reading Booklet Insert.

Nearly all responses showed a clear understanding of and engagement with the topic of the reading texts in **Question 1**. Most responses were written in an appropriate style and format for an article for a specific audience of young people and there was in many a clear attempt to address the central issue in the texts, the feasibility or desirability of outdoor learning in education. Effective answers tended to structure responses independently, selecting and commenting on the details in the texts in a coherent response, often making suggestions about changes which could be made within their own institutions. Comments made about whether or not such actions were beneficial for young people were rooted in the ideas given in the reading texts and showed some ability to probe and challenge those ideas.

In the middle of the mark range, responses tended to reproduce the points made in the texts, sometimes with a little opinion on the effectiveness of particular changes to the educational system, with some beginning to evaluate. A substantial number of responses in this range made some reference to the ideas in the texts, though without really tackling the central concept of the two texts: what makes a rounded, successful and healthy education?

Less effective responses tended to repeat the ideas in the texts, rather than selecting points and commenting on them. In some responses at this level, this resulted in a lack of cohesion with conflicting viewpoints given side by side. Others produced summaries of what each text said with limited understanding of how to adapt the ideas in them for an article for young people. A small but significant number of responses were comparative analyses of the texts themselves rather than an evaluation of the ideas in them .

Most made good use of the bullet points in the question to help structure the response and the ideas in the texts were scrutinised thoughtfully in more effective responses. Less effective responses sometimes showed limited awareness of the specific audience for the article, providing a commentary on the texts but without adaptation to the style and format of an article. Overall, however, there was often a clear attempt made to adapt the style and register to appeal to an audience of young people and, at the highest level, some understanding shown of how magazine articles are structured and presented and how rhetorical language can be used to engage and persuade readers.

The most effective responses paid specific attention to the audience and style required for the task. These were lively but evaluative in style, using ideas from the texts to create and structure arguments and often employing rhetorical devices such as questions, exclamations and some exhortation and calls to demand change or refute the propositions. Most in the middle range of marks wrote in a more straightforward style and there was less focus on scrutinising the ideas in the texts. Less effective responses relied more on the sequence of the points made in the texts with less selection and reordering of points from the originals. This sometimes resulted in responses which had less overall coherence.

In **Section B**, effective responses to the composition questions were characterised by a clear understanding of the genre selected, descriptive or narrative, and of the features of good writing in each.

Descriptive writing at the highest level was evocative and subtle and most responses gave a range of descriptive detail without resorting to narrative. Many responses to the descriptive writing questions were very effective and sustained. There were some detailed descriptions of the ruination of a variety of events by bad weather in the first descriptive writing question which Examiners found engaging and effective. Some with close detail and description of the feelings of those involved in the outdoor events successfully evoked atmosphere. In the second task, across the mark range there was a variety of groups of holiday-makers described, often families or recent high school graduates, although some responses featured a number of unconnected individuals. Less effective responses to both questions tended to become narratives quite quickly, or lengthy narrative preambles to set the scene rather over-balanced the main focus of the task. In both questions, descriptions were more effective when there was specific detail and where the description created an atmosphere which evoked the scene credibly and engagingly. Less effective responses to both descriptive writing questions tended to lose descriptive focus. Less successful responses to the second task often described the holiday resort and activities rather than the people, clichéd beach scenes featuring prominently.

The best narrative writing engaged the reader with well-drawn and interesting characters and scenarios which were credible. Both narrative questions elicited a very wide range of approaches and interpretations and Examiners awarded marks across the range here. Effective and engaging responses to the first question employed a range of genres, although Mystery/Horror appeared frequently across the mark range. Perhaps less imaginatively approached, the second narrative question often produced more convincing and credible stories and characters, based on personal experience which gave purpose and cohesion to the story. While some included rather ordinary events, other less effective narratives were less credible or were under-developed in style and less cohesive in structure.

Some composition responses would have benefited from a clearer grasp of the features of good writing in specific genres. The best descriptive writing was specific, used some original and thought-provoking imagery and effectively evoked the atmosphere of the time and place described. The conscious shaping of narratives to interest and intrigue the reader and the creation of credible characters were features understood by the most effective writers who chose narrative writing options.

In **Section B**, several responses used a pre-determined structure and content which seemed imposed on the task and not always relevant to it.

Comments on specific questions

Section A

Question 1

Write an article for young people about outdoor learning.

In your article you should:

- **evaluate the ideas, opinions and attitudes given in both texts**
- **give your own views about whether or not an outdoor education for children is feasible or desirable**

Base your article on what you have read in both texts, but be careful to use your own words. Address both of the bullet points.

Write about 250 to 350 words.

Up to 15 marks are available for the content of your answer, and up to 25 marks for the quality of your writing.

Question 1

Marks for reading

15 marks were available for Reading in **Question 1**.

Examiners awarded high marks for Reading where there was some probing and evaluation of the ideas in the reading material, rather than a straightforward listing and reproduction of the points in the texts.

More effective responses here focused carefully on the arguments in the texts, with the highest marks awarded for those which handled the central dilemma of whether the education systems in their countries and worldwide should or needed to be radically altered.

The extent to which the implicit ideas and opinions contained in the texts were probed and scrutinised tended to determine the level of candidates' achievement. These implicit ideas often involved, for example, some discussion of the exclusionary nature of both classroom-based schooling and outdoor learning and their various potential harms to young people. Only at the highest level were the texts challenged as to what exactly was meant by 'outdoor learning'; here the cynicism of Text B was picked up and employed to create a counterblast to the essentially romantic and unrealistic view of Text A, that education should be wholly transferred from the classroom to '*the wilderness*'. Others saw the proposals of Text A as regressive and dangerous, putting the future of students and the economy at risk. One most insightful and strongly argued response excoriated its suggestions, asserting that they would return his country to a condition before its modern education system was developed: '*Our future must be in classrooms, learning Math and Programming, not running around like little savages!*' At this level there was also support for the ideas behind outdoor learning and recognition of the effects on mental health of '*immense pressure*' and the '*countless standardised tests*' of conventional schooling. While accepting that young people educated in '*the wilderness*' might well find the transition to higher education and the workplace more difficult, this was perceptively developed in one response: '*Does this not signal a need to change our societal structure? Must education be a training ground for commerce and industry?*' Elsewhere several very effective responses refuted the notion that outdoor learning was no preparation for the adult world, arguing cogently for the application of its principles in various walks of life, and especially in the formation of fully socialised and useful citizens. In responses given marks in Level 6 and the top of Level 5 for Reading, Examiners often rewarded some thoughtful interrogation of Text A's claims of the ease and economy of implementing outdoor learning and its blithe dismissal of concerns about safety and practicality. Effective responses also challenged the underlying assertion in Text A that the very desirable 'soft skills' produced by immersion in nature could only be found there; rather, good teaching and well-managed class and group activities could and did produce the same effects while protecting the academic achievement required by universities and employers.

Frequently, the points in Text B were used to oppose and evaluate the views of Text A, and in more effective responses were themselves developed and evaluated in the process. Although across the mark range more responses derived their evaluative points from Text B, higher level evaluation was more often seen when probing Text A, especially when laying bare its idealised, romanticised views of the natural world and its benefits.

Responses given marks in the middle range, in Levels 4 and 5, tended to be more straightforward, with some reflection and comment on the varying benefits of outdoor learning, and the deleterious effects of the traditional classroom on the mental health and emotional development of young people. Here too was often found discussion of the balance of responsibility for such development between parents and school. Development of the points in Text A about the overdependence on innovative technology in education sometimes went too far and became a general diatribe against the evils of technology and social media, resulting in a loss of focus and a narrowness of discussion.

