



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
January 2011**

Communication and Culture

COMM1

(Specification 2625)

**Unit 1: Understanding Communication and
Culture**

Report on the Examination

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Set and published by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance.

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General

COMM1 continues to impress and amaze examiners. There is so much to do in the allotted time (a broad range of content and three different styles of response) and yet most, even after one term's teaching seem very much ready for it. Thus, as ever, any feedback must properly begin with significant praise for candidates and their teachers. This is not, by any means to say that a January 'first sit' is the ideal option for everyone.

Unit One: Understanding Communication and Culture

Overview

The COMM1 question paper is a significant test: twenty-six and a quarter minutes for each of four compulsory questions and that includes reading, annotation and planning time. The paper format attempts to help here. It offers arguments to support in Questions 1 and 2, an answer book which offers an indication of how much is required in each section and both verbal and visual stimulus. The fact that the majority of candidates are meeting this challenge with full answers for each question asked is a comment on the quality of the cohort studying Communication and Culture. The fact that examiners are regularly impressed by answers adds to this impression.

This is the fourth COMM1 paper and has proved perhaps the most challenging in the sense that this combination of questions seemed, on the whole, to make the highest marks less accessible. This was most often a result of candidates 'stumbling' on either Question 3 or Question 4: in fact on the whole candidates seemed stronger on the first half of the paper than the second half. There was no reduction in the proportion, for example, of Level 4 answers but rather fewer candidates who could sustain this across four answers.

It has to be said that this may have a relationship to this as a January paper. While standards do not differ, it seems reasonable to expect that first sit candidates here will have been differently prepared than those who sit first in the summer. Potentially there has been less time both to access subject specific content and at the same time less time to assimilate this. It seemed clear, particularly in Question 3 responses, where specific questions are asked that some candidates had either not covered particular concepts or had not had time to internalise them. This is in no way a criticism of teachers or an indictment of the practice of 'early sit' but it is a reminder that these are decisions to make with implications both positive and negative. The degree to which January is seen primarily as a context for retake students will depend very much on you and your students and not on pronouncements from examining personnel. Interestingly COMM3, by comparison, attracted very few 'first sit' candidates.

Question 1: 'Culture'

It was generally agreed that Question 1 is working out fine. A return to the High Culture debate found candidates on secure ground theoretically and with a desire to make their case most usually that High Culture had "stood the test of Time" (1a). There was no particular over-reliance on A2 perspectives and yet we still saw sound explorations of power, class and gender. This was probably the strongest set of answers. Few fell short of a reasonable discussion of the issues. Ideas surrounding Arnold, Leavis and 'the canon' were largely understood. The best wrote about the issues in answers which might themselves have been worthy of quotation!

The problems with these issues, as ever, are to do with examples. Put simply the arguments about “Cultural Capital” (Bourdieu) which are often eloquently used in candidates’ answers are also evident in the naivety of some of the examples given. There is a remorseless logic in seeing Simon Cowell, for example, as one of “those who have power in our society” or imagining that Dr Who has stood the test of time’. The Royal family were in the same sense, rarely useful. It is also simply true that for seventeen year olds the ‘test of time’ (if undiscussed) is not long at all!

It’s always worth reminding everyone, though, that this question is NOT solely about the High/Popular Culture Debate. The key issue is that this section of the paper addresses is ‘The Nature of Culture’, of which ‘High and Popular Culture’ is merely one bullet point of four:

- Definitions of culture (any/many)
- The meanings and practices of everyday
- High culture and popular culture
- The relationship between culture and value

Question 2: 'Communication'

It seems to me that important functions of exam papers include clarifying the specification and being true to both its spirit and its word. It should offer reassurance to teachers not only that they are doing the right ‘stuff’ but also that the educational ‘project’ of Communication and Culture, which promises “a dynamic area of study”, which is “excellent preparation for further study”, is being supported. The essence of Communication and Culture, and a key point of its development out of Communication Studies, is the development of critical reading skills, which can be ‘exercised’ on all aspects of everyday life. COMM1 calls for three ‘activities in particular: “analysis’, ‘interpretation’ and ‘exploration’. Thus though subject content provides its own contexts, it is a proper working knowledge of concepts that is most important.

