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GCSE

English

General Certificate of Secondary Education **J350**

OCR Report to Centres June 2016

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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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General Certificate of Secondary Education

English (J350)

OCR REPORT TO CENTRES

A640 Speaking and Listening

General Comments

Speaking and Listening is now a separately endorsed unit, no longer forming 20% of the final GCSE grade in English or English Language. The administration of the moderation process has remained 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 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 was available online to support all teachers in preparing candidates. These exemplar materials should be used for assessment purposes, and to support task setting and administration. The filmed footage demonstrated a complete range of activities across all three contexts, which gave specific support to the "real-life" context and task setting. These two areas are still problematic for some centres.

A large number of advisory visits have been carried out this 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 unit. 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 be made aware of the fact 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. So using examples from this series, a presentation on "Can footballers' wages ever be justified?" allows achievement in the higher bands; a talk on "My Hobby", with no appropriate focus, is unlikely to lead to Band 5 marks.

The requirement of the "real-life context in and beyond the classroom" is still proving problematic for a few centres, despite this being an established specification, although there was further improvement this year. Sometimes 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 "real-life" context is explained very fully. The advice to centres is that it is not just the subject matter, but the consideration of purpose and audience, which extends the performance "beyond the classroom". So a group discussion on a global issue does not meet this requirement if the group are not in any role other than themselves. If the group is given a clear role and purpose, for example as an advisory committee reporting back to a particular body, the discussion moves "beyond the classroom".

The majority of centres have embraced the "real-life" context with enthusiasm and likewise their candidates, seeing it as an opportunity to extend and demonstrate their skills. In these centres task setting is far more imaginative as a result.

There are noticeable improvements in the setting of the drama-focussed activities, with the majority of centres now using role plays and imagined scenarios rather than literature texts and set plays. Role plays are often a good way of fulfilling the demands of the "real-life" context and allow the candidates a much more accessible route to marks in the higher bands. 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.

Record keeping

A key part of the process is record keeping. Many centres have their own working records, which contain feedback to candidates and candidate involvement in the process. There is no problem with centres keeping their own records but for final submission centres must ensure that they are using the OCR Controlled Assessment form for Speaking and Listening. This form covers all the necessary elements required by the external moderator. This year, a few centres sent bulky packages with their own working records and expected that moderators would look at those rather than the Controlled Assessment forms provided by OCR. They often contained feedback to candidates rather than comments directed to the moderator. Centres must remember that the Controlled Assessment forms form a vital piece of evidence in the moderation process. If there is a lack of detail in the description of activities, or if comments on performance have been lifted directly from the band descriptors with little or no linkage to individual candidate achievement, then it is extremely difficult to carry out the moderation of a centre. Typical lack of detail in description would be "a talk to the class" or "a group discussion on a current issue" or "a scene from *An Inspector Calls*". The level of challenge or complexity involved cannot be judged without the specific subject matter, or in the case of the drama-focussed context, the role adopted and developed. Similarly, bland, generalised comments regarding performance, where it is impossible to distinguish one candidate's performance from another, or to know 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 Controlled Assessment forms 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.

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' Controlled Assessment forms should make reference to the band descriptors and give a mark out of 40 for each separate context. Not all centres or individual teachers within centres matched the 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: for example, "Superb!" or "Excellent, an effective role".

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 odd mistakes were discovered by moderators.

Internal Standardisation Procedures

Centres are reminded that it is essential that all staff preparing and assessing candidates watch and discuss the filmed assessment footage that is available online. Signing the GCW351 form testifies to this having taken place, but it was apparent that this had not taken place 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.

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

The majority of centres sent all the required documents to the moderator by the deadline.

Moderators reported a small number of centres being weeks late in sending all the relevant material. It is in the interests of all parties that deadlines are kept assiduously and that candidates' results are not put in jeopardy.

Conclusion

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.

A641 Reading Literary Texts

General Comments:

It was pleasing to see that few centres submitted folders with rubric infringements, usually *Of Mice and Men* with Duffy or Zephaniah where this was the case; 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, 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.

