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FOREWORD

This booklet contains reports written by Examiners on the work of candidates in certain papers. **Its contents are primarily for the information of the subject teachers concerned.**

GENERAL PAPER

GCE Advanced Subsidiary Level

Papers 8004/01 - 03
General Paper

General comments

Use of English

Some candidates present scripts in tiny writing, which can pose difficulties for Examiners struggling to interpret the script.

Many scripts contain too much repetition, particularly of phrases taken from the body of the essay and reiterated in the conclusion. The purpose of a conclusion is to summarise.

Spelling and punctuation continue to improve, but candidates would be well advised not to take into the examination with them a list of vocabulary that they are determined to utilise, whether or not such usage is appropriate. The desire to impress Examiners is understandable but what is looked for is relevance, together with apposite expression.

There has also been evidence of a new trend within essay writing that is not to be encouraged, the use of abbreviations. This tends to accompany a more colloquial style of expression, which is not the approach that would be expected in an academic essay.

Areas where Centres can aid their candidates in grammatical technique include: the use of the plural where the singular would be more appropriate; the misplacement of the apostrophe; the use of the hyphen; the erroneous use of mixed tenses within a sentence; and finally the tendency to write tautologically.

General content

Last year's report identified concern that candidates appeared to be selecting questions from predominantly the first half of the Paper, indicating that perhaps selections were being made in haste, as soon as a familiar topic was spotted. Any such decision taken on impulse was to be discouraged and it was heartening to see in this session that questions were attempted from all areas of the Paper.

There are two things that are lacking from many essays – namely, balance and exemplification. These are still the major areas that need to be addressed.

The wording of a question always contains direction for candidates. It is crucial that they take time to examine closely what the question is asking for, identifying the key or command words. More detail about this follows in the detailed assessment of questions. When the thrust of the question is located, the candidate needs to keep in mind the need to present a balanced argument or assessment. This balance is invariably aided by the use of plenty of relevant examples.

Most candidates are now aware of the need to define terms or the focus of the essay and this has resulted in much improved opening sections.

There are still those candidates who see a topic and write everything they know about it, offering a type of blanket cover, whereas what is needed is attention to the wording within the question.

Candidates should always ensure that they have enough time to reread what they have written and correct minor errors of style and expression.

As a final point in this section it is always a pleasure to read such a variety of answers that show evidence of determination to convey knowledge and opinion and generally reflect an awareness of the world in which we live. Examiners are impressed by breadth of viewpoint and the desire to expand experience through tackling subjects from a cross-curricular basis, which is one of the major strengths of this Paper for the candidature.

In conclusion, Centres may like to know that Examiners enjoyed reading the responses of candidates on the whole and remain impressed by the breadth of knowledge and interest displayed. The combination of awareness and a desire to express this in lucid terms are the hallmarks of General Paper.

Comments on specific questions

Paper 1

Question 1

How far do you agree that people from history considered “great” rarely deserve the title?

Despite the comment earlier that candidates are getting better at defining terms, this question did attract a number of responses where a definition was not proffered. These essays were not able to rise above the bottom end of an average mark for content.

There was an over-heavy concentration on Hitler, seen as the universal heavyweight and evil figure from the last century – yet without a supporting definition of greatness, this could not be verified. Greatness can be evaluated in a variety of ways, both positive and negative, but candidates needed to link their assessment to one or the other.

Many took war-time leaders as the focus of this question; in fact peace figures, such as Mother Theresa or Princess Diana, would have had relevance here. Even more interesting would have been any consideration of personalities who have crossed a divide, such as Nelson Mandela – from the role of freedom fighter/terrorist to premier and man of world peace. The difficulty with war leaders in the “Hitler camp” was that many candidates were prompted to offer emotive responses, without objective supportive exemplification and, as a consequence, balance was abandoned.

Question 2

“Not too much, nor too little.” To what extent is this a basis for a fulfilled life?

This was an abstract question that did not attract many responses; those who did attempt it saw the need to define the term but many took the opportunity to write at length from an anecdotal point of view. Their selected criteria were from food, drink, work, money and sex.

What the question needed was a balanced evaluation of the dangers of over-indulgence and under-provision. Few presented both. Many concentrated on over-indulgence, especially in terms of eating and obesity.

There was a tendency to preach about the amorality of excess. Simple examples would have given this approach more weight, for example the transmission of sexual diseases in a promiscuous society.

Question 3

Assess the most important areas for government spending

This was a very popular question and was largely answered in an informed and systematic way.

The key command word in the question was “*most*” and this directed candidates to make an order of priority in their response.

Health and education were universally addressed as the most important issues, closely followed by force provision and defence. It was interesting to see the various and differing national perspectives set out in essays. Many were able to offer viewpoints that were at variance with national policy and substance from a theoretical/academic basis. These candidates achieved high marks for content of perceptive and mature discussion.

It was rare to find any comparative analysis between developed and developing nations.

Question 4

“Education divides, rather than unites society.” Discuss.

There was almost universal agreement with the statement.

This question required candidates to discuss the importance of education, not merely to consider private versus state schooling, or good universities versus bad ones.

Some took the focus as a class issue, those who can afford the luxury of education and those who need that education in order to be able to have that debate.

The values of education – to inform and promote a breadth of tolerance and understanding – were frequently overlooked for the worthy but more prosaic attributes of respect and discipline.

There was a pleasing incidence of east/west comparisons.

