Course report 2023

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 in conjunction with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

The statistics in the report were compiled before any appeals were completed.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2022:   2,771

Number of resulted entries in 2023:   2,635

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	645	Percentage	24.5	Cumulative percentage	24.5	Minimum mark required	65
B	Number of candidates	734	Percentage	27.9	Cumulative percentage	52.3	Minimum mark required	55
C	Number of candidates	696	Percentage	26.4	Cumulative percentage	78.7	Minimum mark required	46
D	Number of candidates	457	Percentage	17.3	Cumulative percentage	96.1	Minimum mark required	36
No award	Number of candidates	103	Percentage	3.9	Cumulative percentage	100	Minimum mark required	N/A

Please note that rounding has not been applied 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. 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 27: Discuss how significant interactions between characters contribute to the development of the central thematic concerns of two plays.
♦ Poetry, question 7: Compare and contrast three poems which explore feelings and attitudes towards death.
♦ Prose fiction, question 8: Discuss the ways in which themes of belonging and/or alienation are explored in two novels or three short stories.
♦ Prose fiction, question 14: Discuss some of the means by which insights into the principal characters are revealed in the endings of two novels.
♦ Drama, question 25: Compare and contrast the dramatic function of particular family relationships in two plays.
♦ Poetry, question 3: 'Poetry allows us insights into someone else's view of the world; a view which may be surprising or unexpected.' Discuss with reference to 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 17: Compare the means by which difficult, even traumatic, experiences in the lives of the authors have been presented in 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 regeneration and/or the failure to renew in two plays.

Question paper: Textual Analysis

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

Prose fiction was the most popular option chosen by candidates (the Eudora Welty short story, 'A Visit of Charity'), followed by poetry ('Sticklebacks' by John Burnside). Compared to the figures for 2022, there was a decrease in the percentage of candidates who opted to answer on prose non-fiction ('Minor Venetians' by Jan Morris) and drama (*Juno and the Paycock* by Seán O'Casey).

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 drama tended to score slightly higher on average compared to those who chose other parts of the paper.

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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. There was an increase in the number of poetry submissions received (as a percentage of all pieces submitted) compared to 2022.

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.

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.

There were reports from markers of some candidates writing at greater length than in previous years.

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 high scoring essays in response to questions 1, 3, 4, 11, 24 and 28.

♦ As in previous years, essays on the works of William Shakespeare were often good as were responses on Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, and Tennessee Williams.

♦ Very good poetry essays on John Keats, Seamus Heaney, Sylvia Plath, Philip Larkin, John Donne were evident, and some interesting work on William Blake, W.B. Yeats, Charles Bukowski, and the contemporary poet Colette Bryce.

♦ Responding to authors whose texts still have an obvious relevance in today's world in looking at race and misogyny such as Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Surfacing*, and *Alias Grace*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* and *The Underground Railroad*. At the same time, there were still strong responses to the more traditional canon, for example Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*.

Areas that candidates found demanding

♦ Although many candidates showed a good understanding of their texts, they often had issues with analysis which was assertive and not dealt with in depth and supported by appropriate quotation.

♦ Some candidates struggled to write essays that were long enough to offer appropriate in-depth coverage of two dramas or two novels or three short stories or three poems to the standard required at this level.

♦ A few candidates found difficulty with Drama question 26: 'Often power and influence are wielded by unexpected or unlikely characters.' Discuss with reference to two plays. Some candidates made some interesting selections of characters who were 'unexpected or unlikely' and often asserted that the main characters were 'unexpected or unlikely' without any justification for their approach.

♦ Some candidates had a tendency to look at the 'significant interactions between characters' in question 27 of the Drama section but did not securely link these interactions to the 'central thematic concerns.'

♦ A few candidates struggled to offer the appropriate level of analysis required at Advanced Higher, for example writing about *Dulce et Decorum Est* by Wilfred Owen in much the same way as a typical National 5 or Higher response.

Question paper: Textual Analysis

Although there was clear evidence of a few candidates achieving high marks (16–20) in this paper, there was some evidence that the overall candidate performance was of a slightly lower standard than in previous years. Markers reported a reduction in the number of candidates demonstrating grade-A type performance and this was accompanied by some markers reporting an increase in the number of candidates demonstrating grade-C type performance.

Areas that candidates performed well in
♦ There were instances of candidates achieving high marks in response to all four genres.
♦ Understanding of the irony of the title, the disturbing atmosphere of the home, Marian's discomfort in the presence of the old ladies in 'A Visit of Charity'.
♦ When candidates engaged well with poetic technique to articulate the persona's understanding of childhood, change, and the more destructive qualities of adulthood in John Burnside's 'Sticklebacks'.
♦ Being able to make connections between the children and cats of Venice as both are 'minor Venetians' and are dealt with and perceived in very similar ways by Jan Morris.
♦ Those candidates who did well in responding to the drama text were able to focus not only on the individual moments of tension within the extract but were able to pull them all together to discuss the wider family tensions within the given context.
♦ Identifying 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 in which candidates struggled to evaluate their chosen text.
♦ A lack of recognition and engagement of the symbolism of the apple and the ending of 'A Visit of Charity'.
♦ There were some unsupported readings of 'Sticklebacks' as a war poem.
♦ Some candidate responses were not developed enough to offer the coverage demanded by the task.

