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# A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE

Paper 1B Literary genres: Aspects of comedy  
Report on the Examination

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7717  
June 2018

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Version: 1.0

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## **Introductory Comments**

This is the second year of the new A-level examinations and there is a growing confidence in schools and colleges about how to approach the exam. Many centres have acted on the advice given by AQA in official courses and in materials that are available on the website. Where this advice has been central to teaching, students have clearly benefited. It makes sense that all centres look at the materials available and build the central information into their teaching. The two key essentials for success are:

- thorough knowledge of the set texts
- answering the questions in all their details.

There are several teaching suggestions in the course materials on the website to help centres to foreground these necessities.

All four papers were well received and some interesting and insightful responses were seen by examiners. Students had clearly engaged well with their studies of texts which had been read through the lenses of both traditional and cultural genres. Most students seemed to have managed their time effectively in responding to the three required questions, though for some there were issues of time management. Students need to think carefully about the questions and plan what they are going to say, before starting to write.

As with last year, it is appropriate to focus on the four papers together at the start of this report since they are so closely connected and to an extent are interdependent. They share the same philosophy, the same levels of response mark scheme and the same structure. The marks available for each question are also the same and all the assessment objectives (AOs) are tested in all questions in the same ways. In terms of marking, all answers are marked holistically with the AOs seen as fluid and interactive. The only difference is that Paper 1 is a two and a half hour examination and Paper 2 is three hours. Both papers were marked as paper scripts.

The texts on this specification are grouped together through aspects of genre, so when students write about the particular aspects of tragedy and comedy or elements of crime and political and social protest writing that are set up in the questions, they are automatically connecting with the wider genre. This means they do not need to compare texts.

Given the interconnectedness of the papers, their identical philosophies and methods of assessment, the strengths and weaknesses in student performance across the four papers were, understandably, very similar.

## **The importance of students knowing their texts**

Although Papers 1 are closed book exams and Papers 2 open book, there is an expectation on both papers that students have secure textual knowledge. Those students who had a clear sense of the order of events in their texts (who knew how the stories of the texts begin and end and where climaxes and crises occur) had a clear advantage over those who did not. The strongest answers were seen by those students who had a good understanding of the characters, ideas, ideology and genre of their texts and who understood how writers have constructed their narratives

and organised their ideas to shape meanings. When students have good textual knowledge they are able to address the questions confidently and to select material appropriately.

Making good choices is crucial and the student's selection of material is often a good indicator to examiners of whether the question has been understood. The very best answers were seen from those students who were thinking about which material would best support the point they were making, rather than those who used what they could remember and then shaped their argument around that. When this happened, students often drifted from the task. Being equipped with good textual knowledge also helps students to be specific and accurate. It should be noted that Band 2 of the mark scheme has a headline descriptor of 'generalised' – and even here it has to be relevant to the task - so if students are aiming to gain marks in the higher bands they need to be precise and accurate.

Some students gave inaccurate responses. Examiners noticed this with quotations, some students created their own and then analysed their own version of authorial method. Inaccurate quotations and textual details detract from students' arguments – often because they lose any sense of the author's subtlety or creativity in choice making. Students should understand that close textual references in support of relevant arguments are perfectly acceptable – and quotation marks should only be used when students are certain that they are accurate.

Knowing texts is more important than citing critical reading or knowing background information about writers' lives and times. Some students were much happier writing about what they thought was relevant context about racial attitudes in Elizabethan England and Keats' relationship with Fanny Brawne, than writing about the texts themselves and what is revealed within the texts in relation to the tasks.

Part of 'knowing' texts also involves students understanding their texts in terms of genre, although the text's story and the narrative arc must have priority before work on genre can be made meaningful. Students need to know how their texts connect with what might be regarded as traditional generic patterns and how they disconnect as seen when writers consciously play with and subvert genre. Several students seemed to think that there are generic absolutes or templates which writers are always trying to model. It is worth reminding students that genre is a loose set of conventions and these conventions are modified or reinforced with every text produced.

