

A-level

FRENCH

Unit 3 Listening, Reading and Writing
Report on the Examination

FREN3
June 2014

Version: 1.0

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General

The examination proved generally accessible with some questions on which virtually all students were able to score high marks while other questions proved more challenging. However, there were very few examples of very weak scripts, which suggest that the vast majority of students were entered appropriately for this examination. There were almost no cases of questions being left completely blank and very few where the cultural topic essay was clearly unfinished, so it was clear that most students had sufficient time to complete the examination. The one difference in format this year was that it was decided not to use letters I J and L in grids in order to minimise the possibility of the students' answers being misread. This did not seem to cause any problems for students and the same principle will apply in future examination series.

Section A

The four Listening Comprehension questions were all question types which would have been familiar to students from previous examination series and were well answered. In Question 1, part (e) was the only one which caused significant difficulty and students coped well with the vocabulary used in the passage. It was decided to gloss *ortie* as it was felt that this would have been an unfamiliar item to virtually all at this level. In Question 2, even though the vocabulary was more topic-specific in places, students seemed generally familiar with terms such as *purger une peine*, *prison ferme* and *avec sursis*. The first three parts were well answered, part (d) slightly less well and parts (e) and (f) proved more challenging for some. Question 3 was very well answered by almost all students with no individual part being significantly more demanding than any other, and Question 4 was also well answered despite the inclusion of some terms such as *torchères* and *torchage* with which most students would probably have been unfamiliar – perhaps the fact that they were printed as part of the question rather than just heard on the recording helped students to deduce the meaning from context. The most common incorrect statements offered as answers were H, O and P.

The three Reading Comprehension questions were also tackled successfully by most students. In Question 5, part (j) produced the greatest number of incorrect answers, while parts (f) and (h) also caused difficulty for some. As far as Question 6 (a) is concerned, the point has been made in reports on previous examination series that the addition of extra words (other than articles) will invalidate an answer as the response will no longer be synonymous with the question phrase. Thus in 6 (a) (i) the correct answer was *littoral*; answers such as *le long du littoral* or *le littoral français* were not accepted. It was fortunate for some that misspellings were tolerated provided that it was clear that the correct word(s) had been identified, as in part (ii) while most realised that *vainqueurs* was the correct answer, a considerable number of students were unable to copy it correctly. Part (iii) was by far the most challenging with a large number of students offering some or all of the phrase *n'en obtient qu'un seul* and only a minority correctly identifying *(les) mains vides* as the equivalent of *sans rien*. Part (iv) was answered correctly more often than not, though *pourtant* and *au final* were quite common incorrect suggestions, and part (v) caused relatively few problems. In 6 (b) the majority of students were able to identify statements E and G as correct, but finding D proved more challenging, probably because of the phrase *fera grimper*. Statements B, C and F were all frequently offered as incorrect alternatives. Question 7 was again a type with which students would have been familiar from previous examination series and was generally answered more successfully than similar questions in the past, though part (e) proved surprisingly challenging and identifying *bétail* as the answer to part (d) also defeated many.

Question 8 produced a wide range of marks. While the vast majority of students clearly understood the gist of the passage, there were a number of individual words which were not widely known, including *milliers* (often rendered as “millions” or even “billions”), *travail au noir* (in this case “black market” was not accepted), *subvenir*, *s'avérer*, *oser*, *parvenir*, *embaucher*, *ventre* (somewhat

surprisingly) and *arrêter* (often translated as “stopped” rather than “arrested”). This exercise also requires careful attention to detail as well as the ability to express the sense in acceptable English. Thus some students did not achieve the mark for the sentence *Chaouki vient d’arriver de Tunisie* either because they failed to use “has just” for *vient de*, or offered “in” rather than “from” Tunisia – and a few even omitted the sentence altogether, suggesting the need to check carefully. Tenses are frequently an aspect which requires care; this year there were no particularly demanding complex verb forms, but *est parvenu* was sometimes incorrectly translated as a present tense. As far as the use of acceptable English is concerned, the most common problem was the end of the passage where “a fear to be arrested” rather than “of being arrested” was not accepted. Having said all that, it was pleasing to read a number of versions where the passage was accurately translated into very natural English.

