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GCSE

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 2 Writers' Viewpoints and Perspectives  
Report on the Examination

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8700  
June 2018

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Version: 1.0

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## General comments

June 2018 saw the second major series of assessment of the new specification for GCSE English Language. There was an increase of more than 50,000 students from the June 2017 entry, bringing the total number of entries in June 2018 to 532,000.

This entry represents the whole range of ability, with students entered from a wide variety of educational centres. The increase in entry is largely due to the inclusion of a significant cohort of post-16 students. In June 2017, the equivalent cohort of these students (aged 16+) was offered the opportunity to sit the final series of the outgoing specification, and these students were therefore not included in the first series of the new specification. There is also evidence of the continuing popularity of this new specification, with a number of new centres registering with AQA.

## Sources

The two sources were based on a sporting theme. Surfing was a deliberate choice in that it was likely to be equally unfamiliar to the vast majority of students. The subject was relatively neutral in terms of gender, class, race and religion, and avoided any other potential bias. It was welcomed by some as a refreshing alternative to some of the heavier weight texts available. The image of surfers included in Source A served its purpose in making what was being referred to clear to those who were entirely unfamiliar with the sport of surfing, but it did not appear to distract students from the text itself.

Source A was an autobiographical account of the first time the writer saw anyone surfing, and described his early attempts to participate. It was a straightforward first person narrative account, with one single perspective for students to grasp and comment on. This made it ideally suited to the lower end of the ability range, as the superficial meanings were immediately apparent. There was very little, if any, evidence of students misinterpreting the text.

However, there was a range of structural and linguistic features to provide a focus for comment on methods, and sufficient subtlety and sophistication of ideas and perspectives to offer students working at the higher end of the ability range the opportunity to make perceptive and insightful comments on both the writer's perspectives and the techniques they use to convey these. Students responded well to the adolescent voice of the narrator in Source A, picking up his ardent desire to be part of this elite group of 'bronzed gods', and the most able were able to compare this idealistic attitude at the start of the text to the anti-climax of his groaning realism at the end as he collapses on the beach.

Source B was a letter written by British explorer Isabella Bird in 1875 to her sister in England, describing the unknown sport of surfing which she had just witnessed. Again, there were very few misinterpretations of the text and the responses showed an enthusiastic understanding of the writer's perspective, albeit at an appropriately low level for some students.

For the first time in a live exam, the 19<sup>th</sup> century source was used as the basis for the language question. The text was typical of a more informal Victorian style, as one would expect in a letter to a family member, although there were plenty of multi-clausal complex sentences to present a reading challenge. These did not, however, prove to be an obstacle to students, and they engaged well with both the vocabulary and the language features used, with some effective comment on the use of sentences too. There was sufficient richness in the section chosen for the language question to provide students with ample opportunity to reach the upper levels. The writer's

perspectives were clear for students to identify and comment on, with many recognising her initial terror, but ultimately her envy of those who remained on those ‘enchanted’ shores.

Reports from examiners suggest that both sources served their purpose well in this regard, offering both accessibility and the potential for more explorative responses. Students responded with enthusiasm and engagement, in the majority of cases rising to the challenge of the texts. It was particularly pleasing to see how the two sources worked together to offer students opportunities to compare the different perspectives.

### **Question 1**

Question 1 is an assessment of AO1 and the ability of students to retrieve information and ideas from a text. The means by which this is assessed – a series of eight statements about the text which students must read to identify which four are true – allows for a more explicit test of understanding, avoiding the need for students to phrase their own responses. This is a real benefit to both students and examiners alike.

Whilst some of the statements test retrieval of explicit information from the given section of the text, other statements assess the students’ interpretation of implicit ideas. The purpose of Question 1 has been to settle students rather than necessarily to discriminate between them, and the range of marks awarded reflects this. The majority of students proved able to identify the four true statements, correctly interpreting and retrieving the relevant information from the text.

Question 1 was attempted by virtually all students, and 99% scored 3 marks or more. An increased percentage of students (91%) achieved full marks. The mean mark was 3.9, as opposed to 3.85 in June 2017, indicating a high level of consistency between the two major series so far. This confirms that the question continues to function extremely well as an effective means to engage students in the source material, boost their confidence from the start, and begin to prepare them for the more challenging questions ahead.

There was far more evidence of students completing the answer booklet correctly for this question, which is a direct consequence of students’ increased familiarity with the question paper and the preparation they have received in centres. However, it is worth noting that some students have opted for an apparent safety net in circling more than four statements, perhaps in the hopes that this will give them a better chance of selecting four correct answers. The rule applied when marking this question ensures that, for every statement beyond four which is identified, the student loses rather than gains marks, which makes this a poor strategy to adopt.