### **The importance of students answering the questions set in all their details**

Once students are equipped with secure textual knowledge, they have to be trained to answer the questions that *are set* in all their details and not partially address them or respond to their own questions. In order to be successful students must answer the questions set taking account of all the words in the question. 'Answer the question' is an important reminder for students. There are no hidden requirements that students have to try to guess or requirements that are not asked in the questions. When students focus sharply, keep to the task and construct a relevant argument, they do well. They do less well when they try to use extraneous material, unrelated context and unrelated comments about aspects of genre that are not required by the question. What students need to focus on is to construct meaningful and fresh arguments, thinking for themselves about the specific features of the genre they are writing about.

In Section A questions of all four papers, students were asked to explore extracts and passages from texts in terms of the genre. This meant they had to read the passage, firstly in terms of its mini narrative and then see what specific features were evident and which opened up meanings. In

Section B and Section C the specific aspects and elements that should have been focused upon and debated were made clear in the questions, for example Emilia as victim in *Othello*, Sir Toby as a riotous festive figure in *Twelfth Night*, atoning for crime in *Atonement* and the rejection of authority in *Henry 1V Part 1*.

### **The importance of students understanding question format and understanding that all questions invite debate**

In Section B, all four papers have the same kind of question format in that a debate is set up around key aspects of tragedy, comedy, crime or political and social protest writing and students are then invited to explore a view or explore the significance of an aspect. This is also the case with Section C of Paper 1. The word ‘significance’ is used in the Shakespeare passage based question, the unseen questions and Section C of Paper 2 and is the trigger that tells students that they need to consider potential meanings. Unfortunately some students thought that the word significance itself was up for debate and some tried to argue that extracts and ideas were not significant. This was an unhelpful approach and led many students into a dead end.

All questions are framed around AO5 and AO4 so that students can engage with what is really interesting about literature – considering how different meanings arise, thinking and debating different interpretations of their literature texts, having views, expressing opinions, understanding that their own interpretations can be valid. Those students who embraced this performed very well. Those who argued with personal voices and wrote relevantly were duly rewarded. Several students cited critical opinions or wrote about critical positions, often using the Critical Anthology, and this worked for students who understood the task and who used critical voices relevantly and sensitively. For some, however, it did not work. Some students used critical material, including the Critical Anthology, that was not clearly understood and they tacked it on to arguments, often subverting questions. The message here is that unless critical ideas can be used specifically to further the student’s argument, they are best left out.

### **The passage based questions**

All four papers have one question in which students are required to work with a passage from either their Shakespeare play or an unseen text. These passages have been carefully chosen and the reason for their being printed is that students are expected to explore them in some detail. A specific skill is required here which is to work closely with text in an independent way, tracking its narrative trajectory and seeing its relationship with the genre to which it belongs. Bringing in material that is not closely connected to the printed extract does not help students to answer the question successfully.

Passages in the Shakespeare questions are provided to enable students to demonstrate their skills of responding, in a tight and detailed way, to a section of a play that they have studied and then relate their observations about aspects of tragedy or comedy to the wider play. The connections to the wider play need to be sharp and obvious. On Paper 2, students are given unseen extracts so that they can show their understanding of the crime writing or political and social protest writing genres, applying their knowledge to extracts that are new to them. It is worth repeating advice that was given last year.

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*In all extract based questions, students need to read – or reread – the extracts carefully ensuring that they see its narrative, dramatic and tragic or comedic trajectory. They need to see that it is telling a part of a story, which has its own mini narrative, while belonging at the same time to a much bigger whole, a known story on Paper 1 and an unknown story on Paper 2. Students need to engage with the narrative that is taking place. As they construct their arguments, they have to work with specific details that are in the passages. This is made clear in the questions.*

In the Shakespeare passage based question, it is very helpful if students establish an overview of the extract taking note of its shape and the dramatic and narrative (and tragic or comedic) development within it. Fundamentally they need to see it as drama – part of a story that is written to be performed on stage. They need to think about how the passage begins and ends, whether it contains a crisis, climax or critical moment and how the extract contributes to the overall dramatic tragedy or dramatic comedy. It would be a useful teaching exercise for teachers to spend time helping students to develop the skills to construct overviews in brief and telling ways so that they have an anchor for the rest of their discussion.

