

GCSE

English Language

General Certificate of Secondary Education **J351**

OCR Report to Centres November 2017

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

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J351/01 Communication information and ideas

General Comments:

In general, the candidates taking the November examination had a clearer grasp of what each task required than candidates taking the summer exam. Centres had clearly taken on board the advice given in the report on the summer examination and prepared their candidates accordingly. The responses to Question 2 and Question 4, for example, were generally much more relevant than the equivalent responses in the summer session.

The number of tasks that candidates need to complete in this two-hour examination is demanding. It was pleasing to see that most candidates were making better use of time. Very few candidates wrote excessively long responses to questions and those that did rarely improved their marks by doing so. A well planned and focused response will always get better marks than a long, rambling one.

However, a significant minority of candidates chose to miss out questions. The responses most commonly missed out were questions 3 and 4 which are worth more marks than the other reading questions. Very few candidates, on the other hand, missed out the writing section which suggests that they were skipping question 3 and 4 so that they could complete the writing task in which they may feel they are more likely to gain marks.

This is an unhelpful approach because the writing tasks are designed to build on the thought process through which the questions in the reading section should be taking the candidates.

The first writing task, for example, asks candidates to think about overcoming a difficult situation which is an idea which was first introduced in question 4. The consideration of language and structure in question 3 should also prompt candidates to think more carefully about their own choices of language and structure in their own writing. Centres should, therefore, advise their candidates to write something for each question because it is rare for candidates to gain absolutely no marks for a response.

Candidates clearly found the texts' depiction of women at war engaging and enjoyable. They showed great empathy for Jeanette's dangerous adventure, plucky escape from a burning ship and desperate search for her husband. They also showed mature understanding of how Tammy struggled to come to terms with the loss of her limbs and the importance of the help she received from her fellow female soldiers.

Section A: Reading

Question 1

This question was divided into two tasks, each worth two marks. Most candidates were gaining three or four marks on this task and used relevant short quotations but there was some confusion in the heated rush of the exam room about whether Jeanette was clothed or not when she was found. To gain marks for 1b it was not enough to copy out a quotation but it was sufficient to transpose the quotation from the first person to the third person.

Question 2

The responses to this task were much better than in the summer session. Centres are clearly gaining in confidence with a style of question that has not been used in more recent specifications for this subject. The best responses summarised a similarity between the two texts in their own words and then illustrated the similarity by quoting one relevant detail from each

text. Sometimes the detail's relevance was self-evident but sometimes it needed to be explained.

Less successful candidates often seemed content to describe just one or two similarities whereas the best would identify three. Too often a claimed similarity was supported by 'evidence' that was not similar enough or was not clearly relevant to the supposed connection. Other candidates found it impossible to resist the temptation to write about the differences between the two texts which, unfortunately, gained them no marks.

Question 3

Responses to this question continue to be less successful than expected. Too many candidates use this response to explain in their own words the content of the second text without engaging with its language and structure. Others may make some general comments about tone but make too little use of subject terminology to describe how the writer uses language and structure to create that tone.

There were far fewer responses which wrote about a section of the text not specified in the question. The best responses started by engaging with the overall paragraph structure of the selected section of the text and then considering the way the writer had used sentence structure for effect. Better candidates then explored specific choices of words and phrases and explained how and why each specific choice of word conveyed particular ideas.

Most candidates were able to make some generalised comment about Duckworth's account of her experiences. Many understood how her vivid description of coping with pain established the need for which her two colleagues provided support. They began to struggle, however, when trying to make specific comments about the specific effect of specific words and phrases.

Candidates were generally able to identify simpler features of structure such as the alliteration of 'friendly face' and the repetition of 'day after day'. Many struggled, however, to make meaningful comments about sentence structure, simply noting that there were different length sentences which, in some unspecified way, made the text more engaging. Better candidates were able to discuss the relationship between a short sentence like, 'She even used conditioner!' and the longer sentence it follows.

Centres should advise their candidates to write more about significant choices of words. Very few candidates in this session engaged with the connotations of Duckworth's choice of 'Warrior' to describe herself, or the impact of modifying it with the word 'Wounded'. Too many were content to note the alliteration of the two words and the fact that the initial letter had been capitalised. Discussion of the connotations of words like 'warrior' and metaphors like 'sisterhood' gained better candidates much higher marks.