Evidence of internal 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 still too much scaffolding of the responses, such preparation included mind maps and essay frames with a number of key quotations provided for the students to add a comment, with often no more than 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. Students took the opportunity for more detailed language analysis in the poetry pieces, and the integration of context has continued to improve over the past two years, although some essays still incorporate bolted-on biographical explanations.

Comments on Individual Questions:

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. Whilst there were a number of responses to the way writers show the effects of seeking power (Task 2), most notably in *The Merchant of Venice,* the ways in which writers create a thought-provoking ending to texts had a broader appeal in terms of *Of Mice and Men.* Appropriate textual references were used to support a line of argument, with some reference to the impact of the social and historical context. The more developed responses ranged widely through the text to identify how key events led to the conclusion.

Section B: Prose or Literary Non-Fiction
As has come to be expected, *Of Mice and Men* is the text most commonly used with very few centres opting for the other options. Candidates engaged effectively with the presentation of women, usually moving beyond Curley's wife to consider Aunt Clara and the differences between Susy and Clara's brothels. Where only Curley's wife was considered, the "differing impressions" came more from a consideration of the contrast between the male characters' perception of her and the more sympathetic view given in her encounter with Lennie and immediately after her death. Some candidates referred to what they had researched of Steinbeck's view of her character, considering a letter he had written.

There were a very few responses to the other prose texts, with a few exploring the impact of loss on the characters in *Tsotsi* with some sensitivity and insight, and others considering the way Austen presents characters such as Mr Collins as the object of ridicule and therefore lacking respect.

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 ways in which Shakespeare makes two moments particularly tense and exciting, the very best linked their choices to the wider drama, thus achieving a sense of overview. Context was often used effectively in terms of considering the impact of the feud. There was clear evidence of candidates engaging with the language in their response, although those in the lower bands tended to simply explain or translate into modern English. The few responses to *Julius Caesar* were generally stronger overall, with most candidates considering the moment when Mark Antony addresses the crowd after Julius Caesar's death and developing a reasoned line of argument.

Section D: Poetry
Since most candidates opted for *Of Mice and Men,* Owen was the most popular choice and generated the most analytical responses to language. Most candidates endeavoured to focus beyond the horrors of war in general to those who survive and this encouraged more reflective use of contextual detail as a springboard for their interpretations. As has been seen in previous entries, there was some perceptive critical analysis of the poems, but also some loose paraphrase and limited response to the form and structure. Weaker responses were able to consider the long term impact of war with a little textual support and reference to some literary techniques, but with only simple explanation or limited comments on the effects created.

The very few responses to Zephaniah showed candidates responding thoughtfully to the personal relationships. Those on Duffy engaged on a personal level with the experiences of childhood, however, the fact that the majority of responses on these two texts had been submitted alongside Steinbeck caused problems with rubric infringement. Centres are reminded that both Zephaniah and Duffy fall under the category of 'texts from a different culture' and therefore cannot be used alongside *Of Mice and Men*.

A642 Imaginative Writing

General Comments

Centres are to be congratulated on their careful preparation of their candidates for this assessment. Almost all candidates at all levels of ability had clearly been helped to engage imaginatively with the tasks that were set and were able to produce work that was enjoyable to read.

Almost all candidates now write short, focused responses to each task rather than long, rambling pieces. There were, on the other hand, very few examples of responses to the satellite task which were excessively short. Although short pieces can be successful, it is difficult to agree with a mark in Band 3 or above if there is not enough detailed development.

Centres are also making better use of the Controlled Assessment cover sheets. Rather than simply regurgitating criteria from the mark scheme, more and more centres are using the mark scheme as the basis for much more individualised comments which help moderators come to a better understanding of how the centres arrived at its final mark for the candidate.

The level of annotation in the body of each candidate's work is still too variable. Comments on specific strengths and weaknesses give the moderators further assistance in understanding why particular marks were awarded. Centres should also give a clear breakdown on the Controlled Assessment cover sheet of the marks awarded for each of the assessment objectives.

