

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 8693/11

Passages for Comment

GENERAL COMMENTS

The vast majority of candidates made good attempts to engage with the style and language of the passages and to write for the specified audience and purpose set by the directed writing tasks. To achieve higher reward some candidates need to ensure that they move beyond feature spotting in a kind of tick list approach and focus on commenting on the qualities and effects conjured up by specific words and phrases. It may assist candidates to colour code the passages and then plan their answers around this coding in order to prioritise and focus on key quotations that can be explored in further depth in addressing questions about style and language. Emphasis needs to be centred on comment on rather than mere identification of certain techniques and terminology. Areas answers need to attend to and really explore are ideas, themes and meanings.

Generally, candidates produced better responses to the directed writing questions and, in some instances, such responses helped to redress the balance where answers to the questions about style and language were not always so secure.

In general, time management was sound and effective.

COMMENTS ON INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS

Question 1

- (a) This proved to be a popular question with many thorough responses produced. Many candidates were aware of the potential humour throughout the passage and noted the changes in situation and the narrator's mood. Key aspects of differentiation were: the degree to which candidates engaged with details of language and imagery (there was an abundance of choice), and ability to distinguish in detail the different attitudes to travelling and sightseeing represented by the narrator and Olivia (beyond labelling the former as pessimistic and the latter optimistic). Most candidates grasped the idiomatic cup half-empty/full, and a number of answers made informed comments on the genre and audience. For higher reward, some candidates needed to develop a closer awareness of variations in register, use of different sentence types, level of difficulty of word choice, variation of tone and exaggeration. They tended to engage almost exclusively in feature spotting without further development of the features' effects, noting differences in sentence length without exploring how the shorter ones often registered the narrator's trepidation (lines 43 and 44) and the longer ones showed engagement with the surroundings made possible by the narrator's relative sense of safety (lines 34-37). On the whole, most candidates sensed the structure and progression of the passage effectively and touched upon humorous aspects of the material.
- (b) There were some lively responses to this question and some effective ones were written amusingly with phrases such as "You should have seen her face!" and "Her look of horror." They captured Olivia's bemusement incisively and maintained her positive outlook on life in spite of any predicaments that might arise. To secure higher reward, some candidates needed to move beyond paraphrase or offering simple recounts of the events of the visit. A few candidates thought the narrator was an agoraphobic and were unable to tune into some of the irony in the original extract.

Question 2

- (a) Responses to this text were more variable. There were some effective pieces in which the mood and style of the original piece succinctly and to pleasing effect; the ephemeral nature of the original was combined with a flowing ever-changing style as different topics came into view. Such answers tended to focus on the ambience. Other answers needed to develop this aspect of the writing rather than highlighting narrative elements. A few tended to outline a sequence of events explaining how the house has come into being.
- (b) Effective answers explored the mysterious elements of the original extract, commenting on the use of abrupt dialogue, the anonymous nature of the speakers, the use of description and the range of brief phrasing. Such answers were able to trace aspects of these elements in their own directed writing and to present illuminating comparative analysis. Other candidates sensed some of these elements, but to secure higher marks their answers needed to comment on the qualities and effects evoked by particular words and phrases in a little more depth and consistency. Some candidates needed to ensure that they paid equal attention to both the original extract and their own writing. At times, one was analysed fully and the other hardly at all.

