



GCSE

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

8700/2: Paper 2

Report on the Examination

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General Comments

The third summer series of this specification saw a further increase in entries, taking the total number of students to over 556,000. The cohort included students from across the entire ability range. Performance has remained consistent, with slight improvements on the reading questions which are in line with an increase in familiarity with the demands of the paper amongst both teachers and students, as would be anticipated at this point in the specification.

This increasing confidence in addressing the demands of the paper suggests teachers have prepared students well for this assessment, and students are well-versed in each of the key skills. However, the best answers continue to be those which spring from a spontaneous and individual response to the stimulus material, rather than those which are the result of overly mechanistic, prescriptive or repetitive approaches.

Students who succeed in their GCSE English Language exam are often those who have had the opportunity to read a wide range of non-fiction texts from different genres, to analyse a range of methods from a number of literary and non-literary sources, to engage with abstract or thematic concepts (which could be termed 'big ideas') in fiction, non-fiction, set texts, plays, poetry, film and online, and to develop their confidence in exploring their meaning and impact through talk.

Sources

The sources selected for this series were on the subject of shipwrecks. The broader theme was one of adventure and adversity. This topic appeared to engage students and presented them with two very accessible first person narratives detailing the experiences of the writers at sea.

Source A was an extract from Ben Fogle and James Cracknell's autobiographical account of their attempt to race across the Atlantic in a rowing boat. The extract detailed what happened the night their tiny boat capsized at dawn in rough seas. Fogle offers a compelling and dramatic narrative, recounting his experiences of nearly drowning and subsequently regaining contact with the boat and with James. Students were able to empathise with the account of his thoughts and feelings, recognising his battle with the elements and acknowledging the impact the experience must have had on him. They were able to make many different inferences about his feelings from the dialogue and descriptions, as well as interpreting details about his broader perspective on what was happening. In their responses to the text students were able to comment on many things: Fogle's vulnerability, the sense of foreboding, his homesickness, his underwater panic, his disorientation, his isolation and feelings of intimidation, and his relief and delight at regaining sight of the boat.

Source B was a piece of travel writing, taken from an account written by William Hudson of his voyage to Patagonia. His ship encounters a storm at night and the crew attempt to escape secretly, using the only lifeboat, leaving the passengers to their fate. Miraculously, the ship survives and Hudson determines to find land. He recounts his experience in the first person, but takes a more objective, observational approach to proceedings, focusing more often on the events and people around him than on his own feelings. Students again responded to the action-packed narrative thrust of the source, the vast majority of students clearly understanding the events and proving able to interpret Hudson's reactions. There were very few examples of misunderstanding of this nineteenth-century text.

The sources resulted in a very wide range of responses, with students able to create surprisingly individual responses to the questions. The overwhelming feeling of examiners was that the two sources worked extremely well together as the foundation for this paper.

Question 1

This question offered students eight statements about Ben's experience from the first few lines of Source A. This question is intended to provide a gateway for students into the exam, easing them into writing longer questions by assessing their understanding of both explicit and implicit ideas in the text, without the need for writing a response. The statements are intended to assess the student's ability to read carefully. Most students were able to demonstrate this ability, with over 60% of students being awarded the full 4 marks, and over 93% awarded 3 or more marks.

The statements are not intended to catch students out. Where students were awarded 3 marks, the statement they failed to identify as true was not always the same one. Each of the statements tests either the understanding of the meaning of words, the understanding of implied meanings, or simply the retrieval of facts. Therefore the advice from previous series should be reiterated: students need to take their time, read the statements carefully, remember that the statements are ordered chronologically to match the text, and read through the four true statements they have selected and check for common sense errors before they proceed.

There are still too many examples of students selecting more than four statements as true. This leads automatically to a reduction of their final mark for this question and should therefore be avoided. There are also a significant number of students who risk being awarded no marks at all as they persist in ticking, writing on, and even scribbling over, the boxes rather than filling in the lozenges as instructed.

- Question 1 assesses both implicit and explicit understanding of words and meanings.
- Students are reminded of the need to read the text and statements slowly and carefully.
- Ensure all students complete the answer booklet according to the instructions provided.

Question 2

This question addresses the first assessment objective and assesses the student's skill both in interpreting the implied meanings of texts and in synthesising ideas and evidence. These two key skills are weighted equally within the mark scheme. The focus of the question varies and could invite students to engage with an abstract focus (such as the behaviour of school children in November 2017), or it could involve a more concrete aspect of the text (such as the activities of the boys in June 2017). It is clear that teachers have prepared students well for either of these approaches, as responses to question 2 demonstrated an increased confidence in addressing the two key skills. Teachers are advised to continue offering students a breadth of non-fiction texts throughout KS4 and developing their skills in identifying similarities and differences across a range of different aspects, both concrete and abstract.