When compiling their sample folders, centres should also package each candidate's work more simply; to facilitate the moderation process it is better to use a staple or treasury tag to attach the front sheet to the two responses and their respective plans rather than putting each one in a folder or plastic pocket.

The Tasks

Media

1 Write the words of a broadcast persuading people to support a particular charity.

This task successfully elicited appropriate responses from candidates across the range of ability. Almost all candidates showed a confident familiarity with the conventions of a television or radio broadcast. The format supported lower attaining candidates in producing suitable responses in a simple script format while some of the more able candidates created detailed and thoughtful parodies of the televised charity appeal.

2 (a) Write a report for a local newspaper which describes in detail an event that was held to support the charity.

This was a very popular choice as a satellite response. Candidates were usually able to adopt an appropriate style, but some lapsed into a television style report or wrote in the style of a fictional narrative. Most candidates wisely concentrated on getting the words right with very few laying their response out like a traditional newspaper.

2 (b) Write a monologue in which someone explains how they were helped by the charity.

This task also worked successfully for candidates across the ability range. The monologue format was sufficiently flexible to allow a range of responses in which candidates successfully adopted a persona – usually fairly convincingly - and shared the story of their experience. Some wrote first person narrative pieces while others used the conventions for a drama script to present their work.

2 (c) "Everyone wants my money!" Write the words of a talk advising young people how to decide which charities to support.

This familiar format worked well for some candidates but fewer responses to this task were seen in this session. Many students were able to deploy the conventions of a talk successfully and adopt a style suitable for an audience of younger people. Less able candidates tended to concentrate on promoting a charity they wanted their audience to support, while more able candidates began to identify more abstract criteria by which to judge a range of charities.

Text Development

1 Choose one or two adult characters from a text you have read, heard or seen. Write a story imagining them when they were at school.

Candidates clearly enjoyed this task. All were able to transpose familiar fictional characters into a school-based setting and most based their work on their own experience of a 21st century school setting. As always, the best responses drew heavily on the text from which the characters were taken and illustrated thoughtfully the idea that "the child is father of the man".

2 (a) Write a monologue in which one of the teachers from the school expresses their thoughts and feelings about the character(s) from your story and about what happened.

This was a fairly popular satellite task. Weaker candidates tended to repeat too much material from the main response rather than casting new light on the original by adding new information and ideas through the different perspective on events, as the task suggests. The best responses adopted very successfully the voice of an adult and the point of view of a teacher.

2 (b) Write an article for a newspaper in which one of the characters from your story describes their favourite teacher and explains why they like them.

There were a wide range of approaches to this task, most of which were acceptable. Many based their report on a fictional award ceremony in which the greatness of character's favourite teacher was recognised and the character was interviewed about why they were so successful. Many picked up on the newspaper idea and based their article on a report of a dramatic event in which the teacher performed heroic deeds.

2 (c) Two characters from your story meet again in later life to reflect on the past. Write a script of the conversation they have.

Candidates broadly took two approaches to this popular task. Most presented it as a script in which only what was said was recorded, while others added detailed stage directions. Both approaches were successful but many candidates are still reluctant to abandon speech marks when writing scripts. The most successful candidates produced poignant conversations which enhanced understanding of the main response and the original text.

Overall

The work of most candidates was well presented and mainly accurate, but illegible work sometimes made moderation difficult. Although handwriting is not assessed, centres must ensure that candidates are not disadvantaged by poor handwriting. No special permission is required to use electronic aids to produce the final piece as long as spell-checks, thesauruses and the internet are disabled.

Most candidates attempted to use interesting and effective vocabulary and very few used it imprecisely. Their spelling of complex regular words was generally accurate at all levels of ability, but even the most able still struggle to use the correct version of some of the most common homophones. Almost all students made some attempt to manipulate sentence structures for effect, but even the most able candidates are not using punctuation between sentences with consistent accuracy – the comma splice, for example, seems more and more common every year. Paragraphing is another area that continues to cause concern. Although many students have mastered the one word or one sentence paragraph, even the more able are less confident about organising and linking paragraphs in a more straightforward way.

