

GENERAL PAPER

Paper 8806/01

Essay

General Comments

- Candidates must answer the question which is set, not simply focus on a general topic and then adjust their answer to suit. For example, the question on the uses of technology required candidates to explore the financial motivation behind its development and not just the benefits of technology in general.
- If a question refers to 'your society', it is essential that arguments and examples are taken from that society, not from a worldwide perspective. This is most likely to be Singapore, but it could be mainland China, for example. Whatever the focus, it must be limited to a given situation.
- Whilst questions on technology and economics are popular, candidates are encouraged to consider other topics. This may provide them with the opportunity to produce answers which are more individual in content, thus differentiating their response from the general pattern.
- Good answers show evidence of broad general knowledge beyond the standard examples. Scripts which impress are often those which enable the candidate to utilise broad and often contemporary knowledge in a really telling way.

Candidates had been well prepared for this paper, with a clear awareness of its central demands and structure. Arguments were balanced and points usually developed; examples were provided to support the idea being put forward. There was very little evidence of candidates running out of time, thus ending ineffectively, but excessive length is still an issue. It is not uncommon to see such over-long scripts also declining in accuracy and expression in the final one and a half to two sides, negating to some extent what has gone before.

Candidates now recognise the impact of the introduction. In some cases there are still occasions when the opening sentence is grammatically flawed, creating a negative impression from the outset. This can be rectified, but it is an unnecessary hurdle to have to overcome. Neither should the introduction be excessively long or convoluted. Not every nuance of the subsequent answer needs to be contained within the opening paragraph. Concise but focused expression is a real advantage in establishing the context and stance to be developed in the rest of the script.

Many candidates have developed the skill of writing engaging openings to their essays, possibly making use of an apt quotation or a dramatic anecdote to introduce the topic. Provided that these are not just inserted for effect and are linked to what follows, this can be very successful. There is also evidence of quite formulaic openings, especially in subjects relating to technology: 'In this globalised, interconnected and pragmatic world which we live in today...' as an overview of the modern condition, for example. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with the use of standard phrases, but Examiners give credit for 'personal voice' where language is concerned; it is difficult to do this if so many candidates are adopting the same phrases and stereotypical sentences.

Ambitious vocabulary is given credit, as is the use of controlled complex sentencing. Once again, precision is vital. In this example, any of three questions might be the topic of discussion: 'Social equality has been the catalyst for much of the violence in mankind; reams of blood have been spilt over what is little more than an idea, a nation'. In a similar way, the clarity of the argument can be obscured by excessive reference to 'critics' or 'detractors' without clarifying just what these people are criticising or what exactly is detracting from a particular point of view.

Topic sentences should clearly indicate the flow of the argument. These are usually helpful in establishing where the discussion is leading. Having decided upon the topic of the paragraph, it is important not to allow the ideas to digress into over-complex, over-subtle or tortuous expansion of the basic idea.

There is a greater awareness now of the need to establish an argument rather than relying on assertion. Examples are vital here and it is rare to see a candidate make a claim and then move on without some attempt at illustration. There is a wide disparity in the quality of evidence. For example, the question on figures in history relied very heavily on personalities such as Hitler, Stalin, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King. Whilst these are valid, they offer little opportunity for differentiation. The least successful responses simply used a generic term, without specific examples, notably in **Question 12** where 'technology' was mentioned time after time with no precise reference to its type. Although the point has been raised on many occasions, there are still candidates who refer to 'countries such as Africa...' to illustrate poverty/corruption and so on. This is a vague and imprecise claim.

Evaluation is a central aspect of every question in this Paper, as indicated by phrases such as 'How far...?' and 'To what extent...?' These can be clumsily handled at times. In addition, candidates can sometimes be too expansive in merely describing events being used as examples, thus losing the flow of the discussion. Whilst illustrations need to be explained in order to clarify their relevance to an argument, they should not be over-long on unnecessary detail.

