



GCSE

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 1 Explorations in Creative Reading and Writing
Report on the Examination

8700
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General comments

This was the second June series of the GCSE English Language 8700 examination. The paper was set in line with the accredited specification, the previously published specimen materials and the June and November 2017 live papers, and it was generally well received. The source, taken from a collection of short stories called ‘Jigs and Reels’ by Joanne Harris, was about a disillusioned English teacher who comes across an unexpectedly good piece of homework, and was accessible to all abilities. It was written in a way that less able students could understand whilst also containing subtleties and nuances that challenged the most able. This resulted in students of all abilities demonstrating a strong personal engagement with the reading material, and also responding positively to the writing stimuli, which were loosely linked to the themes of the source.

Question 1

It is now widely understood that the purpose of this question is to ease students into the examination, with the expectation that most will achieve 3 or 4 marks, and this proved to be the case: the mean mark was nearly 3.9 out of the 4 marks available, with almost 90% of students scoring the full 4 marks and over 98% scoring at least 3 marks. There were many points about Mr Fisher for students to list – he lived alone, his house was small, he didn’t own a car, etc – and many students wisely retrieved information rather than risk misinterpreting the source. A minor point of confusion for less able students was the idea of Mr Fisher preferring to complete as much as he could of his weekend marking during the week, which they sometimes misread as him spending his weekend marking books in the form room. However, very few students selected from the incorrect lines and many began their selection with either ‘he’ or ‘Mr Fisher’, thus ensuring the correct focus of the question was addressed. Overwhelmingly, students did well on Question 1 and gained confidence at the start of the examination.

Question 2

The key skill for Question 2 is the analysis of language, and reproducing the relevant lines in the question paper continues to assist students in focusing their initial selection of textual detail appropriately. Students also found the bullet points (You could include the writer’s choice of words and phrases, language features and techniques, and sentence forms) helpful in guiding their response, although, as noted in previous reports, the use of the word ‘could’ rather than ‘should’ is deliberate and significant: there is no requirement to cover all of these aspects, and students who narrowed their choice and then explored the effects of their selected examples in depth were frequently more successful.

Within the given lines, there were many rich examples of language employed by Harris to convey Mr Fisher’s views on books and stories of the past. The use of the word ‘golden’ proved a popular choice, with students achieving Level 2 by attempting to comment by offering synonyms such as ‘bright’. At Level 3 students contextualised and clearly explained that Mr Fisher saw books as something special to treasure and cherish, and at Level 4 students typically analysed with perception the concept of Mr Fisher nostalgically reflecting on the golden age of literature when creativity flourished.

There was an improvement in the quality of student responses this series, with almost 40% achieving a mark of 5 or above out of 8. The issues noted in the report on the first series of this specification had largely been addressed, the most notable being the over-reliance on complex subject terminology, which led to decontextualised feature spotting at best. This series, there was a

more concentrated focus on detailed explanations as to why the writer may have chosen to employ a particular language feature, and it seemed to be more widely understood by students that they would be rewarded for the quality of their analysis, not the number of features they could identify. In addition, many students now recognise that it is unnecessary to write at great length, and that clear and perceptive qualities can be exemplified without resorting to additional pages.

There are still areas where students can improve. Some of those who did less well on this question selected unwisely, or were still just identifying and labelling language features erroneously and failing to comment on the effect on the reader or explain a reason behind the writer's choices. At times, they offered a basic, generic comment, eg 'it creates a picture in our heads' or 'it makes us feel like Mr Fisher feels', which could apply to most examples of language in the given lines and is merely a 'simple comment on the effect of language', worthy of a mark in Level 1. Other students selected lengthy examples, such as the writer describing stories of the past with the similes 'ran like gazelles and pounced like tigers and exploded like rockets', and then attempted to offer an explanation of their collective effect, which frequently led to a generalised comment. These students would have fared better if they had dealt with the similes individually and offered a precise explanation of effect for each one. Moreover, sometimes the selection of very lengthy examples led to paraphrasing and discussion of ideas rather than analysis of language.