Responses at this level included some opinion or reaction to the ideas in the texts, with marks in Level 5 given where some comments amounted to ‘some successful evaluation’. Most responses suggested that a balance of the two forms of education was desirable, not an evaluation in itself, but sometimes reaching evaluation in their explanations and justifications. Responses given marks in Level 4 often showed an understanding of the main ideas in the texts and offered sensible suggestions about what schools or colleges could do to improve the lot of students locally while not really evaluating the different ideas or examining the main debate about the curriculum itself and the manner of its delivery. Here the meaning of ‘outdoor education’ was not usually established clearly, only vague assumptions about field trips and expeditions emerging in the response. Some seemed to believe, despite evidence to the contrary in both texts, that outdoor learning consisted only of moving the same lessons, curricula, equipment and staff out of the building and into the nearest green space. Examiners also noted that the focus of the comments was more general and missed some of the implications of the ideas in the texts. In Text A, for example, responses often at this level repeated the writer’s assertions that if food was needed, students could simply forage; if shelter was required, they need only build it *‘from nature’s store’* with limited consideration of the perils to which this would expose a class of children. From Text B, the claim that 85 per cent of UK parents wanted outdoor education for their children was almost always reproduced but the author’s point that they did not value such experience enough to provide it themselves was missed. Commonly, where candidates reproduced the points made in both texts, there was at this level less awareness of the opposing views in them.

Less effective responses showed some understanding of the ideas but there was reference to a narrow range of points or there was some misunderstanding of the details. In Text A, for example, there was little awareness shown of its vagueness or its omission of any concrete evidence of what exactly was being proposed. At the lower levels simple reproduction of the points on offer was characteristic of responses. The sequence and organisation of ideas often reflected closely the order of ideas in the texts and this sometimes resulted in contradictory or disconnected responses. Responses also often had fewer characteristics of an article or the information in the texts was not presented as an article. Such responses often began in a way which showed this, such as *‘Text A says that...’* Ideas were sometimes summarised with very limited conclusions or comments on them which made it difficult for Examiners to award marks above Level 4.

Some weaker responses, given marks below Level 4, were almost totally reliant on lifting or copying from the texts, where only insignificant changes had been made to the wording of the texts. A few responses showed very little connection with the texts, sometimes focusing on improvements to ‘boring lessons’ they had experienced but with limited evidence of having read the texts.

Marks for writing

25 marks were available for style and register, the structure of the answer and the technical accuracy of spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Style and audience

Candidates could adopt a range of appropriate styles and registers for their articles and could show their understanding of the intended audience of young people in a variety of ways. Across the ability range, an apt, fairly conversational but standard English style allowed for Examiners to consider marks for Level 4 and above where a ‘sometimes effective style’ was required. Although not always sustained, many articles began with an appropriate headline and lively introduction which engaged the interest of the reader. Some high scoring responses used a more rhetorical style, presenting their arguments in an engaging way which appealed to their young audience. A tone which reflected a familiarity between writer and audience worked

well for some: '*We've all been there, haven't we? Gazing out of the window as the teacher's soporific voice drones on?*'; '*Is it really necessary to destroy our mental health in order to get those grades?*' Other choices were made in favour of a more informative style, with some exhortation at the end to press for change in the education system, or to seek for compromise, or to accept that stress was an effective spur to achievement in education and in life. The ironic, slightly mocking tone of the writer of Text B was adopted and developed in some responses, often effectively: '*Good luck with telling the admissions tutor of your favoured university that you're a nice person who jumps off logs on a regular basis.*'

In the middle range of marks, Examiners could sometimes award marks in Level 4 even where more technical writing skills were lacking and suggested a Level 3 mark, if the style and register adopted were appropriate for the task and the audience. A clear, consistent attempt to engage a young audience rather than summarise the content of the texts in a straightforward way could sometimes compensate for other elements of style such as weak spelling or insecure grammar. Conversely, responses which were accurate in the main but showed little adaptation of style from the original texts to suit the style of an article were sometimes limited in the marks available.

Level 3 marks were usually awarded where the reading material was largely reproduced so that the organisation and sequence of sentences and paragraphs reflected the original and were not adapted to create a coherent article. While most responses to varying degrees worked their way through Text A then Text B, sometimes offering a brief concluding paragraph to address the second bullet, less effective responses tended to refer to the texts as Text A and B with limited grasp of what the intended audience knew or understood.

Structure

As mentioned above, responses awarded high marks for Writing handled the material confidently and presented their arguments cogently. The issues addressed were combined so that the judgements which emerged were clearly derived from the ideas in the texts but the response was not dependent on them for its structure and sequence. At the highest level, the issues in the two texts were addressed but as a whole rather than a disjointed response to two quite different texts. The central debate about the relative benefits of two different systems of education was grasped from the start and the ideas in the texts were organised as arguments and counter-arguments in a coherent and cohesive article. The opening and concluding paragraphs of these effective articles tended to introduce and sum up the main points, with the intervening sections arguing the case. The argument being pursued determined the sequence of ideas in these responses rather than the sequence of the original texts.

Responses given Level 5 marks for Writing tended to reflect a range of points made in each text but were reordered in a response which was sensibly structured and paragraphed. This often avoided the clashing of contradictory points from each text. While the requirements of universities and the workplace were usually acknowledged, the attractions of outdoor education and its benefits for the mental health of young people were clearly resonant in responses and led to a final call for at least a degree of change in the present system.

Less effective responses sometimes struggled to provide a coherent argument and were more tied to the sequencing of the texts. In most cases the information given in the texts was offered with some rewording but not reordering of ideas. While some brief opinion was sometimes given at the end of the response, these views were unconnected with the ideas outlined up to that point and were contradicted by some comments which had come before.

Accuracy

Accomplished writing which was accurate and controlled as well as appropriate in tone and register was given a writing mark in Level 6. These responses were often authoritative in style and convincing in their arguments but also fluent and virtually free of error. There was a range of precisely selected and complex vocabulary and varied sentence structures were consciously used, often rhetorically, to engage the reader. Some complex sentence structures were chosen which conveyed with some subtlety the contending views in the texts, and complex clauses were controlled by careful punctuation.

Level 5 responses were usually purposeful and clear, though perhaps not as ambitious and wide ranging in vocabulary or as precise in register or style as those given higher marks. Level 4 responses, as described in the marking guidelines, were 'sometimes effective' but not consistently so. Although the style was usually fairly plain, the language used was apt and generally accurate. A range of quite basic errors was made at this level which limited the effectiveness of the style but did not affect clarity of meaning. Sentences were

frequently separated by commas rather than full stops. Semi-colons were sometimes inserted inappropriately and homophones were wrongly selected. The unusual English plural ‘children’ was quite often written with a final ‘s’, and the phrase ‘tactile and tangible’ was lifted from Text A and used with an apparent lack of understanding of the words’ meanings. There was confusion evident between ‘outdoor’ and ‘outdoors’, and inconsistent use, sometimes within sentences, of pronouns such as ‘one’, ‘you’ and ‘their’.

Faulty sentence structures, fluctuating tense use or too much lifted or copied material often kept writing marks for **Question 1** below Level 4. These responses often showed reasonable clarity in conveying meaning but there was a wide range of quite basic punctuation and grammar errors which meant that Examiners could not award marks in Level 4. The omission of definite or indefinite articles was very common, as was the inappropriate use of the definite article with the abstract noun ‘nature’. Tense errors and agreement errors were more frequent and more damaging to meaning at this level. In fairly rare cases, material from the texts was so extensively copied that responses could not be given marks in Band 4 for Writing or for Reading because neither the content nor the style of the response was the candidate’s own. Examiners marking word-processed scripts noted a higher than usual frequency of multiple minor errors. In some of these responses, errors were so frequent that Examiners could only award marks for writing in levels lower than those for reading.

