

GCSE

English

General Certificate of Secondary Education **J350**

OCR Report to Centres June 2014

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This report on the examination provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers in their preparation of candidates for future examinations. It is intended to be constructive and informative and to promote better understanding of the specification content, of the operation of the scheme of assessment and of the application of assessment criteria.

Reports should be read in conjunction with the published question papers and mark schemes for the examination.

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A640 Speaking and Listening

General Comments

This was the first session with Speaking and Listening as a separately endorsed unit, no longer forming 20% of the final GCSE grade in English or English Language. Although some centres have experienced some confusion with the new status of the unit, the vast majority were aware that in terms of the teaching, assessment and administration of the unit very little has changed as explained below:

- Units A652a and A643 are now a single unit A640
- Band 5 is now the top band, but the descriptors and mark ranges remain the same.
- The unit is now common across GCSE English Language and GCSE English, involving common mark sheets and a single moderation process.
- Advisory visits will continue to take place every three years, or more often if a centre needs extra support.
- The administration of the moderation process remains the same with centres selecting their own samples (7 per teaching group) and sending them to the moderator with other required documentation.

For this series, where possible, one moderator was responsible for both A640, Speaking and Listening, and A650, Spoken Language, to reduce the number of separate moderators with whom centres had to deal.

The Training and Guidance filmed footage, to support centres this academic year, was issued online to enable all teachers preparing candidates to access the material for assessment purposes, task setting and administration. As with the previous filmed footage, there was a complete range of activities across all three contexts, but which gave specific support to the “real-life” context and task setting, two areas identified as being problematic for some centres.

A large number of advisory visits have been carried out this year. Initially there was some confusion about whether centres still had to assess Speaking and Listening, but this was confirmed early in the year and the majority of centres were very welcoming and pleased to receive advice and support.

Task setting

Centres are experienced in task setting to cover the requirements of the three different contexts. It was clear that some departments and individual teachers had put a great deal of thought into designing tasks which would allow achievement across the ability range, and into providing opportunities for candidates to succeed.

Task setting is crucial in determining successful outcomes for this component, and centres are always advised to set tasks which allow the assessment criteria to be met, and are engaging and relevant for the candidates. However, centres must bear in mind that some tasks can be limiting. Giving candidates the freedom to choose, for example, the subject matter of a presentation for the Individual Extended Contribution, may lead to under-performance. Thus, using examples from this series, a presentation on “Is Space Travel an unnecessary luxury when people in the world are starving?” allows achievement in the higher bands; a talk on “My Work Experience”, with no appropriate focus, is unlikely to lead to Band 5 marks.

More worryingly, the requirement of the “real-life context in and beyond the classroom” is still proving problematic for some centres, despite being now well into the life of this specification. It is difficult to say whether centres are not taking this requirement seriously and if so, are opting out of their responsibilities to ensure that it is covered, or whether it simply is a matter of not understanding what is required. With the support available, the latter seems increasingly unlikely. Often individual teachers do not fulfil this requirement in a centre where the rest of the department is secure with its demands. It is essential that all teachers preparing candidates for this unit are required to watch the filmed footage, where the RLC is explained very fully.

The requirement that one of the basic three contexts must address this aspect is not onerous or difficult to comprehend. The repeated advice to centres is that it is not just an issue of subject matter, but rather it is a question of purpose and audience, which extends the performance “beyond the classroom”. So a prepared talk delivered by the candidate, regardless of the subject-matter, does not meet this requirement. It does not alter the validity by calling it “a formal talk” or “a conference talk”, if the presentation is still to the rest of the class and if they are not in any other role other than themselves. If the candidate is given a clear role and purpose - for example, as a charity representative - the talk would move ‘beyond the classroom’.

So a talk on work experience is no different to one, say, on fishing; both are straightforward talks to the rest of the class. Similarly deciding, “Who is to blame for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet?” set in a mock court scene, with candidates in role as characters from the play, can never be classed as “real-life”.

However, many centres have embraced the “real-life” context with enthusiasm and likewise their candidates, seeing it as an opportunity to extend and demonstrate their skills.

Similarly problematic for some centres is the drama-focussed context. Increasingly centres seem to assume that drama-focussed means that the stimulus material must be drama text based. Speaking and Listening requirements seem to get confused with those for Drama as a separate subject. So techniques appropriate to Drama, freeze-frames, for example, are not appropriate for this component, where the emphasis is always on Speaking and Listening.

Similarly, performing a scene from a play, usually the set Shakespeare play, without any adaptation, does not allow candidates the opportunity to meet the assessment criteria.

The extra scene or speech is often a popular valid activity, but care must be taken not to stretch the bounds of credibility, or set inappropriate tasks, which do not allow candidates to achieve their potential. Hot seating Lennie from “Of Mice and Men” would be one such task, with limited verbal responses possible.

The number of centres which link Speaking and Listening activities with the work for the A650 Spoken Language study, remains surprisingly small. Successful tasks linked studies of the language of cookery programmes to candidates presenting their own cookery programme.