Question 3

- (a) Candidates were comfortable with the style and content of the speech and some very analytical responses were produced accordingly. Most candidates could refer to the fact that Bush was using personal pronouns to include all Americans and the effect of this, the use of rhetorical questions and the feeling of hope that emerges in the second half of the passage, as well as detecting his use of religious and patriotic flourishes, his references to past American adversities, and the ways in which they were overcome. Such answers made constructive comments about the use of voice, tone, proper names and terms of address. Some answers needed to move beyond paraphrase and the general assertion that Bush was using 'simple' language. A few answers tended to focus on content rather than exploring aspects of language, style and rhetorical devices.
- (b) The directed writing was often realistic, confident and perceptive. The recent mining disaster in Chile, fires and earthquakes (perhaps following the references in line 47, although Haiti and not San Francisco was the most popular earthquake disaster zone), and tsunamis were the most popular examples chosen. Such answers offered a persuasive mixture of an initial negative tone moving on to a positive and uplifting ending. These responses drew on the techniques and effects of the original speech with a pleasing degree of skill. Some answers needed to move beyond a close imitation of the sequence of ideas of the original extract. Some candidates chose to write about another US-based disaster and so found it difficult to differentiate between Bush's original comments in (a) and those he might plausibly make about another country's trials and tribulations.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 8693/12
Passages for Comment

GENERAL COMMENTS

The vast majority of candidates made good attempts to engage with the style and language of the passages and to write for the specified audience and purpose set by the directed writing tasks. To achieve higher reward some candidates need to ensure that they move beyond feature spotting in a kind of tick list approach and focus on commenting on the qualities and effects conjured up by specific words and phrases. It may assist candidates to colour code the passages and then plan their answers around this coding in order to prioritise and focus on key quotations that can be explored in further depth in addressing questions about style and language. Emphasis needs to be centred on comment on rather than mere identification of certain techniques and terminology. Areas answers need to attend to and really explore are ideas, themes and meanings.

Generally, candidates produced better responses to the directed writing questions and, in some instances, such responses helped to redress the balance where answers to the questions about style and language were not always so secure.

In general, time management was sound and effective.

COMMENTS ON INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS

Question 1

- (a) Candidates seemed to engage well with this question and most were able to pick up on the humour and self-mockery of the piece. The better responses understood the way in which the writer deliberately exaggerated the challenge and danger to create humour. They were able to focus on the narrator's self-mockery, his fractious relationship with Tony (especially the map-reading mishap), and the descriptions of Renato and the German bikers. For higher reward some candidates needed to ensure that they commented on the descriptions of the Gulf of Gonnese and the changing landscape inland (lines 51-61); they missed out on a valuable opportunity to comment on the narrator's unfettered engagement with the natural beauty of Sardinia (most notably through some detailed similes) and hence some of his most powerful descriptive writing. Some candidates appear to have struggled to reach the second half of the passage and thus primarily confined their comments to the narrator's relationship with Tony and the navigation error in the first five paragraphs. Candidates need to make sure that they try to give adequate time to all sections of the material, perhaps again highlighting how the use of colour coding as a means of prioritizing certain words and phrases for comment could prove to be a positive benefit. Less secure answers misunderstood the purpose of the piece and became side-tracked into examining how it was a persuasive piece of writing, instead of recognising the way in which it was a humorous retelling of an adventure.
- (b) Most candidates tried to inject some humour (mostly focused again on the characters' relationship and another misguided and thus disastrous choice of activity). The most effective pieces appear to have stemmed from candidates' good knowledge of their countries' various wilderness areas and the range of outdoor pursuits available (rafting and canoeing, long-distance hikes). Answers ranged from hiking in Croatia to canoeing up the Amazon. Less effective responses relied on another map-reading mishap as the main plot device, usually in relation to a non-physical activity (off-road motor sports being popular but perhaps not the most fruitful category of activity), with little attempt to describe the terrain being traversed or the narrator's feelings about what they are doing and what they encounter.

Question 2

- (a) Most candidates quickly recognised the wife's envy and a good number picked up on the fence metaphor and feeling of entrapment. Others sensitively picked up on the way in which the contrast of their dreams revealed much about the tension between the two characters and their different feelings. They also could see the husband's self-centeredness and how the childish dreams reflected this. A useful point of differentiation was whether the candidate understood the value of third-person narrative perspective and the vested interests of the two main characters. Some candidates needed to avoid taking sides (the wife's mostly) because, in such cases, there was a tendency simply to comment on the husband's perceived failings without taking due notice of his numerous attempts to support her, and to miss the comic effects created by the representation of the midwife. Less secure answers tended to rely on a feature-spotting approach and needed to engage more with aspects of language and style.
- (b) The format of the letter and the attitude of the husband were readily reproduced and there were a number of candidates who could choose a style that had some interest and some of the flavour of the original. Most candidates focused – as directed – on what the husband thought of his wife (and her resorting to the assistance of the 'New Age' midwife) and his prognostications on their marriage's future. Some very perceptive responses focused on the husband pleading his side of the situation. Lower scoring answers only related the events that had precipitated the mandated request to stay at the friend's house and they needed to explore the psychological aspects of the original passage in greater depth.