Ways in which this type of answer could be improved:

- Be prepared to challenge the ideas in the reading texts. Always justify and explain the reasons why you agree or disagree as this shows evidence of evaluation.
- Make sure the ideas you use are derived from the passage.
- Aim for breadth of coverage of the ideas in the passage as well some depth in evaluating them.
- Think carefully about the kind of style which suits your task and the audience.
- Check your writing for basic punctuation errors, such as missing definite or indefinite articles, weaknesses in grammar or misspellings of key words which are in the passage.

Section B

Descriptive Writing

Question 2 – Describe an outdoor event which is ruined by bad weather.

Question 3 – Describe a group of people who are on holiday.

The first descriptive writing question was more popular than the second, although the latter produced some very accomplished responses. In the first task, many kinds of outdoor events were described: race meetings, football matches, barbeques, school sports days, garden and beach parties, and often most productively, weddings, where the level of emotional and financial investment and the degree of prior planning and preparation provided inherent drama. Occasionally, the process of preparing the event or travelling to it was recounted at length, overshadowing with narrative the description itself, although in many responses there was much to reward in these preambles for descriptive detail. This tendency to narrative and lack of specific detail was a more common weakness in the second question, although there were many highly effective responses which imaginatively evoked a holiday atmosphere and the personalities and relationships of the people described.

Effective responses to the first question often created contrasting pictures of the event and its surroundings before and after it being ruined by the weather, although this was not an absolute requirement of the task. In some responses a lengthy and sometimes pedestrian description of the event ended abruptly with an almost cursory mention of the sudden storm or downpour, unbalancing the structure. Elsewhere, some responses began with the description of the aftermath, then successfully evoked and assimilated earlier, happier images as it continued. Effective structure was sometimes provided by the early focus on one or two small details which were revisited, much changed, in the conclusion. Weddings were a rich source of descriptive possibility, with much potential for disaster, but sometimes responses attempted too comprehensive a picture, trying to include every person, all the decorations, the food, the outfits, resulting sometimes in lists without descriptive development. Clearly there was difficulty for some candidates in concluding the response, with a move into narrative when, for instance, the parents began a frenzied search for an alternative venue after their chosen one was ruined. There clearly seemed to be a desire to provide a happy ending. Frequent but often effective tropes were weeping brides with smudged mascara, collapsing wedding cakes and trailing and deflating balloons. One very effective description had ‘previously dignified, black-clad waiters scrabbling to get unwieldy metal trays of canapés under cover, some falling over the dripping guy ropes of the

marquee.' Another subtly evoked the happily expectant atmosphere of a reception just before a lightning storm: '*Sunlight glinted off the perfectly symmetrical rows of champagne glasses as a slurred speech of less than eloquent affection was made.*' Events on beaches and in parks were often enhanced by effective description of the arrival of wind and storm: '*Thunder rumbled and grumbled as the wind picked up, snatching greasy paper bags from picnic tables.*' Sometimes a sudden spotlight on an individual among a greater number of people convincingly evoked the moment: '*Stallholders packed up with professional precision, speed and grim expressions, while in the dry comfort of his van the umbrella salesman gleefully counted his takings.*'

Responses to the second question, which was less often selected than the first, were less often awarded high marks. Level 6 responses successfully brought a small group of holiday makers to life, bringing out their personalities and the relationships between them with carefully chosen details, but a significant proportion of responses described not a group of people but a beach or a holiday resort, or a holiday journey in painstaking detail, so that Examiners were rarely able to award very high marks for Content and Structure. Some responses read like a travelogue, listing an area's attractions but not describing them in detail, or people at all. There was also a greater tendency to narrative here, and where people were described, there was often no connection established between them, resulting in discrete portraits with little introduction, overview or conclusion, and thus a lack of cohesion. When family groups were depicted, descriptions were often clichéd: fathers were business-like and preoccupied, mothers sweet-tempered or glamorous, teenagers surly and glued to their screens, and toddlers whined for treats. One response awarded very high marks was a carefully crafted picture of a group of neon-clad tourists armed with flashing camera phones from the point of view of an octopus in an aquarium tank: '*"Such an ugly being," I thought to myself as I flaunted my muscular tentacles in front of the creature's weak, wisp-like appendages...*'. Very effectively, the writing conjured a convincing picture of the group without direct definition of any human features.

Level 5 responses tended to use a wide range of details and were well-constructed, if a little less effective and cohesive overall. At the bottom of Level 5 and in Level 4, responses were sustained and competently organised but usually a little more predictable. The tensions of family holiday travel often featured at this level, with images to describe these scenarios. More general, visual descriptions of clothes and hairstyles were more prevalent. There was at this level, however, a clear attempt to evoke an atmosphere and to describe some details without slipping into narrative with limited description.

Descriptions awarded Level 4 for Content and Structure tended to become a little unbalanced or included over-long narrative introductions about how and why the narrator was connected to the outdoor event in the first question, or preparations from the time of getting out of bed in the morning. Disrupted sports events at this level often entailed an explanation of the narrator's progress through the preceding tournament. Responses at this level to the second question sometimes began with the parental announcement of the forthcoming holiday. In some responses, such overlong preambles often gave way to more specific description though the description sometimes became a more straightforward list of what was seen and heard. The descriptive content tended to be a little more stereotypical or general than responses given higher marks.

Less effective responses given marks in Level 3 or below often included less well organised lists of details briefly given rather than developed. Responses which had little descriptive content were more frequently submitted to the second question and these were rather more common than in previous series.

High marks for Style and Accuracy often reflected the precise and varied vocabulary used as well as the technical accuracy of the writing. In both descriptive tasks, similar details were often included but better responses had a much wider range of vocabulary, precisely deployed to create specific effects. Highly effective responses showed an ability to use both simple and complex language and sentence structures to create subtle, complex atmospheres. In less effective responses, vocabulary was sometimes wide-ranging and complex but used with less precision. In a few cases, this insecure use of language resulted in a style which was difficult to follow and the credit which could be given for a wide -ranging vocabulary was lost by imprecise and inappropriate use.

As is often the case in less secure descriptive writing, tenses switched between past and present, sometimes within sentences. Incomplete or verbless sentences also affected marks given in the middle range, even where other technical aspects of style were more accurate. Lapses in grammar, perhaps minor in isolation but more damaging when persistent, also kept responses out of Level 4 for Style and Accuracy. These included mis-agreement, especially between pronouns and verbs, and the omission of definite and indefinite articles but fluctuating tense use was the most common serious error.

Ways in which the writing of descriptions can be improved

- Try to avoid clichéd scenarios and consider a more individual and original selection of content. Choose a scenario which gives you a range of details on which to focus.
- Keep your focus on details which will help you evoke a particular atmosphere.
- Write sentences with proper verbs and do not switch tenses.
- Use vocabulary precisely: complex words used incorrectly do not help your style.

Narrative Writing

Question 4 – Write a story with the title, ‘The lake’.

Question 5 – Write a story that involves looking after a child.

Both narrative writing questions were popular choices for candidates across the mark range and there was a wide variety of plots, characters and scenarios in these responses. **Question 4** was the most popular choice on the paper with marks awarded at every point on the range. Examiners sometimes saw narratives which did not comfortably fit with either title. In a few cases, this lack of relevance affected the mark for Content and Structure.