Just as a clear topic sentence marks the direction of the subsequent paragraph, the closing sentence should leave the Examiner firmly convinced of its logical development. Whilst many do this, others rely on a formulaic repetition of the wording of the question, irrespective of its link to what has gone before. This was a trait noted by many Examiners, especially when the candidate seemed unsure of his/her own line of argument. A solidly reasoned paragraph, concluded in a strong way, leaves the Examiner convinced of the power of the discussion and looking to award a high mark as a result.

Candidates should ensure that equal attention is given to the concluding paragraph. It is the candidate's 'last word' and, as such, it should make an impact. A number of candidates refer back to their introduction in a highly effective way, giving a sense of planning and organisation based on sustained clarity of thought and argument. This is a technique worth bearing in mind.

The linguistic quality of the scripts is inevitably broad, but many Examiners remark on the skill, proficiency and range of vocabulary which the majority of candidates display. Some points of grammar and expression would repay close attention, not least the inconsistent use of verb tenses and the mismatch between subject words and subsequent pronouns. The use of the future tense to introduce an example was a recurrent feature, as in 'An example of technology will be the i-phone which is now used widely'. This should be avoided and is not difficult to do. The combination of 'Although...' introducing a subordinate clause followed by 'but...' is still frequently seen. 'After all' consists of two words; 'economic' and 'economical' are constantly confused, as has been noted on many occasions in past reports. The use of the article when referring to 'the United States' or 'the United Kingdom' is another basic error which seems hard to overcome. The phrase 'It is with no doubt that...' was commonplace. This is easily remedied with the simple change in wording, 'There is no doubt that...'. The definite article was also a regular omission in the phrase, 'In the light of...'.

Handwriting compounds the problem of interpretation at times. Length is still an issue, especially when the flow of ideas lacks fluency. The use of crossing out with 'corrections' and insertions squeezed into the remaining gaps inevitably has an impact on the cohesion of the argument. Mention has frequently been made of the need to plan at sentence, as well as paragraph and essay level.

Finally, it is worth reiterating the fact that linguistically insecure candidates cannot compensate for these shortcomings by simply writing at much greater length in the hope that greater quantity will compensate for a lack of quality. The opposite is all too true as the Examiner struggles increasingly to follow weakly expressed material, the errors merely exacerbating an already precarious situation.

Nevertheless, many candidates impress with their control, range of vocabulary, powers of accuracy and expression as well as their breadth of knowledge and subtlety of argument. Many scripts evoke genuine admiration for the quality of the responses, especially under examination conditions. These are clearly the product of excellent preparation over a long period of time on the part of the candidates, together with a committed and professional approach on the part of their teachers.

Comments on Specific Questions

Question 1

Is there any value in preserving minority languages in the world?

This was a moderately popular question, but it did provide a platform for some candidates to write the essay which they wanted to write, rather than one on the actual question. 'Language' became the focus, notably the idea of a common language, with its advantages and disadvantages. Whilst this had some potential relevance for the question since a common language may be developing greater importance in the modern world, thus rendering other languages less important, there was a tendency in some cases to sideline or ignore the entire concept of 'minority languages', or to 'throw in' a token mention at the end of a paragraph, such as the *non sequitur*, 'Therefore, minority languages should not be preserved because a common language is becoming more important'.

Many candidates recognised the problem of minority languages surviving in a world where a *lingua franca*, such as English or Chinese, is becoming increasingly the language of trade and international relations, as well as technology and technological progress. The issue of status surrounding certain dominant languages also raised some interesting discussion.

Some scripts were lacking in specific examples, with French and German sometimes being cited as belonging to the category of 'minority languages'. On the other hand, there was some impressive knowledge covering a range of remote tongues, as well as dialects. The link between identity and culture was frequently raised, together with the sense of national or local community. A number of scripts explored the connection between language learning and its psychological benefits. The idea of 'preservation' was addressed by more expansive candidates, discussing the problems of carrying out this task: financially and practically in terms of people qualified to achieve it.

Question 2

'People in the Arts, living or dead, receive far more recognition than those in the Sciences, even though it is less deserved.' Consider this claim.