The question at hand exemplifies this aspect, confirms as it were this shift. It is at once a reminder that “Group communication” never went away but also a confirmation that ‘Group’ provides most significantly a set of important contexts and texts: ‘doing’ Group is thus much less about nailing it theoretically and much more about exploring its ‘dimensions’. This hopefully empowers teachers (and to some degree candidates) to decide how much formal ‘Group Theory’ is useful. The question is about the key Key Concept at AS, Identity. It offers Group as a context and offers other Communication and Culture concepts to prompt responses:, specifically ‘role’, ‘personality’ and ‘context’. Perhaps understandably the most popular area by far to be explored was “the characters and personalities of group members”.

However the most pleasing thing about Question 2 was the diversity of successful responses. Successful candidates came on the one hand with extensive amounts of Group Theory which they were able to bring to bear on the question and others, equally successful came with minimal amounts but “fantastic and extensive understanding of identity” (quote from one examiner). In between was a plethora of informed and ingenious applications of inter- and intra-personal ideas (Goffman, Johari window, Maslow) and lots of evidence of sound understanding of identity as something contested and constructed rather than given. Thus in simple terms there was no evidence to support teacher anxiety along the lines of “Oh no, I haven’t DONE Group”. Group is best ‘used’ rather than ‘done’!

Having largely failed over ten years of the last specification to get candidates to write about real groups, this now seems to have been achieved and the work seems far better for it.

Question 3: 'Toolkits'

Question 3 is, as ever, the site of 'extreme' performances. It is the part of the paper that feels and functions most like an old-fashioned test. It is the place also where knowledge is directly tested, never more so than in this case. This after all was the plan for this question: a test of knowledge and understanding of critical terms replacing an open textual analysis as found in the CMS2 exam of the predecessor specification. Here the text is in no important sense something to be analysed, it is rather a visual aid to support a candidate's explication of key terms, even approaches. Thus if you are familiar with the terms you are likely to boost your overall score and if you are not there is nowhere much to hide.

In these three specific cases performances ranged as follows:

3a) Most knew encoding and decoding (30% got full marks)

3b) Surprisingly barriers proved a real problem to many this time. They had ideas about kinds of barrier but little related to the text. Full marks here was surprisingly rare (6.3%)

3c) For examiners, the impression was that candidates either got this or didn't, with the middle ground left for those who had the concepts but confused the names. Their feeling was there were rather more of the 'knew it' group. Statistically though only 10% managed 9 or 10 out of 10 and these marks were readily available to anyone who could offer a simple definition followed by a relevant example.

Question 4: 'AS synoptic'/'Communication and Culture'

Perhaps our most accessible text (a constant concern of teachers) produced, as yet our most disappointing set of responses. While all of the options in Questions 1 and 2 performed equally well, Question 4 responses were less successful. Given that this is the unseen question, we have to look fairly and squarely at the question set and learn from its limitations.

While some may have fears that unseen material will be too complex for the whole range of Communication and Culture candidates, this question also flagged up the opposite 'danger'. In setting this charming and child-produced text, perhaps too little account was taken of the need for subject specific prompts and challenges. What was offered instead was "non-verbal communication' which only added to the problem since it directed attention to the advice rather than the way in which it was being constructed and contextualised.

Thus candidates produced relevant discussions of non-verbal codes and cultural practices, but not often a critical account (and occasionally even an attack on primary school children!!). Some answers were little more than an assessment of the quality of the advice given. Cultural comparisons were often helpful as was the technical analysis of forms of NVC. Pleasingly very few candidates failed to get this far or even offered negligible responses, which perhaps confirms that the question held no fears for candidates. Some in fact wrote with great relish about 'picking your nose in public' without the awareness that this discussion was unlikely on its own to get you high marks in your AS examination.

Hopefully after four examples, we have confirmed that the 'unseen' element is both a productive part of the test and, perhaps more importantly, nothing to fear. What is being provided is a 'slice' of everyday life to prompt a well-informed, classroom-style discussion.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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