Effective responses, as is often the case in narrative writing, were well organised and thoughtful interpretations of the title which used engaging, credible ideas to create developed stories. An ability to shape the narrative, to produce moments of tension or drama and to vary the pace of the story were credited by Examiners as essential elements of narrative writing, as was the use of characterisation to create believable protagonists and characters. Responses to the first question featured a wide range of scenarios, although those within the horror/mystery genres predominated. There were monsters of many kinds, murders, drownings and suicides. A common idea featured a group of young people on a camping trip, ignoring the locals' warnings about the cursed lake, and being picked off one by one by whatever malign creature resided in it. Some of the horror stories were so embroiled in cliché that Examiners found it difficult to detect any originality or engaging features in the writing, but some responses created tension so successfully, with such convincing detailed characterisation, that very high marks could be awarded. The protagonist of one very well-crafted response was a cynic who had come to the lake to debunk his friends' accounts of a terrifying experience they had had while fishing. Rowing out to the site he was almost overwhelmed by the suddenly churning water, freezing wind and foul-smelling fog commanded by the unseen monster, wisely never described. Just in time he managed to turn his frail dinghy towards the shore: '*The lights of cabins and campfires were never so welcome. I knew that I had survived an encounter with the eldritch horror I had come only to mock.*' The characterisation of the narrator and the menacing transformation of the beautiful lake setting showed a clear appreciation of how to engage and maintain the interest of the reader. Elsewhere the lake was employed as an element of power, mystery and sometimes symbolism. Where the setting was an important component of the narrative rich descriptive detail was sometimes used very effectively. In Level 6 responses for Content and Structure, moments of drama and tension were carefully paced with more descriptive sections and stories were resolved in interesting ways. Although stories in which the narrator dies at the end are rarely convincing, in one hauntingly effective response the young girl who narrated it, in a stream of consciousness style, returned to the lake where her parents had drowned in a speedboat accident, desperate to 'see' them; drawn further and further out of her depth by her grief she succumbed: '*My body began to convulse. The lake flooded through my eyes, enveloping me. As I let go, the water swelled. As my lips touched the water, I felt my mother's last kiss.*' One of the Level 6 responses to this question eschewed drama entirely and was a profoundly meditative account of a boy's growing relationship with his grandfather, developed during their fishing trips to the local lake.

There were also some very effective narratives to address the alternative narrative question. There were some memorable scenarios, of refugee camps, war zones and orphanages, but overwhelmingly the stories were of babysitting for pocket money or being required to look after a younger sibling and told in the first person. These narratives were often very convincingly told if sometimes predictable, and characterisation felt fresh; dramatic climaxes were usually credible. Although the subject material was often mundane, more

effective responses employed humour and sharp characterisation to engage the reader with considerable success. Narratives given marks in Level 5 were usually more straightforward in structure and approach but nonetheless engaging for the reader. Examiners could award marks in Level 5 for Content and Structure where the narrative was organised and there was a clear attempt to create a developed story which was relevant to the task. Responses in this range were more usually chronological accounts but were cohesive and balanced and contained a suitable ending depicting some resolution. Some of these were well constructed with some effective characterisation, but often their lack of credibility failed to engage the reader. Also straining credibility were a significant number of scenarios in which parents left a small baby for a week or more with a teenage babysitter, previously unknown to them and contacted through an advertisement with predictably disastrous consequences.

For this second narrative question, Level 5 responses were often a little predictable but there was some conscious shaping of the story to create moments of drama or tension. Whichever interpretation was given to the tasks, for Level 5 marks for Content and Structure, stories needed to be well-managed with some conscious shaping of the narrative beyond a simple retelling of events.

Level 4 marks for Content and Structure were awarded for stories which were relevant to the task but were less developed and used fewer elements of good narrative writing. Characters and narrators tended to be more simply drawn and responses were often more dependent on a series of events, lacking attention to characterisation and setting. A simplicity of content or a lack of development rather than weaknesses in organisation were typical at this level. Similar plots and scenarios were used as those in more effective narratives, but at this level there was a tendency to say what happened or to state who the characters were rather than drawing the reader in by shaping the narrative. Characters were identified but there was more time and emphasis given to relating events than developing characters as credible and rounded. In responses to both narrative questions too much time was spent in creating barely relevant back-stories or detailing everything leading up to the commencement of the action, from getting out of bed in the morning. Climax and resolution were then rushed and only summarily dealt with and no satisfactory ending was managed. A number of narratives simply stopped, as if the writer had run out of time. While the majority of less effective narratives had some simple but clear sequence of events, there were fewer features of a developed narrative and the reader was less engaged as a result.

Responses given marks in Level 4 and lower were usually simple accounts of events and showed limited awareness of the reader or the features of narrative writing which elevate an account into a developed story. Scenarios which quickly became clichéd and unengaging were used and below Level 4 some responses became confusing and muddled in attempting to control stories which were too wide-ranging or improbable.

High marks for Style and Accuracy were given for responses where the writing was engaging and varied in vocabulary and where different sentence structures were controlled and used to create particular effects. The characteristics of Level 6 writing included a fluent and flexible use of language which was subtle enough to create a range of effects which helped to engage the reader. Punctuation within sentences, especially in the use of dialogue, was secure in responses in Level 6. A sophisticated and precise range of vocabulary allowed Examiners to consider the highest marks for Style and Accuracy. Responses awarded marks in Level 5 tended to be less ambitious and complex but still mostly accurate and largely fluent while Level 4 responses were plain in style and lacked some range in vocabulary. In some responses, more often to the descriptive tasks, the over-use of alliteration created a contrived style and sometimes unintentional humour. At this level, the writing had few serious errors which affected the clarity of meaning, such as weak sentence control, sentence separation and grammar errors. Quite common errors of grammar and expression appeared increasingly in responses given low Level 5 and Level 4 responses, such as mis-agreements, missing articles and imprecise, sometimes ostentatious vocabulary which obscured meaning. Errors in sentence control and separation, as well as lapses in tenses, limited otherwise competently told stories to Level 4, as did frequent errors in basic punctuation or grammar. The omission of definite and indefinite articles, the incorrect use of participles or errors in grammatical agreement contributed to a lack of fluency and accuracy which kept many responses out of Level 5. Similarly, basic punctuation errors and the mis-spelling of simple words and wrongly selected homophones sometimes appeared in otherwise competent writing and were sometimes frequent enough to affect the mark for Style and Accuracy. Weak demarcation of sentences, most commonly the use of commas where full stops were needed, was one of the most common weaknesses in Level 4/low Level 5 writing, though the mixing of tenses and the use of incomplete sentences were perhaps more prevalent in the descriptive writing. As in the descriptive writing, the important writing skill of editing was frequently forgotten in word-processed scripts which were littered with errors.

Ways in which the writing of narratives can be improved:

- Think about how to interest and intrigue the reader in shaping your narrative.
- Consider imaginative ways to tell your story, apart from a chronological account.
- Characters' thoughts and feelings help to engage your reader. Do not rely on events.
- Check your writing for errors which will badly affect your mark, such as basic spelling and punctuation mistakes.
- Use complicated vocabulary with precision and consider the power of simple words and sentences to create particular effects.

FIRST LANGUAGE ENGLISH

Paper 0990/03
Coursework Portfolio 03

Key messages

Candidates did well when they:

- adapted their writing style to demonstrate an understanding of the needs of different audiences and context for each of the three assignments
- read critically and thoroughly evaluated the implicit and explicit ideas, opinions, and attitudes they identified in a text
- assimilated ideas from a text to provide developed, thoughtful and sophisticated responses
- supported their analysis, evaluation and comments with a detailed and specific selection of relevant ideas from a text
- wrote original and interesting assignments which reflected their personal ideas, feelings and interpretations of events and situations
- wrote with confidence using a wide range of vocabulary with precision and for specific effect
- sequenced sentences within paragraphs in a way which maintained clarity of argument, description or narrative
- demonstrated a high level of accuracy in their writing
- engaged in a process of careful editing and proofreading to identify and correct errors in their writing.