Question 3

- (a) Most candidates were usually able to understand the context and purpose of the passage. They quickly identified the desperate tone of these diary entries, and effective answers explored the emotional detachment displayed by Scott and his disillusionment and perseverance. Such answers also tended to focus on the 'desperate struggle' comment in the first entry and followed through its implications in the second and third entries. Other candidates focused primarily on the three plot strands – Scott's temperature readings and thoughts about the cold, his disappointment on reaching the Pole second (although 'good-bye to most of the day-dreams!' rarely elicited any comment), and Evans's physical decline (although often missing the significance of a month transpiring between the second and third diary entries); for higher reward they needed to consider register, changes in tone and increasing use of negative language. A few candidates did not see that this was a non-fiction passage.
- (b) In cases where candidates recognised the need to address the public ('newspaper article'), the responses about Scott's leadership achieved the required degree of focus on the man in an appropriate tone and register, combining measured praise for his courage whilst encapsulating the sense of physical and mental anguish involved in the experience. In such responses the harsh conditions were evoked and the disillusionment and exhaustion were clear. Other answers needed to be less upbeat and flippant about the whole adventure, some even treating it as an extreme challenge akin to the cycle holiday of Question 1. There is no requirement for candidates to divide their writing into columns to look like a newspaper article; in fact this can be counterproductive in taking up valuable time.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 8693/13
Passages for Comment

GENERAL COMMENTS

The vast majority of candidates made good attempts to engage with the style and language of the passages and to write for the specified audience and purpose set by the directed writing tasks. To achieve higher reward some candidates need to ensure that they move beyond feature spotting in a kind of tick list approach and focus on commenting on the qualities and effects conjured up by specific words and phrases. It may assist candidates to colour code the passages and then plan their answers around this coding in order to prioritise and focus on key quotations that can be explored in further depth in addressing questions about style and language. Emphasis needs to be centred on comment on rather than mere identification of certain techniques and terminology. Areas answers need to attend to and really explore are ideas, themes and meanings.

Generally, candidates produced better responses to the directed writing questions and, in some instances, such responses helped to redress the balance where answers to the questions about style and language were not always so secure.

In general, time management was sound and effective.

COMMENTS ON INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS

Question 1

- (a) Most candidates were able to engage with the feelings of anxiety and excitement felt by the writer at various stages of the passage with at least some understanding. All candidates worked their way through the passage, effective answers identifying features and commenting on their effects with proficiency. Strong candidates noted the change from past tense demarcating the preparations for the dive, and the narrator's later, retrospective admission of a lack of interest in the wreck in favour of the fish species he describes, to the use of the present tense employed to describe most of the events that unfold once the narrator is in the water. Other candidates needed to move on from gleaning relevant points throughout the extract (mostly focusing on diving jargon and the narrator's self-referential comments) so that they explored the unfolding structure of the passage and the qualities and effects conveyed by individual words and phrases.
- (b) The directed writing responses were mostly effective and engaging. Providing a source for the bubbles in line 47 (the most popular explanations were many divers working hard to rescue an injured colleague or a colleague whose breathing apparatus has been damaged by a shark) was usually the means of creating a narrative thread candidates used to connect the original extract and their continuations; thus, many accounts sensibly ended with a resolution of that particular problem. Some candidates ignored the bubbles altogether (or accounted for them in passing) and focused on the narrator's own ascent (attempts to avoid the diminishing cognitive function due to narcosis – 'Stay calm', 'deep shallow breathing' etc.), locating Richard again and the boost in morale that would entail, or describing the narrator's efforts to locate and board Voyager in inclement conditions (the hurricane reference being picked up). Some responses included the approach of a shark and some left us in suspense but others described getting away. Others focused on sudden panic and then contrasted it with arriving on the surface and describing the view compared to that under water.