This question was one of the least popular. There was a risk that some candidates might simply use it as a platform to compare the relative merits of the Arts and the Sciences. However, this rarely occurred. Attempts were made to justify the recognition given to those winning awards in both areas, with some examples from both spheres being mentioned. The point was sometimes made that the media played an important role in promoting the Arts and its celebrities to an extent rarely given to winners of prestigious awards such as the Nobel Prize for scientific achievement. Examples of the latter were inevitably limited.

The idea of such recognition being 'deserved' was sometimes explored with the concept of 'instant celebrity' being raised as a result of contemporary talent shows and 'one hit wonders'. Nevertheless, some valiant, if slightly convoluted, attempts were seen, arguing for parity of esteem between the two facets of human endeavour.

Question 3

Should people be allowed to have children by artificial means?

This was also moderately popular, with varying displays of knowledge, relevance and quality of argument. The key word 'Should...' required evaluation. At times, candidates slipped into long descriptions of processes or situations in countries such as India where surrogacy for payment is commonplace. Occasionally, the question was used to expound on the risks of cloning and genetic engineering, not always convincingly. Some even included the idea of adoption as an 'artificial means' of having children. This resulted in some tortuous reasoning.

Less persuasive scripts argued that children born artificially would be viewed as inferior in status or that they would not experience the same sense of affection and value as 'natural children' which could result in deleterious psychological effects.

On the other hand, there was evidence of knowledge about the techniques involved, especially IVF and surrogacy. The risks and benefits were evaluated as well as the moral issues which they entailed. Religious

arguments were frequently raised, together with the idea of 'playing God'. In support of the process, the right of people to have children when they are physically incapable themselves was strongly argued, especially in such a pressurised society as Singapore. Moreover, the economic need to maintain the population level in some states provided another reason to allow artificial procreation.

Question 4

To what extent are the rights of animals protected in your society?

This question required an evaluation of the extent to which the rights of animals were protected within a given society. Whilst there were some responses to the topic, it did not prove particularly popular.

Areas which were covered included zoos, the care of domestic pets, vegetarianism and some attention was given to the idea of the export and import of animals. Changes in zoos were described with candidates generally arguing that the rights of animals to space, decent living conditions and diet were usually well taken care of. In the case of domestic pets, government measures were explored in relation to living conditions of both owners and pets and the role of animal welfare bodies was evaluated. The idea of eating animals was generally linked to religious beliefs.

On the whole, although there were some differences in attitudes towards animals across the generations, it was felt that Singapore (virtually an exclusive focus) had made strides in taking the rights of animals into greater consideration.

Question 5

'The most influential individuals in history are those that have caused the most harm.' How far would you accept this view?

Questions relating to history rarely attract a large response and this was no exception. The idea of 'influence' was not very effectively addressed, although the impact of the 'harm' people caused was a more accessible concept, suffering and death being the most obvious consequence.

Candidates did not find it difficult to write a balanced answer, but the catalogue of 'individuals from history' tended to rely on a list of standard names: Hitler, Stalin, Ghandi, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King. As a result, it was difficult for most answers to rise into the top mark range as the scripts tended to lack depth and originality. Indeed, some of the statements about the 'influence' or 'harm' such characters generated could be quite sweeping and unconvincing in less successful or historically correct essays.

Question 6

Is violence ever justified?

This simply-worded, open-ended question offered a great deal of scope for candidates and was reasonably popular as a result. The most common areas for discussion were war, terrorism, state violence in the form of capital punishment and even the use of corporal punishment in the home. On a personal level, self-defence was discussed on occasions.

The idea of its being 'justified' was usually well-handled. Indeed, this provided a perfect opportunity for clear topic sentences and 'signalling words' to guide the Examiner through the various justifications for each side. War was often seen as justified if it was a last resort in the absence of an alternative such as diplomacy. This was also the case where suppressed groups had no alternative but to take up violent means to overthrow a tyrant. The Second World War and recent events in the Middle East came to the fore in these cases. There was hardly ever any argument attempting to justify terrorism, especially if the death of innocent civilians was involved. People under threat were deemed as being justified in using violence to counter an attacker.