Some students looked for the connotations of words without a consideration of context, eg they saw the use of 'fever' in the phrase 'whole classes swept away in the fever' as something negative because fevers are bad, and were not able to recognise that Mr Fisher was recollecting a positive memory of when he found the enjoyment of reading to be infectious, even contagious, among his classes. Students need to remember that their comments have to be precise and contextualised in order to achieve Level 3 or above.

However, overall, many students coped admirably with this question: they made appropriate selections of language to analyse; they employed subject terminology to enhance rather than drive responses; they did not write at unnecessary length; and they focused on the effects of the writer's choice of specific words and phrases and analysed the language to the best of their ability. The very best students were able to demonstrate understanding of Harris's language choices and explore what they revealed about Mr Fisher's passionate and almost romanticised views on books and stories of a bygone era.

Question 3

The key skill for Question 3 is the analysis of structure and, as noted previously, in its simplest terms, students are required to examine *what* happens *where* and *why*, usefully asking themselves the question, 'How does reading about this *at this point* add to my understanding of the source as a whole?' There was a significant improvement in the quality of student performance this series, with over 30% achieving a mark of 5 or above out of 8. An increasing number of students were confident in their approach to what is still a relatively new skill. They did not over-complicate the question and there was far less over-reliance on subject terminology or high level literary/narrative theory.

The majority found the bullet points (You could write about what the writer focuses your attention on at the beginning of the source, how and why the writer changes the focus as the source develops, and any other structural features that interest you) effective as a framework for their responses. The most successful students understood that the story was a construct. They offered an overview of the structure of the whole source before breaking it down into its constituent parts and analysing the shifts in perspective and focus in a way that clearly explored their significance.

They looked for patterns and were able to make links and connections between different parts of the source, and they explored contrasts and juxtaposition of both ideas and tone.

Many students recognised that the writer chose initially to present background details of Mr Fisher, thereby establishing him as an ordinary man with a set routine, and then immediately followed this with the internal world of his imagination in order to present the reader with a protagonist who used memories as escapism from the dull reality of life. They focused on this lack of chronology, and discussed the smooth transition as the source switched to Mr Fisher's thoughts with the key sentence 'Mr Fisher remembered a time...' In particular, they explored the use of flashback as a means of contrasting an age when children delighted in books and stories with more recent times, when 'everything was boring', thus enabling us as readers to see the difference in attitudes towards literature between the past and the present. They also examined the cyclical nature of the source through the motif of 'gold' and 'golden', where the analogy of the 'discouraged and bankrupt' prospector finding 'a nugget of gold the size of his fist' echoed the earlier reference to Mr Fisher yearning for a 'golden' age of stories. They recognised that Tibbet's work was so remarkable that it transported Mr Fisher back to this era, or that it gave him hope that the magic hadn't 'run out', or indeed that it restored his faith in teaching. The most able students acknowledged the structural foreshadowing of Tibbet as a catalyst and compared Mr Fisher's world-weary attitude at the beginning of the source to his reawakened joy at the end, identifying the precise moment of epiphany along the way.

Students who did not do so well on this question narrated too much of the story or did not focus sufficiently on the effects of the writer's choices. Many can now recognise where the structural shifts in a source occur and are able to track the sequence, but greater consideration of *why* the writer has made a particular choice at a particular moment and *how* that impacts the reader's understanding of the whole is needed. Phrases such as 'at the beginning', 'in the middle' and 'at the end' provide a useful framework, but merely discussing the content of what is happening in the story at those points is not sufficient. This question requires students to think about *why* something is placed at the beginning, middle or end of the source, not just what. At times, students offered basic, generic comments such as 'it makes us want to read on' or 'it draws the reader's attention', which could apply to most examples of structural features and is merely a 'simple comment on the effect of structure', worthy of a mark in Level 1. Other students identified features such as tone, setting and narrative perspective without explaining any shifts or changes in these features as the source developed and the possible reasons for these shifts, which again led to a lack of focus on structure. One unhelpful trait was writing about the construction of sentences, as in Question 2, rather than the position of key sentences and the significance of their placement. Another was only dealing with a small section of the source; the question instructs students to 'think about the whole of the source', and this is essential in order to explore the development of character or events and achieve Level 3 or above.