Question 4

Overall, candidates approached this task more successfully, than in the 2017 summer session. Responses were often more focused and less excessively long. This is a task that requires candidates to stop and think before planning and writing a response and there was still too little evidence of candidates planning their answer to this task. There were also a significant number of candidates who were given no marks for AO3 because they made little or no attempt to compare the two texts.

Although there were a few candidates who simply retold the main events of each text, most were able to give some consideration to the success of each of the women in their particular situation. Many candidates simply explained the ways in which the women had been successful in overcoming challenging situations but the better candidates considered the degrees to which each woman had been successful.

Most candidates were able to give reasons why they regarded Jeanette as successful but only a few qualified her degree of success by referring to her injuries and her failure to find her husband. Candidates must practise close reading of the text and ensure that they read the whole text as the way a text ends may affect the candidate's overall response to what they have read. In Text 1 Jeanette's injuries and failure to find her husband are described for the most part only in the last six lines.

As candidates had been asked to look closely at the language and structure of the second half of Text 2, this was less of a problem in candidates' discussion of Duckworth's degrees of success. Many saw Duckworth as less successful simply because her injuries were so much worse than Jeanette's but others were able to comment on the level of emotional support received by Duckworth and the more humorous tone of the end of Text 2 compared to the more forlorn picture of Jeanette at the end of Text 1.

Too few candidates engaged with each writer's presentation of their material. The better candidates were able to write about the differences in perspective between the two texts: in the first Jeanette is observed by a sympathetic male observer whereas, in the second, the account is given by the woman facing the challenge of war herself. These differing perspectives affected the language and structure of each text: the first focused on Jeanette's dramatic escape and the practical support given to her by men; the second was more about the thoughts and feeling of the survivor and the emotional support she received from female colleagues.

Centres should advise their candidates to keep the phrase, 'How far do you agree?' in mind as they approach this question. It is good to start a response by considering the evidence from both texts that supports the statement and then move on to look for evidence in each text that challenges the statement. This evidence may come in the content of each text but may also be conveyed through the way ideas are presented in a text, including language, structure, tone and perspective.

Section B: Writing

The writing tasks build on the themes addressed by the two extracts in the reading section. The first draws more explicitly on the writers' presentation of women overcoming challenging situations whereas the second task moves a little further away by asking candidates to write a letter of application for the job they have always wanted. For this reason, it is highly recommended that candidates should complete the reading section before attempting the writing task.

Most candidates in this session were able to write clear, straightforward and appropriate responses to one of the writing tasks. It was pleasing to see that most responses covered about three pages of the examination answer booklet which is neither too short nor too long. Handwriting, however, remains a problem as an increasing number of scripts are very difficult to read. Centres would be well advised to make early interventions to improve their candidates' quality of handwriting.

Vocabulary tended to consist of high frequency words so spelling was generally accurate. Better candidates, however, were able to deploy a wider range of vocabulary and often used it successfully for effect. Sometimes, however, more ambitious candidates, valiantly trying to use adventurous vocabulary, used it imprecisely and made their intended meaning unclear.

Sentence structures were generally simple and compound. Better candidates tried to use more complex sentences with common connectives but were not always able to control them and sometimes over-extended their sentences, making the meaning unclear. Centres should work with candidates on the use of punctuation marks within the sentence such as commas as very few candidates use them accurately.

Most candidates did not use accurate or effective paragraphs in their writing. Better candidates did make some divisions in their writing but their paragraphs either drew together too many ideas or were divided unnecessarily from another paragraph with similar material. The best candidates linked their paragraphs in a variety of ways and used different length paragraphs for effect. Many candidates attempted an engaging opening to their piece of writing but very few were able to end effectively.

Question 5

The blog format was sufficiently loose to allow candidates to respond in a variety of ways. Most candidates were able to write an appropriate account of a challenging situation and explain how they had overcome it. The better candidates explicitly addressed their notional blog readers and framed their blog post in the context of an imagined series of posts to give their writing a clearer context.