On a local level, Singapore's strict laws and punishments were seen as largely justified to eradicate such crimes as drug dealing. Caning and long prison sentences were viewed as appropriate and justified as means of retaining the social harmony and peaceful nature of the country. It was not uncommon for candidates to support the traditional idea of 'sparing the rod and spoiling the child'. Harsh treatment of children was seen by quite a number of candidates as acceptable in the long run as parents wanted to see their offspring avoid bad habits and anti-social ways.

A few candidates attempted a more subtle approach by looking at 'psychological violence'. Whilst this could prove to be an interesting and original perspective, it rarely proved to be the case and often seemed to be an attempt to bolster a script lacking in sufficient material. On balance, there were some excellent responses to this question, blending knowledge and thoughtful evaluation.

Question 7

Consider the view that mathematics possesses not only truth, but supreme beauty.

Whilst many candidates study mathematics, few chose to write about it in the General Paper. However, those who did select this topic clearly had a very informed and perceptive view about the nature of the subject. As a result, most of the answers were of a very high standard indeed, arguing for both 'truth' and 'supreme beauty' as integral elements of the discipline. This offers a classic example of a challenging question providing an excellent platform for an original, engaging and first class response.

Question 8

In your society, how far is equality for all a reality?

This question was one of the three most commonly answered questions on the Paper. It required a focus on the candidate's own society and, as a result, many scripts provided Examiners with an insightful picture of Singaporean society (and a few others). There were occasional examples of answers which ignored the idea of 'your society' to the detriment of the mark. Whatever the qualities of the arguments put forward, the question's focus is clearly stated. Consequently, the mark for Content may be restricted considerably.

Certain areas tended to dominate: race, gender, educational opportunities, economic disparities and religion. Other aspects were frequently discussed also: migrant workers, foreigners / permanent residents and homosexuals.

Examples were quite standard in many cases, with most candidates stressing the importance of equality in order to avoid the social unrest of the past. Many of the above categories were then explored within this context, examining the efforts taken by the government to ensure equality as far as possible. Policies regarding education, housing and public holidays were evaluated in this perspective.

In spite of some rosy pictures of achievement in these areas, some candidates showed a thoughtful evaluation as to 'how far' certain policies had been successful. The most commonly discussed concept was meritocracy. Although designed to ensure equality of opportunity for all, the financial implications of providing unequal opportunities for the better-off regularly surfaced: private tuition and other means of enhancement to ensure access to the more prestigious schools. Candidates were very aware of the various measures being undertaken to try to counter this trend, suggesting that it is an issue of real concern to many.

Racial equality was to the fore, with one notable example from recent times being quoted time after time. There was some sensitive evaluation of the position of migrant workers based on the fears and prejudice which can be seen within the society. A similar debate focused on the relative status of 'foreign talents' (sic) brought in to supplement the workforce in higher paid jobs and its potential impact. Considerable attention was given to the gay population and the laws which still affect them.

Overall, the candidates were very well informed and the question clearly struck a chord in many of them, as evidenced by the number of high quality, knowledgeable and evaluative responses to the topic.

Question 9

Should everyone be expected to donate suitable organs after death?

This question attracted a small percentage of responses and the general quality was not particularly high. Candidates seemed to struggle to organise a coherent answer to the various issues: the need for everyone to be involved, what constituted 'suitable organs' and whether it should be applied after death.

The basic argument was that everyone has the right to life and thus donation was acceptable. Religious objections were raised, frequently claiming that a body should be buried in its entirety if it were to experience the afterlife. Very few candidates were specific about the actual organs being considered.

Organ trading in societies such as India was raised, with the argument that this could be avoided if such a practice was standard within society. Issues surrounding healthy and diseased organs occurred with some discussion of the measures required to ensure safety. Not infrequently, the argument appeared about the rich being in a privileged position as they could afford organs whereas the poor could not.

The list of disparate topics reflects the difficulty which many candidates had in organising an effective response to this question.

Question 10

Can humour ever be serious?

