

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 8693/11
Passages for Comment

GENERAL COMMENTS

All questions produced a full range of answers and were tackled fairly evenly, with no question appearing to cause any particular difficulties for candidates. Directed writing tasks produced entertaining and persuasive responses and in some cases helped redress weaker analytical responses on the set passages.

Some candidates still rely far too heavily on a feature-spotting approach when addressing questions on language and style; consequently, the development and structure of the material seems to be missed or not approached in any fashion. Similarly, other candidates elect to offer one paragraph exploring punctuation, say, or figurative language. Whilst such formulaic methods can help the candidate, they can also inhibit comments if candidates fail to recognize that the essential purpose should be to focus on the effects and qualities of specific words and phrases. It may be useful to advise candidates to highlight certain words and phrases on their question papers (this is not the same as using highlighting in the answer they submit); these highlights could then form the brief quotations they will use and comment on. Comments may explore the mood conveyed by such phrases or the types of qualities they bring to mind; working through the passage in this way allows candidates to see the material's development and structure and encourages them to see changes or contrasts in the extracts.

Time management seemed, on the whole, to be effective, although there were a handful of rubric infringements where candidates did not answer one part of the question.

COMMENTS ON SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

Question 1

- (a) Most answers identified the key characteristics of the extract. Nearly all candidates who did this question found it accessible and were able to pick points about Miss Wilmarth and Gerald Cruger's feelings towards her. The majority appreciated "Cruger's Compulsory Conversations" and focused on Gerald's resentment. The indirect free speech proved difficult for some, though, and a not insignificant minority wrote that Gerald told Miss Wilmarth that she was a horse with suitable expressions of indignation. Some candidates spent too much time on the first paragraph. However, a number clearly appreciated the situation and realised that Gerald spending time with Miss Wilmarth meant there was less time with his wife. Some of the best responses directly compared the two women – the practical Miss Wilmarth and the gentle Camilla who was interpreted to be like her flowers, "fragile and costly". The weaker answers came from those who tended to over-react to Gerald's behaviour and condemned him outright. They also tended to misinterpret the last paragraph and again thought Gerald very rude for telling Miss Wilmarth to "finish her oats". Other limited responses tended to paraphrase the physical descriptions of the characters.
- (b) On the whole, the writing task was adequately completed with regards to the tone and the content. The salutation format was occasionally omitted and some candidates adopted quite a formal style for a letter to a sister. Most candidates explored the appreciation Miss Wilmarth had for Mrs Cruger and how she felt very awkward in the presence of Gerald. Indeed, the voice of Miss Wilmarth was captured effectively by the majority of candidates and, at best, some answers successfully made tart observations and engaged creatively with the nurse's put-upon experience.

Question 2

- (a) Effective answers could empathise with the father, noting the weight of the family legacy and the father's attitude to parenting. They appreciated how the writer acknowledged that his father had also been a disciplinarian. It was difficult and these answers focused on the final paragraph and the idea of inheriting roles.

Indeed, there were some very extended and detailed analyses of this extract. Some were keen to point out the Oedipus complex in the family relationships. Most tried very hard to put forward an even-handed presentation of the father and the son. Weaker answers tended to pick out the terrible things the father did and how terrified the child had been. A number of candidates did not understand the military diction and how it conveyed the characterisation of the father as a disciplinarian.

- (b) The candidates' magazine articles were generally appropriate in style and tone, almost invariably advocating the harsh regime described in the extract; the majority could focus on the points that the father may well have made (including expressions of contrition). Some candidates misunderstood the task and rewrote the extract from the father's point of view rather than focusing on the task itself. Candidates must always ensure that they are clear about the objective and the audience.

Question 3

- (a) This was a popular choice which elicited largely well-informed answers, with candidates relishing the analysis of the town before and after the attack. Effective answers could closely and creatively engage with detail and patterns of imagery. Candidates had plenty to say even where the figures of speech were listed rather than analysed for effect. Indeed, nearly all could begin to analyse the language that described the silent town and then focus on the language used for the attack. Less secure answers were from those candidates who did not go into enough detail, frequently missing out the middle section and, in consequence, overlooking all the metaphors describing the people and the aeroplane.