Clearly students need to know the play well though so that they can see the structural relationship between the extract and the parts of the dramatic narrative that come *immediately* before and *immediately* after it. This is not to recommend a formulaic approach overall as students should engage naturally with the passages, but if students do have a secure sense of the whole they will see the benefits of writing about the extract as drama. As long as the extract is the *central* focus of the writing there is no directive as to how much time and attention is given to other parts of the play. Although it is important to refer to the wider play, the comments must connect directly with the extract. Some students for example in their writing about the *Othello* extract unprofitably wrote more about Othello, who does not appear in the extract, than Iago and Roderigo, who do.

When writing about the tragic or comedic aspects set up in the question, students have to think about the drama itself and the playwright's construction of the play. They have to think about the interplay between the actions that are taking place as audiences watch and, in its broadest sense, the speech that is being heard. This means the dialogue, the asides and soliloquies, the kinds of exchanges between characters; it does not mean a discussion of single words, which is rarely productive and invariably take students away from tragic and comedic drama. All comments about dramatic method should be integrated seamlessly into the students' arguments.

Students need to see that the skills for Section A questions are quite different from the skills needed for Section B questions. A number of students thought that they needed to debate whether the passage was or wasn't significant and several thought they should construct their own debate like those in Section B.

In the unseen passages of Paper 2A and 2B, again students need to see that these questions are different from those elsewhere in the paper. Students need to have a secure sense of what is actually happening in the extract and work with what is *there*. Although they do not know what happens in the rest of the text, they do know the genre and they are given some information in the question which they can work with as they think about what is being revealed and how the mini story being told at this point is being shaped.

### **Authorial and dramatic methods**

In all questions students have to incorporate comments on authorial or dramatic methods. The strongest responses were seen by students who integrated relevant comments about method into their arguments and connected them to the aspects of genre set up in the question. The weakest responses were by students who did not respond to the part of the question about authorial method or who bolted on material – usually detached analyses of single words.

A particular problem for some students is that they write about features that they do not fully understand. Last year advice was given about students writing about iambic pentameter, blank verse and prose in questions where the text was a Shakespeare play and although there was a little less inaccuracy this year, there was still some unhelpful discussion and some comments which were wrong. The same was true for several students who wrote about metre in the poetry questions. Across all papers, the best responses included focused comments on structure, voices and settings and these were integrated into the students' arguments. Students can generally write about these features sensibly and confidently.

### **The significance and influence of contexts**

There are still some students who think that they have to include material that exists outside the text and work it into their writing, often taking the place of analysis of the text itself. The contexts that students need to write about are those which emerge from the texts, those which are set up in the questions and those which relevantly form part of their argument. The students who understood this were able to respond to the questions crisply and naturally. Some students, unfortunately, still thought they had to include all sorts of information, ideas or assertions about historical and biographical contexts, much of which was not well understood. In the weakest answers there were generalised – and often inaccurate – claims about women and patriarchy, society, class and race and often these took up space that would have been better given to discussion of the text in relation to the question.

Although there were fewer claims this year that various audiences and readers in past ages 'would have been shocked', this still existed in some responses. Examiners across all papers reported that students were still asserting that audiences of the past would have been shocked by characters' behaviours or the language writers used. It is worth ensuring that students know what the word 'shocking' means and then reminding them that it is unwise to claim that audiences of any time would have felt anything unless there is specific evidence to support the claim. Students also need to think more carefully about what they are actually saying. They need to think what a Shakespearian audience comprised (different people with different views and proclivities, like those in their own literature classes, experiencing drama in a theatre probably not for the first time). Would all those people viewing *Othello*, for example, really have been 'shocked' when they heard Emilia disobey Iago? Students need to be made aware that literature (and particularly drama) across time has plenty of references to the diabolical, to religion, to sex, to social order being overturned and to feisty and outspoken women.

There were also some assertions about Victorian readers and audiences, 20<sup>th</sup> century readers and 'enlightened' readers of today. Students should avoid any sort of claim that cannot be evidenced and look more closely at the question to see what is being asked. There is no requirement to guess what others thought or might have thought or felt. The personal pronoun in the tasks is 'you': 'To

what extent do **you** agree with this view?’ and students need to be prepared to commit themselves from their own perspectives. Their voices are what examiners want to hear.

