Course report 2024

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 2024 appeals process.

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Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2023: 2,635

Number of resulted entries in 2024: 2,992

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	542	Percentage	18.1	Cumulative percentage	18.1	Minimum mark required	66
B	Number of candidates	655	Percentage	21.9	Cumulative percentage	40.0	Minimum mark required	57
C	Number of candidates	924	Percentage	30.9	Cumulative percentage	70.9	Minimum mark required	48
D	Number of candidates	648	Percentage	21.7	Cumulative percentage	92.5	Minimum mark required	39
No award	Number of candidates	223	Percentage	7.5	Cumulative percentage	100	Minimum mark required	N/A

We have not applied rounding to these statistics.

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

In this report:

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

You can find more statistical reports on the statistics and information page of SQA's website.

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Section 1: comments on the assessment

Question paper: Literary Study

This question paper performed as expected. The marking team noted 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 22: Compare and contrast the dramatic treatment of society's expectations of women in two plays.
♦ Drama, question 25: 'Drama serves to remind us that human beings are flawed.' Discuss with reference to two plays.
♦ Poetry, question 4: Discuss the ways in which structure contributes to a poem's meaning in three poems.
♦ Drama, question 27: 'The world as seen on the stage is a world of moral ambiguities and uncertainties.' Discuss with reference to two plays.
♦ Prose fiction, question 10: Discuss the thematic significance of a particular plot twist in two novels or three short stories.
♦ Poetry, question 2: Discuss the poetic treatment of failure or regret in three poems.

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

♦ Prose non-fiction, question 15: 'The most interesting lives are a mixture of triumph and tragedy.' Discuss with reference to at least two non-fiction texts.

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 24 of the Drama section particularly well: Discuss the exploration of death and/or the ageing process in two plays.

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.

Prose fiction was the most popular option chosen by candidates (the Ian McEwan extract from *Lessons*), followed by poetry ('Easement' by Jameson Fitzpatrick). Compared to the figures for 2023, there was a decrease in the percentage of candidates who opted to answer on prose non-fiction (*What Just Happened?!* by Marina Hyde) and an increase in those answering on drama (*Painting Churches* by Tina Howe).

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

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

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

Project–dissertation

The project–dissertation performed largely as expected. Most candidates chose prose fiction texts as the subject of their project–dissertation. The marking team noted that many candidates chose suitable texts for study at this level and had formulated specific and manageable accompanying tasks, but they also pointed out that a number of candidates were disadvantaged by poor text selection and unhelpful tasks.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Question paper: Literary Study

While many markers reported that overall candidate performance in this paper was about the same standard as in previous years, some markers reported a reduction in the number of candidates demonstrating grade-A type performance. Some markers reported an increase in the number of candidates demonstrating grade-C type performance.

Areas that candidates performed well in

♦ In addition to the popular questions referred to in 'Section 1: comments on the assessment', there was evidence of essays gaining high marks in response to questions 3, 4, 12, 23, and 26.

♦ As in previous years, essays on the works of William Shakespeare – *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *The Tempest*, *A Winter's Tale*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Othello*, and *The Taming of the Shrew* – were often good, as were responses on Tennessee Williams and Bertolt Brecht. Markers also commented on some very good poetry essays on John Keats, Seamus Heaney, Sylvia Plath, Robert Frost, and John Donne.

♦ Candidates responded to a range of texts, such as John Williams' *Stoner,* Lakshmi Persaud's *Daughters of Empire*, Graeme Macrae Burnet's *His Bloody Project*, Hannah Kent's *Burial Rites*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*, and also the poetry of Frank O'Hara, Douglas Dunn, Charles Bukowski, and Liz Lochhead. 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*, and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*.

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 'dramatic treatment of innocence and guilt' in question 28 of the Drama section where they did not look at both 'innocence and guilt' and at times did not engage with the 'dramatic treatment' of these themes.

♦ A number of candidates appeared to have a pre-prepared essay ready for the exam, but often struggled to make the adjustments required to make it fully relevant to their selected exam question.

Question paper: Textual Analysis

There was clear evidence of a few candidates achieving high marks (16–20) in this paper, but overall candidate performance was broadly of the same standard as in 2023. Markers reported a reduction in the number of candidates demonstrating grade-A type performance.

Areas that candidates performed well in

♦ There were some instances of candidates achieving high marks in response to all four genres.

♦ In the Prose Fiction section, many candidates had a developed understanding of Roland's journey of self-discovery through his experiences at boarding school.

♦ When candidates engaged well with poetic technique and structure in Jameson Fitzpatrick's 'Easement', they were able to articulate an understanding of the themes of time, change, and growth.

♦ There was a recognition and strong engagement with Marina Hyde's tone in the extract from *What Just Happened?!*, and the techniques used to create her tone, which allowed candidates to see how she established the expectations of her book and her journalistic processes.

♦ Those candidates who did well in responding to the extract from Tina Howe's drama *Painting Churches* were able to see the nuanced relationships between all three characters which went beyond basic interpretations of their actions.

♦ Candidates were able to identify theme (and writer's intent) in all four genres.

Areas that candidates 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 an extended and fully developed response to the text. Instead, it often created a fragmented response where candidates struggled to gain a cohesive understanding of the text, which led to weaknesses in the evaluation of their chosen text.

♦ A lack of engagement with poetic structure and technique often hindered a candidate's ability to fully engage with the poem as a whole.

♦ Some candidate responses were not developed enough to offer the depth of understanding, analysis, and evaluation over the whole text as demanded by the task.

♦ There was often a lack of depth of analytical comment, which stopped many candidates accessing the marks from the top two band ranges.