The focus in this series was the boats. The question provided a discrete focus for students, allowing them to find information and evidence from both texts regarding the vessels, and to explain what they understood about the differences between them. There was a range of material relating to the age, condition, sea-worthiness, size, purpose, etc, of the two boats for students to extract and interpret.

At the lowest level, students were able to identify that one boat was older than the other or that they were different in size. At level 2, students attempted to interpret these differences by commenting, for example, on how the size of the boats made them more or less safe, but without explaining clearly the correlation between size and safety. Those awarded marks in level 3 were able to explain clearly how, for example, the difference in age of the boats meant that although the older boat was damaged, it nevertheless survived the storm, whereas the brand new racing boat capsized very quickly, demonstrating that age was not a guide to safety. There was a significant increase of 10% in the proportion of students achieving marks in Level 3 in this series, which is very encouraging.

At the highest level, students were rewarded for responses which were perceptive or detailed or, in some cases, both. Students can offer interpretation which is perceptive: insightful, conceptualised or profound; or which is detailed: extended, developed or analytical. Students working at this level were typically able to comment perceptively on the irony of the 'brand spanking new' boat in Source A being untried and untested, and crucially unfamiliar to the two rowers who could not know its capability in such strong seas. Other students were able to provide detailed analysis of the features of the boat in Source B, extending their comments on one particular aspect and developing their interpretation with accumulated textual detail and layers of inference. The number of students achieving level 4 has risen considerably, which suggests increased confidence in responding to this question.

Encouraging students to write in detail is an approach well worth adopting, as it can often be the means of moving up a level. For example, a student working at level 2 might typically attempt to make one inference, and then move on to make a separate point. However, by focusing and commenting further on the same point, the student is more likely to provide the explanation they need to meet the criteria for 'clear' at level 3. By the same token, a student working at level 3, by engaging in more detail with the same point and looking to extend and develop their comment with further inferences, is in a better position to move into level 4. Coaching students in the patience required to add depth and detail to their responses can only be a positive way forward for all abilities.

- There was a significant increase in the number of students gaining level 3 and level 4.
- Students demonstrated increased confidence in addressing the concrete focus of the task.
- Improving the detailed explanation of a small number of inferences is more beneficial than making a larger number of less precise inferences.

Question 3

This question invited students to respond to the language choices of the writer in describing the power of the sea. The section of text selected as the basis for this question was the paragraph in Source A where Fogle describes how he was washed overboard as the boat capsized and was 'brutally submerged' beneath the ocean. There was a wealth of material for students to draw on, with examples of similes, metaphors, onomatopoeia, alliteration, juxtaposition and repetition, as well as a broad range of interesting adjectives, adverbs and verbs on which to comment.

Many students selected the imagery of the towering wave, the avaricious belly and the washing machine as the basis for their comment, and these were all excellent examples to choose. In general, there was more evidence of students making a wiser selection of language examples and this contributed directly to the increased performance of students on this question. Almost half of students (48%) met the criteria for level 3 and above in their response to language, demonstrating the ability to comment clearly on the language choices of the writer and explain the effect of those

choices. This increase in performance is significant and is a huge credit to teachers in effectively providing students with the necessary skills.

At the lower levels, students were able to pick out examples and comment on their effect in an inaccurate, imprecise or incomplete way, which left the examiner unsure of the link between the word choice and the proposed effect. For example, some students stated that the word ‘vast’ showed the power of the sea, without making it clear that it was the enormous size of the wave, created by the use of the adjective ‘vast’, which indicated just how powerful and overwhelming the sea must feel.

Also typical of students awarded marks in levels 1 and 2 were comments which provided generalised or generic effects. For example, a comment such as ‘The writer describes the sea as powerful by using the metaphor “sucked into the belly of the wave” which makes the reader feel scared’ is too generic. Speculative comments on how ‘the reader’ might respond are less helpful than specific references to the effects within the context of the source material. A student working at level 2 might refer to the features of a washing machine, for example, without relating these comments to the experience of Fogle underwater. It is only when the comments are contextualised that they will be rewarded as having sufficient clarity for level 3.

Another area where students failed to meet the criteria for level 3 was in discussion of colour. Too many students offered generalised comments on the symbolic effect of colour. The waves in the source were not white because they were innocent, pure, angelic or fragile. This type of ‘one size fits all’ approach to colour analysis does not support students in making clear, contextualised, specific comments on the effects of writers’ choices of language.