Reference has been made to the support available as regards task setting for all aspects of Speaking and Listening. The tasks illustrated on DVDs issued and online filmed footage should be used together with the commentaries and a guidance document available on the OCR website, specifically for the “real-life” context. The Controlled Assessment Consultancy is always available to centres seeking further advice on individual tasks and through this a centre’s tasks may be validated. Centres with previous entries will have had direct feedback regarding task setting and task setting is always a major aspect of Advisory visits by external moderators.

Record keeping

A key part of the process is record keeping. Centres are advised to maintain on-going records for all candidates, perhaps making use of a centrally-held database of marks for candidates, with written comments. These procedures, and good practice in centres, help to prevent problems arising from staff absences or changes of staff. It also helps in the selection of the final three activities to be used to form the basis for assessment. Good practice continues to involve providing multiple opportunities, with the final selection being on an individual basis.

Many centres have their own working records, which contain feedback to candidates and details of candidates' involvement in the process. Final submission for assessment is then on the OCR Controlled Assessment form for Speaking and Listening, which covers all the necessary elements required by the external moderator.

Centres must remember that candidates' record sheets form a vital piece of evidence in the moderation process. If there is a lack of detail in the description of activities or when comments on performance have been "lifted" directly from the band descriptors with little or no linkage to individual candidate achievement, it is extremely difficult to carry out the moderation of a centre.

Worryingly, some centres came close to having records returned to be re-submitted with the necessary range and detail of comment. It is also not acceptable for candidates to write comments on the Controlled Assessment Forms

Typical lack of detail in description would be "a talk to the class" or "a group discussion on poetry" or "court scene "Romeo and Juliet"". The level of challenge or complexity involved cannot be judged without the specific subject matter, or in the case of the drama-focussed context, details of the role adopted and developed.

Similarly, bland, generalised comments regarding performance, where it is impossible to distinguish one candidate's performance from another, or which band descriptors are being employed, are unsatisfactory.

It is important that all the teachers preparing and assessing candidates adopt a common approach to filling in the record sheets and that good practice is enforced throughout a centre. There was often great variation within a centre, with some teachers providing detailed, helpful and pertinent comments on candidates, and others whose forms were at best perfunctory.

It is a centre's responsibility to ensure that external moderators are supplied with a comprehensive set of records, with all sections completed and marks/arithmetic checked to eliminate mathematical and transcriptional errors. Thankfully the majority of centres provided all the necessary information, with well presented records, increasingly word processed in part and wholly. However, one "rogue" teacher can undo the efficient hard work of a department.

The Application of the Criteria

The starting point for this must be achievement as set against the performance criteria, fixing first on a band and then secondly the mark within the band range. Comments on achievement on candidates' records should make reference to the band descriptors and give a mark out of 40 for each separate context.

Worryingly, it was noted that not all centres or individual teachers within centres matched band descriptors used to the marks awarded. There were discrepancies, with teachers not seeming to describe performance accurately. It must be noted also that the sole intended audience for comments is the external moderator, so comments of encouragement are inappropriate: "Really well done" or "Excellent, an effective role".

Good practice in awarding marks balances strengths and weaknesses, and does not just reward strengths. An explanation is given, for example, as to why a candidate failed to achieve the next band when on a borderline. This aspect of the application of the criteria is particularly important, where there is bunching of marks, to distinguish separate performances.

The final mark is based on a simple mathematical calculation; the three separate marks are totalled and divided by three. Centres are advised to check the final calculations carefully as a small number of mistakes were discovered by moderators.

Importantly, no assumption should be made as to a link between bands and the level awarded.

Internal Standardisation Procedures

The majority of centres continue to have secure, and often very rigorous, procedures in place to ensure internal standardisation of the marks. Good practice is to use cross moderation/marketing exercises across groups, reorganisation of groups for assessment and department marking often using centre-filmed material, together with using the filmed assessment evidence provided annually by OCR.

Centres are reminded that it is essential that all staff preparing and assessing candidates watch and discuss the filmed assessments. Signing the GCW330 form testifies to this having taken place, but it was apparent that this had not occurred in all centres. The internally-set standard must be confirmed against OCR's Agreed Standard. This is done by assessing and comparing the marks awarded by OCR for the filmed assessments with the centre's marks, irrespective of centre size. The centre must then adjust its standard where necessary. Centre visits by an external moderator further confirm a centre's marking.

Worryingly, some centres professing to have watched the DVDs/filmed footage went on to get the "real-life" context wrong. Also centres are warned against using out of date, old material from previous specifications. No material has been issued on video tape for this specification, yet some centres claimed to have watched one.

Standardisation procedures should cover assessment, task setting (not necessarily the same tasks across all groups, but all candidates meeting all the requirements) and record keeping.

Administration

Despite building a session on administration into the Advisory Visit, and including administration instructions in the filmed footage, there is still a great deal of confusion about how this unit is moderated.