Together with the question on mathematics, this elicited the fewest responses. Even within the limited number of answers the range was quite considerable. Some candidates became tangled up in the notion of humour and seriousness, relying on vague abstraction to form their answers which struggled for clarity and cohesion as a result. This was compounded on some occasions by an attempt at excessive and imprecise subtlety.

At best, successful scripts rooted their answers within a set of clearly defined parameters, closely illustrated by actual examples of comic genres including films, television programmes and books. At one end of the spectrum, slapstick comedy was viewed as humour with no real serious objective to it (except to make us laugh); at the other, satire and other types of humour held up a mirror to personal, social and political foibles to highlight their pretension or hypocrisy. A novel, such as *Catch 22*, was used effectively to expose the futility of war, for example.

Once again, the choice of question proved vital, and often profitable, for those candidates who were clear from the outset what the question entailed and their response to it.

Question 11

'The key criterion for good government is how well the economy is managed.' Is this a fair assessment?

This, together with **Questions 8** and **12** generated the majority of answers. Differentiation was vital, but it was largely self-evident. Weak or moderate responses tended to ignore the central economic thrust of the argument and just listed what were considered to be 'key criteria of good government'.

The second type of answer, which produced a competent response, began by examining the importance of financial management, then went on to list alternative 'key criteria', but without much evaluation of their relative importance.

Successful essays addressed this issue whilst even more perceptive answers argued that the economic condition of a country underpins any other aspirations which a government may have.

Examples needed to be broader than Singapore to be fully persuasive, although domestic illustrations were acceptable, of course. Many candidates used Singapore to epitomise good government in the light of its foresight in terms of economic management in contrast to countries such as Greece and even the United States.

Other factors which appeared with considerable frequency as representing important elements of good government included the following: ensuring a fair distribution of income; providing welfare for citizens in terms of education and health provision; national security; freedom from corruption; respect for human rights and the importance of listening to the views of the governed.

Many candidates referred to China as a country whose economic management was exceptional, but whose management of other criteria was less impressive, notably the large income disparities across the population.

Inevitably, such a large number of responses generated a diverse range of quality, but those who 'managed' to draw together the 'key' elements of the question produced some excellent scripts.

Question 12

How far is it acceptable for technology to be used only for financial benefit?

This very popular question posed similar issues about differentiation to **Question 11** and a similar pattern of responses emerged to enable this to take place.

The phrase 'only for financial benefit' caused problems for some candidates who struggled to deal with the extent to which profit was acceptable. It was here that some less confident candidates resorted to the device of simply regurgitating the key phrase at the end of each paragraph, whether relevant to what had gone before or not, e.g. 'Therefore I agree only to a small extent that technology should be used only for financial benefit'.

Another approach was largely to ignore the whole idea and then list the various advantages of technology, usually in the medical, educational and communication fields. It is surprising that quite a number of weaker scripts virtually failed to mention specific aspects of technology, relying on the generic term for much of the answer. This is a crucial point to note for future questions on this and similar topics.

At the next level candidates did refer to financial gain or profit and justified it along the lines of funding further research and development. Alternatively, it was commonly argued that profit-making did not matter (whatever its extent) provided that the products offered more choice, convenience and pleasure to the consumer. These scripts then moved on to listing other benefits which technology can offer, often covering the same ground as above.

The most successful responses addressed the 'How far...?' aspect of the question, raising similar issues, but evaluating them in the light of their impact on human well-being. The most frequent areas here included environmental protection, security of the nation, improving healthcare and ensuring effective global communication. Nevertheless, there was a recognition that all these goals have financial implications and that profit is acceptable provided it is not abused and that these other criteria are met. Very good answers also commented on the impact of technology on nations in different stages of development where exploitation was roundly condemned. Monsanto was a ubiquitous example as the 'villain' of technology being abused for financial benefit. Once again, with such a vast range from which candidates could choose, Examiners had hoped to see more individual illustrations, for or against the statement.

This question raised a number of important issues regarding the following key points: answering the specific question; the logical development of paragraphs and their conclusion and the need for precise and varied illustration.