- (b) The task seemed to be understood by most candidates. There was some real engagement demonstrated in this section with some excellent accounts of parallel events. Effective answers gave a general impression of calm and then there was some disturbance. A good number of responses involved variations of the original passage in that they depicted urban disasters: terrible public transportation accidents, rioting, mass murders, etc. (including a good number of renditions of terrorist attacks). A minority of candidates opted for a less derivative topic: descriptions of jungle attacks, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis were all vividly described. On the whole, the material was always apt, adopting content to style and purpose, though less effective answers did not sustain a journalistic approach.

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Some candidates still rely far too heavily on a feature-spotting approach when addressing questions on language and style; consequently, the development and structure of the material seems to be missed or not approached in any fashion. Similarly, other candidates elect to offer one paragraph exploring punctuation, say, or figurative language. Whilst such formulaic methods can help the candidate, they can also inhibit comments if candidates fail to recognize that the essential purpose should be to focus on the effects and qualities of specific words and phrases. It may be useful to advise candidates to highlight certain words and phrases on their question papers (this is not the same as using highlighting in the answer they submit); these highlights could then form the brief quotations they will use and comment on. Comments may explore the mood conveyed by such phrases or the types of qualities they bring to mind; working through the passage in this way allows candidates to see the material's development and structure and encourages them to see changes or contrasts in the extracts.

Time management seemed, on the whole, to be effective, although there were a handful of rubric infringements where candidates did not answer one part of the question.

COMMENTS ON SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

Question 1

- (a) This was a popular choice. Nearly all candidates who tackled it found it accessible, and nearly all appreciated M.F.'s adherence to his culture. There was some secure understanding of the passage's structure and the sense of privilege that the writer felt as he experienced a different world. Less effective answers came from candidates who tended not to go into enough detail and ignored some of the material, focusing just on the opening and final paragraphs.
- (b) Better candidates produced some very enthusiastic responses. Less secure answers seemed to ignore the rubric requirement for some sense of excitement. The letter format was adhered to well by most candidates. Answers at the lower end of the range copied whole phrases from the original extract; candidates should be reminded that they must use their own words as far as possible in a directed writing assignment unless the word or phrase is unavoidable.

Question 2

- (a) Most of those candidates who opted for this question had a perceptive understanding of the speech and an ability to analyse the persuasive techniques for effect. There was good analysis of the "gleaming towers" and the "froth" as well as the metaphor of the "global casino". The good answers also focused on the ending and commented on the idea of government "without heart". Indeed, the speech seemed to lead automatically to deductions about language, a process which Examiners were pleased to see. Even candidates at the lower end of the range opting to answer this question were able to explain some of the points and comment on the impact of the "According to the WTO..." anaphoric statements in the passage's second half. That said, the less secure responses tended to rely on feature spotting of rhetorical devices without taking their effects and purpose into consideration – valid identification becoming self-limiting in nature.

- (b) The writing task was also quite successful for many candidates who carefully included the techniques found in the original. An interesting range of topics on urgent issues was written – e.g. human rights, climate change, unemployment, gangs, poverty – and such topics were approached seriously. Candidates getting marks lower down the range had the idea of writing to persuade but often found it difficult to choose a topic and, in consequence, their writing lacked urgency and a persuasive bent; a lack of commitment to a topic often resulted in a lack of authenticity and effectiveness of writing.

Question 3

- (a) This was a very popular choice. Students seemed to enjoy the analysis and commentary on the failing restaurant. Their understanding of nuances was often very obvious in the favourable reviews which ensued. Most were able to comment on the descriptions of the food but some failed to explain the impact. Answers at the top of the range appreciated the opening philosophical section and also acknowledged some of the irony present in the passage. They also commented on the range of emotions the writer experienced. Less secure answers focused just on the criticism and, although some commented on the point that “we all had potential once”, they failed to develop this thought. Such responses did not always seem to understand what a “review” was and thought the writer had been very ill-mannered.
- (b) On the whole, the writing responses were generally adequate although some candidates failed to focus on the food at all. Some did not resist the temptation to launch into autobiography or personal confession, doing so at the expense of mentioning the central aspects of the original extract.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 8693/21
Composition

GENERAL COMMENTS

Examiners reported some very imaginative and thoughtful material being submitted this session; some scripts were very enjoyable indeed to read.

There was a good differentiated range of candidates, but a significant number are entering this examination whose grasp of English is not secure at this level. It needs to be stressed that AS is a stage on from IGCSE/O Level (and equivalent) standard. The most frequent language problems were in pronoun confusion, syntax errors, uneven punctuation, lack of paragraphing, and (above all) tense confusion. (The latter was particularly marked in responses to Questions 2 and 4.)