Question 6

Most candidates found the clear audience and strict letter format of this task helpful. Some, however, struggled to develop sufficient material to develop their letter at length, simply repeating a desire to work in their chosen job and assert their suitability for it. The best candidates adopted an effective tone, explaining in detail why they were suitable and using a persuasive style of writing to influence their audience.

J351/02 Exploring effects and impacts

General Comments:

This was the first re-sitting of the new specification 9-1 English Language Paper Two: Exploring Effects and Impact. The essential features of this specification are: -

Two reading passages, both of which must have been read before starting to answer.
A choice of one of two essay writing options.

A new style retrieval and re-organisation question testing A/O 1, based on the legacy A680/01 reorganisation task.

Two questions testing AO2, language and structure with question 3 on the second reading passage double weighted.

Both A/O 3 and A/O 4 tested together in question 4 with tariffs of max. 6 and 12 respectively.

The Mark Scheme recognises six levels of achievement for each of these tasks with tariffs of 1 or 2 for each level cumulatively to the max. of 6.

For Writing, there are six levels for AO/5: organisation, structure and coherence but four levels for AO/6 sentence structures, punctuation and spelling.

Centres will have realised that the effects of an untiered paper are that the range of achievement will be very broad indeed and that the distinctions between the levels will, despite the proximity of the marks, become quickly and readily discernible. Indeed, the range of achievement stretched from candidates who gave very competent answers to all the questions and whose mark across the board was good to candidates who failed to attempt any of the questions or ignored most of the reading and wrote an essay of sorts. In the latter case it may be better not to make GCSE entries in future sessions.

As expected, most responses were clustered around levels 3 & 4 and below and some fine distinctions were needed by examiners here, as elsewhere, to award marks that were fair, generous and in exact accordance with the relevant level descriptor statement.

Both reading passages proved popular with candidates and served as effective discriminators of the four skill ranges tested. There was a clear distinction between candidates who had read the passages thoroughly and to the end and took an informed overview of what they were about and how the writer had developed them for the specific effects; and impact they had and, on the other hand those who had not, and simply looked at the detail without seeing the bigger picture that it contributed to.

Too many candidates still rely on device spotting as a means of structuring their responses to questions 2 & 3 on language and structure. Simply to say that writer uses a metaphor which makes the passage memorable is insufficient for a mark of any sort. Often hunting down similes, metaphors, etc. takes a candidate away from task and text not further into it.

Some candidates (either consciously or not) spent too little time on the reading tasks to do themselves justice on any them or the passages but went on rapidly to their choice of writing task. This is not a helpful strategy: most candidates can show their writing competencies in less than an hour. Few can do so on the reading without more than that. It is very unlikely that a piece of writing however well- wrought within the candidate's competencies will make up for a poor mark on reading. Indeed, some candidates who took this approach then went on to write at

far too great a length as if quantity was all that mattered in gaining marks. It does not, and candidates should be reminded that the quality of their writing is all -important.

Key Messages

- a – Candidates should be able **to differentiate in Question 1, even at a basic level, between phrases and sentences,** as well as **select appropriate material as opposed to wholesale copying** from the reading passage.
- b – Candidates should be taught **to explain the effects** of selected language **and** structure points in Questions 2 and 3.
- c – Candidates should write a **personal comparative response** to Question 4 **which is firmly grounded in the two reading passages** rather than based on personal experience and anecdotal opinion. They might wish to use the rubric prompts to help structure their responses.
- d – Candidates should focus on writing creative responses to the given topics which **are controlled, organized, and appropriate in terms of purpose and audience,** rather than **lengthy pieces which lack clarity, accuracy, and impact.** They might wish to use the rubric prompts to help structure their writing.
- e - Overall the reading passages were accessible and generally understood. Candidates had generally been well prepared for each question and the vast majority of candidates attempted all questions, many writing at length.

General

- **The paper was deemed effective in discriminating across all abilities**
- **The paper was a fair test of candidates' achievements and ability**
- **Candidates found the paper accessible and in many cases, it would seem, enjoyable**
- **There was better performance generally in writing rather than in the reading tasks**
- **In some centres candidates were ill-prepared for Q1.**

The paper worked well, although, I feel, not as successfully as the summer paper. Most candidates responded positively to the paper. However, I had more NR papers than I have ever had, even when marking foundation tier on previous specs

Comments on Individual Questions:

Most candidates made an attempt at these tasks. The most common errors were selecting information from the wrong part of the extract & giving the answer 'old' for 1b.