There was an issue where centres, through no fault of their own, sent their documentation to Cambridge Assessment rather than a specified moderator. Some of this documentation took time to track down, or was lost, and OCR apologises to the centres affected in this way.

However, even where centres had the correct moderator address labels, moderators have reported centres being weeks late in sending all the relevant material, with no explanation or apology forthcoming. In some instances, thankfully a small number, moderators have received negative reactions, when legitimately asking for moderation material. It is in the interests of all parties that deadlines are kept to assiduously, and that candidates' results are not put in jeopardy.

Some centres confused the different sampling arrangements for Spoken Language and those for Speaking and Listening. The Spoken Language sample is selected by OCR and an e-mail request is sent to centres. For Speaking and Listening, the sample is centre selected, unlike all other CAs.

However, even though one moderator is involved, centres should keep the two units separate: A640 Speaking and Listening and A650 Spoken Language. The moderation material should be presented in an easily identifiable form. Much time-consuming, needless work was involved separating forms and documentation before moderation could take place.

To summarise, Instructions to Centres on Moderation are available on the OCR website, as are all relevant forms, hard copies are sent to centres, administration procedures also form a section on the online filmed footage and in the accompanying commentary.

As centres increasingly move to systems where non-specialist examinations officers are the point of reference and dispatchers of moderation material, it is vital for the smooth running of the process that instructions regarding procedures are read, understood and carried out by all relevant parties. Examinations officers need the support of Heads of English or their deputies in all this.

However, grateful thanks are given to all those who got it right and enabled moderators to meet their deadlines.

Conclusion

In conclusion it cannot be stressed enough that centres should make use of all the support material readily available for this unit. Mention of this has been made previously, but to summarise it includes:

- DVDs with commentaries and guidance, issued 2010 and 2011
- Online filmed material with accompanying commentary - 2012-13 and 2013-14
- Specific “real-life” context guidance document
- The Consultancy Service for Speaking and Listening
- Advisory visits with centre specific feedback
- Reports to centres on the examination series, both centre specific and the Principal Moderators’ general Report to Centres

The Administration procedures have been summarised previously.

Finally, the Speaking and Listening Unit has always been a real strength for candidates, as witnessed by moderators making Advisory visits to centres. There is a great deal of good work being done and this is testimony to the hard work and dedication of the teachers involved in preparing and assessing candidates. Many thanks as always for your continuing commitment.

A641 Reading Literary Texts

General comments

It was pleasing to see that very few centres submitted folders with rubric infringements, usually *Of Mice and Men* with Duffy or Zephaniah where this was the case, and it is clear that the requirements of this unit are now firmly understood. It is important, however, to clarify that the tasks must be the correct ones for the year of entry, as submitting other tasks would constitute malpractice and they cannot be accepted. Assessment was generally consistent with generosity most evident in the higher bands, where close analysis of language and its effects is required. Moderators reported that the use of plastic wallets for individual essays (and sometimes separate pages) made the reading of candidates' work time-consuming and simple stapling would be better. Evidence of standardisation through a second teacher's comments is required and the cover sheets are for summative comments rather than a simple recording of the tasks undertaken. These comments, together with the marginal annotation of essays, form the basis of the assessment process and communication with the moderator, and lead to the most accurate marking.

Preparation of candidates was thorough and there was evidence of clear engagement with the texts and tasks across the ability range. However, in some instances there was too much scaffolding of the responses where preparation included mind maps and essay frames with a number of key quotations provided for the students to add a comment, often a paraphrase. These responses were very similar both in content and structure. Better candidates could flesh out these bare bones with more extended comment and some sense of the text as a whole. The best candidates could provide a conceptualised view and range more freely through the text for evidence of their points.

Some moderators expressed concern about extremely long pieces where it appeared that the candidates may have been allowed more time than they should have been allowed to produce their work. Such responses usually did not however benefit from their length, as they often became repetitive or rather laboured in approach. Students were generally better at language analysis in the poetry pieces, and the integration of context has improved over the past two years, although some essays still incorporate bolted-on biographical explanations.

In this session it was noted that there were more instances of clerical errors, which are time-consuming for the centres to amend (CW/Amend forms), and we would ask centres to check that marks on the folders and MS1 mark sheets are consistent; where marks have been changed as a result of internal standardisation, these should be amended on the cover sheets of the folders.

Approaches to Tasks

Section A: Themed Tasks

It has been encouraging to see many centres making use of these tasks, sometimes for their own choice of text but often as alternatives for the set texts, with *Of Mice and Men* and *Romeo and Juliet* being the most popular choices. George's decision to kill Lennie was discussed sensitively by many candidates, whilst others showed a clear understanding of the dilemmas faced by characters who had several courses of action and decisions open to them, most notably Romeo, Juliet and the Friar. Appropriate textual references were used to support a line of argument, with some reference to the impact of the social and historical context, but generally only a limited commentary on language, and weaker responses lapsed into narrative. The more developed responses ranged widely through the text and offered relevant characters and incidents, incorporating the "How far" aspect of the question. The very best focused closely on

the presentation of key moments of decision. *Macbeth* was the most widely used centre-chosen text, with some thoughtful exploration of the choices made by Macbeth in killing Duncan and the subsequent choices this entailed, with the very best linking these to the overall tragedy. The other themed task, challenge to social attitudes, was not generally seen.