Responses to Question 3 this series have been encouraging, although in order to help students further, attention is once again drawn to the document [How structure is assessed in Paper 1 Question 3](#), produced as part of the Further Insight series and published on the AQA website. It gives details of what a student needs to do for this question, explains the Indicative Standard in the mark scheme, offers some ideas on structural features for students to analyse and includes example responses with commentaries.

Question 4

Question 4 was generally well-answered across the ability range, and over 45% of students achieved a mark in Level 3 or above. Although this question has the highest tariff – at 20 marks, it

represents 50% of the marks available for Section A and 25% of the marks available for the whole paper – and should therefore be the most challenging of all the reading questions, students continue to enjoy the freedom to write in a more personal way than in Question 2 and Question 3, and their responses were lively and engaging at all levels.

As with previous questions, the bullet points (You could consider your own impressions of what Mr Fisher expected Tibbet's homework to be like, evaluate how the writer conveys Mr Fisher's reaction to what he discovers, and support your response with references to the text) guided students on the focus of their evaluation, but there were no right or wrong answers. Students were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement, 'This part of the story, where Mr Fisher is marking homework, shows Tibbet's story is better than Mr Fisher expected, and his reaction is extreme,' and they were at liberty to completely agree, completely disagree, or agree with some aspects and disagree with others. All evaluations and interpretations are valid, as long as they are rooted in the source.

Some students thought Mr Fisher's expectations of Tibbet were low as 'he'd obviously done part of his homework on the bus' and he wasn't a 'brilliant scholar by any means', whilst others decided Mr Fisher was not surprised at Tibbet's story because 'not all his boys lacked imagination', and he had already recognised Tibbet's potential as 'there was a spark in him which deserved attention'. The more students could select evidence like this to formulate their views, and the more they could link their ideas together with words like 'even though' and 'despite', the more considered their evaluations became and the more likely they were to achieve the higher levels of the mark scheme.

This also applied to evaluating whether or not Mr Fisher's reaction was extreme, and the best students acknowledged the different stages he went through. Those who believed his reaction was extreme recognised that he had not only an emotional response to the story but a physical one as well, whilst others stated his reaction was rational and appropriate, given his love of literature and loss of faith. Either way, those students who began to evaluate the reasoning behind Mr Fisher's reaction, and grasped the central idea that it was Tibbet's work being 'something new... something entirely original' that provoked this reaction, moved into Level 3 and above.

Students' evaluations covered the full spectrum, as would be expected from a non-tiered examination. Some of the less able were confused by the image of the prospector finding gold and thought Mr Fisher was removing his boots and shaking something out, and there were also those who found it impossible to accept that any English teacher could become so excited over a piece of homework. However, the very best students responded with empathy and sensitivity to Mr Fisher's situation. They believed he saw Tibbet's story as something sacred, almost a holy relic. Responses in Level 4 compared Tibbet's story to a beautiful treasure discovered in a sea of mediocrity, or argued that it reignited hope in Mr Fisher's gloom and allowed him to come back from the brink of depression to once again see the beauty of imagination. The most able recognised that Mr Fisher experienced an epiphany, or even a metamorphosis, when he read Tibbet's work and, as a result, his hope for the future of literature was rekindled. Such students frequently explored the whole concept of creativity experiencing a renaissance.

The key skill for Question 4 is the evaluation of both the ideas in the source in relation to the given statement and the methods used by the writer to convey these ideas. Whilst increased numbers of students evaluated methods, this is still an area of weakness for some. Better students demonstrated consideration of the writer's craft in constructing the story and often incorporated an evaluation of the impact of language, eg the use of short, staccato sentences to represent Mr Fisher's rapid heartbeat, and also structural techniques. However, although all students need to

understand that it is necessary to evaluate the *how* as well as the *what*, they should not limit themselves to these two aspects of the writer's craft.