Question 2

- (a) This was generally well answered. Again nearly all candidates who attempted it were able to engage with it and were able to focus on the ending with the description of the miniature. Stronger responses showed an appreciation of the boy's absorption by the comic book he is currently reading (as opposed to those he has dispensed with); his judgement of the (only slightly older) teenagers in the Chinese restaurant (in opposition to the imagery suggesting his loneliness and diminished sense of self-worth); and, the significance of the parody of the creation story (lines 50-51 and following) and whether there is a degree of healthy self-mockery attendant in that action. Again, there was a high incidence of candidates who successfully worked their way right through the passage. Effective answers found plenty of language to analyse whilst the less secure ones engaged mostly in feature spotting and based their commentaries on the changes in the boy's mood and the oppositional property of darkness and light image patterns.
- (b) Candidates produced mostly adequate or better responses to this directed writing task. There was some very perceptive writing attributing the boy's behaviour to an adolescent 'phase', deflated self-esteem after his father had (plausibly) walked out on the family, even autism, and asking the (usually female) friend for advice based on her own child raising experiences. Other candidates needed to be less involved in catching up with an old friend because their concern about their strange son was left to a last minute cry for help.

Question 3

- (a) Candidates who tackled this question usually engaged with it and began to analyse the effects of the descriptions of the fireworks. Effective answers went into detail and enjoyed matters such as the comparison of the Chinese fireworks to the Indian ones – 'sound like wind from vegetarian twins' - and the effect of the descriptions of the fathers who took over the lighting of the fireworks as being 'back in shorts'. The means by which her growing indignation is registered was explored quite perceptively by many candidates. Other candidates needed to grasp the writer's sense of dissatisfaction and disquiet in more depth and to explore the qualities and effects evoked by individual words and phrases. They could find something to say about, for example, attitudes and about the wide range of choices of expression. Examples of onomatopoeia in the description of the fireworks and their names could have received more attention.
- (b) The directed writing answers were generally good at taking on the role of the disgruntled visitor and focusing on audience and purpose. Effective answers showed carefully persuasive writing underpinned by a sense of close control and certainty. Other candidates needed to register the requirement to write a letter of complaint to a newspaper (formal register required); they tended either informally to recount the writer's negative experiences (lack of sleep, possibility of personal injury) or, at the other extreme, rage against and condemn the citizenry of Mumbai for appalling child-rearing practices and/or their police force for gross negligence without any regard for local religious and cultural imperatives as are registered in the original extract.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 8693/21
Composition

General Comments

In general, there was a high level of good writing across a large number of Centres. If occasionally able writers drifted away from the task or wrote inappropriately, they were very much in the minority, with most fully focused on the task in hand.

A 600-900 words length for each composition is stipulated, but many candidates wrote too little, at around 500 words, which was effectively self-penalising. None wrote beyond the 900 word limit.

There seemed to be more confusion with tenses this session than has been seen in the past, and in lower scoring answers (including some cases of candidates who did not seem to have an adequate standard of English to make entry at this level appropriate) problems with tense could impede an essay's flow.

The overwhelming majority of candidates allocated their time in the exam well, dividing it evenly between the two answers.

Comments on Individual Questions

Question 1

This was a fairly popular choice, and it produced some effective and varied responses. Some candidates focused on future worlds with some skill and panache. Most responses were of the post-apocalyptic variety (with quite a few candidates providing plot details reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (perhaps inspired by a film adaptation)). A few were of the 'return to the dawn of time' variety. Even the lower scoring responses attempted to produce suitably desolate descriptions of location and their protagonists' thoughts and feeling about surviving inhospitable conditions. This question produced some of the most descriptive pieces of writing seen this session.