There were also some students writing and making claims about the effects of pronoun use, particularly the use of ‘I’ and ‘me’ which many students said showed arrogance and selfishness. When speech is used it is natural for pronouns to be used, so students really do need to think more carefully before making claims about what ‘I’ reveals.

Another increasing trend is the way that students, regardless of the task, are becoming fixed on the ‘issue’ of women and how appallingly they were treated in previous ages. While students are to be congratulated on using their Critical Anthologies to open up ideas about texts (and here specifically feminist theory), they have to be careful about making sweeping statements and forcing material into answers that does not relate to the question. The ‘issue’ of both women and men is important, but the texts offer so much more to think about than the single concern of gender inequality. Sometimes readings are imposed on texts that are not supported by evidence in the texts themselves and have no bearing on the question set. There needs to be some subtlety in the application of theoretical concepts.

### **Writing skills**

When students are debating and discussing meanings, it is important that they try to express themselves in clear and logical ways. Many students were able to shape their ideas and write about them impressively. It is not necessary for writing to include an excess of critical, tragic and comedic terminology, perhaps using that terminology for its own sake and not fully understanding it. It is important that students write in a clear, structured and accurate way and time needs to be spent working on writing skills since AO1 is tested in every question. It is also worth emphasising the importance of focusing on the task from the start and making a telling comment in the first sentence. Some students wrote introductions and conclusions which were vague, general or empty.

### **Removing burdens and giving students ownership**

Some students seemed to be burdened with material they felt they had to include. Apart from contextual material and terminology, some students seemed desperate to make comparisons with other texts, often at the expense of the question. Comparison is not required in this specification as the AO4 strand is met when students are connecting with the wider genre through focusing on the key tragic, comedic, crime and political and social protest writing aspects of the question. Some students felt that they had to bolt on references to other texts and very rarely did the references add anything to the argument. A comparison only works when it highlights something specific about the text being discussed and the question itself, and although some students could use their wider knowledge of literature to make telling points, it is not a requirement to do so. For most students, references to other texts got in the way.

### **The importance of clear and independent thinking**

While content and skills clearly have to be taught, students need to be given the confidence to think and respond independently. Students need to be able to look at questions on the day of the exam with a clear mind. They need to approach the paper and questions without any



preconceptions, always taking the time to read carefully. Students should remember that if the question does not ask for something, then they are not required to include it.

Those students who could think independently and creatively about questions were, of course, rewarded appropriately.

## Specific comments

### Section A

There were some highly impressive, fluently expressed responses to Section A. Some students produced incisive answers which got to the heart of the comedy in the passages. The task in Section A invites students to write about comedic aspects which are present in the passage and crucially, the ideas and meanings which they see arising from such aspects. Success comes in part from making wise choices about which comedic issues are most relevant and interesting to write about, but essentially it is the quality of the ideas and perceptiveness of comments which determine marks. Students who did less well often spent time spotting many comedic elements but then making simple, rather than illuminating points. Often quality is better than quantity, students should focus on identifying *some* aspects and spend time commenting thoughtfully upon such aspects.

The two passage-based tasks were both based on scenes from the later stages of their respective plays and understandably, many students chose to focus on the ways in which some of the comedic problems set up earlier in the plays were (or were not) being resolved. As mentioned above, the importance of seeing the full narrative of the passage is vital. Students who dealt with more than just the first segment of the passage usually found some interesting comedic significances to comment upon: in full texts, endings are places where important significances emerge, and the same can be true of excerpts. For instance, the signposting of future potential problems in *The Taming of the Shrew* and the refusal to compromise and find harmony in *Twelfth Night* were seen at the ends of both passages. It is worth encouraging students to deal with the full sweep of the narrative in any given extract.

While the thrust of the task is around the significance of the comedy, students are also cued to write about dramatic method. This should be done in an integrated way, rather than as a standalone paragraph. Students are advised to make their ideas the centrepiece of their response, while acknowledging what is happening dramatically, and how this adds to meanings. So for instance, in the *Twelfth Night* passage, some students commented upon the dramatic entrance of Malvolio, which in performance often provokes laughter because he is usually still clad in yellow stockings. Yet a deeper point is the way in which that comedy works on levels of knowledge: as Malvolio enters, it is worth considering what each character (and the audience) know about the Malvolio plot. Orsino and Olivia's opening dialogue is amusing perhaps because they have genuinely assumed Malvolio is mad, whereas Shakespeare has positioned the audience so they have superior knowledge and comedy arises from how these misunderstandings unravel. The movement of this scene from misconception to revelation (for both Malvolio and Olivia) was analysed in some excellent answers.