GENERAL PAPER

Paper 8806/02
Comprehension

General Comments

- Candidates should remember that the shorter, lower tariff questions should be answered concisely: having offered an answer, do not repeat it in different words. Time taken up by unnecessary repetition means less time available for the application question, where far more marks are at stake, and where a noticeable deterioration in the quality of organisation, technical accuracy and even handwriting can occur.
- The questions on the paper are worded very carefully and should be read very carefully (see detailed examples of questions being misread in the comments on **Questions 2 and 5**).
- The best responses to the application question feature analysis and evaluation of the validity of some of the author's views in a structured essay – one with a brief introduction and conclusion, in between which the paragraphs are linked by well-chosen and varied discourse markers.
- Handwriting should be of sufficient size, and letters correctly formed, to ensure ready legibility.
- Candidates need to be reminded that the front page of the examination paper states that correction fluid is expressly forbidden.

This year's topic unsurprisingly proved to be one with which many candidates engaged vigorously and effectively, and they produced scripts in line with the high standard of previous years. Most candidates completed the paper within the allotted time but there were a significant number of incomplete scripts, or ones where the high tariff **Question 11** was inadequately covered. It seems that the incidence of rushed or incomplete scripts is on the increase.

Once again, the overall standard of candidates' English was good: the range of vocabulary, along with the accuracy and variety of sentence structure were particularly praiseworthy.

There was one concern related to the standard of handwriting: the writing of some candidates was felt to be minuscule and consequently difficult to decipher, whilst in other cases, incorrectly formed letters were abundant.

Comments on Specific Questions

Question 1

This opening question held few terrors for the vast majority of candidates, who saw that Congreve was highlighting how music can bring balm to the tortured soul. Some impressive vocabulary was displayed here as candidates wrote how music "assuaged emotional hurt" or "placated pained hearts" but it was enough simply to say that it calmed or comforted one when one was upset or embittered. A small minority took a more literal, but acceptable, view of the quotation, seeing it as expressing music's ability to enrapture or pacify an uncivilised individual – a literal "savage" – who had not encountered it before.

What difficulties there were with this question arose when a candidate misread "breast" as "beast" and wrote of taming wild animals.

Question 2

The careful reader of the wording of this question would have seen that it asks for the candidate to pick out criticisms the author makes of the background music he describes, and he does indeed make several after the colon following “less attractive manifestations” (the colon indicates that what will follow is supporting evidence for this view). He considers it to be invasive and all-pervading; it makes conversation difficult; the music itself is bland and unchanging, even jarring at times. Finally, it is forced upon the listener who has no power to switch it off. This last point was seized upon by very nearly every candidate but a number stopped after making that one point only – they did not describe any of the other features following the colon in the previous sentence and consequently failed to satisfy the basic requirement of the question.

Question 3

This one mark question proved surprisingly difficult for a good number of candidates, many of whom did not know the meaning of “jaundiced”. A clue to its meaning was offered, as is so often the case, by careful reading of the context: the author has spent the first paragraph describing less attractive ways in which music is employed, making “complaints which some will dismiss as jaundiced”. The use of the word “dismiss” suggests complete disagreement with this view and in fact, simply writing “those who disagree with him” as an answer to this question was sufficient.

There were many other possible answers here, as the author’s criticisms of background music might prove unreasonable to many constituencies: those who write or play it; those who use it in their stores; those who enjoy such music.

However, several answers were offered which were wide off the mark, the most common of which were “our earliest ancestors” and “Congreve”, none of whom would have had experience of the modern phenomenon the author describes.

Question 4

This question was very well answered by almost all candidates, who saw that music variously operated as an early-warning system, a source of entertainment and a means of encapsulating important knowledge about one’s society and transmitting it to future generations.

