
GCSE

English Language

8700/2

Report on the Examination

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General comments

The third November series of GCSE English Language was entered by a very similar number of students as were entered in November 2018, with approximately 40,000 students sitting the exam.

There was little evidence of students not attempting specific questions, although where there were blank pages, they tended to be in response to Question 4. As far as these things can be judged, whilst responses often tend to be shorter in November, there was limited evidence of students failing to apportion their time adequately.

Sources

The two sources selected for the November 2019 series were linked by a focus on elephants and the writers' attitudes towards them. The theme of animals and the relationships we have with them invites students to engage with issues of moral responsibility and our place in the natural order. Students were able to respond to both texts, engaging with the ethical dilemmas portrayed in each of the two sources and using them as the foundation for their response to the task in Section B.

Source A was an extract from a relatively well-known autobiographical essay by George Orwell *Shooting an Elephant*, where Orwell recounts an event which took place in Burma, where he served during the days of the British Empire as a young and inexperienced police officer. Students clearly responded with understanding to his dilemma as he faces the challenge of a potentially violent elephant, now peacefully grazing, and the expectations of a huge and growing crowd of villagers that he will shoot it. Students were quick to pick up on the psychological and emotional difficulty facing Orwell as he recognises the manipulative power of the crowd in direct contradiction to his own sense of morality.

Source B was an extract from *Wild Animals in Captivity*, an autobiographical account of his time as Head Keeper at London's Zoological Society Gardens, by Abraham Bartlett. The extract begins with the purchase of the young elephant and recounts the experience of caring for Jumbo as he grows and develops. The changing attitudes over time reflect the changes in the elephant's behaviour and provided students with a wealth of material to interpret.

There were clearly points of contrast as well as points of similarity between the two sources. The synthesis in Question 2 and the comparison in Question 4 were well-addressed. Students appeared to have no difficulty in making links between the texts and as such, they presented an ideal pair of sources for this assessment.

Question 1

The mean mark on Question 1 was around 3.5 out of a possible 4 marks. More than half of students were able to identify the four correct statements, and over 90% were able to identify three of the four correct statements. The task assesses the student's ability to identify explicit information and interpret implicit ideas from the first few lines of the modern text, Source A. The statements all related to the phone call received by Orwell informing him of the escaped elephant and to Orwell's reaction. The task required a combination of implicit and explicit understanding of the text.

The statements most frequently misjudged by students were statements E, F, G and H. A number of students selected G rather than H. Statement G reads: Orwell takes his rifle to kill the elephant.

The key word here is 'kill' as in the text Orwell states that his rifle is 'too small to kill an elephant'. The rifle he takes is to scare the elephant with the noise. Students have read either the statement or the text too quickly and made assumptions, or they have used contradictory information from a different part of the source to respond to the statement. In either case, a close and careful reading of the given lines and the statements would lead students to selecting the correct statement.

Another statement selected wrongly by students was statement E: Orwell is confident he can sort out the problem with the elephant. The word 'confident' is not used in the text, and therefore the statement relies on a student's skill in inferring meaning. Students needed to infer from the phrase 'I did not know what I could do' that Orwell was uncertain or unsure about his actions and his ability to deal with the situation. It is often only one word within a statement which determines whether it is true or false. Again, careful reading of the text and of each statement should guide students towards selecting the four true statements.

For students to ensure achieving full marks, they should always re-read the four statements they have selected and ask themselves about each one:

- Is it true?
- Is it accurate?
- Is it from the right section of text?

Question 2

In response to this question, students were asked to focus on the behaviour of the two elephants. Students are expected to have absorbed information from the whole of both sources relating to this specific focus and bring the information and ideas together to consider either the similarities or differences, as directed. In this case, the focus was on similarities. The synthesis required by AO1 can take the form of either textual evidence or the ideas themselves, and students are rewarded for both. The key skills for this question are the ability to infer or interpret meaning and to comment on the similarities which are identified, again using an interpretative approach.

There was ample material for students to draw on, with the elephant in Source A demonstrating a certain amount of violence, having broken his chains and escaped into the town. He is aggressive and destructive, killing livestock and raiding the market. However, he is also presented as tranquil and harmless as he grazes, unconcerned by the reaction of the crowd to his behaviour. The elephant in Source B is similarly volatile, with episodes of peaceful co-operation with his keepers and the public, matched by violent and destructive rages when he is very difficult to handle. In addition, as a young elephant, he was playful and friendly.

At the lower end of the ability range, students tended to paraphrase rather than interpret, with some attempts to infer that breaking his chains meant the elephant in Source A was angry, or that the elephant in Source B was naughty because he played tricks. Students working at Level 2 were often able to identify the similarities between the elephants being violent, but were unable to move beyond that initial identification to explain how or why they might have behaved in that way.

Where students were sufficiently skilled, they sought to explain the how and the why, interpreting the elephants' behaviour by stating that the motivation for their behaviour was a need to escape, for example, or as a result of cruel treatment. These sorts of comments were rewarded at Level 3 as they offered clear inferences regarding the elephants' behaviour. In making connections between the two animals, students working at Level 3 were able to link like with like and explain how both elephants were held captive, albeit in different settings, and were therefore demonstrating a similar desire for freedom.