Section B: Prose or Literary Non-Fiction

As has come to be expected, *Of Mice and Men* is the text most commonly used, with only a few centres opting for *Notes from a Small Island*. Candidates engaged effectively with the discussion of the extent to which characters were capable of kindness, often referring thoughtfully to the impact of the Depression and consequent itinerant and harsh nature of life on the ranch. The phrase “any character” in the task tended to lead candidates to consider more than two characters which led to superficial answers. The best responses engaged closely with how key moments of kindness were presented. Only a very few candidates engaged with alternative interpretations of each character’s acts of kindness, e.g. Carlson’s shooting of the dog.

The very few responses to Bryson were able to select some relevant experiences and give some commentary on the way language is used to make the moments entertaining, although it is evident that candidates often see the humour as somewhat dated.

Section C: Drama - Shakespeare

Romeo and Juliet was the text most commonly used, although there were a few responses to *Julius Caesar*. In exploring the actions and behaviour of older characters in *Romeo and Juliet*, some candidates used a rather narrative framework for the answer and did not focus sufficiently clearly upon impact. The Friar and Nurse were the favoured characters, followed by Lord Capulet and Lady Capulet. Stronger responses could trace the impact of chosen characters through the text, linked to the wider drama, thus achieving a sense of overview. Context was often used effectively: the strongest candidates wrote articulately about the power of the older generation in the play, while even the weaker responses showed an awareness of the fact that it would have been frowned upon for Juliet to marry purely for love. There were some engaging comments in relation to the 'romantic' nature of the ageing nurse and her desire to see young love triumph. However, very few candidates engaged with the language in their response and they therefore limited the extent to which they explored the presentation of characters and the dramatic nature of the text, making it hard for them to access the higher bands.

The few responses to *Julius Caesar* were generally stronger overall, with candidates usually selecting Caesar and Brutus for their exploration of the consequences of pursuing power. They identified death and destruction as the likely outcomes, considered the different motives for each character and the impact of fate versus free will. The best essays responded to the language, and most powerfully to the imagery, of the text and related their exploration to the play as a whole.

Section D: Poetry

Since most candidates opted for *Of Mice and Men*, Owen was the most popular choice and evoked the most analytical responses to language. Most candidates endeavoured to focus on the ways in which Owen presented futility in the poems, again providing useful contextual detail as a springboard for their interpretations. There was some perceptive critical analysis of the poems, but also some loose paraphrase and limited response to the form and structure. Many candidates found it difficult to grasp the concept of futility or indeed ignored the word, saying that all war was bad, dreadful and incurred endless suffering, while not being very precise about the meaning of futility. Weaker candidates gave a description of the poems and stated that “This

shows the futility of war” at the end of every paragraph without being any more precise. More able students explored the different aspects and manifestations of futility in a number of poems but mainly *Dulce et Decorum Est*, *Futility* and *Exposure*.

The few responses to Zephaniah showed candidates feeling strongly about the issues of betrayal raised in the poetry, with this theme clearly striking a chord. They found it more difficult to explore the ways in which language, form and structure are used to present the poet’s ideas, and often resorted to paraphrase. Ironically it appears that the accessibility of the language makes it harder for candidates to analyse it than with Owen.

On balance, the poetry responses were often considered by moderators to be the strongest in the candidates’ folders, with greater independence of thought and closer analysis of language.

Zephaniah

Some clear focus on terms of reference of QN, HOW /PRESENTS / BETRAYAL, with apt detailed reference to content and language. In general candidates were more adept at discussing content rather than language, though there were some good attempts at the latter. There was some good appreciation of the tone and voice of the poems. *Biko the Greatness* and *Three Black Males* were favoured poems.

There were no responses to Julius Caesar, Austen, Hardy, Fugard, Bryson, Adie.

A642 Imaginative Writing

General Comments

It was clear that centres had prepared their candidates carefully for the controlled assessment tasks in this session. It was also pleasing that very few centres submitted tasks from the wrong year or from another English qualification.

Front sheets were usually accurately completed with some helpful summative comments. It would be helpful, however, if all centres made clear the breakdown of marks between the assessment objectives as well as the overall final mark. Centres should use tags or staples to attach work together rather than plastic envelopes or cardboard folders as this slows the moderation process.

Moderators reported enjoying reading many well-written and engaged responses to the tasks in both the Media section and the Text Development section of this unit. The folders tended to be more balanced than in previous sessions: candidates had sometimes put more effort into their first piece than into their second, but this time they usually achieved similar marks in both pieces of writing.

The Tasks

Media

Write a feature article about a famous person explaining why you have such strong views about this person.