Question 5

This question was another which repaid the careful reader. Some overlooked the question’s focus on Orpheus and wrote about music’s generic power. Others simply offered a retelling of what Orpheus did with his musical skill and what happened to him thereafter. The astute reader saw that the power of his music is shown by the unprecedented nature of his achievement – “uniquely” in the text – as shown by the candidate who wrote “his music was so enchanting he could obtain the exclusive privilege of bringing his wife back from the dead”. Another way of expressing the magnitude of his achievement was to point out how Orpheus moved even the hardest of hearts, the guardians of the dead, whom one might well assume would be implacable and unfeeling. One candidate expressed it thus: “...even the protectors of the dead, who had icy cold hearts, were touched”.

In addition, the successful candidate saw that it was necessary to specify Orpheus’s “human frailty”. Simply calling it a “weakness” was not sufficient; a reference to his impatience or his inability to follow instructions ensured success.

Question 6

The use of the brackets here shows that the information contained therein is additional to, not central to the main argument; alternatively, that it is interesting and worthy of note – what some candidates called a “fun fact”.

Whilst many candidates saw this, some thought that the brackets indicated that the material was totally irrelevant to the main thrust of the author’s argument, which is not the case. Others thought the brackets indicated that it was the author’s personal view which he was unsure about; others thought the brackets indicated the untruth of the information contained within; some others thought the brackets acted as a way of highlighting or emphasising what was, in fact, the main point of the paragraph.

Question 7

The first, and most demanding element of this question depended upon understanding “coded” as showing that the musical preferences were somehow symbolic or cryptic (one candidate termed it “a hidden agenda”), oblique indicators of one’s character or personality which needed interpretation. Many saw the author’s meaning here, but some thought erroneously that “coded” indicated a dishonest intention – that the preferences were not ones one actually liked but the ones which would gain the most acceptance from one’s peers.

Question 8

This question was another which repaid careful reading. Those who saw that it required a careful, point-by-point comparison (in terms of wealth, influence and society’s response to their deaths) between Mozart and contemporary musicians did very well.

A number overlooked the focus of the question as phrased and compared musicians in general from the past (not all of whom by any means were poor, lacking in influence and died unnoticed and unmourned) with their modern counterparts, and consequently failed to score.

Question 9

As in previous years, many candidates successfully glossed the majority of the words, though very few succeeded with all five. Once again the invitation to gloss a word in a short phrase was ignored by the many who insisted on offering five one-word answers.

Candidates found “strident” very demanding: it is used in line 5 as the opposite of “soothing” – raucous, jarring, shrill or ear-splitting etc. — so candidates who wrote that it meant “pleasant” or “comforting” had misunderstood this.

“Disparate” was well answered, as was “conducive”. More demanding was “readily”, which some confused with being ready i.e. prepared. Several candidates offered “quickly” or “immediately” and indeed speed is part of the word’s meaning but on its own it misses the eagerness the word suggests: one candidate wrote “with open arms”; another “with no qualms or inhibitions”. Both were excellent answers.

“Enigma” proved surprisingly difficult for many: again, if one had not known that it meant a puzzle or mystery, careful reading of the previous sentence – about how even Freud did not know why music affects us – might have suggested this.

Question 10

The vast majority of candidates are well versed in the techniques of a successful summary and scrupulously obey the rubric: no more than 120 of one’s own words. There will always be some who overshoot the limit (one this year used 152 words) but they must realise that by doing so they are penalising themselves by using up valuable time and energy which will count for nothing, as ALL summaries are counted, and anything beyond 120 is crossed through and ignored. Only the very weakest candidates relied heavily on the language of the text. Similarly, there were fewer instances this year of summaries featuring so much crossing out that it is very difficult to read the words which are left.

It is also worth mentioning that the summary does not simply say “summarise everything in paragraphs 4-6”; it specifies the benefits that music can bring. This becomes relevant when, after a straightforward point 1 about music involving many areas of the brain, candidates needed to cover points 2 and 3, that music can bring “joy or solace”. Many candidates erroneously thought solace meant pain, rather than comfort; others thought it meant peace, which lacks the word’s implication of healing.

Points 4 and 5 – music can be serious and meaningful, or simply entertaining – were not spotted by many, though all scored point 6 about the health-improving aspect of music. However, at this juncture some demonstrated another feature of weaker summaries by being long-winded: instead of simply stating that music is good for one’s health and leaving it at that, they included supporting detail from the passage about it increasing lung capacity, exercising muscle groups and increasing alertness. This used up a significant number of words which would have been better used elsewhere.