There were few students working at Level 4, but these students were able to either conceptualise their comments and draw on ideas such as natural instinct and the unethical human actions which caused this behaviour, or to provide an extended and developed response which explored a range of possible motivation for a particular behaviour.

Where students failed to maximise marks, it was occasionally as a result of their focus being exclusively on differences rather than similarities. While comments about differences can be credited as part of a discussion of similarities, students are reminded that they must focus on the question set. The focus on similarities rather than differences was chosen to give students the widest number of options. A number of students also tended to identify a connection between the two elephants' behaviour but move on to another point without commenting on the implications of what they had identified. A clear interpretation of the similarities is what will carry the student into Level 3.

Key points

- Focus the majority of the response on similarities (or differences, according to the task)
- Interpret and explain the similarities (or differences) in addition to identifying them
- Consider the 'big ideas' to enhance the quality of comment
- Develop responses by extending comments to include more detail on a particular point

Question 3

The student response to this question was generally very good. The mean mark for this question rose as students demonstrated a real engagement with the language used by George Orwell. Despite his reputation as a proponent of sparse or plain prose, the language in the passage selected proved to be very fruitful. Students in previous series have focused on comments which show an inferential understanding rather than focusing on the key skill in Question 3 – to comment on the effect of language. This was rarely the case in this series, with a welcome focus on language analysis and a pleasing increase in the number of students achieving Level 3.

There were some excellent selections of language to be made, with the metaphors of the 'puppet' and the 'conjurer' particularly popular and productive as choices. Many students grasped the essence of these images, identifying how Orwell described himself as manipulated by the crowd with the image of 'a puppet pushed to and fro', his own will subjugated to theirs as they willed him on to shoot the elephant. Linked to this image, the metaphor of the 'conjurer' also offered students the chance to explore the concept of this event as a spectacle with Orwell pressured to perform against his will. Some chose a further image, that of Orwell as the 'leading actor of the piece', and extended their comments to include the effect of the image as intended to create a sense of distance between Orwell and the audience, or the crowd.

There were very few students working at Level 1, but those who were tended to paraphrase the events and did not even attempt to engage with the language. Almost all those who tried to write about the effect were able to access Level 2. These responses were characterised by comments which identified the image, for example of the 'sea of faces' and were able to say that this created an effect of there being lots of people, but were unable to contextualise those comments within the image itself, to explain what it was about the 'sea' which made it an effective use of language: its endlessness; its vastness; its waves of people or influence; its homogeneity; its tendency to drown people etc.

Another weakness in some responses was the choice of individual adjectives as the basis for analysis. Whilst words such as 'happy', 'excited' and 'immense' are easily accessible, they do not provide the richness that other figurative language offers and students struggled to access the higher levels as a result. There was also some confusion over the use of personification as a language feature, with students attributing the term to almost any reference to people. Although the use of subject terminology is not one of the key skills, correct identification of this language feature is likely to be linked to a clearer explanation of its use.

There were some students who chose to comment on the effect of language on an unspecified generic reader. These sorts of comments have begun to creep into responses, and often invite very generalised comments on effect. It is of little value, for example, to comment that the effect of describing the crowd as a 'sea of faces' makes it sound frightening *for the reader*. This tells us little about the specific words chosen or why the writer might have chosen them and is unlikely to be rewarded higher than the bottom of Level 2 as a weak attempt.

Key points

- Students responded well to the range of language features, particularly metaphors
- Avoid commenting on the effect of language on an invisible, generic reader
- Focus on individual adjectives can make it difficult to achieve the higher levels
- Move on from identifying an image to contextualising it and explaining how it works

Question 4

This is the most demanding of the reading questions and presents the greatest challenge for students. They are required to read and understand information and ideas from two substantial sources and focus on the writers' perspectives specifically. They are expected to bring together and compare the two perspectives, analysing the differences and linking these points of view to the methods used by the writers to convey them. There are three discrete key skills which contribute towards a particularly challenging comprehension task. Having said this, students appeared better prepared for this task, and many were able to juggle these skills with great success.

There were certainly several different strands of comparison to explore. Some students focused on the different levels of experience of the two writers and explored how this had an impact on their view of the elephants; whilst Orwell was merely a young police officer with no experience of elephants, Bartlett was a veteran zoo keeper, professionally trained to handle large animals and far more knowledgeable about their behaviour. Other students concentrated their response on the idea that Bartlett lacked empathy and was motivated in his treatment of Jumbo by mercenary capitalism and opportunism, whereas Orwell was deeply sympathetic to the innocent elephant and was doing all he could to protect it from the crowd baying for vengeance.

Many students demonstrated their understanding of methods, mostly by writing about the language features used, although there were occasionally references to tone and narrative perspective. Students commented on Bartlett's use of emotive language such as 'poor beast' to show his kindness but also his superiority to the elephant by calling it a 'beast'. Others commented on Orwell's use of repetition to reinforce his reluctance to shoot the elephant, and to emphasise the relentless pressure put on him by the crowd. Where methods were used, they significantly enhanced the response, but there were too many instances where students omitted any reference to how the writers conveyed their views. This will always result in a lower mark, and students are reminded again to ensure they address this critical part of the task.