Overall, it is clear that both centres and candidates enjoyed working on these tasks. All the work submitted showed real engagement and some imagination and the very best, as always, was amusing, engaging and sometimes genuinely powerful.

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. The vast majority of candidates were able to engage with the reading material for Section A: an information text about the annual gathering of polar bears in Hudson Bay and a newspaper article about a polar bear locked up in a Mexican zoo. For the two optional Writing tasks, candidates were generally able to produce relevant responses, though with varying levels of engagement and control.

Most candidates appeared to have been well prepared for the examination. The spaces in the answer booklet provided for responses were sufficient for all but a few candidates, who used (very often unnecessarily) separate pages attached to the booklet or the additional pages provided towards the end of the answer booklet. This extra space was generally used in relation to either question 2(a) or 2(b). There were, however, fewer instances of candidates writing at excessive length for Section B. The message contained in past reports about the need for quality rather than quantity in Section B answers has been clearly understood.

Individual Questions

Section A – Reading

Questions 1(a) – 1(c): These questions provided a relatively gentle way in to the paper, though not all candidates scored all 6 marks. The most effective responses to these questions were those which employed short phrases. Verbatim copying of whole sentences is not a useful strategy for 'short-answer' questions such as these.

Question 1(d): As ever for this question, stronger responses demonstrated a clear focus on the task and were able to show evidence of expressing points in their own words. These candidates made a wide range of relevant points in order to show a secure understanding of the text and task.

Once again, 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 (such as extraneous information about the treaty mentioned at some length in the extract's final paragraph)
- points made at excessive length
- points repeated
- own views offered.

Use of own words is a discriminator in this question, that is, use of own words 'as far as possible', as the question makes clear. Some candidates altered only the occasional word. This led to a very mechanical approach with an over-reliance on lifting (albeit not verbatim lifting) as candidates worked doggedly through the passage rather than addressing the question in a focused way.

The weakest answers lifted material indiscriminately and showed a considerable misunderstanding of the task and/or text.

Question 2(a) – 2 (b): Most candidates took note of the relative weightings of Q2(a) and Q2(b) – 6 and 14 marks respectively.

Question 2(a): Stronger responses commented on the specific effects of the direct address in the title *Save Yupi!*, and of particularly striking words in the sub-headings and captions (e.g. 'Trapped', 'locked up', 'sweltering heat', 'needs your help').

Most candidates drew attention to the contrast in the photograph of the bear in his concrete enclosure at the zoo and the photograph of the wide open spaces of the Arctic which should be Yupi's natural habitat.

Once again this session, less successful responses merely identified features without commenting on effects or made generic comments about headings, photographs and captions that could be true of any newspaper article, or indeed, of any media text. The least useful responses wrote superficially about big fonts and colourful pictures which 'draw you in'.

Question 2(b): Successful responses contained clear evidence of the ability to select and analyse relevant detail, and commented both on the information given and on specific words and phrases. It should be noted that the quality of analytical comment is a discriminator in this question. Stronger responses explored the effects of words and phrases used to make readers feel sorry for Yupi: for example, 'could not be any further from home'; 'locked in a bare concrete enclosure'; 'it's no life for any creature'; 'intelligent predator'; 'pacing up and down repeatedly'.

However, many responses did not address aspects of language used in the article. Weaker responses simply described the content of the passage.

Section B – Writing Questions 3 and 4

Examiners saw the full range of performance. It was pleasing once more to see the time and effort taken by some candidates in their planning, with mind maps again popular. There were fewer instances of candidates confusing quality with quantity of response. Those who did write at excessive length often produced rambling, shapeless responses without obvious paragraphing.

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 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 and, at best, only straightforward development of ideas; sometimes responses had a perfunctory conclusion or ended in mid-air. The least successful responses were very brief and/or contained a level of linguistic error that impeded effective communication.