The best practice for the production and presentation of coursework portfolios was when:

- centres followed the guidelines and instructions set out in the Course syllabus and the Coursework Handbook
- a wide range of appropriate texts were used for **Assignment 1**, which contained ideas and opinions to which candidates could respond, and were relevant to their interests
- centres set a range of appropriately challenging tasks which allowed candidates to respond individually and originally to topics and subjects they were interested in, or of which they had personal knowledge or experience
- teachers gave general advice for improvement at the end of the first drafts
- following feedback, candidates revised and edited their first drafts to improve their writing
- candidates checked, revised, and edited their final drafts to identify and correct errors
- teachers provided marks and summative comments at the end of the final draft of each assignment which clearly related to the appropriate mark level descriptors
- teachers indicated all errors in the final drafts of each completed assignment
- centres engaged in a process of internal moderation and clearly indicated any mark adjustments in the coursework portfolios, on the Individual Record Cards, and on the Candidate Assessment Summary Forms.

General comments

A significant number of candidates produced interesting coursework portfolios which contained varied work across a range of contexts. There was evidence to show that many centres set tasks which allowed candidates flexibility to respond to subjects related to their personal interests or experiences. The majority of coursework portfolios contained writing of three different genres. There were very few incomplete folders.

The majority of centres provided the correct paperwork and completed all relevant forms accurately. The Moderation Team reported that many centres provided summative comments closely related to the mark schemes at the end of each completed assignment. These were extremely helpful in helping moderators to understand how and why marks had been awarded and centres are thanked for following the process as instructed in the Coursework Handbook.

The major concern for all moderators was that some markers of the coursework portfolios did not indicate errors in the final draft of each assignment and/or provide a summative comment which referred to the marking level descriptors to justify the marks awarded. Failure to follow this process often resulted in inaccurate or inconsistent marking and was one of the main reasons for the adjustment of marks.

Administration

Successful administration was when centres:

- indicated all errors in the final draft of each assignment
- carried out a thorough process of internal moderation which was clearly signposted on the assignments themselves as well as all relevant documentation
- supplied marks and specific comments relating to the mark schemes at the end of the final draft of each assignment
- accurately completed the Coursework Assessment Summary Form (CASF) and ICRC, including any amendments made during internal moderation
- ensured that each coursework folder was stapled or tagged and securely attached to the Individual Candidate Record Card (ICRC)
- submitted their sample of coursework folders without using plastic or cardboard wallets.

Internal Moderation

Centres who followed the instructions for carrying out internal moderation as directed in the Coursework Handbook are thanked for engaging in this important process. There was a general trend of greater accuracy of marking by centres where there was clear evidence of internal moderation than by centres where no internal moderation process was evident on the coursework folders and documentation.

Some centres did not record changes made at internal moderation on the candidates' Individual Candidate Record Cards (ICRCs) which caused some confusion about the final mark awarded to candidates. Centres are requested to ensure that any changes made at internal moderation are signposted clearly on the work itself then also recorded on the ICRC as well as on the Coursework Assessment Summary Form (CASF).

Using the coursework handbook

A cause of concern for all moderators was that some issues persist even though there are clear instructions in the Coursework Handbook, and the same concerns have been raised in previous Principal Moderator Reports. To ensure effective and accurate marking is achieved, and that all paperwork arrives safely for moderation, it is essential that all the instructions given in the Coursework Handbook, and on the relevant forms, are carefully followed.

Below highlights the three most significant issues related to the administration and annotation of candidates' work which led to mark adjustments by moderators:

1 Indicating all errors in the final version of each assignment

- Some of the assignments showed little or no evidence of complying with the instruction in the Coursework Handbook that markers should indicate all errors in the final draft of each assignment. This process helps markers to effectively and accurately evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a piece of work and to apply the most appropriate 'best fit' mark from the mark scheme. If this process does not take place, it is difficult for markers to make a balanced judgement. In several centres there was evidence across all three assignments that markers had awarded marks from the higher levels of the assessment criteria to work containing frequent, and often serious, errors that had not been annotated by the marker. This inevitably led to a downward adjustment of marks by the moderator. It is important for all who mark the coursework portfolios to fully understand the importance of indicating and taking into account all errors in the final draft of each assignment. To avoid adjustment of marks for accuracy, it is essential that centres engage in this process and clearly indicate errors in their candidates' work.

2 Individual Candidate Record Cards (ICRC)

- A significant number of centres did not attach the portfolios of work to the ICRC in accordance with the instructions in the Coursework Handbook and point 4 on the electronic version of the ICRC.
- Some confusion was caused when centres included ICRCs for the whole cohort as well as the ICRCs for the sample sent; centres only need to send the ICRCs (securely attached to the coursework portfolio) for the candidates in the sample submitted for moderation.
- A small number of centres provided their own version of an ICRC instead of using the one provided by Cambridge; these had to be requested by the moderator, which slowed down the moderation process.
- On some folders there were errors in the transcription of internally moderated mark changes, or it was unclear which mark was the final one. Where internal moderation has taken place, any mark changes should be transferred from the assignment to the ICRC to ensure that the moderator has a clear understanding of all mark changes.

3 Coursework portfolios

- A significant number of centres did not collate the individual assignments into complete coursework portfolios but instead placed loose pages of work into the grey plastic envelopes and despatched them to Cambridge; this caused moderators some difficulties when assembling the coursework folders and increased the risk of work becoming lost or mislaid. Centres should secure each individual coursework folder using tags or staples with the ICRC securely fastened as a cover sheet.
- Moderators reported that several centres used plastic wallets or folders to present candidates' work as an alternative to securely attaching the individual assignments to the ICRC; this caused extra work for moderators and increased the risk of work being mislaid. Centres are requested not to place coursework folders into plastic or cardboard wallets.
- Some centres included more than one rough draft in each folder; this is unnecessary and can lead to confusion. Please ensure that the rough draft included is clearly labelled as a draft.
- Occasionally rough drafts contained annotations and specific feedback; centres are reminded that when markers offer feedback on a rough draft, it should be general advice. No errors should be indicated, and the marker should not offer corrections or improvements.
- Some centres included documentation not required for the moderation process; the only paperwork that should be included in the sample is clearly indicated in the Coursework Handbook.

Comments on specific assignments:

Assignment 1

Candidates were successful when:

- they responded to interesting texts of appropriate length which contained engaging content
- they demonstrated analysis and evaluation of the individual ideas and opinions identified within a text
- the form, purpose and intended audience of their writing was clear to the reader
- they wrote in a fluent, accurate and appropriate style.

Moderators commented that many candidates responded to texts which were of an appropriate length and challenge and which appealed to the interests of the candidates. Successful texts included articles exploring issues relevant to young people, for example, the pros and cons of online learning, feminism, social media, the pros and cons of having tattoos, environmental issues, and issues of local or national interest. Less successful texts were those which were old and outdated or were of limited personal interest to the candidates. Texts selected for **Assignment 1** should be an appropriate length, explore ideas and offer opinions, and use rhetorical or literary devices designed to provoke or sustain the reader's interest to ensure that the text offers scope for candidates to fully engage and respond to in a sustained piece of writing.