In summary

- Question 1 continues to be an accessible, engaging and effective start to the paper
- The overwhelming majority of students achieved either 3 or 4 marks
- The procedures for completing the answer booklet correctly were much improved
- Students are reminded to select no more than four statements.

### **Question 2**

This question assesses a student’s ability to write a summary by synthesising and interpreting evidence from both sources, according to a given focus. This continues to be an area where centres could usefully target additional teaching to ensure students are fully aware of the demands of the task. In this paper, the focus for Question 2 was concrete rather than abstract, as students were asked to summarise and interpret what they understood about the different surfboards. This

was a slight departure from examples of Question 2 in the previous two live papers, which took as their focus what students could summarise and interpret about behaviour or feelings. The concrete focus allowed for a more precise use of supporting textual detail, as well as providing a clear distinction from the focus for Question 4.

There were plenty of opportunities afforded by both texts for students to address the relevant criteria and demonstrate the key skills at every level. Some students were able to write perceptively about the cultural and spiritual significance of the surfboards in Hawaii and the individuality of each hand-carved board, for example, as opposed to the advances in technology and increased commercialism in the mass development of boards in California, in order to achieve marks in Level 4.

Students at Levels 2 and 3, with varying degrees of clarity, were able to make inferences about the durability and relative effectiveness of the different boards and infer something about the level of care shown towards their boards by the two groups of surfers. Less able students were also able to identify simple differences, such as the relative size and weight of the two sets of boards.

A proportion of students, including some who performed well on other questions, provided an intelligent summary of appropriate textual details from both texts, but crucially failed to interpret these and infer any meaning at all. This certainly highlights the importance of interpretation in this question. A minority of students tended towards paraphrase at the expense of interpretation, although more than 72% of students were able to demonstrate at least an attempt to infer meaning or identify some meaningful difference between the texts. Overall, however, there was a strong correlation with the marks from last June, with only a small drop in the mean mark, which is in line with the slight decrease in mean marks across the other reading questions in Section A.

The wording of this question included the phrase ‘what you understand about’, which was intended to encourage students to infer meaning rather than simply summarise. It is vital that, in preparing students to respond to Question 2, it is made very clear that interpretation is at the heart of both key skills assessed here (making inferences and showing differences). This is true regardless of whether the focus of the question is concrete or abstract. In order to help students further, attention is once again drawn to the document [Teaching Synthesis in Paper 2 Question 2](#), produced as part of the Further Insight series and published on the AQA website.

In summary

- Performance on Question 2 was marginally lower overall than in June 17
- Interpretation is key to success in Question 2
- The additional phrase ‘what you understand about’ was intended to clarify the task for students
- Students should be prepared to respond to a more concrete focus as well as a more abstract focus for this task.

### Question 3

This question assesses the student’s ability to comment on the writer’s use of language and to explore the effect of the language choices made. That the given lines were from the 19<sup>th</sup> century text did not appear in any way to detract from the students’ ability to showcase their skills, and in many cases the text provided students with the opportunity to offer highly sophisticated responses. There were only a very small number of rubric infringements where students referred to the wrong lines, and these were dealt with in accordance with the instructions in the mark scheme.

There was sufficient richness in the language choices on offer for students to explore, according to their ability. Those working at Levels 1 and 2 were able to select words such as ‘majestically’ and, even without knowing its exact meaning, were able to use contextual clues to comment on how this word made the surfers seem impressive or magical. References were sometimes made to unicorns and knights, as well as more religious or royal figures in an attempt to comment on effect. At Level 3, students would typically comment on the use of similes and metaphor, as well as the use of individual words and phrases, often exploring how the simile of the heads ‘bobbing about like corks’ showed the relatively small size of the surfers in comparison to the immensity of the sea.

At Level 4, students were able to analyse language choices in detail. Some explored the effect of the surfers being described as ‘majestic’ royalty, appearing to dominate the waves over which they rode so triumphantly. Others explored how the battle between the surfers and the engulfing power of the sea, whose ‘towering white crest’ was ever above and behind them, was never quite resolved. There were some perceptive, original and very detailed responses to language, which certainly merited full marks for this question. It was also rewarding to see students exploring the writer’s choice of extended sentences, which echoed the journey time of the surfers from the moment they caught the wave, through their battle with the sea, up to the point where they made it safely to shore.

Overall, the responses to Question 3 were extremely pleasing and demonstrated a huge step forward in language analysis, with 80% of students able to make at least an attempt to comment on the effect of language. There were some less successful responses, where students were drawn into an inferential reading of the text, opting to comment on the meaning or content rather than the language choices made by the writer.