Common problems with punctuation once again included a failure to mark sentence divisions and confusion between upper and lower case letters.

There were happily fewer instances this session of the contrived use of statistics, metaphors and triplets.

For Question 3, the strongest responses demonstrated a lively and engaging style appropriate for a magazine article. They wrote convincingly and, at times, almost poetically about the wonders of the planet. Less successful responses tended to list features that made Planet Earth amazing.

For Question 4, many responses argued effectively for the continued dominance of core subjects in the curriculum. Occasionally, there was a spirited defence of studying subjects simply because they were interesting or enjoyable. In these responses, it was heartening to glimpse a notion of education beyond the utilitarian.

A680 Information and Ideas (Higher Tier)

General Comments:

The paper was well received by candidates in terms of both the reading extracts and the writing tasks. There was very little evidence of candidates having run out of time and many of the responses seen were extremely detailed and relevant. Candidates who did not always fully understand the reading extracts were able to demonstrate their writing skills by engaging with the titles of the Section B tasks. Almost all candidates found the reading questions accessible – there were few candidates who left scripts incomplete and few who were unable to access the questions. The writing tasks were equally popular for candidates of all abilities.

In each of the reading tasks, those who answered the best used the words of the question to help them answer; some weaker responses are evidently the result of a narrower approach to what the texts and questions might present. Close reading and responding to whatever the questions and extracts present is the way to proceed. Clearly candidates expect, and should be given, some guidance on what the questions and texts require, but teachers should note that hard and fast rules can be counter-productive and an open mind to the concepts of purpose and audience can be more helpful. This is particularly true of questions 2 and 3. Using a prescribed list of literary terms – 'AFOREST' for example– can lead candidates away from a relevant response and not towards one.

There was a broadening of the mark range achieved in Question 1 this year. Although there were a larger number of points to select for this particular question than in previous years, it was perhaps more challenging for candidates to decide what was and was not relevant.

There were very few candidates who had clearly been entered for the incorrect tier - far fewer than in previous series. Hardly any candidates failed to complete the paper as noted above. In the past, we have seen quite a number not managing time efficiently and not answering Question 3 at all - this didn't seem to be a problem this year, except with those who took the strategy of doing the writing question first. It is perhaps worth noting that some candidates wrote very detailed and lengthy responses, especially in Section B. Some of the time spent doing this might have been more profitably directed at checking the accuracy of their writing, or, indeed, spending more time on the Reading passages. The quality of answers is absolutely dependent in the first instance on the depth of understanding candidates can acquire: this is also very relevant to the new specifications.

Generally, it was felt that the paper allowed for an appropriate range of marks and there were successful discriminating factors to allow for marks from Band 1 downwards. One Team Leader reported: 'There were no observed rubric errors, candidates clearly engaged with the material, and there were fewer incomplete papers. Errors in AO3iii followed similar patterns to other years. The paper as a whole seemed appropriate and drew responses of a similar standard to other years.'

Another Team Leader wrote: 'I thought this was a very accessible paper for students overall. They seemed to engage readily with the subject matter and very few fell into the trap of allowing their own experiences or prejudices to colour their responses to Section A. Many were able to identify clearly the one or other of the contrasting approaches in the extracts to good effect. In contrast to some series in the past, very few candidates I assessed had been entered for the wrong tier.'

Candidates related to the subject matter very well indeed and apparently enjoyed it. It had sufficient challenge for the top end but was accessible at the lower end too. The only problem was that technological advances move so quickly that what was considered remarkable at the time the paper was written might well be considered 'old hat' today.

There was much to enjoy in the candidates' responses. Many displayed a high degree of confidence and maturity of thought and were able to sustain their writing sufficiently well to convey their ideas and, more importantly, to display their thinking. This was especially so in relation to Question 4: responses to this task showed that, in the main, candidates established exactly the right tone and had something to say. They convincingly articulated how their knowledge of technology surpassed that of adults. Reassuringly, they were still able to acknowledge what adults had been able to teach them; there was balance. The fact that they could write so well in an examination situation, under pressure, says much for the teaching they have experienced in order to be so confident and clear.