Centres are encouraged to use a good range of relevant and up-to-date texts for **Assignment 1**. Other less successful texts were ones where the candidate fully endorsed the writer's views and opinions because they offered few opportunities for evaluating ideas and opinions, as required by the mark scheme. It is also crucial to select texts for their quality of written communication: moderators reported seeing a number of poorly written texts taken from a variety of websites. Many of these were too long and tended to be informative, offering very little scope for rigorous evaluation or analysis. Moderators also reported seeing texts which contained potentially offensive or disturbing material. This may indicate that candidates were allowed to make their own text choices, but centres are reminded that it is their responsibility to ensure that all texts used for Assignment 1 are fit for purpose, and this includes avoiding offensive or unsuitable material.

Some centres set one text for a class or sometimes whole cohort. When this approach was adopted by a centre there was usually a tendency for candidates to produce responses which were very similar in content and structure due to heavy scaffolding. This made it difficult for candidates to create the original and sophisticated responses expected of the higher-level assessment criteria and was a reason for adjustments of marks. Centres are advised that teaching a text to a whole class and offering a scaffolded plan for the response may be a useful teaching strategy for developing the necessary skills and knowledge for **Assignment 1**, but this approach should not be used for the final coursework submission; it is recommended that candidates are offered a choice of texts approved by the teacher.

If centres are unsure about how to approach and set tasks for **Assignment 1**, they can refer to the Course Syllabus and the Coursework Handbook. Both documents provide advice and guidance about task setting and text selection and can be found on the School Support Hub via the main Cambridge website.

Reading

Although some centres were accurate with their marking of reading, as in the previous moderation sessions, there was a significant trend for many centres to award marks from the highest-level assessment criteria to work which more appropriately met the lower-level assessment criteria. Candidates who successfully met the higher-level assessment criteria were those who demonstrated a consistently evaluative approach to most of the ideas and opinions in a text, and provided a developed, sophisticated response which made direct reference or included quotes from the text. Candidates who engaged in a general discussion about the topic or subject of a text, or those who did not thoroughly evaluate a text, tended to produce work which more appropriately met the Level 4 assessment criteria in Table B (reading). The most common reasons for adjustments to a centre's marks for reading were when moderators identified a trend of candidates engaging in a general discussion about the topic of a text/s, or when the number of points covered were 'appropriate' rather than 'thorough'.

Writing

Many candidates responded to texts in an appropriate form and style. Letters were the most popular choice of form, and many candidates demonstrated some understanding of audience and purpose. When candidates were less successful with writing, it was often because the form, intended audience and purpose of the writing was not clear. This made it difficult for the candidates to meet the highest-level assessment criteria and was a reason for adjustments to writing marks for **Assignment 1**. Successful responses to **Assignment 1** tasks were those in which the writing was highly effective, almost always accurate, and consistent throughout in the application of form and style. Work which showed insecurity with form and style, such as the omission of an appropriate ending to a letter, a limited or inconsistent use of rhetorical devices for speeches, or lack of clarity of the intended audience, tended to meet the assessment criteria for Level 5 or below, Table A (writing) or below. The moderators noted that there was a general tendency for many centres to award marks from the highest-level assessment criteria to work which more appropriately met the lower-level assessment criteria.

Another common reason for the adjustment of marks for writing was because of the accuracy of the candidates' writing. When errors impaired meaning, such as the incorrect construction of sentences or use of grammar, typing errors, or the incorrect selection of words from spellcheck, the overall quality and efficacy of the discussion was affected. Errors such as these are classed as serious and make it difficult for candidates to meet the higher-level assessment criteria; this type of writing is more characteristic of writing achieving marks from the middle to the lower levels of the assessment criteria. Moderators also noted a tendency for centres to over-reward vocabulary that had some merit in its selection but was not always used precisely or effectively in the response.

Advice to candidates for Assignment 1:

- thoroughly explore, challenge, and discuss the ideas in the text
- avoid making general comments about the topic or subject of the text, instead, ensure that comments are specifically related to the ideas, opinions or attitudes identified in the text
- look for, and use inferences made implicitly in the text
- look for contradictions or misleading assumptions in the text and comment on them
- develop points to create a thorough, detailed, and clear line of argument or discussion
- make sure that the audience and purpose is clear and adapt the written style accordingly
- proof-read assignments to ensure punctuation, vocabulary choices and grammar are correct.

Assignment 2 (description):

Most tasks set for **Assignment 2** were appropriate and encouraged candidates to write in a descriptive style. Many candidates wrote engaging and vivid descriptions from experience or their imaginations, which were a pleasure to read. Moderators also noticed that there were fewer descriptions which slipped into narrative than in previous sessions, but this is still a relatively common flaw in descriptive writing assignments, sometimes due to the nature of the tasks set. Moderators reported seeing some tasks which invited candidates to describe a specific scene from a play, or chapter from a novel, which tended to lead to unoriginal responses, or tasks more suited to narrative writing. Centres are reminded to set descriptive tasks and remind candidates to avoid using narrative writing techniques in their responses.

The most engaging and successful descriptions were those where the candidates had carefully selected vocabulary to create a realistic and credible sense of atmosphere, place or person, and which were well sequenced and carefully managed for deliberate effect. Successful responses included descriptions of towns or cities in which candidates lived, important events in candidate's lives, or significant settings or places. Less successful tasks were those which asked candidates to describe events or scenarios of which they had no personal experience, or settings and situations in which the candidate clearly had no interest or engagement. Many of these responses relied on unconvincing descriptive writing which did not engage the reader. This type of writing is characteristic of work achieving marks from the middle to lower levels of the assessment criteria, although it was noticed that many centres awarded marks from the higher-level assessment criteria. This was quite often a reason for adjustment of marks from Table C (content and structure).

Whilst many candidates showed a secure and confident understanding of language, there was still a general tendency by a number of centres to award marks from the higher-level assessment criteria to work which contained ineffective overuse of literary techniques. Some moderators commented that this seemed to be actively encouraged by some centres. To achieve marks from the higher-level assessment criteria, candidates need to demonstrate a confident and secure understanding and use language for specific effect. This is difficult for candidates to achieve if they over-use adjectives, include inappropriate images or idioms and/or use obscure or archaic language. The overworking of language was a common reason for moderators adjusting marks.

Another common reason for adjustments to marks was when moderators identified a trend of awarding marks from the higher-level assessment criteria to writing that contained a limited range of sentence structures, incorrectly constructed sentences, or contained frequent errors with punctuation and grammar. Writing that achieves marks from Levels 5 and 6 of Table D (style and accuracy) is expected to be consistently accurate, consistent with the chosen register, and demonstrate an ability to use a range of sentences for specific effect. Many candidates 'told' the reader about the scene being described, rather than engaging the reader with a careful and precise use of vocabulary and images. The moderators also noticed a general trend for candidates to use repeated sentence structures and create almost list-like descriptions.

In addition, the work of a significantly large number of candidates contained frequent and serious errors which impaired the meaning and overall effect of the candidates' work. The most frequent errors were missing prepositions and articles, tense inconsistencies, typing errors, commas used instead of full stops and grammar errors. Quite often, the meaning of sentences was blurred, or meaning was lost altogether. Errors which affect the meaning and clarity of writing cannot be considered as 'minor'. As mentioned earlier in this report, the absence of the indication of all errors made it difficult for the moderators to determine whether errors had been considered when marks had been awarded; moderators noted that on some weaker assignments no errors had been annotated and the summative comment declared a high level of accuracy. Accurate and effective application of the assessment criteria is achieved through the careful weighing up of the strengths and weaknesses of a piece of writing and the application of a mark which 'best fits' the assessment criteria. To achieve this, it is essential that errors are identified and indicated by the markers. Engaging in this process allows markers to effectively balance the strengths and weaknesses of a piece of writing and apply marks that are most appropriate to their candidates' work.