Portfolio–writing

Areas that candidates performed well in
♦ 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 climate change, trans issues, misogyny and gender equality. There was excellent persuasive work which moved more towards satire, for example dealing with the aging process for women or Scottish politics.

- Some interesting and well-researched informative pieces on quite technical and niche topics such as quantum physics.
- Some very good prose fiction which understood the conventions of fiction and candidates were able to use, or break, those conventions to good effect.
- Although drama was not done by many candidates, 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.
- Reflective writing that dealt with the writer's own experiences and sense of identity in extremely mature and considered ways.

Areas that candidates found demanding

- Engaging with topics and approaches to topics that did not take candidates beyond National 5 or Higher standards in terms of complexity, sophistication, and development: animal cruelty, VAR, mental health, social media, the Scottish exam system – topics which, if researched, crafted, and developed well, could be moulded into 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.
- Some of the poems submitted lacked a firm grasp of poetic structure and shaping.
- Problems with technical accuracy and an apparent lack of careful editing and/or redrafting in some pieces.

Project–dissertation

Markers noted the continuing popularity of topics with feminist and gender-related themes. While many candidates continued to submit project–dissertations on classic authors and popular genres such as the dystopian novel, markers reported an increase in the overall variety of texts being studied. Some examples included *The Fishermen* by Chigozie Obioma, *Tristessa* by Jack Kerouac, *The Setting Sun* by Osamu Dazai, Aristophanes' *Lysistrata, Bad Blood* by Lorna Sage, *Cider with Rosie* by Laurie Lee as well as the poetry of Michael Pederson, Sir Philip Sidney, Ocean Vuong, and Chan Chan.

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 *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Márquez, *The Luminaries* by Eleanor Catton, and *Sons and Lovers* by D.H. Lawrence) often achieved a high mark.

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- 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

- 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 and Stephen King's Carrie.
- Some dissertations showed evidence of inappropriate or vague topics (mental health in *Girl, Interrupted*; the theme of love in *Little Women*; the theme of war in Wilfred Owen's poetry).
- 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 their approach to their 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

♦ 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

♦ 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 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

♦ acquiring the critical apparatus necessary for the analysis and evaluation of complex texts through focused teaching and extensive practice

♦ prepared to analyse more than just word-choice and imagery when discussing poetry

♦ reminded that a response consisting of only brief, unconnected bullet points is unlikely to score 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

♦ 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

♦ avoiding groupings of disparate texts

♦ constructing specific and manageable topics

♦ incorporating the analytical focus of each study into the wording of the title or topic

♦ 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

♦ aware of the word limits set by SQA

♦ providing footnotes and bibliographies as recommended in the course specification

♦ providing a range of relevant quotation to support their approach to the task

♦ avoiding plagiarism

♦ made familiar with all of the advice and technical requirements provided by SQA

The importance of the topic specified by the candidate in the project–dissertation cannot be overstated. In specifying topics, candidates and centres should be aware that candidates are, in effect, selecting and defining their own individual instruments of assessment. It should therefore be emphasised that vague, generalised and unfocused topics are unlikely to enable candidates to demonstrate attainment of the standards against which their project–dissertations will be assessed. Further guidance on the selection of topics is available on SQA's Understanding Standards website.

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.

Grade boundaries from question papers in the same subject at the same level tend to be marginally different year on year. This is because the specific questions, and the mix of questions, are different and this has an impact on candidate performance.

This year, a package of support measures was developed to support learners and centres. This included modifications to course assessment, retained from the 2021–22 session. This support was designed to address the ongoing disruption to learning and teaching that young people have experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic while recognising a lessening of the impact of disruption to learning and teaching as a result of the pandemic. The revision support that was available for the 2021–22 session was not offered to learners in 2022–23.

In addition, SQA adopted a sensitive approach to grading for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses, to help ensure fairness for candidates while maintaining

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standards. This is in recognition of the fact that those preparing for and sitting exams continue to do so in different circumstances from those who sat exams in 2019 and 2022.

The key difference this year is that decisions about where the grade boundaries have been set have also been influenced, where necessary and where appropriate, by the unique circumstances in 2023 and the ongoing impact the disruption from the pandemic has had on learners. On a course-by-course basis, SQA has determined grade boundaries in a way that is fair to candidates, taking into account how the assessment (exams and coursework) has functioned and the impact of assessment modifications and the removal of revision support.

The grade boundaries used in 2023 relate to the specific experience of this year's cohort and should not be used by centres if these assessments are used in the future for exam preparation.

For full details of the approach please refer to the National Qualifications 2023 Awarding — Methodology Report.