Question No. 1

Q. 1 'The Thirty-Nine Steps' – John Buchan

- a) The majority of candidates were able to identify the two phrases in the mark scheme although some candidates included an overly long quotation including reference to the rats gnawing holes in the floor and the rotten ladders. A few candidates answered that the mill building was 'long out of use' which of course did not answer the question because it didn't relate to the **condition** of the building.

- b) The most common answer to what 1a shows about the building was 'its old' but this in itself was not considered sufficient to gain the mark and extensions focusing on its lack of use, dangerous state of disrepair, abandonment, and neglect were duly rewarded. It is important to note that mere quotations lifted from the passage such as 'The mill had been long out of use' did not gain a mark because of the question requirement for an explanation.
- c) Many candidates gained at least one mark by identifying examples from the passage showing that Hannay was thinking about how to escape. The most common correct answers were apt references to 'hiding place' and 'without leaving tracks'. Some candidates thought that 'on the far side of the mill stood an old stone dovecot' indicated his intention to escape but this did not gain a mark because as it stands it is simply a statement about a building in the distance.

Question No. 2

Following on from the comments above centres and candidates are respectfully reminded of the sequence of statements of this AO:-

- Explain/ comment on/ analyse

Here is the hierarchy of skill sets we expected to see, and indeed did see here and in question 3. Explain is to paraphrase, describe, talk generally about the passage;

Comment on is to start to explore and investigate the writer's methods and intentions in producing impact and effects;

Analyse is to take the building blocks of the passage apart and reassemble them synthesising detail and overview.

- Language and structure: as a rule of thumb language is what is below sentence level and structure above it: but it also includes an overview of the passage as a whole. For example: here the clear division of the piece into indoors and outdoors, exactly as prompted by the first question.
- Using relevant subject terminology to support views: they are the outcomes of their deliberations on the first triplet. So essentially this comes last, so as to link the response or segments of the response to each other and back to the task.

Lists of literary terms which are given without any or with only tenuous references to textual detail are not rewardable.

What the passage doing? How does it do it? Are the essential questions.

Many candidates did 'device spot' with little reference to impact. Very few candidates referenced structure & those who did tended to refer only to long or short sentences. Candidates frequently referred to 'tension' or 'suspense' but did not explain how this was created. A significant number of candidates talked about the wrong part of the text.

Q. 2 'The Thirty-Nine Steps' – John Buchan

Comment

Many candidates were able to select appropriate references from the text and identify them using relevant subject terminology, although the subject terminology was not always accurate with, for example, confusion between similes and metaphors, and confusion with parts of speech

such as verbs being identified as nouns and so on. It is clear, however, that candidates generally had been well prepared regarding selecting references and identifying relevant parts of speech in order to answer this question.

The problem for candidates when answering this question often arose from being too concerned with 'what' in the passage made Buchan's description of Hannay's escape appear difficult rather than 'how' his use of language and structure helped achieve this. Often candidates did little more than select a reference and then either assert that it was difficult or make a comment which was merely descriptive of the selected reference. Such attempted 'explanations' were usually vague or circular in nature. Those responses which clearly explained the effect of features such as the simile used to convey the degree of pain suffered by Hannay – 'My shoulder and arm ached like hell' – gained higher marks than those which stated he was in pain, and did not then explore the connotations of 'hell'. Candidates who made implicit relevant comments on the difficulties of Hannay's escape were rewarded but the highest attainers were those candidates who were able to develop explicitly explanations focused on Buchan's use of language and structure by commenting on the imagery employed and its impact on the reader. As a structural point it is quite clear that Buchan employs a sustained buildup of difficulties experienced by Buchan including his feeling sick and giddy, his burning head made worse by the glaring sun, and the horrible fumes. Some candidates identified 'giddy' as showing excitement although of course in the context of the passage Hannay is experiencing no such thing. It is worth some candidates reconsidering their understanding of 'hyperbole'. Quite a number identified the writer's description of Hannay's painful suffering as being exaggerated/hyperbolic when clearly it isn't. Unless, that is, we choose to ignore that he's in pain, cramped up in a dilapidated building, and in fear of being killed or recaptured by his pursuers.