There were very few rubric infringements and time seemed to be managed well by most candidates. Some did spend too long planning work, though, at the expense of developing their final piece. Candidates who do not endeavour to tackle all aspects of the questions chosen only deprive themselves of marks.

Teachers need to emphasise to candidates the importance of paying attention to

- purpose
- audience
- format
- tone

in their writing. The clues are in the questions: candidates should pay more attention to their wording. They should realise that a formulation such as 'in your writing you should...' is part of the question; they should not simply follow the general drift and ignore the specific instructions. The questions offer help and candidates should be urged to take advantage of this. Genre distinctions should be kept by the candidates using the appropriate style and format. 'Opening chapters' should be treated as such.

Common errors were in the following:

- failure to distinguish past perfect and past simple tenses
- wrong prepositions to verbs
- wrong tense use in conditionals
- not moving back a tense in reported speech
- shifting tenses in narrative frames
- pronoun confusion
- misuse of participles: past -ing forms
- syntax errors: adverbs, SVO structures

Candidates should be grammatically prepared for formal expression at this level. Many would benefit from revision of sentence types and mood.

Examiners noted a tendency to use the lower case 'i' to denote the first person pronoun (text-style) and to treat the comma as a full-stop.

COMMENTS ON INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS

Section A: Narrative/Descriptive/Imaginative

Question 1

This was a popular choice and prompted some thoughtful and evocative responses. Good answers elicited sharp and focused contrasts, whilst less secure answers tended to explore narrative rather than descriptive aspects. Examiners were sometimes disappointed by the absence of differentiation in setting and atmosphere. Some candidates had simply tacked the shopping onto a prepared narrative piece, while some concentrated on the preparations – both of which made the effect rather pedestrian.

Question 2

There were some imaginative and engaging responses, with 'soldier' interpreted in a variety of ways. Essays were effective when handled as an opening to a story, with good structure towards a dramatic/sensitive narrative. Weaker essays gave information rather than developing a narrative which built up mood and character. Often noticeable – when dialogue was used – was a laxity in use of punctuation.

Question 3

This was tackled by fewer candidates. Answers were on the whole competent but seldom inspired. Most were about fame and disaster, and sometimes the 'crucial point' was not obvious or was a bit predictable. Opportunities to create a character as well as base it on reality saw some candidates attempt stories based on figures as diverse as Adolf Hitler, Nelson Mandela and Frank Sinatra.

Question 4

This was by far the most popular choice in Section A and, when narrative and descriptive control were applied, produced some very successful imaginative work. When material was clearly unplanned there were some rambling and unmeasured responses. The ostensible openness of the question may have tempted some to offload 'prepared' material, failing adequately to deal with tension and the unknown. Some used the opportunity to descend into general references to 'the creature' and a 'I couldn't believe it' style of narrative. Other candidates mixed genres and created confusion by going off into preoccupations of their own inadequately linked to the task. Effective answers, by contrast, continued the style of the opening and had a mix of descriptive and narrative elements, with an effective suspenseful structure.

Section B: Discursive/Argumentative

Question 5

There were some very good and thoughtful insights offered by candidates here and some very personal essays were seen. Effective answers weighed up both viewpoints or even more bravely took one of the perspectives and built their views strongly around the selected issue. There were interesting and sometimes culturally revealing interpretations of 'state control' and 'protection', and sometimes a display of a high level of political awareness. For every candidate who just discoursed on the state of the world, there was one who carefully analysed political, economic, psychological, religious and other factors.

Question 6

This was a popular choice and stimulated some entertaining and engaging answers. Many candidates showed a good grasp of promotional type material and selected phrases and vocabulary appropriate to the task. Most negative comments however, did not particularly use a report form or style; often these had the register of comic sarcasm rather than a sophisticated response with adequate reasoning. A significant number descended into grotesque exaggeration. Those who deftly inserted the stiletto and twisted it were few and very welcome! However, mostly, the responses were full of verve and energy all the same.

Question 7

This produced some mixed responses. There were some very good and well argued contrasting pieces, but also some material which did not always develop exemplification in greater depth. At the top of the range some imaginative answers dealt effectively with the demands of the question, especially with respect to

technology and health. The most successful candidates realised that this was a discursive / a task and that their comments had to be explained and justified, not simply listed. Responses thoughtful and considered were fairly balanced between optimism and pessimism.