However, these flaws were seen less frequently by examiners, and many were impressed by the focus and success of responses to the language question. The best level 4 responses often included perceptive comments which took a conceptualised approach to the language chosen by the writer and discussed those choices within a framework of ‘big ideas’. They were able to take words such as ‘bottomless’ and set that choice of adjective within their understanding of the concept of infinity. Similarly, students demonstrated an understanding of the writer being sucked into the belly of the wave in terms of the endless battle between man and nature, concluding that man is only ever at a disadvantage because of the imbalance of power. These ‘big ideas’ are a feature of quality non-fiction texts, and encouraging students to identify and explore them in as wide a range of texts as possible is one of the pleasures of teaching English. It also prepares students well for an assessment involving unseen texts and is a valuable asset in responding to all questions, bar question 1.

- Students have demonstrated a better choice of language examples in their responses.
- Performance on question 3 has improved, with almost half of students gaining level 3 or above.
- Students should focus on specific, contextualised responses rather than generic or generalised comment.
- Exploring the ‘big ideas’ in texts supports students in reaching the higher levels.

Question 4

This question invited students to engage with the writers’ feelings and perspectives on their adventures at sea. The inclusion of feelings alongside perspectives in the question was a reflection of the emotional as well as psychological nature of their experience. The precise words in the question may vary according to the content of the sources, and teachers should advise

students that this may be the case and to be guided by them in their response. In this series, it was clear that students responded well to the inclusion of ‘feelings’ as a specific focus in a very intuitive way.

There was a plethora of material on which to comment. Many students chose to comment on how Fogle was clearly overawed by the power of the sea, haunted by the thoughts of his wife at home, petrified by the experience of being underwater, terrified at the prospect of losing the boat and his friend, desperate to find himself hundreds of miles away from the nearest other boat, relieved to discover James was alive, but devastated to realise how complacent they had become as all their belongings washed away. In Source B, the writer’s perspective was more ambiguous in the first paragraph, providing students with a range of possible interpretations: nervous and scared, reassured and relaxed, or hopeless and resigned. All were valid, when backed up by relevant and appropriate textual detail. The changes in the perspectives and feelings of the two writers were frequently commented upon, and identifying these shifts can provide students with useful points to explore in more depth and detail to enhance the quality of their response.

Question 4 builds on the inferential understanding and synthesis of ideas required by question 2 (the ‘what’), and the exploration of language methods required by question 3 (the ‘how’). There are still some students who do not address the ‘how’ in this question, and their marks are reduced as a result. Teachers are reminded once again that exploring the methods used by the writers is an integral and necessary strand and students should be prepared for this requirement. However, there were positive signs that methods are being referenced in an increasingly integrated way, with the best students seamlessly moving between perspectives and methods in their wide-ranging analysis of the texts. It is very pleasing to see that methods are not being ‘bolted on’ to a response which is driven by perspectives. Indeed, there are increasing signs that students are offering responses driven by method.

In terms of the comparative element to the task, there was more evidence of students comparing ‘like with like’. Students at level 2 might typically compare how Fogle was scared by the boat capsizing whereas Hudson was uncertain about the safety of the ship. Fear of the ocean and concerns about safety are very different feelings, and they would be rewarded as an attempt to compare. However, comparing how both writers responded with terror to the power of the sea, or how they viewed the relative safety of their boats would be a comparison of ‘like with like’ and, when explained clearly, would warrant a mark in level 3. This ability to identify like with like is key to success in question 4, but is also central to the synthesis required in question 2, and is therefore a valuable teaching focus.

With three key skills assessed in question 4, it can be more difficult for students to write in the same detailed way as they might in question 3 where there is only one key skill. However, students demonstrated both routes to level 4, providing responses which were insightful, for example by comparing how Fogle under-estimated the power of the sea and was irresponsible and complacent with how Hudson was more pragmatic and realistic in his expectations of disaster and was resigned to his fate. There were also responses which dealt in detail with the simile of the ship’s engine in Source B, extending their analysis of the different strands of the image of the ‘overworked human heart’ to include comments on the straining timbers and the effect of personifying the boat showing Hudson’s feelings of empathy and attachment.

- Students responded well to the range of feelings and perspectives in both texts.
- Students must engage with the ‘how’, incorporating methods in their response.
- Comparing ‘like with like’ is essential for meeting level 3 and level 4 criteria.
- Both detailed and perceptive responses were rewarded at level 4.