The writing in response to Question 5 showed that the skill of narrative writing has not diminished, with many candidates showing felicitous and imaginative use of language. Both questions were well answered on the whole: there were some absolutely delightful, heartfelt responses. Weaker candidates found Question 4 the more difficult of the two although there were some outstanding philosophical reflections at the top end and very creative responses in Question 5.

Section A responses were, in the main, beset with the familiar difficulty of being unable to say exactly how language was working rather than just describing but, it is fair to say, the level of understanding was much more secure.

In terms of the writing responses, use of the apostrophe continues to diminish and the use of some linguistic devices was often gratuitous rather than effective.

Comments on Individual Questions:

SECTION A

Question 1

The majority of responses to this question were clearly focused and it is clear that many candidates had been well taught about how to approach the task. The better answers were concise, written in own words, and covered a range of appropriate points. Less successful answers included a good deal of excess material –often repeating points – and sometimes lost focus on the task by including personal comment, their own material, and own questions. The repeated points often referred to 'the car' or 'the rescheduling of meetings etc.'. The least successful responses, which were in a minority, analysed the text through an approach more applicable to the requirements of Question 2 and Question 3, with comments about the writer's use of language, such as rhetorical questions or other language features. Answers such as these often stumbled across germane points by accident, but usually the points were in quotation marks and not own words. Some candidates stuck very closely to the sequence of the passage and therefore ended up with lengthy accounts, with a good deal of excess and unnecessary material, often expressed in the style and vocabulary of the passage.

Candidates need it clearly explained that this is a three-part process: read the passage thoroughly and make sure the task has been fully understood; draft the relevant points; and reorganise them in own words. Candidates who took time to plan their answers in this way almost invariably did better than those who tried to do it as a 'one off' exercise. Too many

candidates simply hadn't read the question and included disadvantages as well as advantages: this was self-penalising.

The passage itself contained more valid points – up to 16 – than previous passages and so candidates had an excellent opportunity to score more highly on this question this year. Candidates ought to have been able to identify a good range of points rather than the four or five that many had in previous years.

The examiners felt that this question was generally answered well with most candidates being able to select around 7 or more points. It was also felt that a number of candidates ended up lifting from the passage or failing to reorganise material and although a vast amount of excess was relatively uncommon, so was the sort of organisation and concision necessary for the highest band. As noted above, there also seemed to be a number of candidates who used the question as a springboard for personal reflection on the subject and therefore were self-penalising, ending up blurring points as well. The most common inclusion of excess material or repetition was all aspects of the car and those features relating to reorganising one's day or reading emails on the way to work. It was pleasing to see that many candidates were able to differentiate between the specific details of making life easier such as running the bath and the more generic benefits such as helping the environment or saving time and money.

The critical skill for a high mark was to synthesise detail with an overview of what is said. Far too many candidates wrote far too much, eschewing concision entirely.

Question 2

The better responses to this question focussed not only on the presentation of the article but also on the effect of the language John Arlidge uses to convince the reader of the advantages and disadvantages of 'the internet of things'. There were general comments about the images although many of the comments were not well-argued and linked to structural or language features of the article. The visual images were obviously accessible and some points were made about the interconnectivity of gadgets as portrayed by the first image and the warning at the end of the passage about invasion of privacy. The most common comment on the second image was the 'happy' man waking up and how this linked to the 'ideal' day in the life depicted in the passage. The best candidates saw that the second image was a magnification of the first but that both are ambiguous: do the green wire circuits, 'motherboard' to many candidates, liberate or entrap?