Question 2

This was the most popular of the questions on the paper. Content was often mundane and/or involved gruesome murder and kidnapping in large part. More thoughtful planning would have assisted some candidates' performances. Some candidates attempted to create a sense of closure in unfortunately hackneyed, contrived ways that diffused most of the suspense and tension they had laboured to create. By contrast, there were some competent stories showing a good grasp of how to handle suspense writing. These candidates worked hard to make gradually manifest an originally unspecified, or at least latent, threat to the protagonist's well-being (often a form of stalking), or that of a loved one.

Question 3

This title produced some reflective and effective personal writing, occasionally a little anecdotal in tone; many reflected on holidays or visits; others wrote about being in the examination room when they could be doing something else. Candidates clearly relished the opportunity to engage in some autobiographical writing. However, a good number could have expended more thought about potential situations in the planning stage. Many struggled to produce pieces featuring clearly contrasting lexis – a few moments to create suitable word banks would have been time very well spent. They tended to produce bare narratives nearly devoid of characterisation and the description of settings

Question 4

This task tended to elicit rather conventional responses on the whole, sometimes devoted to the fixating about meeting a favourite boy/girl at school or in a shop or on a plane. By contrast, there were more effective answers aware of more interesting potentials for 'romance' writing. Generally, though, there was far too much attention on the romantic possibilities without due consideration of the question's requirement to 'create an unusual setting'. The majority of the narratives unfolded prosaically, at parties or in clubs, at schools or colleges and in cafes, but with limited attention paid to what it was that made the setting unusual.

Question 5

This was a popular choice and elicited some strong and well-argued, thoughtful answers. The most engaging were not afraid to take a strong line of argument while also exploring strong counter arguments. Weaker answers tended only to explain the potential pitfalls of LDCs receiving financial aid in the longer term (dependency on the donating nation(s)) without much sense of the (at least short term) pragmatic benefits of the aid being received in the first place; stronger answers clearly differentiated the forms aid could take (emergency food aid and essential infrastructure provision after a natural disaster; strategic investment in crucial industries; development loans for specific purposes and with defined terms from international bodies like the IMF, etc.) and the tangible, mutually-supportive end benefits (usually stronger trade links, political cooperation and defence pacts) that could accrue for both the recipient and donor nations.

Question 6

There were some strong contrasting pieces here, particularly those probing technological and scientific matters. Some high scoring candidates encapsulated a strong sense of voice and a keen sense of audience very well indeed. They broached a wide range of potential issues (usually environmental, economic and technological in nature) and explored each in some detail from both perspectives. Some of the better responses advocated various forms of materialism in the first piece, and ethical and spiritual considerations in the second, to very good effect. Weaker answers seemed unable to focus fully on the need for both an article and substantive content, and the objectivity and formality implied by the direction to write pieces published in a magazine did not seem to have been internalised. Some candidates wrote the pessimistic piece first and tended simply to provide 'solutions' to previously cited problems in the optimistic piece that followed.

Question 7

There were many focused and personal answers which drew on the candidates' own experiences. This was a question that elicited highly effective answers from candidates across a wide variety of school backgrounds. Some very good answers were based on a clear understanding of what might be very different experiences of education. The best answers adopted an objective perspective to explore, in a suitably comparative way, the various issues arising from differing levels of infrastructure, the availability (or otherwise) of learning materials, the differing levels of experience and expertise that may exist between the two sets of teachers, and the varying degrees of motivation amongst candidates from different candidate bodies.

Question 8

This was the least popular of the discursive/argumentative options. Answers tended to focus on beauty products or household goods and addressed the rubric of the question competently. The selection of a suitable 'product' was key here. Some ill-advised product choices hindered attempts to demonstrate how the chosen product is an essential part of the candidate's life. By contrast, one of the best responses carefully and passionately made the case for the continued availability of an inexpensive but highly effective brand of insulin (clearly a response based in personal experience). Other plausible and persuasive pleas were made for the continued availability of specific auto parts and beauty products, sometimes to very humorous effect.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 8693/22
Composition

General Comments

In general, there was a high level of good writing across a large number of Centres. If occasionally able writers drifted away from the task or wrote inappropriately, they were very much in the minority, with most fully focused on the task in hand.

