
GCSE

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

8700/1 Paper 1 Explorations in creative reading and writing
Report on the Examination

8700
November 2019

Version: 1.0

Further copies of this Report are available from aqa.org.uk

Copyright © 2019 AQA and its licensors. All rights reserved.
AQA retains the copyright on all its publications. However, registered schools/colleges for AQA are permitted to copy material from this booklet for their own internal use, with the following important exception: AQA cannot give permission to schools/colleges to photocopy any material that is acknowledged to a third party even for internal use within the centre.

General comments

November 2019 saw the third resit series of the new specification for GCSE English Language. There was an increase in entry of 7.5%, with over 41,000 students taking the exam. As always, there were fewer students performing at the upper end of the ability range than in the June series. However, the full range of ability was in evidence, and all abilities seemed to engage well with the reading material and also respond with interest to the thematically linked writing questions.

Source

The source was an extract from the short story 'The Silent Land' by Graham Joyce. It focused on an episode on a mountain, where a couple of skiers are caught in an avalanche, and was accessible to all, written in a way that less able students could grasp but also containing more subtle elements that challenged the more able. Students engaged well with the danger and action of the situation, as well as the description of the avalanche itself.

Question 1

Question 1 is an assessment of AO1 and students' ability to retrieve information from a text. The purpose of this question is largely to settle students, and the wide range of possible correct answers enabled the majority of students to gain three or four marks without too much difficulty. While most students gained four marks by making four separate points on the four lines in the answer booklet, examiners also rewarded those who gave additional accurate information in fewer statements.

The focus of the question – the surroundings – did require students to read the extract carefully and to be careful not to mix the details about the area. There were a number of students who lost marks because they misread the details about the mountain and the resort. Selecting quotations from the text continues to be an effective method of answering the question, but students should be careful to select material that refers to the focus of the question and that makes sense. Single word responses can also be effective, but students are advised to select the most clear and straightforward details for this very brief approach.

Students are reminded that inferences are not required for this question and can often prove unhelpful as they can lead students to speculate rather than interpret..

Question 2

This question assesses the student's ability to comment on the writer's use of language and to explore the effect of the language choices made. Students continue to focus well on the short extract placed at the start of the question and very few strayed from this. The amount of imagery and interesting vocabulary in the section meant that students across the ability range were able to access the question with some confidence.

Those working at Levels 1 and 2 responded to the image of Zoe as 'an eagle' and the confidence this presented in her. They were also able to respond to the special moment she found herself in and that she would never forget it by selecting the words 'pure' and 'never be taken away'. These students were more successful if they went beyond an attempt to comment on how happy Zoe was to give a clear explanation of how the writer used language to show that she was excited or thrilled. Examiners were impressed by those students who moved up into Level 3 by explaining Zoe's

relationship with the mountain, showing how the phrase ‘breathed back at her’ indicated that she felt a connection with the mountain, which was almost speaking to her, and that she felt at peace with her surroundings. More detailed responses built upon Zoe’s connection with the mountain and then developed this idea by connecting it to her exhilaration and feeling of freedom and dominance with ‘I am an eagle’. Some students chose to explain how nonsensical the image of the mountain breathing back was as ‘mountains cannot breathe’; students who take this literal approach to imagery often fail to explain the writer’s use of language and so are unlikely to reach the higher levels of the mark scheme.

Students working at Levels 3 and 4 were often able to understand and explain the more complex ideas in the piece, noting, for example, that Zoe had ‘trapped’ a special moment in her memory. Less able students often interpreted this as meaning that Zoe was trapped or imprisoned. Another difficult image that met with varying degrees of success was the phrase ‘pre-echo of death’. There was some misreading, which meant that less able students sometimes stated that Zoe was suicidal when they considered the phrases ‘arrest of life’ and ‘pre-echo of death’.

Students continue to struggle to make clear comments on the use of sentence structure and punctuation; such comments should only be made where it is possible to link the usage to a precise effect.

Key points

- Students are reminded to comment on the impact/effect of a word or phrase rather than making a simple, generalised comment about how a technique works – or does not work.
- More successful answers linked the selected details to the context of the whole piece.
- Spotting language devices within a piece is only creditworthy if there is some explanation of the effect of the the devices.
- Stating how, in the candidate’s opinion, the imagery does not make sense shows misunderstanding of how metaphors, similes and personification add meaning.

Question 3

This question tests students’ ability to see the text as a construct, created and ordered for narrative effect. Examiners reported a decline in confidence with this question compared with the summer, with students writing about language, or making simple generalised comments about ‘making the reader read on’ or stating that ‘they are dead at the end’.

The structure of the extract showed a gradual increase in tension and a clear and exciting climax. At first, Zoe is captivated by the beauty and peace on the mountain and misses the warning signs of the avalanche. Her husband Jake notices the danger first and tries to warn her, but they are powerless against the force of the avalanche. There was understanding of the tension and danger at the lower end of the ability range, with more able students able to see the gradual increase in warning signs and how/why Zoe did not notice them until it was too late.

More successful answers commented on the development from the opening, where the setting was quiet and beautiful, to the first warning signs before the ultimate catastrophe. These students were also able to comment on the whole text, rather than stopping in the middle. The most able students noted that the writer switches between the setting, and Zoe and Jake, almost as though the reader is seeing the same details as Zoe but is more aware of the dangers as he or she is less submerged in its beauty. In addition, some more able students noted the change in colour imagery

from the start to the end, showing how this added to the chaos of the avalanche, as well as the isolation and vulnerability of Zoe and Jake.