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Portfolio–writing

Areas that candidates performed well in

- Candidates undertook a wide range of writing on a wide variety of topics over all genres.
- There were some high-quality persuasive essays on a range of topics such as a diatribe against minimalism in modern interior design, Chinese threats to the economic hegemony of the United States, and the charitable status of private schools in Scotland. Likewise, a very good informative piece on Bob Dylan's influence on American culture, and an argumentative piece on Taylor Swift's influence on the world today which asks, 'Are we ready for it?'
- Candidates created some very good prose fiction pieces that understood the conventions of fiction and were able to use, or break, those conventions to good effect.
- Although drama was not done by many candidates, some of those who chose to write drama did so very well, and they were very comfortable in the use of dramatic conventions and were able to construct well-developed pieces.
- There was some reflective writing that dealt with the writer's own experiences in very thoughtful and sensitive ways.
- The candidates who gained high marks in all genres were those who had control of their material. Whether this was how they integrated and explained research findings, how they deployed literary techniques in their work, or how they structured and edited their work, always thinking about the impact on the reader.

Areas that candidates found demanding

- Some candidates engaged with topics and approaches to topics that did not take them beyond National 5 or Higher standards in terms of complexity, sophistication, and development. For example animal cruelty, VAR (video assistant referee), mental health, social media, and the Scottish education system are topics which, if researched and developed well, could become good pieces of Advanced Higher work, but often pieces like this were found to be lacking at this level.
- 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.
- A number of the poems submitted lacked a firm grasp of poetic structure, shaping, and poetic technique. A few candidates submitted groups of poems – as opposed to a preferred single poem – and this would often mean that they were being judged on a range of poems with a range of performance.
- There were problems with technical accuracy and an apparent lack of careful editing and/or redrafting in some pieces.

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Project–dissertation

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 authors being looked at this year such as Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Jean-Paul Sartre, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Tsitsi Dangarembga, and Albert Camus.

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 *Nausea* by Jean-Paul Sartre, *Maurice* by E.M. Forster, and *The Idiot* by Fyodor Dostoevsky) 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 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 saw an increased number of dissertations that had a focus on mental health and the psychology of characters, with little literary engagement with the texts.

♦ 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 so prevented the candidate from constructing a dissertation that could achieve the higher mark ranges, for example, Agatha Christie novels, Stephen King's *Carrie*, the *How to Train Your Dragon* series of children's books by Cressida Cowell, and *Star Wars* spin-off novels.

♦ Some dissertations showed evidence of unsuitable or vague topics (for example children literature's view of the world, themes of love and evil, characters dealing with serious dilemmas in different time periods, and the study of female mental health).

♦ Some responses demonstrated literary analysis that lacked any critical depth – often where a candidate had chosen to focus on an issue (for example mental health) rather than offering analysis of the literary features of the text(s).

♦ A small number of dissertations put a greater emphasis on biographical and historical contextualisation of authors and texts than on the core literary texts and techniques.

♦ Some dissertations had a very limited range of quotations to support the approach to the task.

♦ Some dissertations showed little evidence of editing and/or redrafting and consequently displayed problems with expression and technical accuracy.

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 and/or references from their texts that allows 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

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
♦ 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

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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

♦ 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 in particular to produce writing which can be seen as 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

When preparing candidates for assessment in 2024–25 onwards, we remind teachers and lecturers of the new conditions of assessment:

'There is no time limit for the portfolio–writing. Candidates should start at an appropriate point in the course. That is, when their writing skills have reached the level of development required for Advanced Higher English. The piece of writing can be generated over a period of time. However, the first draft of the assessment piece must be done in class under supervision over a period of up to 4 hours. This may take place over several sessions, if required. Since there is no word-count for the task at this level, the first draft does not need to be produced in its entirety at this stage. For example it may be the first half of a short story, or several stanzas of a poem, or the main body of a discursive piece. There is no requirement for a formal timed write-up.

The early stages of the writing process can be completed outwith the learning and teaching situation. When candidates are ready to complete the first draft of the assessment piece, this must be done in class under the supervision of a teacher or lecturer and with access to appropriate resources (for example notes, outline plan, research and/or ICT, as appropriate). Following teacher or lecturer feedback on the first draft, candidates then complete the final piece of writing under some supervision and control. Note: centres should only submit the final piece of writing for external marking.'

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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 often starting from a position of disadvantage

♦ constructing specific and manageable topics – topics should not be too vague, or too narrow, and must 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 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 the 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

♦ avoiding plagiarism

♦ 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 of the band range). Encouraging candidates to engage with these exemplars allows them to see best practice.

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Appendix: general commentary on grade boundaries

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

For most National Courses, SQA aims 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, SQA holds 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 SQA's 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. SQA 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.

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.

During the pandemic, we modified National Qualifications course assessments, for example we removed elements of coursework. We kept these modifications in place until the 2022–23 session. The education community agreed that retaining the modifications for longer than this could have a detrimental impact on learning and progression to the next stage of education, employment or training. After discussions with candidates, teachers, lecturers, parents, carers and others, we returned to full course assessment for the 2023–24 session.

SQA's approach to awarding was announced in March 2024 and explained that any impact on candidates completing coursework for the first time, as part of their SQA assessments, would be considered in our grading decisions and incorporated into our well-established

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grading processes. This provides fairness and safeguards for candidates and helps to provide assurances across the wider education community as we return to established awarding.

Our approach to awarding is broadly aligned to other nations of the UK that have returned to normal grading arrangements.

For full details of the approach, please refer to the National Qualifications 2024 Awarding — Methodology Report.