A 600-900 words length for each composition is stipulated on the paper, but many candidates wrote too little, at around 500 words, and this was effectively self-penalising. Candidates should be reminded that the instruction about word length is intended as reliable guidance on what is deemed (in exam conditions) a reasonable length for the suitable development of ideas if they are hoping to achieve marks in the higher bands. None wrote beyond the 900 word limit.

Technical accuracy and structure remained the main differentiators of performance criteria. There seemed to be more confusion with tenses this session than has been seen in the past, and in lower scoring answers (including some cases of candidates who did not seem to have an adequate standard of English to make entry at this level appropriate) problems with tense could impede an essay's flow.

The majority of candidates allocated their time in the exam well, dividing it evenly between the two answers, but there were some notable exceptions with those who wrote on Question 3 (see below).

Comments on Individual Questions

Question 1

This was a popular - and topical – choice and it produced a wide range of responses. There was a substantial amount of good descriptive writing, demonstrating nicely contrasting pieces with opposite moods sustained quite well. However, some responses tended to make the second half a mere negative image of the first - 'there were some pretty houses...now there were no pretty houses...' – concentrating more on the absence of what was there before, rather than what could actually be seen. Weaker answers usually reverted to travelogue mode and weak clichés.

Question 2

This was answered by many candidates and produced variable material. Some answers were highly driven by motivation and contrast, but other answers tended to be rather lacking in clear planning and direction. Some lacked the qualities of the required *opening* chapter, often reading more like a complete story. A lot focused on the idea of 'escape' at the expense of the 'moving'. Some spent a long time still in the city and hardly mentioned the rural area. Weaker answers tended to bias their writing too much to one way rather than the other, with extensive description of the city or romantic rural idylls with little sense of the effect of the move relating to outlook or mood. Some candidates had a completely different take on this given that rural life can involve walking to find water and fuel – and there were some powerful responses in this connection. There were also some amusing and effective descriptions of a city dweller's response to rural life.

Question 3

While this title resulted in some very derivative responses others used it more interestingly as a springboard to explore tribal life, folk stories and unusual customs. Recycled versions of vampire movies were popular. Weaker answers used anything which might relate to something going wrong to prompt a story and many drifted off into pseudo-detective writing rather than concentrating on actual suspense. Skill was needed to plan a good short story under timed conditions, and many did not reach any sense of resolution or ending.

Some candidates seemed to get so absorbed in the task that they overran and ended up with their Section B choice.

Question 4

This was the least popular of the Section A tasks. There were some effusive, unfocused answers where planning would have helped to shape responses more effectively. Weaker scripts displayed a confusion with verb tense and narrative perspective. Some wrote extensively on getting into the air and getting down again with little in between. The stronger responses were, by contrast, very strong: especially when candidates imagined that they had the power of flight themselves.

Question 5

This was a popular choice and produced many engaging and reflective answers; candidates demonstrated a good working knowledge of the material and often argued their cases with insight and strong exemplification. There was a large amount of informed debate which more than met the key criteria. Some well argued pieces had a clear understanding of the range of difficulties. The strongest answers revealed real knowledge and understanding. It was interesting to read the varying responses of candidates drawn from a range of different countries. Impressive subject knowledge was displayed by the highest scoring candidates, in their knowledgeable, balanced and detailed compositions. By contrast, some wrote very biased pieces based on (personal) experience of the UN within one particular country. Having adopted that approach many candidates prevented themselves from a more considered, wider view of the statement, which would have been appropriate to this task.