The less effective comments comprised much speculation about the colours in the pictures and their respective connotations. 'Red for danger' was a popular choice but the other colours were rather unconvincingly attributed calming or soothing qualities or even purification. Not that many candidates linked the first picture with the caption in their efforts to explain why the reader was convinced in relation to the question. It is perhaps worth noting here – and what follows applies to Question 3 as well – that not every question in a passage is *ipso facto* a rhetorical question. Furthermore, many candidates write about 'exaggeration' or 'hyperbole' and 'emotive' language when clearly the examples given are not those of the respective language term referred to. Many candidates also refer to the influence of 'direct address' in convincing the reader of the views expressed in the passage citing the use of pronouns such as 'you' and 'our' and whereas this may well be a valid point especially in a politician's speech, for example, it is also worth noting that many pieces of writing contain pronouns as a generic feature. Generic comments whether about layout, presentation or language are not particularly germane to the specific extract being analysed, and candidates would do well to start their analysis with the article and question, when responding, rather than begin with the language features they have been taught. On a similar note, examiners pointed to the unexplained use of terminology such as 'lexis', 'semantic field', 'pull quote' and so on as well as repetitive formulaic references to 'diction' as opposed to vocabulary.

Most candidates were able to understand the contrast in the passages between the advantages and the disadvantages and were able to identify the warning at the beginning of the article that such technology comes at a cost. Some commented on the cost as being literal as well as a figurative reference to the invasion of privacy and hacking spelt out at the end of the passage. A few candidates merely concentrated on the advantages in the passage and ignored the disadvantages. Others tended to describe their selected references rather than analyse them. For example, the references to 'nightmare vision' or 'invasion of privacy' were often selected as disadvantages but with little explanation about the choice of language and its effect on the reader. Relatively few made the link between the almost dream like sequence of events at the start of the working day and its development into a nightmare. Other popular analytical points were endorsement from the chief executive of Mercedes Benz, listing (often without examples), and juxtaposition.

Stronger candidates saw the conclusion coming and read between the lines from the outset: 'will come at a cost'; the illusion created by making the worst moments of the day seem like the best; the robot like sci-fi threat of talking cars; the crescendo like structure climaxing in the children's temperature checker, and so on. This all led to a clear sense of satire of the moronic culture that can't be independent and do things for itself: suggested by the repetition of 'like smart connected…. cool' the latter being a moronic word of choice.

Question 3

As is often the case, candidates found Question 3 more challenging although many made clear responses to the tone of the article. Quite a number of candidates fell into the trap of selecting references and then paraphrasing them. There was little comment on their effect and sometimes no examples were provided. When they were some of the weaker responses, as always, made generic comments about paragraphs and short and long sentences without relating them specifically to the article at hand in terms of the question. Quite a number of candidates picked up that the views of each person were separated into paragraphs but again relatively few identified the circular nature of the views expressed, beginning and ending with Jobs.

It was also noticeable at times that many candidates began their responses in an analytical way but then drifted into description of content as their answers progressed. There was a tendency for some candidates to either be descriptive through paraphrasing selective references or to feature spot without attempted explanation of the effect of language devices such as triplets and alliteration. Some candidates, as noted in Question 2, clearly did not understand the term 'emotive' when applied to language. Many argued that the article was 'relatable' rather than addressing their comments to the question: this is not a helpful way to respond. As in previous sessions, a number of candidates wrote about the reader being drawn in and the rapport built up through 'inclusive pronouns' such as our' and 'you' rather than responding to the actual question. As noted above, but perhaps worth repeating, the reference to inclusive or collective pronouns or direct address seems to have become a stock phrase in analysis even though it could possibly be applied to virtually every article with pronouns ever written.