Some students are still overly dependent on the identification of language terminology at the expense of any real engagement with how or why the writer had selected that particular feature. There is nothing inherently wrong with the use of complex language terminology – indeed, where these terms are well-used and understood they serve to significantly enhance the quality and sophistication of the response overall. However, where they are seen as an end in themselves, they tend to distract the student from the substance of the task, which is commenting on the effects.

Another trend, and potentially therefore a further area for centres to address, is where students tended to comment on what effect the language had on ‘the reader’ in a contrived and generalised way. The implication is that all language must have an emotive impact on the reader, creating fear, tension, intrigue or excitement, for example. This type of comment is too generic to be judged ‘clear’ and rewarded in Level 3. Students should be encouraged to look at the specific effects of particular words, zooming in on them for a really tight focus and engaging with a contextualised response to the language by referencing the source material, rather than making vague and potentially speculative comments about the impact of the language on the reader.

In summary

- Performance has remained stable with the mean mark changing very little since last June
- The key to success in Q3 is exploring the effects of language
- Examiners reported an increased tendency to engage with language choices
- Students should avoid generic comments and focus on contextualising their responses.

## Question 4

This question presents a demanding and multi-dimensional challenge for students. The task requires a response which includes not just a demonstration of the student's understanding of the ideas and perspectives in both texts, but also a comparison of these ideas and the writers' different perspectives, supported by relevant textual detail, and an explanation of how both writers have used a range of methods to convey their points of view.

Each of the three preceding reading questions provides the student with practice and inspiration for this response, with the understanding of ideas introduced in Question 1, synthesis between texts in Question 2, and a focus on methods in Question 3. These questions offer the student stepping stones towards meeting the challenge of Question 4, and they served their purpose extremely well, as 97% of students not only attempted Question 4 but were able to access the task, according to their ability, and gain appropriate credit for their response.

Question 4 was a pleasure to mark, and many examiners reported that this was their favourite question due to the liveliness and enthusiasm of the responses. Students responded well to all parts of the question and engaged with the comparison element particularly well. Both sources in this paper presented just a single first person perspective, which made identification of the writers' points of view that much clearer for students across the ability range and avoided any potential for confusion.

There was a wealth of material to draw on for students addressing the writers' perspectives, and even the weakest responses showed an understanding of the writer in Source A's positive reaction to surfing and cross referenced this with the writer in Source B's more negative reaction. Into Level 2, students were able to refine their understanding and compare Mike Doyle's pleasure on one hand with Isabella Bird's sense of fear on the other.

At Level 3, students made clear comparisons and explained, for example, that whereas Mike Doyle was desperate to take part and join the 'bronzed gods' he so admired, Isabella Bird was perfectly content to remain a spectator on the shore. Students working at Level 4 were typically able to make perceptive comparisons between the writers' perspectives on surfing culture and community, exploring the secretive/open, private/public or exclusive/inclusive nature of the sport. It is the ability to envisage and apply this conceptual framework to the texts which typifies the higher ability student.

Where students were less successful, they tended to fall into the same traps as last year: focusing on ideas at the expense of perspectives; dealing with the texts separately without making meaningful connections; and identifying methods used without exploring their effect or how they contributed to presenting the writer's point of view. Centres would be advised to continue to target these areas in their teaching to ensure students are sufficiently prepared to attempt to access the full range of marks available for this question.

On a very positive note, there were far more students commenting on the methods used by the writers than in both previous series. Many students appeared much more confident in engaging with methods, and this suggests that the majority had been really well-prepared for this task. An impressive 75% of students achieved marks in Level 2 and above, with more than 30% reaching Level 3 or higher, which is a real endorsement of students' success on this demanding question.

In summary

- Performance was very consistent, with only a marginal reduction in the overall mean mark from June 2017
- Students across the board rose to the challenge of this multi-dimensional task
- Students' responses were a pleasure to mark and showed real enthusiasm
- Larger numbers of students demonstrated confidence in engaging with methods.

### Question 5

This question presented students with a controversial statement covering a number of aspects on the topic of sport, a theme which was loosely connected to the reading sources. Students were asked to respond to the statement by writing an article for a newspaper on the same topic. There were a number of different strands within the statement which were deliberately chosen to broaden the appeal of the task to as many students as possible, providing students with the opportunity to write about sport from a wide range of perspectives, not just as spectators or participants.