*The Taming of the Shrew* passage also seemed to be a turning point in the play's narrative, where Katherina appears to have been tamed. Several students commented on the repartee between the spouses and the different ways in which Katherina's actions could signify a sort of comedic victory for Petruchio or a deception on the part of a knowingly manipulative Katherina. There were also

plenty of interesting comments on the entrance of Vincentio, which not only provokes humour in terms of his interaction with Katherina and Petruchio, but also introduces a further comedic problem given his intention to visit his son. Here is a good example of how comment on the significance of a dramatic moment in the narrative can allow students to say something about the ways in which comedy works. For instance, Vincentio's arrival shows how in comedy, the introduction of further problems in an already complex set of disguises and deceptions causes amusement, because it allows the audience to anticipate farcical situations which lie ahead.

One further way to think about how dramatic choices give rise to comedic significance is to think about who is on stage and how the dialogue is distributed between the characters. In *The Taming of the Shrew* passage, the stage directions indicate not only the spouses but also Hortensio (whose asides appear to make him step out of the world of the play), but also the servants. Here we see how often comedies (unlike tragedies) are usually ensemble pieces - there is often a wider community which observes the ending phases of the play, usually because comedy's journey (a literal one in this case) is towards harmony and a public celebration of success. Clearly, this passage is a key point in that journey whereby the couple seem to be operating in a more collaborative manner in a public situation.

The *Twelfth Night* passage also features several characters whose dialogue is more confessional and accusatory than quickfire. Here too, there is a sense of the community of the play, yet the movement is towards continued hostility rather than social harmony. If students can see how these sorts of narrative events and dramatic choices give rise to interesting comedic significances, they will have plenty of value to say.

A final point to be made in regard to Section A is about the way in which links are made to the wider play. It is essential that the other parts of the play chosen are sensible choices which genuinely offer an illuminating correspondence to the concerns of the passage. For instance, commenting on the earlier appearances of Malvolio or the spat between the steward and Feste in the first act have clear links to the events of the passage. Likewise, citing the first, spiky meeting between Katherina and Petruchio, or how Katherina's final speech may appear to confirm the transformation seen in the passage also seems apt. What is less helpful is where students light upon a minor word or idea in a passage and then link it to a part of the play which is only loosely relevant to the passage. For instance, some students picked up on Orsino's use of the word 'madman' then wrote lengthy essays on the representation of madness in the play. Fortunately, such examples were rare and most answers focused on the meat of the extract, choosing relevant examples from the rest of the play which genuinely had a narrative and/or comedic link to the passage.

## **Section B**

In this section of the paper, the challenge offered to students is to respond to a view. Tasks invariably offer students a view which can genuinely be debated, it is entirely possible to argue firmly in favour or against the view in the task. There is no requirement to offer a two-sided debate, although many students choose to do so. What matters is the quality of argument and the way in which points are made and shown. Examiners reported reading some very well-argued and convincing answers on both texts. Many students possessed excellent textual knowledge and knew how to structure an argument, driving their points home in an assured manner. Their responses had a shape and a confidence which came from knowing the details of the text.

The best answers seen in the Comedy paper this summer all shared similar hallmarks. Of all of these, the most important thing is to deal with the terms in the task. As an example, question 3 asked the extent to which students agreed with this statement:

*'Shakespeare characterises Lucentio as a romantic, engaging and triumphant lover.'*

When approaching this task, it should be apparent that the key focus is Lucentio. Therefore, on a basic level, the task finds out if students know what Lucentio says and does in the play; textual knowledge is absolutely vital. The task is about Lucentio and so the student's energies need to be applied to this character.

There are then three key terms with a comedic edge applied to Lucentio in the given view: 'romantic', 'engaging' and 'triumphant'. While students might give more weight to one of these terms in their response, the best answers dealt with all three terms. It should be clear that if the student works with these terms then they are naturally 'doing' comedic context. In fact, if they answer the question fully, they are naturally addressing all of the assessment objectives, so the mantra of 'answer the question' is demonstrated.