As regards structure points, there were different definitions from candidates as to what constitutes 'structure' in the text. For some, structure comprised repetition of words in a sentence whereas for others, it comprised a variety of sentence structure or sequencing of events or material. Those candidates who identified structure points relating to punctuation such as 'there are many commas' often failed to make convincing points about how this had helped make the description of the difficulties more effective in the passage. A number of candidates made no attempt to comment on structure whatsoever, and many who did, quite acceptably, commented on their chosen language points at first followed by a briefer comment on structure at the end in a separate paragraph. It was clear that candidates generally devoted an appropriate amount of time to this question in relation to its tariff of six marks only but candidates should always note the scope of the question.

Question No. 3

Many candidates did 'device spot' with little reference to impact. Very few candidates referenced structure & those who did tended to refer only to long or short sentences. Candidates frequently referred to 'tension' or 'suspense' but did not explain how this was created. A significant number of candidates talked about the wrong part of the text.

Some candidates worked very hard here on spotting and listing similes, metaphors 'polysyndertons' (sic) and many more, without seeing the effects and impact Doyle was working for. Such responses are rewarded as generously as possible but cannot break through into the higher levels of achievement without a simple solid sense of what is going on.

Q. 3 'The Hound of the Baskervilles' Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Comment

Much of the comment above made about Question 2 is of course relevant in principle to Question 3 in spite of the different contexts involved. Again the focus was on how writers use language and structure to achieve effects and influence readers, with candidates being expected to use relevant subject terminology to support their views. The wording of the question, unlike that of Question 2, allowed more scope for personal interpretation by asking candidates to explore Conan Doyle's presentation of the discovery of the man they were hunting.

The vast majority of candidates focused on the description of the man as an animal and were able to make perceptive, if somewhat repetitive, points about the man's dehumanisation in the text. Candidates were often diplomatic in their avoidance of the writer's overt racism by attributing the 'evil yellow face' to the reflection of the candle rather than skin colour. Quite a number of candidates focused on the suddenness of the convict's appearance and the stiff upper lip calmness of the pursuers. Many candidates did not focus on the writer's deliberate dehumanisation of the 'man' by piling insult upon insult about both his appearance and physiognomy, contrasting his susceptibility to 'vile passions' with the almost colonial, gentlemanly refusal by Dr. Watson to shoot even such a nasty pasty in the back. It is a fair structural point that Conan Doyle starts with the terrible and ends with the terrible plus, plus, plus.

Question No. 4

This is the 'new' question in this specification and caused the most interrogation and discussion during training sessions and elsewhere. And not surprisingly, as it seeks to assess two objectives in one task.

However, as the work in the June session showed, most candidates who found a variety of ways to compare the passages and the ways in which the writers had worked to produce effects and impact handled it with confidence. Almost all were clearly conscious, too, that this is a task driven exercise in which there needs to be a 'yes/but' approach to 'how far do you agree?'

Even candidates who started their answer with 'I agree completely' or, more dangerously with 'I disagree completely' soon changed their minds to a more balanced approach as they developed their thoughts.

The level descriptor hierarchy was very clear, making AO/3 straightforward to assess. Did answers compare throughout, showing a clear understanding of how the passages work? Did they make some attempts to compare and support them? Or did they simply write rather randomly about one passage and then the other? Or, at the bottom end, write about one but not the other?

No particular approach necessarily guaranteed a higher or lower mark here because that was dependent on the quality of what was said, but generally the greater the comparison the better the analysis. Many rightly and successfully re-cycled and reorganised material from earlier answers: that is exactly the point of the structure of the paper. Others ploughed new furrows of each text with great success.

In strong responses, there was much fruitful comparison of the perspectives of the relative protagonists. Others made vivid comparisons of the number and intensity of similar and contrasting rhetorical devices *and their effects*. Silence and violent activity framed more perceptive comments and analysis.

Less effective answers tended to rely on description, paraphrase and assertion.