Question 6

Candidates responded to the challenge soundly and wrote some practical and encouraging pieces, often using rhetorical devices to good effect and displaying a sharp sense of audience. Quite a number of answers only picked up the 'ideal' part of the question and thus wrote about their idea of a perfect society rather than relating it to the environment or sustainability. Some of these managed to still write quite fluently on parallel issues. Some candidates tended to focus on human rights issues and it led to their running short of material to engage with the terms of the question.

Question 7

This was the most popular of the discursive/imaginative tasks, and it produced good number of sound answers. Churchill, Hitler, Jesus, Mandela and Obama were the prime examples most usually treated, but in stronger answers candidates referred to other examples from their own and other cultures, which resulted in a more interesting argument. Those who kept the 'born vs. made' quotation firmly in mind usually gave an interesting meditation on the topic, but quite a number of candidates lost focus and tended to discuss what makes a good leader, rather than engage in discussion about the actual topic, ignoring the nature/nurture dimension altogether. Some floundered because they did not refer to any examples. Some spent time on 'businessmen', often using the category as a synonym for leadership.

Question 8

This seemed to strike a chord with most of those who attempted it and there were some sound and practical pieces of advice put on offer in the strongest answers. Less secure answers drew on cliché and generalisation to the point where substance was lost. Some tended to confuse the two parts with references to savings accounts and investment as part of spending. Some did not understand the idiom, and wrote about having resources to protect against adverse climate conditions, reservoirs and irrigation, but in general the responses were clear and focused. Most candidates seemed to appreciate the appropriate tone for a newspaper article, but fewer managed to come up with a broad selection of examples for each side of the subject, so there was quite a lot of repetition in an attempt to reach the word length requirement.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 8693/23
Composition

General Comments

In general, there was a high level of good writing across a large number of Centres. If occasionally able writers drifted away from the task or wrote inappropriately, they were very much in the minority, with most fully focused on the task in hand.

A 600-900 words length for each composition is stipulated on the paper, but many candidates wrote too little, at around 500 words, and this was effectively self-penalising. Candidates should be reminded that the instruction about word length is intended as reliable guidance on what is deemed (in exam conditions) a reasonable length for the suitable development of ideas if they are hoping to achieve marks in the higher bands. None wrote beyond the 900 word limit.

Technical accuracy and structure remained the main differentiators of performance criteria. There seemed to be more confusion with tenses this session than has been seen in the past, and in lower scoring answers (including some cases of candidates who did not seem to have an adequate standard of English to make entry at this level appropriate) problems with tense could impede an essay's flow. This was particularly the case with responses to Question 4.

The majority of candidates allocated their time in the exam well, dividing it evenly between the two answers, but there were some notable exceptions with those who wrote on Question 3 (see below).

Comments on Individual Questions

Question 1

This question produced a very strong range of material with extremely diverse workplaces chosen; there were some highly imaginative, evocative and impressive pieces of descriptive writing, and many of these were sophisticated. Some of the workplaces chosen had unusual and interesting settings: the ocean for a sailor, a blacksmith's workshop and so forth, in which colours, sounds and textures could be brought to life effectively. There was a genuine sense of engagement with this task.

Question 2

This was the most popular of the narrative/descriptive/imaginative tasks. The continuations were generally effective and developed a sense of genre fairly quickly so that conventions of threats and surprises were established well. Good discriminators were a convincing description of the island setting (*place*) and some engagement with the feelings and thoughts of the characters created and, possibly, their various motivations and adaptability to their new surroundings (including survival skills and innate savvy), to help convey an appropriate sense of *mood*.

However, there was often a reluctance to do more than name the characters (certainly personalities or character traits were not in much evidence), and many answers merely treated the characters as two-dimensional entities (usually a captain and inexperienced, younger passengers), usually contending against the mooted storm and, quite often, inhospitable inhabitants on an island (usually one containing a jungle and, sometimes, a mysterious cave or abandoned settlement). Some wayward answers went straight into stories of country houses and haunting, overlooking the second and third sentences of the opening given in the question.