There were also concerns raised by examiners about students who misread or misunderstood the question and focused their response on the attitudes of the elephants. If students cannot provide

evidence of understanding the concept of a writer's perspective, they are not able to access Level 3. This should be a starting point for teaching students how to respond to Question 4.

Some students appeared to be repeating some of the material they had used in their responses to Question 2. Students are reminded that the focus of Question 4 will always be different from the focus for Question 2; these two questions address entirely different AOs and therefore require different skills. Students therefore need to have a distinctly different mental schema in approaching each question in Section A.

Some of the best responses were those which tracked changes on the writers' perspectives from the start to the end of the text. Explaining how and why their perspectives changed and incorporating how the methods changed too often gave students an opportunity to be clear, if not perceptive and detailed. For example, tracing the shifts in Orwell's point of view from curious uncertainty at the start, to bewildered concern in the middle and reluctant conviction at the end, invited some really nuanced and perceptive understanding.

Key points

- The focus of Question 4 will always be the perspectives, attitudes or feelings of the writers
- Repeating the response to Question 2 for Question 4 is never an effective strategy
- Students need to demonstrate that they understand a writer's perspective to access Level 3
- Three points of comparison are sufficient to demonstrate clear or perceptive understanding

Question 5

The writing task in Section B invited students to write an article to respond to a statement about animal freedom. The deliberately provocative statement incorporated a number of different strands, as it has in previous series, and the advice remains that students are encouraged to deal with as many of the different strands as suits them and their argument; there is no requirement for them to deal with the whole statement unless they wish to.

The range of forms expected of students in response to the task in Question 5 is relatively limited and it is therefore anticipated that students will make some attempt to adapt the tone, style and register of their writing to match the audience, purpose and form in the task. Whilst many students were able to do just that, and write lively and engaging articles, there were too many examples of students writing letters to indiscriminate recipients, or writing speeches for unspecified events. Some evidence of being aware of the correct form and adapting the style appropriately to the task is required to reach the higher marks.

Students incorporated a wide-ranging variety of views in their articles, although they tended to follow similar patterns of argument. Some students felt that zoos were unethical, keeping animals in inadequate and cramped conditions, providing a miserable, unnatural habitat for them. Others however, argued that zoos were magnificent places of scientific importance, protecting animals from poachers or extinction and offering a luxurious lifestyle for pampered cheetahs and bears. When it came to eating meat, there were a few diatribes both for and against veganism, but views regarding the ethics of eating meat were definitely mixed. The same could not be said for pets which were almost universally accepted as a legitimate form of 'captivity'.

Students struggled when their argument shifted on the key premise of the statement that all animals should either be free or not. This frequently resulted in muddled and rambling arguments which could only be judged 'some successful communication' (Level 2). The students who were most successful were those who established a central argument and sustained the thread of the argument throughout the various points they made. This constitutes an argument which is at least

clear (Level 3), and potentially convincing or even compelling (Level 4), although there were few of the latter on offer during this series.

As part of their planning and preparation for the writing task, students would be well-advised to write a summary of their argument in a single sentence. If this idea is established in the opening paragraph and confirmed in the concluding paragraph, then it is more likely that the student will maintain a greater degree of discipline in the intervening points.

Another strategy adopted by more successful students was to address just one or two of the strands in the statement and to write in more depth about each. Students who were able to offer extended ideas, particularly if they became more complex as they developed, were more likely to achieve marks at the upper end of Level 3 and into Level 4.

The range of skills on offer varied, with some students offering a sustained tone and register throughout, while others struggled and offered a combination of formal and informal style. The tone was frequently irate and aggrieved, although there was also evidence of a more sentimental and sympathetic approach to the task. Students varied in the level of complexity and sophistication of their vocabulary, according to their knowledge and ability. There were fewer examples than in the summer of students using a wide range of vocabulary inappropriately and imprecisely. Linguistic devices were scattered liberally throughout and were rewarded according to their relevance and effectiveness within the response.

In terms of technical accuracy, there was inevitably a range of skills on offer from students, with evidence that students were using an increasing number of different sentence forms in their writing. This has led to an increase in the range of punctuation used as students have incorporated exclamations, questions and imperatives into their writing, varying the syntactic structure and providing examiners with a wider range of punctuation to reward too. There were a number of issues with sentence agreement.

Alongside these issues, however, there was also evidence of often secure spelling of complex words. The balance of skills demonstrated frequently led to a mark in Level 2 for AO6, as students showed they were able to provide evidence of technical skills, but only some, not most, of the time. This is the threshold between Level 2 and Level 3, and it is essentially in consistency where many students need to improve.

Key points

- Students are not required to cover every thread in the statement in their response; selecting one or two threads can lead to a clearer argument
- Form is important: letters, speeches and articles vary in their characteristics
- Students should summarise their argument in one sentence before they begin writing
- 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.