Some students chose to write about fun and fairness in relation to PE lessons at school and their experience of primary school sports days, whereas others took a more political approach and addressed issues of accessibility within sport for the disabled and women. Other common perspectives inevitably involved football, and issues around the injustice of players' wages, the corrosive influence of betting, as well as the furore and 'stench of corruption' surrounding FIFA. Many students wrote about the concept of 'winning at any cost', and the best responses in Level 4 were able to contextualise the idea and frame it within a conceptual understanding of economics, politics or morality. Some of the responses produced under exam conditions, as essentially first drafts, were incredibly impressive and a clear reminder to all of the very high level of skill amongst our students.

Those working at the upper end of the ability range were often able to project an individual voice, sometimes adopting an alternative point of view, such as those students who voiced their perspective that corruption was rife in every area of life so why object to it in sport. These students typically offered a conscious crafting of language, characterised by a subtle moulding of features to suit the context: extending metaphor and other imagery, incorporating puns, and deploying rhetorical devices to devastating effect. The sequencing of their ideas was also exceptional, with a sense of momentum building in their response as the reader was drawn inexorably into a series of increasingly convincing and then compelling points, leading to a carefully structured conclusion.

It was particularly pleasing to identify the improvement in these skill strands (use of linguistic devices and sequencing of ideas) as they have been the focus of feedback meetings, 'stretch and challenge' events and hub group materials throughout the year, suggesting these AQA customer support opportunities are having a clear impact on performance. In Levels 2 and 3 examiners also saw an improvement in the sequencing of ideas, supported by the addition this series of a prompt in the answer booklet to remind students to plan their response. There was significant evidence of more planning taking place and, in most cases, this led to a stronger and more coherent sense of a whole argument, which is likely to encourage students towards the clarity necessary to be awarded a mark in Level 3 or above. It is the overall quality of the communication which determines the level, not the quality of the individual skills, and therefore students and centres should focus their efforts on ensuring a clearly identifiable point of view is a priority.

Students occasionally fell into some of the familiar traps that have been identified in previous series: over-use of linguistic devices; imprecise use of more sophisticated vocabulary; a failure to signpost the direction of the response; and an inability to sustain an appropriate tone or style for



the given audience, tending towards the colloquial or over-familiar. Some students attempted to address every aspect of the question and were then mired in an array of separate ideas which were difficult to amalgamate into one coherent whole. It is worth stating here that students are not required to comment on every aspect of the statement provided, and those who were more selective in which aspect they addressed tended to produce clearer points of view in their responses.

In terms of technical accuracy, the whole of the ability range was seen. Students at the lower end of the ability range typically struggled to vary their sentence forms and relied upon simple constructions throughout. Some students whose basic spelling was generally accurate were unable to qualify for a mark in Level 2 as they simply did not use the complex vocabulary required to demonstrate a more advanced level of spelling. Also at the lower end, students had difficulties with agreement within sentences and were unable to demarcate effectively. In Level 2, students would routinely attempt to vary their sentences, but the repeated use of rhetorical questions, for example, does not qualify as 'varied sentence forms' in Level 3. Students need to consider using imperatives, exclamations and complex sentences, as well as assertions and simple or compound forms.

At Level 3, achieved by an impressive 50% of students, there was widespread evidence of complex and secure spelling, with an accurate range of punctuation. Although punctuating according to a pre-determined list could potentially invite an unwelcome mechanical approach to sentence construction, when students are able to draw on a wider variety of punctuation marks, and when sparingly and precisely used, this has a significant impact on the quality and sophistication of the writing overall. Indeed, students who are able to draw on a variety of punctuation marks are potentially able to demonstrate not just a wider range of punctuation, but a greater variety of sentence forms too. At Level 4, there was evidence of high levels of control over sentence construction and agreement, and a mastery of a wide range of ambitious spelling and punctuation. The range of sentences on offer was also varied, including subtle manipulations of more complex structures to create particular effects.

Across the writing assessment objectives, the performance of students was very stable. The mean marks for both AO5 and AO6 in June 2018 were almost identical to the mean marks in June 2017. What is even more impressive is that the writing performance of students on Paper 2 was very much in line with their performance on Paper 1, with a very close correlation between the percentages of students achieving marks at every level. This applied to both AO5 and AO6, which suggests that both writing tasks inspired and rewarded students equally, regardless of whether they were writing a creatively or expressing a point of view.

In summary

- Performance on the writing task was very consistent and matched performance on Paper 1
- Sequencing of ideas and the use of linguistic devices were notably improved
- Improved use of punctuation is a useful and effective way of ensuring a wider variety of sentence forms
- Students should continue to plan their ideas and incorporate more structural features in their writing

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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