Candidates showed real engagement in their responses to this task. Along with their usually disparaging comments about Miley Cyrus and Justin Bieber, there were positive profiles of some less well-known figures who clearly deserved the candidates' admiration. More successful pieces included headings, sub-headings and other conventions of the feature article genre, without allowing it to distract from their focus on writing effectively, but there were some very attractive pieces which contained little writing worthy of credit.

Your famous person appears on a chat show. Write the words of an interview in which the famous person answers three or four questions.

Candidates are clearly familiar with the form, style and tone of chat show interviews. Many created appropriate voices for both interviewer and interviewee and developed pleasing intertextual links between the satellite task and the core task. A surprising number, however, found laying out an interview quite challenging and insisted on using speech marks liberally where none were required. Centres would be well advised to ensure that candidates know the basic features of this particular form.

Write a short story in which the famous person from your article has to deal with an unexpected situation.

This task was attempted less often than the other two, but was generally well done when it was undertaken. The main challenge is establishing a plausible scenario for the story and developing and resolving it in the relatively limited number of words that can be written in two hours. Most stories provided a counterpoint to the core task by attempting to gain empathy for a celebrity they had maligned in the core task.

Imagine that you have read the article and disagree with what was said about the famous person. Write a formal letter to the editor expressing your own views.

This was the most popular satellite task and was generally well done. The letter form provides a clear structure and a definite audience, both of which seem to support candidates in producing their best work. It was interesting for moderators to see candidates trying to take an alternative view of the famous person they had praised or condemned in the core task. For some, it was a step too far, but the better responses left the moderators wondering what exactly the candidate's true feelings about the famous person were. Candidates must be careful, however, not simply to paraphrase material from the core task: details in the core task may be referred to but this should be a separate task which brings a fresh perspective and new material to the folder.

Text Development

Choose a character from a text you have read, heard or seen. Write a story about this character which takes place before the events in the text.

Candidates addressed this task with real relish. Many told tales of the younger days of Lennie and George, often picking up and filling out the sketchy references in the original text to what happened in Weed or the influence of Aunt Clara. In a similar way there were a few responses which explored the origins of the feud in Romeo and Juliet or the background of some of the older characters. It was also pleasing to see that many candidates are using a much wider range of texts as a stimulus for their writing and that a growing number of centres are encouraging their students to pursue their personal reading interests rather than basing their response on the same text as everyone else. It would be useful to have a brief indication of what text the response is based on, but centres should be reminded that these responses are judged as self-standing pieces and that reading and understanding of the original text is not rewarded.

Write a monologue in prose or poetry in which one of your characters expresses his or her thoughts about what happened.

This was the most popular satellite task and was usually completed successfully. The best candidates were able to create voices that were vivid and engaging and provided a fresh perspective on the response to the core task. It is wise to choose a different point of view from the main protagonist of the core task because it avoids the temptation, which some candidates fell into, of repeating much of the information from the response to the core task.

Your story is to be made into a film. The director has asked for your views on the setting for the story. Write a letter to the director explaining what the settings should be and the importance of the settings to the story.

Many candidates attempted this task with some success. Having the clear letter structure and a very specific audience and purpose was supportive for many. There was some confusion, however, about which text the letter was about and very few addressed the second half of the task – the importance of the settings to the story – in any detail.

Imagine that your chosen character has applied for a job. Write the words of an interview in which the character answers three or four questions about why they want the job and the reasons why they think they are suitable for it.

Candidates enjoyed this task because it allowed them to place their characters in an unusual situation. Most were able to develop a suitable structure for the interview and create an appropriate style and tone, but some struggled to develop their ideas in detail. Most ignored the stipulation that there should be three or four questions only. This is in place to ensure that the answers that the interviewee gives are developed in some detail so that candidates can access the highest bands.

Overall

The work of most candidates was well presented and mainly accurate, but illegible work sometimes made moderation difficult. Centres must ensure that candidates are not disadvantaged by the quality of their handwriting, which is not assessed, and should provide scribes or electronic aids where necessary or advisable.

There was some improvement in this session in the accuracy of punctuation between sentences but very few candidates use punctuation correctly within the sentence. The most able are fond of semi-colons, but would benefit from clearer advice from centres about the rules for using them. There continues to be some carelessness about the accurate use of capital letters.

Overall it is clear that both centres and candidates had enjoyed working on these tasks. All the work showed real engagement and some imagination and the very best, as always, was a genuine pleasure to read.

A680 Information and Ideas (Foundation Tier)

General Comments

The question paper proved to be accessible and of an appropriate level of demand for the tier. Most candidates were able to engage with the reading material for Section A: about the use of mobile phones on planes and trains (in Text A) and an article about a coffee trader who banned the use of mobile phones in his shop (in Text B). The first of the Writing tasks was the more popular of the two.

The majority of candidates appeared to have been well prepared for the examination and schools are now familiar with the format of questions and booklet. The spaces provided for responses were sufficient for all but a few candidates, who used (very often unnecessarily) separate pages attached to the booklet. There was a more significant minority of candidates this session who were not fully clear about the different requirements of Questions 1 and 2. Perhaps this was at least in part attributable to the absence of a January module. In a unitised system of assessment, it was possible for candidates to perform at a higher standard in units they re-sat.