There were a large number of candidates who focussed predominantly on tone, singling out features such as pronouns and short sentences as indicated above. Many identified the author's shock at Jobs' attitude to his children using technology and the more perceptive candidates picked up the irony of successful technology people not allowing their children to use iPads although they encourage us to allow our children to. A more common occurrence this year was where candidates used a structure where they identified a technique - sometimes in error - such as alliteration or rhetorical questions and their comments attached this to a rewording of the question. This was especially true where any question was seen as rhetorical and these were ways in which the writer made the text interesting, expressed irony or sarcasm or humour or helped the reader to read on. Many candidates spotted the reference to real books and the humorous simile 'like a nerd's paradise'; most picked up the comment on tech fascists.
The opening comments in the passage were a blind alley of irrelevance, which few candidates, rightly, explored. A lot of marks were gained on the opening references to Steve Jobs: there are

at least three responses and some rich language to unpack. Stronger candidates saw that an overview was necessary here and were impressively selective in choosing their responses on the basis of how much there was to analyse linguistically. Weak answers simply ploughed through the passage with little more than paraphrase.

In this passage we moved from two points of view to a range of views: candidates who took the passage as a vindication of Steve Jobs rather than a subtly mocking parody were unlikely to be very successful.

Section B
Question 4

This was slightly more popular for candidates who were versed in the use of oral register and there was much evidence of the success of teachers in ensuring that generic features were used consciously. Many chose to attack parents for not listening to their kids and perhaps not surprisingly many lectured parents about the technical knowledge that they could learn from their kids. In fact, according to most of the speeches, parents are unable to switch on a computer let alone use it.

A surprising number railed – often very rhetorically – against the arrogance of parents who thought they knew everything just because they were older. There were reminders that pupils today learn far more at school than their parents ever did, not only in terms of advanced subject content but the range of subjects studied. A few tipped over into inappropriate registers of insult, derision or aggression which spoilt otherwise thoughtful work.

Some candidates were able to craft exceptionally well structured pieces and even among lower band candidates paragraphing was present. One examiner remarked that often this question ended abruptly suggesting that candidates had failed to use their time sufficiently well. Some candidates started with the writing with some leaving Question 1 until the end – this tended to be an unsuccessful strategy and led to brevity in the reading questions, especially Question 3.

Many answers did not take advantage of having been given audience and form and did not sound like a speech. Some able candidates turned the task into a rant or at least a polemic, which failed to show a necessary relevance to the task. Many went for the tech-related approach with some success. There were very, very few candidates who did not provide at least a structured and coherent response to this task. Most candidates wrote the answer with an audience in mind. Most made very clear reference to the speech that was being presented.

There were many effectively structured arguments presenting a forceful and intelligent point of view, especially those arguments which argued that parenting itself was a learning process. This approach yielded some of the very best work, which often commended the stress-free world of childhood to harassed adults. It was pleasing to see so much pleasure taken by so many in crafting words and structures with a self-confident sense of purpose.

Question 5

This question was tackled in a wide range of ways, and no approach was disadvantaged. The responses were usually narrative, often dealing with the importance of overcoming challenges often in a crisis. There were some well- written biographical pieces, which were personal and engaging. Most responded to the narrative approach indicated by the question though some turned it into a more discursive piece. Most saw it as personal writing and this produced some very convincing work. Some tended to write narratives which were clearly not about themselves and these, though displaying competence, were less inclined to show real flair. Candidates are repeatedly advised not to write about events and situations that are beyond their experience and, more significantly, their imaginative powers and yet SAS style fire fights in Afghanistan and capture by LA drug dealers are still popular.

Some candidates still wrote too much and this often meant an answer that started out with real promise unravelled as the attempt to complete the story overcame all other considerations. A common theme was the challenge of exams in Year 11. This approach elicited some very good work, which featured nail-biting tension but in other cases it became tedious.

AEs felt that the best responses seemed to consistently come from this question, suggesting careful teaching of structure and support for candidates in learning to consciously craft writing. One AE remarked that comma splicing was prevalent as was the evanescent apostrophe of possession. It was also felt that candidates were very fluent in the use of the short sentence but less confident in the internal punctuation of complex sentences. In general, it was felt the standard of writing has improved immeasurably over recent years.

More creative candidates went for this question but there were some very confusing attempts to make the piece of writing 'fit' the title and the idea of 'Challenged'. However, there were also some very sophisticated responses.

Work which is planned carefully and is developed according to the plan is almost always more successful than that which starts off with little idea of where it is going.

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