Key points

- Students need to focus on structure and not language in Question 3..
- It is important that students note why a certain detail is located at that point in the text.
- There are still a significant number of students who write that an aspect ‘interests the reader’ or ‘makes the reader want to read on’. These responses cannot be credited above Level 1. Students who are drawn to write about the bullet point that asks them what, in the passage, interests them, should be advised that this refers to structural aspects, rather than to the passage in general.
- One possible approach is to cover points from the beginning, middle and end of the passage; this would enable them to show a greater understanding of the movement across the whole piece and possibly support them in finding contrasts/developments in events or imagery.

Question 4

This question asks students to respond to and evaluate a statement about the second part of the passage. In this series there were two areas of focus: Zoe being ‘slow to react’ and the situation sounding ‘really dangerous’. There was ample detail and imagery from which to select. Examiners reported that many students found the second half of the statement more accessible than the first, and most engaged with the dangerous situation and wrote well about the avalanche itself. However, Zoe’s ‘slow’ reactions tested students’ reading of the source; only those who read the piece more thoroughly were able to write with success about the gradual increase in warning signs that Zoe missed. There was some sympathy for Zoe and Jake, but also some incredulity that Zoe did not listen to her husband or that she could have been ignorant of signs that students thought were obvious.

Level 2 responses tended to focus on what happened to Zoe without much discussion of whether or not she was actually slow in reacting. Level 3 responses were able to discuss the increase in warning signs and the fact that when Zoe did react, the avalanche was almost upon her. At Level 4, a few responses discussed the fact that Zoe was more focused on the beauty and her joy than the actual details of her surroundings, as well as the conceptual aspects of man versus nature and vulnerability. Some students were determined to find a counter-argument, but without having secure evidence for this. Students should be reminded that a counter-argument is not essential for this question; they may be more successful making and developing points that continue their original argument.

Some students wrote about ‘roaring’ and ‘tsunami’ but forgot that the characters were on a mountain facing an avalanche, which lead to comments about lions attacking or drowning or being unable to swim. These comments could not be credited above Level 2. Selected quotations need to be contextualised to become clear and be rewarded at Level 3. Other students strayed into more personal responses about the suitability of the location as a honeymoon destination, Zoe’s mental state or her skiing proficiency. Unless rooted firmly in the text, comments will not meet the threshold for a ‘clear’ response at Level 3.

Examiners reported seeing more confident comments on methods but, as with Questions 2 and 3, should be reminded that they need to discuss the effects of these methods.

Key points

- Students do not have to find a counter-argument. Those that feel they have counter points, should ensure that they have evidence to support these ideas.
- Remembering to contextualise the selected quotations would enable further success.
- Students should remember to comment on the details that pertain to the question and that are present in the text, rather than making suppositions.
- It is not essential to cover both halves of the statement. Some less able students could be more successful focusing on a less complex approach.

Question 5

Both options for the writing section enabled students to engage quickly, with the more successful answers showing imaginative ideas of alternative notions of beauty or an unusually magical world. Both the narrative and the descriptive options prompted some engaging pieces of writing, with examiners reporting some excellent ideas for each.

In the first option, the image enabled most students to access the idea of a magical world, but students did not always choose more original ideas. There were many stories about fairies and dreams which students found difficult to control and structure within the time allowed. Many of these narratives lacked detail. Some students chose to write as children, but the difficulty was that the younger narrative voice was simplistic and did not allow students to showcase their narrative skills. Many students stayed very close to the image without including any additional, original ideas. Students should be reminded that the image is a prompt and they could, therefore, have imagined anything inside the snow globe, or could have chosen a magical world unrelated to the image. The more successful students demonstrated more confidence with their ideas and took control of their writing. The most successful used the image as a springboard into their imaginations and brought their own twist to the prompt. Some were able to be more inventive with structure, for example, moving in and out of the snow globe and, in some cases, across different time periods. There were characters who were trapped inside the globe, found the world inside the globe to be dystopian or were able to take control over the globe and ‘punish’ people by imprisoning them within. Such ideas show more sophistication than simply remaining close to the ideas presented in the image.

The descriptive prompt, ‘a beautiful place’, also enabled many imaginative and engaging responses about a wide variety of places, ranging from Mecca and New York to exotic locations and a den in the woods. Less successful responses for this option sometimes became narrative in approach rather than descriptive in approach, recounting a favourite holiday or a special memory. To achieve marks above Level 2 students needed to focus on using a variety of techniques and linguistic devices to convey the beauty of the chosen place, rather than simply listing a sequence of events that took place there. Some students simply drew on the market from the summer paper and so found it difficult to develop ideas beyond those used in the summer.

Examiners reported that AO6 seemed consistent with the performance in the summer; with most students showing awareness of the importance of punctuation and grammatical agreement. However, many students provided evidence of technical skills some, rather than most, of the time. And were therefore awarded marks in Level 2 rather than Level 3.

Key points

- The image is a prompt and should encourage ideas beyond the obvious recount of the details within it.

- Writing as a younger voice leads to rather simplistic narratives.
- Students who included a range of punctuation did so with increased confidence. However, technical skills are often in evidence some of the time and need to be sustained throughout.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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