In most cases, candidates appeared to have followed the advice regarding time allocation; few responses showed evidence of running out of time. However, some candidates did themselves no favours by rushing through the Reading questions and padding out their Writing responses until the invigilator signalled the end of the examination.

Individual Questions Section A – Reading

No examiners reported any instances of candidates using the incorrect text for Q1, but once again a few candidates used the first text to answer either Q2 (a) or Q2(b). These candidates appeared to have little familiarity with the format of the paper.

1(a) – 1(c) These easier questions provide a relatively gentle way in to the paper, though not all candidates scored all 6 marks. Each of the two sub-questions for Q1(a) asked for one-word answers, which most candidates acknowledged.

1(d) Stronger responses demonstrated a clear focus on the task and were able to show evidence of expressing points in their own words – ‘as far as possible’, as the question demands. These candidates showed a secure understanding of the text across a number of valid points.

Less successful responses were often marked by the presence of one or more of the following:

- points made that were not relevant to the task
- points made at excessive length
- points repeated
- own views offered.

Better answers addressed both elements of the question and made a clear distinction between the writer’s views and other people’s views. In general, less successful answers tended to write about views generally and often introduced views of their own.

Use of own words is a discriminator in this question. Some candidates misinterpreted this requirement, mistakenly thinking that it was sufficient to alter the occasional word. This led to a very mechanical approach, as candidates worked doggedly through the passage rather than addressing the question in a focused way.

The weakest answers lifted material indiscriminately and showed an almost complete misunderstanding of the task.

Question 2

Most candidates took note of the relative weightings of Q2(a) and Q2(b) – 6 and 14 marks respectively. There was still, however, a minority of candidates who wrote at excessive length for Q2(a).

2(a) Stronger responses commented on the precise effect of such features as the rhetorical question and answer in the heading, the sub-heads 'True champion' and 'Mindless chit-chat', and the phrase 'banned bad manners' in the words beneath the picture. Most candidates wrote about the effects of the smiling coffee trader and the sign outlining the no mobile phones policy in the photograph.

Less successful responses merely identified features without comment or made generic comments about headings, photographs and captions that could be true of any newspaper article, or indeed, of any media text. Once again, examiners were informed in very general terms that headings 'make you want to read on' and were in big, bold fonts in black against a white background. In such responses, photographs inevitably 'drew the reader in' and 'made you want to read on'. There was very little merit in superficial points of this kind.

As with Q2(b), the space provided for the answer provides guidance to candidates about a suitable length for their response. Selection of some relevant points together with pertinent analytical comment is sufficient to gain all 6 marks for this question. Candidates spending too much time writing on Q2(a) risked under-performing in Q2(b).

2(b) Successful responses contained clear evidence of the ability to choose and analyse relevant detail, commenting on both the information given and specific words and phrases. It should be noted that the quality of analytical comment is a discriminator in this question. Stronger responses explored the words used to describe the rudeness of customers: 'mouthing their orders', 'jabbering', 'never so much as glanced', 'too wrapped up in their own conversations'. The strength of the writer's views was evident in his comment on the 'curse' of the mobile phone and the sarcasm in 'basic human right to hold two conversations at once, while tweeting with their spare hand'.

However, many responses did not address aspects of language used in the article. Weaker responses simply described the content of the passage, and some candidates who did not read carefully confused the writer with the coffee-trader subject of the article.

Candidates would benefit from regular practice at answering Q2(b)-style questions, using both information **and** language points to address the question. Practice at reading carefully and purposefully would help to lift the performance of the weakest candidates.

Section B – Writing Questions 3 and 4

Examiners saw the full range of performance.

It was pleasing to see the time and effort taken by some candidates in their planning, with mind maps again popular.

Once again, it is worth pointing out that length of answer alone rarely secures high reward. There simply is no need for candidates to write more than one-and-a-half to two sides of text (using the average size of handwriting as a guide). Some candidates perhaps feel the need to write until the very end of the examination – but they would be better advised to spend five

minutes or so checking their work for basic errors. There should be no need to use supplementary pages, which are very rarely an indicator of strong performance. Excessively long Writing responses are usually testimony to poor time management across the paper.

Stronger responses showed a clear control of the material, and offered an engaging opening, clear development of ideas and an effective ending. Careful consideration was given to choices of vocabulary and sentence structures, and the readers' need for clarity and accuracy was acknowledged.

By contrast, less successful responses did not convey much evidence of crafting material for a reader. There was a lack of control of material and, at best, only straightforward development of ideas; sometimes responses had a perfunctory conclusion or ended in mid-air. In general, the greater the length of responses, the more rambling and repetitive they tended to become. The least successful responses contained a level of linguistic error that impeded communication.

Common problems with punctuation included confusion between upper and lower case letters, and a failure to mark sentence divisions. There were also instances of very poor handwriting, as if candidates were unaware of the needs (or indeed existence) of a reader.