Question 5

Can scientists ever justify being involved in weapon research?

There was a categorical and sweeping assertion that weapon research is wrong, because war is wrong and aggression is wrong, but that it is inevitable. The most commonly cited examples of this were Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the Second World War, which were portrayed as the epitome of evil. Many held the scientists responsible for the work that resulted in these bombs as abominations to humanity. There were too many emotive and impassioned tirades, which have no real value in an academic essay, without the opposite viewpoint being considered.

It was notable that almost no candidates mentioned any beneficial spin-offs from weapons research, for example radar, telecommunications, medical advances etc. Had even one of these been considered, some balance would have been found.

Some candidates seem to believe that scientists are motivated by a spirit of malevolence. No one mentioned the concept of research in the name of scientific exploration and experimentation.

Question 6

Is there any point in predicting the weather when we can have no control over it?

Many candidates merely described the changes in the weather patterns due to global warming. This appeared to be a prepared topic.

The overall impression was that candidates viewed this as an easy option, and the response was disappointingly mundane. Planning what to wear on a trip, or the need for an umbrella were interwoven with shipping forecasts and harvest planning.

Few saw the benefits of warnings to evacuate, to make provision within building regulations or to protect infrastructure, for social or economic reasons.

Question 7

"There are more advantages to living in the countryside than in the town." Discuss.

This was a very popular question.

There were some bucolic descriptions that became carried away by their own rhetoric, the birds singing and the grass swaying in the unpolluted breeze often repeated to little real purpose.

The real problem that arose here was that a list of advantages of one area was simply reversed into disadvantages in the other, whether or not there were genuine differences: there was often no attempt at evaluation or comparative analysis.

Question 8

"Children should be the product of nature, not of science." Do you agree?

It was apparent here that candidates looked at the wording of the question and made their responses on the basis of their initial reaction, without stopping to look further. Most saw it as an opportunity to discuss cloning, few realised that the remit was much broader, that is, infertility treatment, the dilemma of the infertile etc. as opposed to the natural procreative function which, it is assumed, everyone can achieve.

Hardly anyone examined the issues of fostering or adoption, which, even if not common in the home society, are a regular feature of media from the west.

Those candidates who did consider the ethical dimensions tended to achieve higher awards for content. Those who offered a religious perspective were able largely to substantiate their beliefs, at least in terms of supporting them from religious teaching.

Again balance was essential here, as directed by the wording of the question.

Question 9

Do languages spoken by relatively few people have a place in the modern world?

There were few answers seen to this question.

Those who did attempt it tried to rewrite the question to suit a discussion of the merits of English as a universal language.

Examiners had hoped to find a consideration of the cultural integrity of language; it is, after all, the hallmark of a society, giving regional and societal identity.

Question 10

"Only the rich can afford works of art." How far is this true?

Hardly any candidates chose this question. Those who did were able to offer their opinions on the materialism of the rich who will gather works of art for the sake of investment. Yet there was a complete lack of exemplification to support the argument – no examples of major works of art, or artists, that are collectable, and no rich patrons named.

Question 11

"Fiction has nothing to do with real life." Discuss.

Almost above all others this question demanded some examples. Very few were forthcoming, which considerably weakened the essays that were submitted.

All the candidates saw the link between real life and the vehicle of fiction to convey a message or an experience, many saw the utilisation of fiction as an interpretation of modern day values.

Without the support of examples, these answers were weak and insubstantial.

Question 12

Assess the qualities to be found in a good advertisement.

Many candidates became too concerned with the methodology of advertising rather than the features and qualities.

Equally this question needed examples to support the points made, and apart from the ubiquitous McDonald's, none were forthcoming. There was no requirement to focus exclusively on examples from global advertising, it would have been interesting to read about local advertising. Yet the vast majority offered neither, which seriously weakened the essays.

This was a straightforward question and one that could have been attempted by academic high fliers and those who preferred a more observational approach too. We are all members of a consumer society, to varying degrees, so this should have been an issue on which everyone has an opinion.

Additional Questions 8004:

Question 5

"Politics is only concerned with results, not with what is right or wrong." How far do you agree with this statement?

There were few responses to this question. Those candidates who did select it became rather subjective in their discussion, making many criticisms of their local politicians. Of course, this is valid, provided that candidates support their assertions with exemplification. Many essays, however, read as a list of grievances and impassioned resentments. There is a danger here for candidates as they lose focus on the intention of the question. The issues of, for example, vote-rigging and corruption were highly relevant and could have formed the basis of an analytical response. Too often rhetoric was overpowering.

Question 10

"Newspapers are more concerned with profits than with the truth." Discuss this statement.

The general conclusion that was conveyed was that newspapers have no moral voice now, if, indeed, they ever did have. According to candidates, newspapers will sell titillation, sensationalism and exposés in order to capture readership. It would have been interesting to have examples from local papers to support this viewpoint that seemed to be widespread. Political corruption within the developing world was juxtaposed with celebrity gossip from the west.

It appears that candidates no longer regard the press as the safeguard/protector of the freedom of democracy, money is more important.

There were some mature responses to this question.

Question 15

How far is a musical education vital to personal development?

Few candidates engaged with the word "vital" and consequently there followed a discussion on the general benefits of music to an individual, in terms of the relief of stress etc.

Those who did address the intention of the question were able to show an impressive awareness of the developmental/creative importance of music, and its effects in everyday life. There was some real and enjoyable enthusiasm displayed here, with examples and insight.