Question 8

The two-part question allowed for structured answers, the best of which were skilfully ironic. Good answers established clear and proficient contrasts between the two letters, using illustrations perceptively and with precision. Less effective answers tended to be rather brief and occasionally unfocused. Weaker answers did not really engage what might be 'terrifying'. Some misunderstood the question and wrote two general letters about being young rather than considering the era in which we live.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Teachers need to emphasise to candidates the importance of paying attention to

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in their writing. The clues are in the questions: candidates should pay more attention to their wording. They should realise that a formulation such as 'in your writing you should...' is part of the question; they should not simply follow the general drift and ignore the specific instructions. The questions offer help and candidates should be urged to take advantage of this. Genre distinctions should be kept by the candidates using the appropriate style and format. 'Opening chapters' should be treated as such.

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COMMENTS ON INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS

Section A: Narrative/Descriptive/Imaginative

Question 1

This title prompted some very imaginative and atmospheric writing. Strong answers created a sense of menace and danger; less secure answers tended to take a more narrative approach. Some answers spent too long asking the same questions such as 'What was that noise?' and did not offer sustained development. The best pieces used imagination well, creating mystery and seizing the chance to describe vividly.

Question 2

This was popular and all kinds of 'New Worlds' seemed to be on show - from discovering land and sea to the thoughts of the narrator as he was being born. There was plenty of enjoyable material and evidence. Those who used this task as an opportunity for contrast (e.g. that between a narrator's original country, and her/his final destination) often described shopping as a 'new world', producing rather mundane or forced answers. The best created a very palpable sense of setting and atmosphere.

Question 3

This was tackled by some candidates in an effective and controlled fashion. By and large they produced some steady and competent responses, with the best answers delaying a surprise or twist until the end of the piece. There was a great deal of thematic variety, ranging from adultery to murder to cheating. Many got involved with – and some seemed to excel in – describing feelings of guilt and anguish. However, some were plain declarations of love, usually ignoring 'psychology and motivation'. Most managed to write something relevant, though the biggest weakness was a tendency to leave the 'confession' element too implicit.

Question 4

This was a very popular choice. There were some very good answers which sustained the opening note of complete disorientation throughout but also some very unclear and unplanned compositions which tended to confuse tenses. Scenes from television and film were sometimes used here, which often made the account rather predictable; and the questions posed to guide the response were occasionally misused, with candidates repeating the questions along the lines of 'where am I?' and 'where am I going?' The best answers displayed the use of vivid imagery and figurative language, and effectively structured their ideas.

Section B: Discursive/Argumentative

Question 5

This was answered well on the whole, with many candidates exploring both points of view in an informed and well illustrated way. Some knew aspects of history in extremely close detail, and were able to tackle the question with understanding, apposite examples and even deep feeling. There were a good number of references to Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Most agreed with the statement. However, a small percentage of candidates wrote about peace as opposed to violence in very general terms, without focusing on the 'protest' aspect. Weaker candidates vaguely generalised about peace rather than considering what 'change' might mean.

Question 6

This was grasped well by many candidates, and they wrote organised and relevant material supported by a strong sense of purpose and audience. There was plenty of useful advice for ageing readers. Some candidates, however, forgot 'older readers' and the 'advisory' focus. Better candidates identified areas specifically, like travel/own interests or hobbies/voluntary activities, making sure that their tone was encouraging rather than condescending.

Question 7

This prompted some very strong opinions and effective compositions. Some dismissed the whole idea with relish but others displayed a fascination and sense of wonder at the very possibility of other forms of life even existing. The best answers demonstrated a strong use of analytical and persuasive language, employing scientific knowledge to discuss the meaning of 'life'. Weaker candidates found it difficult to structure an argument on this topic, with the line between fact and fiction blurring. On the whole, though, there were many very full, well-informed answers, which suggested that this topic is of great interest to candidates of this age group.

Question 8

This was very popular. There were many effective answers which explored aspects of conduct and morality in great detail. These often built on the recipe idea inherent in 'ingredients'. Answers were, on the whole, well planned and an appropriate register was employed by the majority of candidates. Some failed to

capitalise on 'public speaking competition at school', which gave them a particular audience on which to focus. Many, though, captured the appropriate tone. Many wrote with conviction and energy, exhorting the audience to define success in their own terms. Sometimes there was a tendency to over-use inappropriate colloquialisms, but in general rhetorical language was used effectively in this question.