Points 7 to 11 posed fewer problems, and paragraph 5 was similarly dealt with effectively. Most scored point 16, about how music helps patients suffering from medical conditions or nervous disorders (again some candidates wasted words by making this point in too much detail). Point 17 was covered well by those who remembered to include dementia patients as the beneficiaries of music's power to revive memories; leaving them out invalidated the point.

Finally, as a preliminary assessment of the candidate's Use of English is made at this point, a clear, fluent and articulate summary will score highly, whilst one that is hard to decipher, shows few if any organisational skills and is noticeably reliant on the language of the original text will not score so well.

Question 11

Music is something teenagers hold dear and have strong opinions about, and this year's passage gave plenty of scope for astute comment on some of its psychological, social and even medical benefits. Candidates did not struggle to find material in the passage with which they concurred or disagreed, but simply to offer an undeveloped list of such things, with no exploration of the topic, is a poor response.

There was almost universal agreement with the idea of music being a source of comfort and relaxation, with many candidates eloquently describing their lives as being inherently stressful and their being in need of the succour music can bring. On the other hand, the efficacy of singing the national anthem produced a wide divergence of views: many agreed that singing it together with schoolmates was an important unifying act; others felt that it was an empty ritual in which few actively participated. Either way, it would have been good to see candidates going beyond mere statement of attitude or behaviour. For example, are there particular phrases in the lyrics of the anthem which successfully stir the blood? – or moments when the tune or orchestration is at its most effective? It would have made a very telling contribution to an answer to have focused on one or two such details rather than, as was often the case, making sweeping statements alone.

There was a similar divergence of views on the role of music in palliative care. Many dismissed the author's views as unscientific and certainly not to be found in Singapore, whilst others offered powerful personal testament to its effectiveness, such as the candidate who recounted how favourite music was played continually to his grandmother who was suffering with Alzheimer's and she eventually remembered her grandchildren's names. This illustrates another fruitful approach to the application question – an apt personal anecdote can add a different dimension to what can so often be an impersonal, unengaged response.

And as for music offering an attractive and potentially highly lucrative career-path, as the passage implies has been the case for a few, this view was given very short shrift, as candidates felt that parents in Singapore would certainly not see such a career as offering anything like the security of one in the traditional worlds of finance or medicine. As one candidate vividly put it, compared to a job in the financial sector "music takes a back seat – and maybe it is even in the car boot".

As ever, many candidates produced lively and well-structured responses, with an attention-grabbing introduction (one began "When words fail, music speaks, goes the cliché..."). Similarly, strong answers featured a variety of discourse markers to delineate and connect paragraphs, and a succinct conclusion. Weaker scripts, on the other hand, failed to include one or more of these. A number of candidates began paragraphs thus: "In paragraph one, Gordon writes that..." to be followed by "In paragraph three, Gordon writes that..." and so on. Such a mechanistic approach does not adequately provide the coherence which is one of the four criteria used for judging success in this question.

The overall standard of candidates' written English was as high as in previous years both in terms of technical accuracy and in terms of precision and subtlety of discourse.

Naturally there are some areas in which some candidates display less command than others and the following weaknesses have been highlighted by Examiners:

- "I agree to the author's view that..." should be "I agree with..."
- it is unidiomatic to write "the author's views are agreeable to me"
- the author "emphasises", he does not "emphasise on"; he "places emphasis on" would, of course, be acceptable

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- it is much better to refer to “young people today”, not “youth today” or “youths”, as “youth” carries a pejorative weighting - if one is going to talk about “the youth of today” it is almost inevitably going to be critical of them
- it is unidiomatic to refer to “elderlies”; the correct usage is “the elderly”
- special events, such as National Day, take capital letters
- some candidates are prone to comma splicing, leading to over-long, rambling and disjointed sentences.

To end on a more positive note, it should be noted that the vast majority of candidates’ responses were a joy to read.