Information and guidance on how to apply the mark schemes are given in the Coursework Handbook. Examples of good tasks and exemplification of the standard of work expected at the different levels of the mark scheme are also provided in the Coursework Handbook.

Advice to candidates for Assignment 2:

- use a range of vocabulary suited to the context and content of the description
- create images appropriate for the context and content of the description
- create an engaging imagined scenario using language designed to have an impact on the reader
- avoid slipping into a narrative style
- proof-read responses to identify and correct common errors such as missing articles and prepositions, switches in tenses and typing errors
- avoid repetitive sentence structures; instead use a range of sentences for create specific effect.

Assignment 3 (narrative):

Much of the task setting for **Assignment 3** was generally appropriate and moderators saw some engaging and effective narratives which were well controlled and convincing. Moderators reported seeing some tasks which did not invite narrative responses as they were too informative. These included accounts of Jack the Ripper or sometimes descriptions of film or book plots. Successful narratives were those in which candidates created stories characterised by well-defined plots and strongly developed features of narrative writing such as description, strong characterisation, and a clear sense of progression. The narration of personal experiences and events, or responses where candidates were able to create convincing details and events within their chosen genre, tended to be more successful. Candidates were generally less successful when their understanding of audience and genre was insecure, and the resulting narratives lacked credibility and conviction. Moderators commented that this sort of writing was often seen when candidates were writing in the genre of horror or murder mystery stories. Stories such as these, although containing a definite beginning, middle and ending, were often unrealistic and incredible, or lacked development of character or plot. Some responses failed to conclude properly, ending with an unconvincing or unsatisfactory cliff hanger. This sort of writing is classed as 'relevant' or 'straightforward' and should expect to be awarded marks from Level 4 or below from Table C (content and structure). Moderators noticed that there was a trend with a significant majority of the work sampled for centres to award marks from Levels 5 and 6 to writing which more appropriately fitted the Level 4, or below, assessment criteria. This was quite frequently a reason for marks being adjusted.

When moderators saw very accurate work containing precise well-chosen vocabulary, and which maintained a consistent register throughout, they could agree when centres awarded marks from Levels 5 and 6 in Table D (style and accuracy). As with **Assignments 1 and 2**, moderators noticed a significant trend for centres to award marks from the highest levels of the mark scheme to work which contained frequent and persistent errors and which more accurately met the assessment criteria from Level 4 or below in Table D. This was a common reason for adjustment of marks. The comments made for **Assignment 2** with regards to accuracy and the annotation of errors are also relevant to **Assignment 3** and should be noted by all who mark coursework.

Advice to candidates for Assignment 3:

- create stories that are realistic, credible, and convincing
- remember that characters' thoughts and feelings help to engage the reader
- avoid clichéd scenarios and consider an individual and original selection of content
- carefully proof-read and check assignments for errors such as punctuation, use of prepositions and articles, tenses, and construction of sentences.

FIRST LANGUAGE ENGLISH

Paper 0990/04
Speaking and Listening Test 04

Key messages

Moderators reported that the general level of accuracy of the assessment was good. Where recommendations of scaling were made, it appeared centres had not differentiated appropriately between different levels of attainment, particularly in **Part 2** and specifically between Level 4 and Level 5.

Where lenient assessment had taken place at the top end of the mark scheme it was often because the candidates had chosen topics that were not sufficiently challenging which resulted in mainly narrative presentations. These were often also lacking ‘lively delivery’ or ‘eloquence’ or ‘a wide range of language devices’.

Where centres had been severe in the lower levels of the mark scheme it was often because the centre did not have a range of abilities represented in the cohort. Sometimes centres were reluctant to ‘bunch’ marks even though performance suggested they should be.

There were few reported instances of the rank order of merit being problematic within centres.

Centre administration was of a high standard and most centres coped well with the introduction of Submit for Assessment (SfA).

Each candidate’s test requires a full formal introduction to be made prior to the beginning of **Part 1**. This introduction should include the centre name and number, the candidate’s full name and candidate number, the date on which the test is being recorded and the name of the examiner. This is important information for the moderator.

Correct timing in the test is vital to successful performance. Generally, the candidates observed the 3–4 minutes allowed for **Part 1** through careful preparation and practice. The timing of **Part 2** was more problematic for some centres. Examiners must ensure a minimum of 7 minutes is allowed for each candidate. Other centres ignored the maximum 8 minute ceiling and allowed candidates to converse for much longer. This is counter-productive.

General comments

For most centres, administration of the test was diligent, accurate and easy to follow. Summary forms were completed to a high degree of accuracy and samples uploaded to SfA were well-chosen and reflected the full range of marks awarded within the centre.

Where there were issues the following guidelines may help to clarify administrative requirements:

- Uploading the recordings for all the entered cohort remains the preferred option for moderators. This allows a moderator to carefully choose recordings to moderate that accurately reflect the performance of the centre across the whole range of its marking.
- Where instructions to centres regarding uploading samples to SfA differ, it is important that the centre chooses wisely which recordings to upload. The top and bottom marks in the centre’s range must be included. A centre should then consider the grade boundaries, available to centres on the appropriate Cambridge website, and ensure the sample reflects these. A centre should consider which candidates’ recordings best reflect the marks that have been awarded so that a fair representation of the centre’s performance can be made by the moderator.
- On several occasions the details of the candidates uploaded to SfA did not correlate to the actual recordings accompanying them. On more than one occasion the same candidate’s recording was

uploaded under the details of multiple other candidates. Centres should double-check to ensure the correct recordings are uploaded to match the individual candidate details.

- Totals appearing on SfA next to the candidate recordings did not match the totals recorded on the accompanying summary forms. Centres should ensure that the totals match please.
- Every test should begin with a full introduction to include the date on which the candidate is being examined.
- Internal moderation is actively encouraged. Where only one examiner is involved, it may be possible to pair with another centre to discuss standards and share good practice. If internal moderation adjustments are made, it is helpful if changes are indicated on the summary forms uploaded to SfA.

Generally, the standard of examining was very good with candidates being given plenty of opportunities to express their views and demonstrate their range of oratory skills.

Where there were concerns, the following advice is offered:

- Examiners should not engage in 'off topic' conversation with candidates before asking them to begin their **Part 1** task. While this may well be aimed at putting candidates at ease before the test, it is potentially distracting for candidates who want to focus on their prepared talks.
- It is strongly advised that each test should begin with the examiner's formal introduction and be followed immediately by the candidate performing **Part 1**, the Individual Talk.
- Given that both Speaking and Listening are assessed in **Part 2**, it is important that the conversations last long enough for candidates to clearly demonstrate their strengths in both mediums.
- It is also important that the conversations offer sufficient challenge to allow candidates to demonstrate the range of skills they possess. Focused questioning and prompts are needed to move the conversation forward, together with an adaptability on the part of the examiner to absorb the candidate's previous comments and to extend the conversation as a result.
- Examiners who rely on a pre-determined set of questions disadvantage their candidates, in particular with regard to the mark for Speaking in **Part 2**. A question from the examiner should lead to an answer from the candidate which then may lead to a comment or prompt from the examiner that is connected to the same content matter.
- Examiners who dominate conversations or who frequently interrupt candidates during the conversation do so to the disadvantage of those candidates. Good examiners prompt candidates then allow them the opportunity to respond in full and to develop their ideas before moving the conversation forwards again.