Question 3

Candidates engaged in a lively way with the prompt 'Teenagers these days just don't know how to behave'. Many agreed and provided colourful catalogues of teenage misbehaviour by way of illustration. Others reminded the oldies that they too had once been young and had perhaps themselves misbehaved long ago in the mists of time. Heart-warming stories of young people contributing to charities abounded.

Question 4

There was a wide range of engaging responses to the topic 'Life isn't fair'. Stronger responses adopted a more philosophical approach. In the middle of the range there were some interesting catalogues of woe pertaining to candidates' own lives. Towards the bottom of the range, writing tended to be repetitive, with one or two main points not adequately or engagingly developed.

A680 Information and Ideas (Higher Tier)

General Comments:

Although there was less humour in this year's paper, examiners reported that it had been well-received. Candidates found the focus on animal rights and environmental issues readily accessible and the subject matter also proved rather contemporary, in the light of recently revived interest in Britain's whaling history. Candidates throughout the ability range found material for comment in each of the given texts and misunderstanding was rare. The contrasts between the passages were very effective in helping candidates differentiate the skill sets each question required: language and presentation in the first and language and tone in the second. Few candidates were side-tracked either in the reading or the writing by the inclusion of extraneous material of their own, which did not relate directly to the tasks. Both writing tasks offered a wide canvas for expression of a range of views and experiences. Rubric error was rare, with only a few instances of candidates writing on the wrong text or attempting to cover both writing tasks. Very few candidates failed to complete the paper and this does suggest that centres are, once again, making sound judgements on tier entry, with only a few exceptions.

Comments on Individual Questions:

Question No. 1

The most secure answers showed clear understanding of both the text and the task through careful selection of relevant points and avoided the introduction of excess detail, in the form of examples and quotations. Candidates earning the highest marks had very precise focus on the question and understood that a summary was required, delivering each point of relevant information in a pithy phrase or sentence. As an example, most candidates mentioned 'whale watching'; here the point needed was that tourism made better economic sense than commercial whaling - not just that whale tourism existed. Likewise, stronger answers made clear that human activity provided additional threats to whale numbers, over and above the threat of whaling and avoided simply enumerating and detailing what those environmental factors were. Higher scoring candidates also resisted the temptation to summarise the whole extract, omitting comment on the emotional quality of the ex-whaler's personal testimony, for example, and rightly reserving that for Q2. Consistent use of own words is an important requirement here and the best answers avoided lifting phrases and statistics from the text, again saving that material for Q2. It will never be appropriate to quote in a response to Q1.

Although previous sessions have seen some improvement in awareness of the need to write concisely, examiners did report that this had not been sustained in this session, with some candidates prioritising number of points over selection and synthesis. What is omitted (e.g. the "whaler's testimony") is as important as what is included. Here, at the start of the examination, there is a temptation to explain and repeat points at great length, which means that marks are lost when concision is not even attempted. The highest scoring candidates work hard on organising their responses to Q1 and eliminate excess detail and repetition at the planning stage.

Question No. 2

The text from Greenpeace had the clear intention to influence opinion and generate reader response. Most candidates could appreciate this at some level and the best answers rose above the conventional, formulaic notions that the text simply delivered information. The best answers took the deceit, greed and self-interest of the whalers as the core of responses which clearly analysed the article's substantiation of this and then went on to look at the ways in which Greenpeace presented its virtuous and crusading "truth telling" self.

There was a good balance between comment on presentational features and comment on language use, with more candidates prepared to engage with the text and not merely to describe the images and headings. Where there was comment on the image, this was linked to the text, saying that the picture illustrates the beautiful animal which is under threat and that this image is kept in the reader's mind as they digest the statistics which expose the dire plight of the whales. Quotation of facts and statistics was a popular way into the response with the best answers taking time to consider what was in this information that supported the Greenpeace argument. The redundant generic point that 'it shows they know what they are talking about' is still with us but is becoming less frequent.

The text offered plenty of examples where language was used to create effects. The better responses offered detailed reference to the text and were able to not only identify a device such as alliteration, for example, but were able to set this in context and explore what was added to the overall impact of the text. Again, with regard to generic points, better candidates looked at word choice in 'consumption, contamination and catastrophe'; not just resting with 'alliteration engages us and makes us read on'. Candidates wrote well on the emotive language in the personal testimony, drawing together the mention of 'blood money' with the title word 'greed' and the subtle suggestion that only people stuck in the past who have not 'moved on' to a more enlightened view of animal rights would support whaling. Thoughtful attention to use of language is essential for access to the top bands and this must move beyond merely naming and defining a device.

Consideration of how the text was structured was a feature of the top answers, with clear-sighted understanding of how each 'myth' is built up to be knocked down and then leave the reader feeling betrayed by lies. The progression from threat of extinction to new hope and from polluted seas to fresh appreciation of the marine environment was another good way into the text.

