Course report 2025

Advanced Higher English

This report provides information on candidates' performance. Teachers, lecturers and assessors may find it useful when preparing candidates for future assessment. The report is intended to be constructive and informative, and to promote better understanding. You should read the report with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

We compiled the statistics in this report before we completed the 2025 appeals process.

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Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2024:   2,992

Number of resulted entries in 2025:   3,080

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	623	20.2	20.2	66
B	778	25.3	45.5	57
C	941	30.6	76.0	48
D	584	19.0	95.0	39
No award	154	5.0	100%	Not applicable

We have not applied rounding to these statistics.

You can read the general commentary on grade boundaries in the appendix.

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In this report:

- 'most' means greater than or equal to 70%
- 'many' means 50% to 69%
- 'some' means 25% to 49%
- 'a few' means less than 25%

You can find statistical reports on the statistics and information page of our website.

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Section 1: comments on the assessment

Question paper: Literary Study

This question paper performed as expected. Feedback from the marking team indicated this was a fair and accessible paper with a suitable range of questions that allowed candidates to display the skills and knowledge acquired during the course. Candidates chose questions from all parts of the paper. The six most popular questions were:

- Drama, question 24 'Tragic characters inhabit an interior world of self-deception.' Discuss with reference to two plays.
- Drama, question 27: Compare and contrast the characterisation of dominant male characters in two plays.
- Poetry, question 4: Discuss some of the means by which change and/or transformation are explored in three poems.
- Prose fiction, question 8: Discuss how significant themes are introduced and developed in two novels.
- Poetry, question 1: Compare and contrast the exploration of isolation in three poems.
- Poetry, question 2: 'A poem is often a reaction to an intense emotion: love, joy, outrage, guilt, regret…' Discuss with reference to three poems.

Although only a few candidates chose a prose non-fiction question; the most popular questions from that part of the paper were:

- Prose non-fiction, question 15: 'As a travel writer you must keep a tight rein on your subjective self and keep an objective eye on the world around you.' Discuss with reference to at least two non-fiction texts.
- Prose non-fiction, question 19: Analyse some of the means by which at least two non-fiction texts make an emotional impact upon their readers.

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There was no evidence that any particular question in the Literary Study question paper was more or less demanding than expected, but candidates answered question 4 of the Poetry section particularly well: Discuss some of the means by which change and/or transformation are explored in three poems.

Question paper: Textual Analysis

This question paper performed as expected. The marking team noted that the paper was fair and accessible for candidates at this level.

Poetry was the most popular option chosen by candidates ('Returning' by Robert Lowell), followed by prose fiction (the extract from *The Lincoln Highway* by Amor Towles). Compared to the figures for 2024, there was an increase in the percentage of candidates who opted to answer on prose non-fiction ('Super-Infinite' by Katherine Rundell) and a decrease in those answering on drama (*The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd* by D H Lawrence).

There was no evidence that any particular question in the Textual Analysis question paper was more or less demanding than expected, but candidates who answered on prose non-fiction tended to gain slightly higher marks on average compared to those who chose other parts of the paper.

Portfolio–writing

This year candidates were required to submit one piece from any genre. The portfolio–writing performed as expected.

Prose fiction was once again the most popular genre for submissions, followed by persuasive writing and then reflective writing.

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Project–dissertation

The project–dissertation performed as expected. Most candidates chose prose fiction texts as the subject of the project–dissertation. Feedback from the marking team indicated that many candidates had chosen appropriate texts for study at this level and had formulated specific and manageable accompanying tasks. However, they also noted that some candidates performed less well due to poor text selection and unhelpful tasks.

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Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Question paper: Literary Study

Markers reported that overall candidate performance in this paper was higher than in 2024.

Areas that candidates performed well in

- As well as the popular questions referred to in 'Section 1: comments on the assessment', there was evidence of high scoring essays in response to questions 5, 7, 13, 22 and 23.
- As in previous years, essays on the works of William Shakespeare – *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *The Tempest*, *A Winter's Tale*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Othello* – were often good, as were responses on Tennessee Williams, Henrik Ibsen, Martin McDonagh, Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco and Tony Kushner.
- Markers commented on some very good poetry essays on John Keats, Seamus Heaney, Sylvia Plath, Liz Lochhead, Anne Sexton, William Blake, and John Donne.
- There were some good responses on a variety of texts such as Albert Camus' *The Plague*, Geraldine Brooks' *Year of Wonders*, and the short stories of Angela Carter. At the same time, there were still strong responses to the more traditional canon, for example Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale,* Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*, Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*.
- Candidates' engagement with their chosen literature was strong, which often resulted in particularly strong evaluation.