Most candidates made a fair attempt at comparing the texts; most focusing on content; hunter/hunted; weapons; escape. Few candidates compared language. Weaker candidates offered up their own views as a means of responding rather than any informed critical evaluation. Many candidates also seemed to think that lavishing praise on the writers would secure them a high mark in the absence of any analysis.

Q.4 'The Thirty-Nine Steps' – John Buchan and 'The Hound of the Baskervilles' Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

It was pleasing to see many candidates quite rightly, sometimes partially, challenging the statement about both texts being frightening and exciting. Many responses agreed with the 'frightening' description for text 1 and gave relevant support for this, often quite rightly recycling information previously used in question 2, but few argued that Hannay found it exhilarating, or indeed his pursuers who were arguing fiercely when frantically searching for him and kicking away barrels and rearranging the building. Some candidates did apply the 'exciting' aspect to the effect on the reader not knowing how it all was to end, although perhaps 'suspense' or 'cliff hanger' would have been more appropriate. With text 2, many candidates thought the excitement arose from the actual chase after the violent criminal but of course, the ostensible calmness of Watson and Sir Henry finally 'blown' and ending up sitting on a rock did nothing to help this 'exciting' chase and its rather bathetic ending. Most candidates clearly identified the difference in narrative voice/perspective of both texts and as a result the different effects on the reader, which can be simply summed up as being 'frightened for' Hannay and 'frightened of' the criminal.

Some candidates started by giving their own opinions but no marks were awarded for this introduction. Others struggled to compare the two texts and it seemed to happen almost by accident while others really focused on the comparison at the expense of focusing on the statement. A few candidates wrote about one text only. As noted above many candidates did realise they could use parts of their previous answers here and that seemed to give many the confidence to give substantial answers.

Some candidates still respond to this evaluation task by simply describing the events of both texts followed by assertion about the statement, and fail to use appropriate material from the texts in support, and/or ignore the question prompts

Questions 5 & 6

Question 5 was much the more popular of the two, although some of the very best essays were on 6 where real and/or imaginative experiences were deployed to tense, engaging and powerful effect.

Some candidates attempted to re-work, re-cycle or simply lift and copy extracts from the two reading passages to flesh out otherwise sparse writing. This rarely worked well and usually failed to show the candidates at their best.

As I say above, some candidates simply write far too much and as a result continuity, relevance and sometimes complete coherence were lost. The best work rarely exceeded three sides and was engaging, intense and absorbing for the reader. Strong responses often took a literal thread as the basis of the narrative/description and added impressive non-literal superstructures of personal grief, loss, anxiety and many more.

The more popular question was 'The Hunt'. Most candidates responded well to the tasks with even the weakest making clear attempts to manipulate language with varying degrees of success. Paragraphing is still an issue for many candidates & I noticed significant errors in how prepositions are used. Many of 'The Hunt' responses relied heavily on war game scenarios which tended to be overlong and rambling with candidates introducing and losing characters throughout, as well as constantly changing tense. A significant number of candidates used Americanisms (sidewalk, trunk) within a British narrative.

Responses to strange surroundings often lacked clear structure & focused on describing the setting whilst making little reference to its impact on individuals.

Q. 5 – The Hunt

OR

Q. 6 – Write about a time when you found yourself in strange surroundings

Question 5 was the more popular title and there were some very creditable accounts of being hunted or actually hunting animals out of necessity for food. Many accounts bore striking similarity to stories such as the Hunger Games and some were quite closely linked to text 1. A number of responses involved supernatural events and characters while others were more down to earth and more often than not set in a forest where the hunted (often children) frequently stumbled upon a dilapidated, mysterious cottage or mansion, with dire consequences. Question 6 brought more variation with both fictional and factual accounts. The former as with question 5 were often based on fantasy and strange experiences whereas the latter described new places to live, for example, and even new schools. The responses I read were often well conceived and quite well controlled but there were a significant number which were so detailed and lengthy that they lacked coherence, impact and structure. Furthermore, the excessive length often brought with it numerous errors, which increased the longer the story went on. It is obviously pleasing that candidates feel inspired to write in such detail but they should also be aware of the need to demonstrate their language skills including organization, accuracy, and impact. Quite a number would do well to balance imaginative ideas with technical ability and divide their time accordingly. The problem of sustaining a main tense when writing was very common, especially with narratives.

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