

A LEVEL

Moderators' report

**ENGLISH
LANGUAGE AND
LITERATURE (EMC)**

H474

For first teaching in 2015

H474/04 Summer 2023 series

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Introduction

Our moderators' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

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General overview

The non-examined assessment (NEA) is a compulsory component of the A Level English Language and Literature qualification. It is worth 40 marks and counts as 20% of the total A Level.

The non-examined component has two sections. For Task 1, Analytical and Comparative Writing, candidates write an essay of 1500–2000 words on a non-fiction text chosen from a list set by OCR and a second free choice text. One of the texts must have been published post-2000. For Task 2, candidates produce a piece of original non-fiction writing of 1000–1200 words.

It could be helpful to read this report for the 2023 session in conjunction with previous instalments of such reports, as much of the messaging about positive achievements in the NEA remains valid year on year. The NEA offers students the opportunity to explore texts and topics that matter to them. It is a space in the qualification where individual interests can be pursued in both reading and writing. In this light, it is pleasing that moderators reported a wide range of texts being studied for Task 1 and a variety of original writing forms created for Task 2. In Task 1, there was evidence of well-integrated discussion of two imaginatively paired texts. The best work for Task 1 foregrounds AO4 connections and develops in a way that allows one text to shed light on the other. Once again, this year, there were examples of previously unstudied texts and text types being used in Task 1, and for the second year in a row, every single specification text was represented in the NEA submitted. The most popular choices were *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*, *Stuart: A Life Backwards*, and *Stasiland*. *In Cold Blood* and *Hyperbole and a Half* also appeared frequently but were less heavily represented than in previous sessions. *The Examined Life*, *Twelve Years a Slave*, and *What the Chinese Don't Eat* made several appearances, often with good effect. The strongest Task 2 work demonstrated enthusiasm, knowledge, and a keen awareness of genre conventions in non-fiction writing.

Candidates who did well in the NEA Task 1: Analytical and comparative writing	Candidates who did less well in the NEA Task 1: Analytical and comparative writing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • produced a fully integrated discussion of both texts with analysis of one text facilitating discoveries about the other (AO4) • sought links between AO1 and AO2 throughout, with the identification of a concept/method leading directly to an exploration of meanings • selected a free choice text that was rich in effects and meanings, with links to specification text that went beyond just shared topic • used contextual references judiciously to explore writers' social and cultural attitudes (AO3). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tended to write about each text separately with only broad topic links (AO4) • focused too heavily on shared topic and showed reluctance to apply the broad range of methods from integrated linguistic and literary study and the terminology they have learned over the course (AO1/AO2) • produced work that was insufficiently drafted with limited focus on language effects and terminology that was limited or misapplied (AO1) • some relevant contextual information included but separated from consideration of attitudes and values (AO3).

Candidates who did well in the NEA Task 2: Original non-fiction writing	Candidates who did less well in the NEA Task 2: Original non-fiction writing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • had studied a wide range of interesting non-fiction style models in preparation for Task 2 • produced original non-fiction writing that had a 'real-world' purpose and audience and a keen sense of genre conventions • produced texts that were ambitious and had multiple purposes (inform/persuade/entertain) • explored topics for which the candidate had real commitment, knowledge and understanding • produced an introduction that was economical, and clear in identifying purposes(s), genre and audience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tended to not demonstrate a deep understanding of non-fiction text genre conventions • produced a generic 'article' with little sense of where it would appear or for whom it was intended • created a text that was too-narrowly informative and which struggled to lift itself clear of the researched material on which it was based • created texts that had insufficiently shaped researched material, or mediated personal experience, to demonstrate creativity and flair • produced an introduction that was too general and topic-focused.

Task 1: Analytical and Comparative Writing

In the work submitted for Task 1, it was clear that most candidates understood that the key requirement is to explore the construction of meaning across paired texts drawn from the prescribed list in the specification, as well as free choice texts. Some centres approached this by teaching one of the specification texts to the whole cohort and then pairing it with texts of their own choice, while others encouraged free choice from both text categories. Both approaches were equally valid. What seems likely is that achievement and engagement go hand in hand with students having a role in the selection of texts and the focus for their comparative study. The component does not prescribe certain texts or text types for the free choice, as long as they conform to the requirements laid out in the specification and have been approved in advance via the Text and Task Approval Service. It is worth remembering that the specification encourages choices of texts from any literary genre (novels, short stories, plays, poetry, or literary non-fiction) or from collections of non-literary genres such as essays, journalism, speeches, diaries, etc. With this in mind, it was very pleasing to see examples of Task 1 work pairing specification texts with both poetry collections and plays this year. There was some thoughtful exploration of the poet Ocean Vuong by students from two different centres. In one case, a study of *Time is a Mother* (2022) focused on the presentation of mother figures, and in the other, the exploration of queerness in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). Both texts were productively paired with Jeanette Winterson's *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*. These cross-genre pairings not only extend student reading but also encourage different ways of thinking about AO4, with specific AO1/AO2 links forming the basis of the comparison.