Question 3

This was far less popular, but it encouraged some really enjoyable and sophisticated responses. There was a variety of approach, with many showing strong evidence of motivation and sharp characterisation placed out against an ambience of fear and lawlessness. Conventions were explored to full effect. The question provided a positive prompt for story-telling and allowed candidates to place themselves clearly in terms of the narrator and then choose the time scale for the events. Most candidates wrote third-person narratives where, arguably, employment of the omniscient narrator allowed some explication of and engagement with the character's motivation. The best responses were usually rendered in the first person (to foreground the eponymous character's inner most feelings as well as the source of their motivation) and featured some convincing descriptive writing (such as locations the outlaw either entered or was made to defend if elements of the law encroached on his (it was invariably 'his' rather than 'her') turf). Most candidates seemed clear about the opening chapter aspect of this question.

Question 4

There was a good range of answers here, though a number seemed to miss the focus of the question. Some effective answers described strange and unknown worlds with some skill and awareness; but less secure work was marred by tense confusion. Another pitfall was the tendency to dwell on the imprisonment rather than the contrast between before and after. Weaker responses spent energy describing how awful it was in prison or arguing why they had been imprisoned unfairly. Some compositions were not very well planned – mostly material differences were noted in the present setting being explored, but with little sense of a plausible point of reference developed through an explanation of how the character remembers it from thirty years before. A number relied on emotional meetings with their families after all that time but some without any real focus on the changes.

Stronger candidates were able to draw on the contrasts over thirty years even when their own knowledge might be sketchy. The most successful tactic was to create a character vividly recalling how s/he remembers the community surrounding the prison in anticipation of the release, and then carefully noting the physical changes that have taken place in a thirty year hiatus once the character is a free person. The best responses focused on personal relationships (with parents and siblings usually) and how these have been transformed over thirty years of incarceration, a case of 'sights and sensations' being augmented by philosophical insights and profound emotions, respectively, too.

Question 5

This title prompted some very engaging and thoughtful work, especially where exemplification was woven into the material adroitly. Candidates showed good knowledge of the underpinning issues and even of the historical contexts of the arguments. A few thought that 'capitalism' referred to capital punishment or communism. Relatively few related it to their own situations or countries. Some very strong scripts were able to adduce pertinent quotations in the course of their discussions.

Question 6

This was answered unevenly; frequently the request to develop contrasting styles of language was not fully in evidence, making the two reports rather repetitive. Some candidates wrote with some sense of vision and understanding, in the polarised styles prescribed. Disasters were the favoured topics (terrible fires in conurbations being particularly popular), but political events tended to produce more focused, contrasting pieces of writing.

Question 7

There was a strong and informed sense of voice and audience in many of the responses to this. Candidates tended to side with the quotation, and presented their arguments with some degree of sophistication. However, many answers were not at all prepared to give much attention to dimensions such as traditional cultural systems and discussions could be one-sided, lacking an argumentative element. Some high scoring scripts picked up the distinct differences between the three approaches to foretelling the future given.

Question 8

This question was the most popular of the discursive/argumentative options, perhaps owing to the degree of engagement in many Centres with citizenship issues defining the 'individual and the state'. Candidates were able to draw on a range of suitable perspectives, and many remarked on the JFK-esque formulation of the talk's title.

Candidates argued their views quite effectively and persuasively in most cases, although a number were poorly expressed and vague. There was a strong sense of national pride in evidence in many answers and a determination to honour the qualities that the candidates saw in their environment and appreciation of the healthcare/education/national defence/welfare provision received. Some of the best responses came from candidates who extolled the virtue of their country – and particularly its leadership – and insisted that all had a duty to support the country by working for it once trained, pointing to patriotic, cultural and religious obligations on the part of the individual.

A good number understood that this was a speech and wrote accordingly, with rhetoric generally well used to pledge their loyalty to their country. There was usually a very sound conception of audience, not only with regard to the most immediate one of a scholastic peer group, but also taking into account the wider context of who had organised the competition in the first place.