



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

**English Language and Literature ELLA4
A**

(Specification 2720)

**Unit 4: Comparative Analysis through
Independent Study**

Report on the Examination

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General

The requirements of the coursework task are:

- to establish a clear and interesting thesis in the opening paragraph and sustain a logical investigation of that thesis throughout the essay
- to sustain a balanced comparison of the methods of the two writers and relate that clearly to the theme chosen
- to select and analyse appropriate poems/passages for the task
- to contextualise the material chosen intelligently
- to select from a range of literary and linguistic terms in order to analyse the texts and to demonstrate how the writers have created their effects
- to achieve a balanced argument within the word limit of 2,500 words.

Each of these ingredients is important though a weak performance on one or two of them does not prevent a candidate from achieving success overall; only the very best candidates achieve a synthesis of all six factors.

Centre marking

Once again, moderators were overwhelmingly in agreement with the marks submitted by centres and this reliable standard of marking was usually supported with intelligent, relevant annotation and thoughtful final comments. These comments, ideally, showed a mixture of language from the appropriate band on the mark grid and a more personal response to the essay concerned. Despite this widespread conformity to good standards, this report does, however, need to give advice to the small number of centres who, through a lack of attention to standardising materials, were unable to perform appropriately.

Administration

Administration was largely efficiently carried out. Individual essays should be held together, preferably with treasury tags. A number of first drafts and photocopied extracts were missing and occasionally forms were not signed or submitted. The first draft is a tool intended to assist candidates in their preparation since teachers can use it to guide students to improve their final submission. First draft advice should direct students to improve the structuring, focus and balance of their essays but not, of course, correct spelling errors or add material that is not their own. An unmarked first draft is equally unhelpful. It is essential that internal moderation is carried out before final submissions. This is particularly important where centres are working together in a consortium arrangement.

Consortium moderation meetings

Most of the teachers who attended these meetings found them very worthwhile. Many enjoyed the opportunity to share ideas with each other, to see how others had approached the task, and to be reassured that their own judgements had been correct and endorsed by the group. The detailed and helpful comments made by teachers in reading the submissions were much appreciated by all moderators. Centres, particularly those who are new to the unit, should know that keeping in touch by email with the area Moderator is essential. Standardisation meetings take place in the autumn and materials are produced for that meeting which are sent to every centre. Please contact your Adviser for the unit if you are unsure of any aspect of the task.

Choice of theme and thesis

Titles should be simple: 'Compare the ways in which X and Y write about...', followed by a single word or very brief phrase. The thesis paragraph enables the student to elaborate on or narrow the focus of the chosen theme. This elaboration should not appear in the title. All planned themes should be checked with area Moderators- it is clear this is not always done. Some themes – 'relationships', 'identity' are rather too general. While a single theme for all candidates in a centre is permissible, it rarely stimulates much independent study.

Choice of poems and passages

There was a clear trend this year towards writing about the work of two poets rather than mixing genre. It is certainly true that candidates do tend to use language frameworks more efficiently when writing about poetry although many teachers will naturally want to extend their students' literary experience by including a novel or play. Weaker candidates who can write perfectly well about poetry often tend to narrate or paraphrase over a wider area of text than they should when they comment on novels, short stories or plays. It would be a pity, though, if other genres were not studied since close analysis of short prose passages is a skill well-worth developing.

Number of poems and passages discussed

It should be the exception rather than the rule that a single poem/passage from each poet/writer/ playwright is discussed. Such a choice would only be made by a good candidate who clearly has a great deal to say. Some weaker candidates skimmed on the evidence by choosing a single poem from each poet to discuss. This was especially a problem if, for instance, it was a short poem like Larkin's 'Talking in Bed' which they did not understand and which was, anyway, entirely inappropriate to the theme they had chosen. Candidates should write about two poems from each poet or a sizeable passage or two (about 20-30 lines each) from each play or novel/ short story. Too little evidence makes for a thin response as does roaming across several poems or longer sections of a novel.

Choice of texts

Evidence suggested that fewer texts from the list were being studied this year than had been previously. Plath, Larkin, Heaney and Duffy dominated. Writing about Plath, especially, too often allowed candidates to be distracted by biographical speculation. Naturally there is a great deal about these poets on the internet which might also lure candidates from the task. Though the choice of text must, of course, be made by the centres concerned, past experience in all units suggests that choosing texts about which critical opinion is not yet firmly entrenched usually makes for fresher and more innovative writing from students and is more in keeping with the spirit of independent study that this unit is intended to stimulate.

Context

The task 'to contextualise the material chosen intelligently' is not intended to produce biographical, historical or critical reference. In a relatively short essay such an approach would be intrusive. 'Context' can also be measured in a number of other ways. For instance, the way the candidate feels about the mood of the material is contextual as are the modern connotations of words or phrases in the text. Of course, a brief contextualisation of a passage when writing about a novel is also important but this should not give way to excessive narration or paraphrase. The structure of a poem or a novel/play may also be an element of context. 'Context' therefore is inextricably woven into the way a candidate comments on language or theme and should not be seen as a discrete entity to be awarded credit separately.

Structure of coursework essays

There was a wide variety of effective structural approaches to writing the essay. Writing about one writer's work in the first part of the essay and then about the second writer's work in the second part is not a sensible approach since comparison can only be implicit at times. A fully integrated comparison, however, is almost impossible to achieve and there should be allowance for the development of observations on one poem over a couple of paragraphs before making comparative points on another poem. One very effective approach was to state an interesting thesis, explore it by comparing one poem /passage from each writer and then go on to consider the wider implication of the thesis in a second or even third poem /passage.

The coursework task should enable candidates to display the range of the skills they have accumulated in their study of the other units. The opportunity to improve upon coursework throughout the year means that high standards of performance are expected in coursework. These standards have largely been met by candidates.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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

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