Question 5

It is fair to say that this appeared to be a popular task. The nature of celebrity and who deserves to be famous provided the vast majority of students with a topic they felt comfortable and confident discussing, and there was little evidence of students struggling to find either material or a point of view. There were common themes, but there was a dizzying array of different approaches to the topic, offering a range of creative, individual and extremely thoughtful perspectives.

Some students argued that fame was wasted on those who were obsessed by appearance, who were born into great wealth, or who demonstrated dubious behaviour and were therefore ultimately undeserving of the attention. Others argued that good looks take time, effort and a certain skill to maintain and therefore the two sets of characteristics in the given statement were not necessarily mutually exclusive. Another group of students took issue with the editors of the newspapers they were addressing and laid the blame firmly at the door of an avaricious and immoral media for the coverage they gave to these Love Islanders, whereas others offered a sophisticated and nuanced analysis of the nature of fame itself and were able to recognise that we the readers were mostly responsible for those who appeared in the papers: you get the celebrities you deserve.

What characterised the best of these responses was the ability to engage with the 'big ideas': politics, economics, gender, aesthetics, class, morality, psychology, even philosophy. Students who were confident and familiar with these ideas were able to frame their own perspectives in this larger context and thereby enhance the quality of their argument. These are the same big ideas that support responses to the reading questions, and it is clear that providing students with opportunities to encounter and explore these brings benefits across not just this paper but across the entire suite of English assessments.

Almost all students adopted an appropriate form and register for their letters, many providing evidence of their ability to address the audience by engaging directly with the editor and their past or future actions. Many students also took advantage of the topic to adopt a lively and individual voice, selecting an engagingly bold tone, often using humour, irony and hyperbole to good effect. The range of linguistic devices was broad and there were fewer examples of devices being over-used.

The structure of arguments showed some signs of improvement, with fewer students linking random ideas in a simple series of un-sequenced points. This is still an area for teachers to address, however, with greater attention to the use of paragraph links and discourse markers likely to have an impact on the overall quality of the argument. The clarity, or otherwise, of the argument is the first and most important judgement made by the examiner and determines the overall level awarded, followed by a detailed assessment of the individual skills in evidence.

Another area where teaching has clearly had an impact is in the level of vocabulary seen in many responses. At its best, the rise in more complex and sophisticated vocabulary enhances and enriches the student's response; at its worst, the result is counter-productive. Ideas, and an argument which might have been judged clear, risk being swamped by the imprecise use of an inappropriate selection of vocabulary. The words themselves obfuscate the meaning and all clarity is lost. Whilst there is no desire to inhibit a student's ambition in using more complex words, it is worth reminding teachers that vocabulary must be broadened in a contextualised way if it is to have the desired effect in the exam.

Technical aspects

In terms of technical accuracy, students continue to demonstrate the same strengths and weaknesses. Sentence demarcation is usually secure for the majority of students, and there was evidence of a high proportion of students who appeared confident in using a wider range of punctuation marks. Semi-colons and colons are still more frequently used incorrectly than correctly, but commas, question marks, exclamation marks and speech marks are more commonly accurate. It may well be that teachers are heeding the advice offered in last year's feedback sessions that increasing the variety of sentence forms is doubly beneficial: students gain credit for using a variety of sentence forms, ideally for effect, and in so doing they necessitate the need for a wider range of punctuation marks which they are also rewarded for using.

Spelling varies as would be expected across a cohort of students of this size. Agreement continues to be an issue for students working at the lower end of the ability range. Teachers are only too well aware that improvement in these two areas is hard to achieve, but the boundary between level 2 and level 3 for AO6 (Technical Accuracy) is the difference between the keywords 'some' and 'mostly'. If students are able to control their subject/verb/pronoun/agreement some of the time, then they are in a promising position to ensure that they can control it most of the time. One possible way for students to achieve this level of accuracy in spelling and syntax is simply to write less and control what they write more carefully.

The length of students' responses is significant. Although there were a few students who benefited from extending their response to question 5 beyond three sides of the answer book, there was a huge number of students for whom the opposite could be said: writing at great length makes it far harder for students to sustain both the clarity of their argument and the accuracy of their technical skills. It cannot be emphasised too strongly that a concentrated, crafted and concise response is almost always going to be rewarded more highly than a diluted, rambling and elongated response.

- Overall, performance on question 5 remained very steady in this series.
- Students engaged with enthusiasm and confidence to the writing task.
- Students who engaged with 'big ideas' were able to enhance and enrich their responses.
- Vocabulary is improving but it must be used appropriately and precisely to be rewarded.
- Varying sentence forms and punctuation is a useful means of improving marks for AO6.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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