There are other areas where students can improve. Some of those who did less well on this question offered speculation rather than interpretation, and although it is perfectly acceptable to briefly cross-reference earlier parts of the source in order to evaluate, for example, a change in character or tone by the end, a few focused too heavily outside the given lines. In addition, some students would have benefitted from considering their own impressions in relation to the statement before they began to write, rather than forming an opinion during the course of their writing. More able students who started with a sense of their own evaluation and then constructed an argument with a focus on the *what* and the *how* were the most successful. They separated the different elements of the statement, re-read the source and selected relevant evidence, and then drew evaluative conclusions accordingly. Thinking before writing encourages students to provide a clearly structured argument, incorporate a range of ideas from the text, explore methods and embed references.

Question 5

Both writing questions proved to be accessible to students, many of whom wrote with enthusiasm and engagement.

The first option, describing an old person as suggested by the picture, was a slightly more popular choice. Most descriptions featured men, although the question was deliberately gender neutral so answers could equally have focused on women, and although old is a relative term, the majority of students chose to describe the very elderly. Some focused exclusively on the man's eyes and the secrets they held or the wisdom or loss that was on display, whilst others characterised him as a whole person and described not only his physical appearance but his personality and circumstances, eg being homeless or a war veteran. Some chose old people who were part of their lives, such as grandparents and elderly neighbours, whilst others created characters like a dying king or a battle-scarred warrior.

A range of responses was offered across all abilities, from a straightforward description of the picture, mainly consisting of wrinkly faces with pores and crevices, to those where the picture had been used as a springboard for students' imaginations, resulting in lyrical pieces that were moving and almost poignant in their reflections on the ravages of old age, and some of which were breathtaking in their beauty and craft. A balance of positive and negative issues regarding ageing was in evidence from students, and also a willingness to tackle quite mature and conceptual ideas surrounding death and the human condition.

The second option, a narrative about a time when things turned out unexpectedly, was less popular, although it too was attempted by students across the ability range. Unforeseen exam results and surprisingly scoring the winning goal in a game of football, rugby or even polo were frequent topics, but also apparent were much more individual and original themes: alien abduction stories; discovering previously unknown family members; blind dates that went wrong; a murderer who kept his victims' heads in the freezer; supposed medical cures that wiped out mankind; and a government figure whose lies were cleverly exposed at a heated press conference. A few students began with something unexpected and narrated the aftermath, whilst the majority led up to the unexpected event and sometimes ended on a cliffhanger. Both approaches were valid and worked well. The most able students wrote narratives with delicately-handled imagery and structures that were stunning in their accomplishment, original, engaging and delightful to read.

The importance of planning for Question 5 was emphasised this series, and many students heeded this advice. Having to analyse structure in someone else's creative writing in Question 3 is increasingly encouraging students to consider the shape of their own writing in Question 5. Planning was especially important in the narrative as students needed to know from the start what the unexpected thing was going to be so that everything in their plot led up to that point, and it was also useful in the description when, for example, the old man had a flashback to his younger years. Some students adopted a circular structure or an extended metaphor that ran throughout their response, often with convincing and compelling results.

An increase in planning seemed to lead to more concise responses, and there were fewer unnecessarily lengthy narratives and descriptions, although there were still some cases where the more students wrote, the greater the deterioration in ideas, structure and accuracy. There is a growing understanding that students should adopt a quality rather than quantity approach, and there was increasing evidence of crafting, with students looking back over their work to make improvements, which is encouraging.

However, there are still areas for improvement. Some students continue to produce formulaic responses with a contrived use of senses: I can see/I can hear/I can smell. Others continue to include over-ambitious vocabulary that is misused and obscures meaning. Writing skills obviously need to be taught, but there is also an argument for not over-preparing students with formulaic methods, especially for creative writing. There is much to be said for an honest response where the student's voice can be heard, rather than an artificial, contrived construction.

In terms of AO6, centres continue to be mindful of the increased Technical Accuracy mark and had obviously emphasised the importance of varying sentence forms. Some students planned a checklist of what punctuation to include and ticked each one off once they'd used it, irrespective of whether or not it had been used correctly or effectively, whereas the more successful students employed an impressive array of punctuation – colons, semi-colons, brackets and dashes – and integrated them seamlessly into their responses to enhance meaning. Although comma splicing, punctuation of dialogue and the use of apostrophes continue to be areas which need more focus, the technical writing skills of the majority of students did not hamper meaning, and better responses were written with fluency and used sentence construction and punctuation for impact.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.