Drama texts were also represented this year. One candidate explored the topic of memory and identity in Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) and *Stuart: A Life Backwards*. This was an interesting piece of work. It is possible that this candidate also studied Friel's *Translations* for H474/02, in which case AO3 understanding would likely be deepened in response to the texts in both components. It could be interesting for centres to think of similar ways of creating connections between the study for other components in their work for Task 1. Again, in this session, students did not shy away from considering complex social issues in their work for both Task 1 and Task 2. Topics included childhood trauma, grief and loss, family dynamics, religion, discrimination, misogyny, addiction, recidivism, and the search for identity, among others. It is commendable that students wrote about topics that were important to them, with the only caution being when the response becomes more sociological than language-focused. One centre produced very interesting work on *Twelve Years a Slave* paired with a variety of fiction and non-fiction texts, including Marlon James' *The Book of Night Women* (2009), Julius Lester's *Day of Tears* (2005), Marcus Sidonius Falx/Jerry Toner's *How to Manage Your Slaves* (2014), and Wesley Lowery's *They Can't Kill Us All: Ferguson, Baltimore, and a New Era in America's Racial Justice Movement* (2016). In addition to topic links, there can be much value in focusing on stylistic and structural links. In such cases, the text pairings might appear heterogeneous, but illuminating relationships begin to emerge through the study. Previous reports have highlighted some effective approaches in this regard. As an example from this year, one student produced very interesting work on Anna Funder's *Stasiland* and the use of case histories and multiple narratives, linked to Graeme Macrae Burnet's *Case Study* (2021).

Other interesting and unexpected free choice texts that appeared were the novels *Pride and Prejudice* (with *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*, focusing on power and absurdity in the presentation of mother figures); Gail Honeyman's *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (2017); Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997); Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981); Sarah Moss' *Ghost Wall* (2018); Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain* (2020); Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016), Anon's *Go Ask Alice* (1971); Joanne Greenburg's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1964). Non-fiction choices included Caroline Knapp's *Drinking: A Love Story* (1977); Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005); Annie Ernaux's *The Years* (2008); Hilary Mantel's *Giving up the Ghost* (2003); and Barbara Demick's *Nothing to Envy* (2009).

Task 2: Original Non-fiction Writing

Task 2 required candidates to produce a piece of original writing in a non-fiction form of approximately 1000-1200 words. The original writing should be preceded by a 150-word introduction that reveals an understanding of the chosen non-fiction form and reflects on some of the literary and linguistic techniques utilised. The majority, but not all, candidates understood both the requirement to produce an introduction and its function as an 'introduction' rather than commentary or evaluation. It can be very helpful if candidates provide a precise context of reception in their introduction, such as naming a specific publication or website, as this information gives a real-world context to their writing. This sense builds on the understanding of conventions that students acquire about non-fiction texts from their study of appropriate style models. The best work for Task 2 was fully matched to the target genre through the exploration of style models during the drafting process. Previous Principal Moderator reports further develop these ideas, and it could be worth revisiting them alongside this report.

Once again, this year, some of the most impressive original writing drew on candidates' own experiences in the production of life writing, as well as journalistic and opinion pieces. Students often underestimate the power of stories from their own lives as the basis for this element of the task. There were many successful examples of autobiographical/memoir writing that provided insight into lives lived with reflection and poignancy. In some cases, it felt that the very act of producing this writing would be beneficial to the students, aside from any consideration of A Level NEA achievement (which was often high). The introduction to one candidate's memoir piece described it as a 'literary biopsy,' a startling coining that powerfully conveys the idea of the authentic and the crafted being combined in the production of the strongest work of this kind.

Sometimes, the forms produced by students for Task 2 felt rather too narrowly informative to showcase the flair and creativity expected in the higher levels of AO5. This can be the case with film and music reviews, where the material struggles to rise above the researched content on which it is based. This is particularly true when the specific context in which the review would exist or its intended audience is not clearly defined. It can be more effective to reframe the review for a new context and audience. Last year's report illustrated how well this can be achieved by referencing one student's film review retrospectives for *Total Film* magazine. Obituaries can also be problematic in this regard. One student this year produced an obituary for Tupac Shakur, which was an interesting subject, but writing the piece as an obituary, as if it were written in 1996, proved limiting. If the piece had been reframed as a re-evaluation of Tupac's life and art in the context of what has elapsed in the intervening years, it could have opened up many more possibilities. Additionally, considering where this writing would appear and for whom it would be intended, would generate other levels of creative potential.

Speeches, scripts, and other spoken word texts were frequently seen in this session. The best work of this kind demonstrated a keen sense of the medium and used a range of rhetorical devices, often allied to a persuasive purpose. But in some instances, students did attempt to script the unscriptable. For example, one student produced a chat show script, a form that by its nature incorporates elements of spontaneous (and therefore unscriptable) speech. In this instance, it would be much better to produce something that could and would be scripted, such as a journalistic or documentary account, or the script for a podcast.

Administration

Please make sure that all work is received by moderators by the due date of 15th May.

The sample of work should be securely fastened by treasury tag or staple, rather than being placed in plastic wallets.

If more than one teacher has been involved in the delivery of this component, then there should be evidence of internal standardisation. This is best achieved using different coloured pens by different teachers or assessors.

Marginal annotation and summative comments by examiners are very valuable at moderation to chart the development of assessment decisions and should be as detailed as possible.

Please do not send the Candidate Authentication Forms to the moderator. These should be completed and retained in centre as part of your records.

Avoiding potential malpractice

It is advisable to train candidates in the correct practices for acknowledgement of any secondary sources used in their essays. Oxford/MHRA referencing is preferred.

Teachers should be alert to sudden changes in the quality of candidates' writing and style.

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