Effective answers are clearly dependent on text knowledge: if a student knows the details of the text, then they can produce well-supported points. Question 4 focused on the old men of the play, with Baptista and Gremio cited as characters for students to work with. Several first-rate responses were produced on this task and the key to these was knowledge of what the characters are shown to do and say. Thorough responses are rooted in the text, so the very best thing students can do is to work on their knowledge of the text.

Questions 5 and 6 also generated some well-structured responses in which arguments were driven home. The task on Sir Toby Belch also offered students three key comedic ideas to base their response on: 'riotous', 'festive figure' and 'delights audiences'. Once again, students who dealt with these terms invariably produced effective responses. Most students structured their responses as two-sided debates which looked at areas such as Sir Toby's entertaining qualities and then his less than pleasant treatment of Sir Andrew. There were some very effective responses which argued quite forcefully that Belch was anything but a character who delights audiences, so as ever, it is entirely possible to present a reading which argues a strong case for a single point of view, rather than a 'for/against' structure. Whichever way students choose to organise their response, knowing how to introduce a response, develop and extend points, marshal evidence, select the most useful parts of a text for the question and then bring an argument to a conclusion are key skills which students need to develop in their two years of study.

A final point to make about the sequencing of argument concerns central ideas. One of the things examiners consider when making judgments is how convincing the logic of an argument is. In question 6, students needed to see that they weren't only writing about disguise in the play, but specifically whether the adoption of disguise produced painful or positive outcomes. Some choices were more convincing than others. For instance, it would seem sensible to focus on areas such as Viola's disguise and Feste's adoption of the Sir Topas' persona. Most students did this, and there were other possibilities which, if carefully argued, worked in part. For instance, some responses looked at Olivia's mourning as a kind of disguise or Maria's imitation of Olivia's handwriting. There were instances, though, where the ideas themselves were less central; for example, it's harder for an examiner to go along with the idea that Orsino disguises his homosexual feelings by feigning heterosexual lovesickness, or that Fabian disguises his malice to keep his position. While these ideas might seem interesting and offbeat, it was the case that students struggled to make them

appear convincing. The best arguments usually made sensible choice of examples, then wrote about those examples in a detailed and fluent way.

### **Section C**

Many of the points already made about question focus and dealing with key terms in the task apply in Section C. It was pleasing to note that students all dealt with at least one of the pre-1900 drama texts as per the rubric, and also good to see that most responses divided their time fairly equally between their two texts. Students often wrote with real gusto in Section C and, in general, made sensible choices when presenting their views.

Question 7 was the slightly more popular task. Examiners reported enjoying reading some sharply focused responses which very quickly got down to business. In such answers, the spotlight is placed firmly on the most useful and sensible parts of the text to work with, so once again, the decisions that students make have a direct impact on the quality of their work. There were some students who tended to overlook the concept of ‘resourcefulness’ in question 7 which made their response less effective. Likewise, such responses also didn’t do much with the word ‘celebrates’, choosing to build a response solely around ‘power’. While these types of response obviously have relevance, it is harder to reach the higher mark bands with a partial treatment of a task.

Although the point has been made about reading tasks carefully, question 8 did give rise to issues for a handful of students. This task invited students to ‘Explore the significance of deception’. Clearly this type of task is an invitation to offer some thoughtful points about how deception is shown in comedic texts and what meanings (significances) arise from the deceptions shown. While many top band responses were seen, there were some students who warped the task. In such instances, students tried for example to argue that deception was less important than amusement, accompanied by an essay on amusing episodes in their texts. These type of responses struggled to show question focus.

A final point to make applies to all sections in the paper, but can be exemplified by an example drawn from Section C. While it is clear that this specification values theoretical approaches to literature, there are some students who are so keen to write about such reading positions that they forget to write about the texts themselves. Question 7 was focused on female characters and in some answers, there was a tendency to write about patriarchy, oppression, female silence etc. at the expense of what actually happens in the texts. Theoretical approaches can be very illuminating, but they are meant to shed light on the texts, rather than just being the focus themselves.

In conclusion, the June 2018 paper worked well for the majority of students.

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

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