Comments on specific sections of the test

Part 1 – Individual Talk

The overwhelming majority of responses to **Part 1** were traditional informative and explanatory presentations. There is absolutely nothing wrong with this approach as it is the safest way to deliver a good mark for the candidate if organised, prepared and delivered successfully. There were examples of monologues delivered in a character created by the candidate that were successful but these were few and far between. One centre featured candidates stating directly before starting that they were presenting 'in the role of' – but these were positions in relation to an issue (e.g. from the position of a gamer) – and not really dramatic monologues. Researched presentations worked well where information was presented to be of interest to the listener. The ability to balance statistics, facts and opinions, with the shaping of these as part of a whole, was an important distinguisher at times between more and less successful **Part 1** responses.

Once again this series, there was a wide range of varied and interesting topics delivered with enthusiasm and good knowledge of the chosen subject matter. The majority of candidates prepared well, researched their chosen topics and kept within the prescribed time limit. There were no reported occasions where a moderator had suspicions that a candidate had read from a script or used too detailed prompt cards which is to the credit of all those who entered for the test. There were, however, some candidates who had 'over-prepared' to a point where they were concentrating so much on delivering a memorised response verbatim that they forgot that, in essence, **Part 1** is a performance piece that requires engagement with an imaginary audience. This led to issues with delivery and a somewhat stilted performance not commensurate with Level 5.

Very strong performances in **Part 1** successfully combined excellent knowledge and development of a topic, a tightly defined structure timed accordingly and a lively delivery style. Choosing a topic that can be explored and developed within the 3–4 minute time limit remains the first step to success. A topic chosen merely to

impress a moderator with its supposed maturity or complexity but with which the candidate has little empathy, knowledge or experience will almost certainly lead to a lesser mark than one chosen because the candidate has a real enthusiasm for it. Similarly, ‘Wikipedia’ style talks where there is linear content based on numerous facts but little developed opinion or analysis do not tend to be very successful because they lack sufficient depth to engage the audience fully. It should also be remembered that half the marks for the test are accrued in **Part 2** so candidates have to be prepared to discuss in some depth the topics they have chosen. If candidates have chosen poorly the lack of knowledge is quickly exposed as the conversation develops.

A strong element of presentations achieving Level 5 in **Part 1** remains the structure underpinning the talks, supported by appropriate timing. A clearly defined persuasive argument or a cyclical arrangement that brings the concluding statement back to the initial point often helps candidates to fulfil ‘the full and well-organised’ descriptor for Level 5. While structure itself does not confirm a mark in Level 5, it does provide a strong basis for candidates to exhibit their linguistic and presentational skills. Self-reflection and analysis remain strong elements in moving a talk beyond ‘adequate’. Stronger candidates integrated a good range of language devices into their presentations adapting register, tone and pace to suit. Rhetorical questioning, the use of figurative language and other linguistic techniques were also used purposefully.

Centres should encourage students to choose topics that they know well through personal experience and topics they are passionate about. Experiences they have been through work well if not constructed as just a straightforward narrative. Attempting to analyse, for example, the effect these experiences created and why they are so memorable takes a presentation beyond ‘adequate’.

Some examples of **Part 1** topics from this series that worked well include:

Dream Journals
Stigmas
The Importance of Sleep
Can Money Buy Happiness?
Vinyl v Digital Music
The Possibility of Time Travel
The Power of Words
Chinese Musical Instruments
Traffic Congestion
Does Global Warming Really Matter?
The Trolley Problem (Ethical/Moral Dilemma)
Sustainability
Immigration and Prejudice
Should Students Listen to Music in Class?
The Sale of User Data
Psychology of Colour
Faults with the Education System

The weaker topics seemed to be Social Media, Football, Video Games and Body Image. Candidates must engage more deeply with these subjects and attempt to do something different with them. A little tweaking of the focus of the talk can have a huge impact – for instance instead of a generalised ‘Technology’ title, a more targeted approach from one candidate was ‘Brain Focus and Technology’. Another which, in some centres might have been ‘Mental Health’ was much better focused as ‘Dogs and Mental Health’ and another as ‘Mental Health and Athletes’.

Part 2 – Conversation

It remains the case that the examiner can influence the quality of the discussion in **Part 2**. The most skilful examiners asked open questions that fed directly from responses given by the candidate. Good examiners engaged fully with the topic and corresponding discussion and increased the complexity and subtlety of the questions in order to allow candidates to appropriately demonstrate their ability to deal with ‘changes in the direction of the conversation’.

Overwhelmingly, examiners were supportive of candidates in meeting all of the requirements. In almost all cases examiners remained focused on the topic matter introduced in **Part 1** and showed an appropriate level of interest. Occasionally examiners spoke in too much detail and took too long to ask their questions. The aim should be to prompt and to lead rather than to debate. The examiner needs to engage with the

candidate but needs also to ensure sufficient challenge in **Part 2** to stretch the candidate to perform at the highest level possible for that individual.

Where there were issues with **Part 2** the following advice is offered:

- It is the examiner's responsibility to ensure **Part 2** lasts for at least 7 minutes in order to give candidates the fullest opportunity to demonstrate their skills and accrue marks.
- **Part 2** conversations solely conducted on a question and answer basis, where the series of questions is only loosely connected and responses from the candidate are then ignored in favour of the next question on the list, do not fulfil the descriptors in the higher levels.
- It is important that questions are open and not closed.
- Examiners must ensure the conversation is connected to the ideas presented in **Part 1** for the whole of **Part 2**. Veering into more generalised conversation does not help the candidate's performance.
- Allowing the conversations to progress beyond the maximum time allowed of 8 minutes is unnecessary and may become counter-productive.

Advice to centres

- Keep preparing your candidates as you have for this series.
- Make sure candidates know the timings of the test. Ensure that their Individual Talk is 3–4 minutes long. You can help them in the test by interceding before 5 minutes and initiating the conversation.
- Do not interrupt candidates in **Part 1** unless they have exceeded the allowed time. Only if they really do have nothing to add should you move the test on by intervening with prompts or words of encouragement. This should be reflected in the mark awarded for **Part 1**.
- Do not ask questions in **Part 1** as this signals the end of this part of the test and the beginning of **Part 2**, the conversation.
- Ensure a full 7–8 minutes is allowed for the conversation in **Part 2**.
- Administering the conversation in **Part 2** can be quite challenging for examiners so it may be necessary to practise just as the candidates should. Knowing the topic in advance and preparing some relevant back-up questions may help the examiner but they should not be restrictive and the candidate should have no prior knowledge of them.
- Helping a candidate choose the most appropriate topic is key to them being successful in the test. A gentle suggestion to choose an alternative topic may be very beneficial in some cases.
- Try to dissuade candidates from delivering memorised talks in **Part 1** that may have artificial fluency but lack any emotional attachment and suffer from robotic intonation.
- Scaffold questions strategically to encourage higher level responses from more able candidates.

Advice to candidates

- Choose a topic you are passionate about and one you can talk about for 3–4 minutes then discuss in even more detail for 7–8 minutes.
- Practise your presentation but do not learn it by heart.
- Have bullet point notes to help prompt you in **Part 1** but not the 'full speech'.
- Structure your Individual Talk carefully, making sure that it develops points and stays within the 3–4 minutes allowed.
- Respond to the prompts and questions from the examiner in **Part 2** as fully as possible by developing your ideas, giving examples and leading off into other aspects of the topic if you can.
- Watch good examples of speeches/presentations/talks to learn how good speakers make their speeches lively and interesting. Try to copy these techniques.
- Practise simulations of **Part 2**. There are as many marks available for **Part 2** as for **Part 1** so treat each part as equally important.
- Treat the test as a 'real life' experience that will prepare you for many future occasions where your ability to select information, present successfully to an audience and articulate ideas in personal conversations will prove invaluable.
- Enjoy the experience. This test is one of the few examinations you will take where you are in control of the subject matter.