Areas that candidates found demanding

- Although many candidates showed a good understanding of their texts, they often had issues in generating the level of analysis demanded at Advanced Higher level.
- Some candidates struggled to write essays that contained appropriate coverage of two dramas or two novels to the standard required at this level.
- Some candidates had difficulty in looking at the 'presentation of social injustice' in question 23 of the Drama section where they would often engage with 'injustice' in a broader and less focused sense. Likewise, the idea of 'self-deception' in question 24 was dealt with as 'deception' more generally and this detracted from some candidate responses.
- A few candidates appeared to have a well-prepared essay ready for the exam but often struggled to make the adjustments required to make it fully relevant to their selected question.
- Some candidates had an over-reliance on microanalysis of techniques like word-choice in drama and prose fiction and this often resulted in a less cohesive response.

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Question paper: Textual Analysis

There was clear evidence of candidates achieving high marks (16–20) in this paper, but overall candidate performance was broadly of the same standard as in 2024. Markers reported a reduction in the number of candidates who produced very short responses to the texts.

Areas that candidates performed well in

- There were instances of candidates achieving high marks in response to all four genres.
- In prose fiction, candidates were able to understand and comment on Emmett's inner strength, his morality, his ability to see his father's flaws, and his love for his brother.
- In the poem, responses were successful when candidates engaged well with poetic technique (as specified in the question) to articulate the persona's experience of change and the passing of time.
- In prose non-fiction, candidates were often able to clearly engage with Katherine Rundell's admiration for John Donne and explore the techniques used to show this admiration with some skill.
- Candidates who did well in responding to the drama text were able to see the variety of tensions within the Holroyd household – the tensions between Mr and Mrs Holroyd, between Mrs Holroyd and her children, between Mrs Holroyd and her environment but, importantly, the sexual tension between Mrs Holroyd and Blackmore.
- Candidates were able to identify theme (and writer's intent) in all four genres.

Areas that candidate found demanding

- Some candidate responses (in all four genres) were structured as bullet points. However, more often than not this did not help the candidate create a cohesive and developed response to the text. Instead, it often created a fragmented response where candidates often struggled to gain an overall understanding of the text. With the poem in particular, a 'scattergun' approach to listing quotes with

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short microanalysis often did very little to create a cohesive analysis and associated evaluation of the entire poem.

- Some responses demonstrated a lack of engagement with poetic structure and technique in order to fully engage with the poem as a cohesive literary entity.
- Some candidates were unable to engage with the subtext and symbolism in the prose fiction extract.
- At times, candidates strayed into their own admiration of Donne, and not Rundell's admiration of Donne.
- Some candidate responses in drama failed to recognise the sexual tension between Mrs Holroyd and Blackmore.

Portfolio–writing

Areas that candidates performed well in

- There was a wide range of writing on a wide variety of topics.
- There were some high-quality persuasive essays on a range of topics such as the quality of teachers in Scotland, stopping the normalisation of AI art, and the misdiagnosis of female-specific medical conditions. Likewise, there were excellent informative pieces on the causes of the Armenian genocide, dialectical and accent variations in Latin American Spanish, and a deconstruction of the film 'The Menu' through a Marxist lens.
- Some candidates presented very good prose fiction which understood the conventions of fiction and candidates were able to use, or break, those conventions to good effect. There were pieces handled with skill and poignancy in looking at love during the troubles in Northern Ireland, and love being lost in Karachi. There was also a highly imaginative piece considering the visceral nature of love using the metaphor of a cadaver of an animal on a roadside.
- Although drama was not done by many candidates, those who chose to write drama did so well, and they were comfortable in the use of dramatic conventions and able to construct well-developed pieces. One of note was a skilful reinvention of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* reimagined as 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Neds' written in the Scottish vernacular.

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- Reflective writing dealt with the candidate's own experiences in very thoughtful and sensitive ways, where they navigated experiences of love, dementia, loss, isolation, and change with great skill and poignancy at times.