Question No.3

This was not an easy text and examiners were pleased to note some good quality responses here, in some cases stronger than for Q2, with less generic comment and candidates working hard to understand Fry's attitudes at various stages of his experience. Virtually all candidates could access the text at the simple level that Fry did not want to witness a whale hunt and could identify features of language use which supported communication of his view. Most candidates could identify a difference in tone as he moves from Nantucket to Barrow and Captain Henry proved to be an engaging character. There was some subtle comment on how Fry manages to make the 'boundless enthusiasm' of Philbrick unattractive through his interruptions but makes the 'bouncy and boisterous' nature of Henry's family more appealing.

Fry's respect for the Eskimo came across clearly and candidates wrote well on this, drawing out the background details relating to the freezing temperatures, the size of the boat and the weight of the whale gun. Candidates showed great sympathy for the need to eat all the 'nasty bits' of the whale. Candidates found it less straightforward to define Fry's attitude to Philbrick's views and this proved to be a good discriminator. The most able candidates were able to live with ambiguity here and to explore, for example, the use of contrasts and ironies, looking at how the centre of the 'slaughter' was now 'neat' and 'pretty' and that the conversation between Fry and Philbrick takes place in the shadow of a whale skeleton, for example. Although there was a little confusion at times over which man was speaking, most candidates tried to take on board Philbrick's argument that modern man destroys species in the search for fuel and to gauge Fry's response here. His ironical comment on his mode of transport leaving Nantucket was used to good effect.

There were some highly perceptive responses that linked Barrow and Nantucket through the theme of ancestry, exploring Henry's respect for his ancestors and his belief in continuity set against Fry's distaste for a 'grisly' past and the concern, planted by Philbrick, that future generations will judge us harshly. I applaud the one candidate who identified the closing comment as an echo of the line attributed to Admiral Lord Nelson at the Battle of Copenhagen, 'I see no ships.' Centres should be assured that this did not form part of the assessment.

Question No. 4

This was by far the most popular choice and delivered some excellent pieces of writing. The question did require candidates to adopt a given format, either a personal diary or an online blog, and the best answers maintained awareness of that format throughout, not simply writing 'Dear Diary' or 'Hi Bloggers' at the top of a piece of creative writing, sometimes as an afterthought. Awareness of the imagined audience was a feature of the more successful responses and it is worth reminding candidates that, in addition to their imaginary audience, they have the real audience of their examiner to consider, and that more casual language, slang and expletives are not appropriate in the context of a public examination and do not display the candidates' language skills to best advantage. Those candidates that kept focus on the task delivered some powerful commentaries on personal, life-changing experiences. Examiners reported that the format was a great success, even when it was used as a start to a piece of narrative, mostly because it enabled candidates to find a specific subject and get straight into a tone and mood with which they felt comfortable and confident.

Choice of subject matter was wide-ranging. Meeting inspirational sporting figures and celebrities featured occasionally, but more frequent were moving accounts of encounters with people dealing with adversity in their everyday life. There were blood-curdling moments of conversions to vegetarianism and powerful descriptions of turning both to and away from religious belief. Centres might be interested to learn that lessons learned from guest speakers at assemblies featured often: Holocaust survivors, Second World War veterans and Red Cross volunteers have all had a great impact on our candidates. Teachers were not forgotten either and many candidates poured out heartfelt thanks to the teachers who had turned their lives around. Travel experiences featured frequently, with school exchange visits, charity projects and often just holidays with family and friends, providing food for thought. Blogging was often the format of choice here and it is evident that Trip Advisor is having some influence on candidates' writing styles as they indicated how real life experience of various resorts had made them 'change their mind' about a variety of destinations. In terms of the AO3iii mark, the most common issues for this question were with tense agreement and the use of correctly punctuated direct speech.

Question No. 5

There were fewer responses to this task but it was often the choice of the more able candidates who offered some highly philosophical and often tightly argued statements of belief. The best responses were very well organised with clear lines of development. Those candidates who began writing without forethought, in a 'stream of consciousness' style, generally lost their way and either stopped very short or went on repeating themselves, hence denying any developmental structure to what they wrote. Good paragraphing skills were essential and examiners were pleased to note some improvement here, particularly in the making of logical connections between paragraphs, which is very important in a task of this nature.

Examiners were happy to accept all views, whether based on personal experience or global events and it is worth noting the importance of having some content in these ideas-based tasks. The use of a well-chosen anecdote or example enhanced a piece very effectively. However, it has been a common theme of this paper that 'less is more' and a few carefully selected references were often more striking than attempts at a world history digest. (Understanding of the causes of the Second World War was assessed in another exam.) It is worth encouraging candidates to look at the overall coherence and tone of their essays. The best pieces avoided the sometimes uncomfortable pairing of significant, important matters with the mundane and trivial. Quotations from such figures as Einstein and Mahatma Ghandi reinforced the candidates' points very effectively but perhaps should not have been set alongside the words of the wise turtle from *Kung Fu Panda*. In terms of the AO3iii mark, the most significant issue was with sentence structure. Candidates were trying to express some complex ideas in this task and lengthy, unpunctuated sentences did not support clear delivery of the viewpoint.

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