Areas that candidates found demanding

- Although prose fiction is a very popular genre, there was often little evidence of well-planned, well-crafted, and well-edited pieces. Some prose fiction submissions lacked the complexity and sophistication required at this level and displayed only a limited ability to use the conventions of the genre. For example, short stories that included lots of description but little in the way of effective use of techniques and features such as structure, imagery, symbolism, effective plotting, and characterisation.
- Some of the poems submitted lacked a firm grasp of poetic structure, shaping, and poetic technique. As is the case every year, a few candidates chose to submit groups of poems – as opposed to the preferred single poem – and this would often mean they were being judged on a range of poems with a range of performance.
- There were problems with technical accuracy and a lack of careful editing and/or redrafting in some pieces.

Project–dissertation

Markers noted a popularity of topics with themes associated with mental health, trauma, abuse, psychopathy, and 'toxic relationships'. While many candidates continued to submit project–dissertations on classic authors and popular genres such as the dystopian novel, markers reported a range of other author's being looked at this year, such as Marge Piercy, Ursula Le Guin, Vikram Seth, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Radclyffe Hall, Samuel Selvon, Ocean Vuong, Flora Nwapa, Elif Shafak, Hafza Zayyan, Jean-Paul Sartre, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Joan Didion.

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Areas that candidates performed well in

- Many project–dissertations displayed clear knowledge and understanding of the chosen text or texts.
- In some cases, there was evidence of sophistication of thought and engagement with primary and secondary texts.
- Many project–dissertations had a clear, specific focus that allowed candidates to engage effectively with their chosen texts.
- Detailed analysis of a single text (for example *Life After Life* by Kate Atkinson and *The Collector* by John Fowles) often achieved a high mark.
- In many cases, there was clear evidence of personal engagement with the chosen texts.
- A number of candidates did well when studying traditional classics (for example Daphne du Maurier, Jane Austen, the Brontës, Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, and Louisa May Alcott) that allowed them to offer in-depth analysis and reference to a wealth of secondary sources.

Areas that candidates found demanding

- Markers noted an increased number of dissertations that focused on diagnosing the assumed mental health issues of characters, with little literary engagement with the texts.
- Some dissertations focused more on social issues instead of on the literary techniques the writer uses to illustrate the importance of the social issues.
- Some dissertations were overly reliant on retelling the story of the chosen text(s).
- Some candidates chose a text or texts (often contemporary genre-based fiction) which lacked sufficient literary content and prevented them from gaining a mark from the higher mark ranges, for example Richard Osman's *The Thursday Murder Club*, Denise Mina's *The Long Drop*, Stephen King's *Misery*, *The Shining*, and *Carrie*, and Taylor Jenkins Reid's *Daisy Jones & the Six*. There were many dissertations on the novels of Sally Rooney, but many dealt with the characters as real people and not as literary constructs, and this often hindered the writing of a piece of critical literary discourse.

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- Some dissertations showed evidence of unsuitable or vague topics that were unhelpful to candidates, for example 'A comparative analysis of love in the novels of XX'.
- Some responses demonstrated literary analysis that lacked any critical depth – often where candidates chose to focus on an issue (for example mental health or poverty) rather than offering analysis of the literary features of the text(s).
- Some dissertations had a very limited range of quotations to support their approach to their task. For example, using only two direct quotations to cover an entire novel has a serious impact on a candidate's ability to analyse the text and build an evaluation based on evidence.
- Some dissertations focused on graphic novels. This was problematic when the focus was on the visual elements of the graphic novel and not the literary elements. As the dissertation is all about literary analysis, a focus on the visual weakens the literary analysis.
- Some dissertations showed little evidence of editing and/or redrafting and consequently displayed problems with expression and technical accuracy.

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Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper: Literary Study

For the Literary Study question paper, teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates are:

- offered an experience of literary study of sufficient depth and breadth to allow reasonable choice in the context of an unseen examination
- thoroughly prepared in the skill of critical essay writing
- given sufficient practice in making effective use of the time available in the exam
- reminded to read all the questions before making their choice
- provided with strategies for understanding and addressing the terms of the question and for appropriate planning of their responses
- equipped with a precise and extensive critical vocabulary
- equipped with a range of quotations from their texts which will allow them to provide the analysis required at this level of study
- reminded that 'analysis' need not always be 'inserted' (often inappropriately) in the form of extensive quotation that is then subjected to microanalytical comment on individual words and phrases
- shown how valid analysis may well reside (often by implication) in a permeating thread of relevant critical comment that informs an emerging argument
- made aware of the exemplar Literary Study essays available on SQA's Understanding Standards website

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Question paper: Textual Analysis

For the Textual Analysis question paper, teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates are:

- developing close and essential familiarity with the conventions of a range of literary genres (including the more common forms and structures of poetry) through guided reading
- experiencing texts from a range of time periods in English literature
- prepared to answer on more than just one genre in the examination, where possible
- given sufficient practice in making effective use of the time available in the exam
- acquiring the critical apparatus necessary for the analysis and evaluation of complex and sophisticated texts through focused teaching and extensive practice
- prepared to analyse more than just word-choice and imagery when discussing poetry
- able to connect their analytical points to create an overarching evaluative stance of the text
- reminded that a response made up of only brief, unconnected bullet points is unlikely to gain high marks
- made aware of the exemplar Textual Analysis responses available on SQA's Understanding Standards website

Portfolio–writing

For the portfolio–writing, teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates are:

- reading the work of other writers (including their peers) to familiarise themselves with genre conventions and the range of approaches that might be taken in their own writing
- shown how the techniques analysed in the Literary Study and Textual Analysis question papers could be incorporated in their own writing
- recommended to submit only one poem, if submitting poetry, rather than a group of unrelated (or even loosely related) poems

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- made fully aware of the conventions of the different discursive genres available to them and to take care when labelling these submissions
- familiar with the techniques used in poetry and prose fiction to produce writing that is complex and sophisticated
- encouraged to carry out detailed editing of their work before final submission
- made aware of the exemplar pieces of writing on SQA's Understanding Standards website

Project–dissertation

For the project–dissertation, teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates are:

- selecting texts of appropriate substance and quality. In the course specification, it states in the 'Course assessment structure' section that 'the project–dissertation assesses candidates' independent reading of complex and sophisticated literature'. The most important decision made by any candidate, guided by their teacher or lecturer, is that their choice of text or texts is 'complex and sophisticated'. If this is not the case, then the candidate is starting from a position of disadvantage
- constructing specific and manageable topics – topics should not be too vague, or too narrow, and should have a literary focus in them. Candidates should refer to the 'Advanced Higher English Project–dissertation topics examples' on SQA's Understanding Standards website. This is a good starting point for creating appropriate, focused, and manageable tasks for candidates
- incorporating the analytical focus of each study into the wording of the title or topic, always keeping in mind that this is primarily a study of an 'aspect or aspects of literature'
- avoiding groupings of disparate texts, especially mixing genres, for example grouping a poem and a novel
- focusing on broad concerns such as setting, characterisation and theme in a novel rather than inappropriate microanalysis, including analysis of individual examples of word choice and isolated images
- providing a range of relevant quotation to support their approach to the task. For example, a candidate who uses only five quotations to support their approach to a

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task on a 500-page novel will struggle as analysis should be focused primarily around textual evidence. Limitations in textual evidence will most probably lead to limitations in analysis and evaluation. The exemplars on SQA's [Understanding Standards website](#) show the advantages of firmly and consistently engaging with textual evidence of the chosen text or texts

- aware of the word limits set by SQA
- providing footnotes and bibliographies as recommended in the [course specification](#)
- made familiar with all of the advice and technical requirements provided by SQA

The importance of the selection of texts and creation of a topic are the fundamentals of a strong dissertation. The course specification is the starting point for every teacher and lecturer. In the appendix of the course specification, the course support notes provide more detail. SQA's Understanding Standards materials provide help by providing exemplification and commentaries (especially the dissertations at the top end of the band range). Encouraging candidates to engage with these exemplars allows them to see best practice.

We remind centres about SQA's current position statement on the use of [generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in assessments](#) (including examples for English).

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Appendix: general commentary on grade boundaries

Our main aim when setting grade boundaries is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and levels and to maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

For most National Courses, we aim to set examinations and other external assessments and create marking instructions that allow:

- a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional grade C boundary)
- a well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional grade A boundary)

It is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject, at every level. Therefore, we hold a grade boundary meeting for each course to bring together all the information available (statistical and qualitative) and to make final decisions on grade boundaries based on this information. Members of our Executive Management Team normally chair these meetings.

Principal assessors utilise their subject expertise to evaluate the performance of the assessment and propose suitable grade boundaries based on the full range of evidence. We can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the discussion at these meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more, or less, difficult than usual.

- The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more difficult than usual.
- The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been less difficult than usual.
- Where levels of difficulty are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

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Every year, we evaluate the performance of our assessments in a fair way, while ensuring standards are maintained so that our qualifications remain credible. To do this, we measure evidence of candidates' knowledge and skills against the national standard.

For full details of the approach, please refer to the [Awarding and Grading for National Courses Policy](#).