Question 9 equally produced a very wide range of marks. The intention behind the question is primarily to test the students’ knowledge of the grammatical structures listed in the Specification, though as the sentences do focus on one or more of the prescribed topics, some topic-specific vocabulary may be required. This year there were very few such items which caused difficulty, though unlike the comprehension questions, accurate spelling of words is needed (although errors of accent which do not change the meaning of the word are tolerated) and some students struggled with *meilleur*, *pays*, *essentiel* (often given with the English spelling), *gouvernement*, and *espoir/espérance*. In part (a) it was perhaps to be expected that the translation of “What is ...?” would prove challenging and it was decided that the use of the colloquial *C’est quoi* was just about acceptable. Some of those who did know the correct *Quel(le) est ...* failed to make the appropriate agreement with whichever noun they chose for “way”. The other common error in this question was not giving the correct form of the demonstrative *ce*, with *cet* being quite frequently offered. In 9 (b) the agreement on *vulnérables* was missed by some students, others gave the wrong gender of *taux*, and the omission of the final accent on *élevé* was not tolerated as it would then no longer be a past participle/adjective. In 9 (c) the most common problems were the use of the subjunctive (though it was pleasing to note that most students were able to form it correctly) and of the correct prepositions in *assez d’argent* and *pour vivre*. I should add that the use of *Il faut* for “It is essential” was not accepted as it was felt that it did not have the same force as the English phrase. In 9 (d) most students were able to use the conditional tense correctly, but the use of the present participle proved more difficult, and many students who realised this was needed added an extra ‘e’ in the middle of *créant*. The translation of “jobs” also caused some problems with attempts to pluralise *travail* leading to the greatest number of errors. Finally in 9 (e) the use of *dont* seemed unfamiliar to many and it was disappointing to find that relatively few students (perhaps only about one in four) were able to use the indirect object pronoun *leur* correctly. Overall, this question is tackled very successfully by students who have a sound knowledge of basic French grammar and who adopt the approach of asking themselves “What structure is this sentence testing?” before writing their answers.

Section B

The Cultural Topic essays varied hugely in standard. At the top end there were a good number of very thoughtful essays which gave precise responses to the question asked, analysed it in depth, provided a wide range of evidence to support the points made or opinions offered, and were expressed in accurate, sophisticated French. At the other end of the scale a few students seemed to have very little knowledge of the topic they had studied or else struggled to express themselves in comprehensible language. The most common weakness in approach was failing to answer the question set but rather writing about the topic in general terms or else repeating a previous essay – sometimes students appeared to be answering the question which had been set last year and which had presumably been used in the “mock” exam.

The essay on a region was probably the least well answered of the five Cultural Topics. The weakest essays especially in response to 10 (b) dealt in very general terms about the attractions for young or older people and were more appropriate for a language essay at AS Level. Comments on the lines of “There are many beaches and cafés and plenty of opportunities for sport” could apply to virtually any coastal area in any country and do not show any detailed knowledge of the specific region. The most thoughtful responses to this question analysed in detail what might attract permanent residents as well as tourists, and a few very successful essays argued that the region in question was not an ideal one as it was not attractive to both age groups. It is worth mentioning in this respect that if a student is asked to discuss a quotation in the essay, he/she does not automatically have to agree with it and the best essays often challenge all or part of the statement made. There were some very good answers to 10 (a), though some students simply listed a range of industries. The best essays not only showed a detailed knowledge of the industries (supported by plenty of evidence, often statistical), but answered precisely the second part of the question by analysing how they could develop in different circumstances according to decisions taken by local or national government or even depending on the global economic environment.

Both essays on a period of history seemed equally popular, with the Occupation being by far the most frequent period studied. For those who chose 11 (a) the difficulty was the need to concentrate on one person. Many students did not have enough detailed knowledge to do this and it sometimes seemed as if they were expecting any question set to require a comparison of two or more people. There were, however, some very good answers especially those discussing Pétain, where students analysed in detail the impact of his decisions on different sections of the population. Those who chose to discuss de Gaulle were often not quite so successful, largely because their comments tended to be restricted to the claim that he encouraged the French Resistance movement with little supporting evidence beyond his radio broadcast from London. Some of the best answers came to 11 (b) where students argued that there were a number of key events and it was difficult, if not impossible, to choose one single major event. Others argued that different events were key at different times or for different sections of the population. Once again those students who analysed in what way the course of history was changed were much more successful than those who merely recounted the events of their chosen period.

Of the authors studied, Camus, Joffo, Sagan, Voltaire and Guène were the most common choices and Question 12 (b) proved more popular than 12 (a). Those who did opt for 12 (a) often simply recounted the plot rather than analysing the ending – for example was it surprising or to be expected in terms of the characterisation or development of the themes of the work(s)? For those who studied a short-story writer (usually Maupassant), it is worth pointing out to schools the advice that is given in the Cultural Topics FAQ section of the AQA website as regards the number of stories which should be discussed: “*As a guide, reference should be made to at least three stories by an author, but there will certainly be no need to refer to all the stories in a collection. If a short story writer is chosen, a range of stories should be studied and then the students will be able to select the ones most appropriate for any given question. If a question asks about just one character, then it is acceptable to refer to just one short story.*” This last sentence was particularly relevant to 12 (b) where full marks were therefore available to a student who discussed just one character in one story. However, in this case the choice of story was important as some of the shorter stories, such as *La Mère Sauvage*, for example, do not lend themselves to detailed analysis as easily as, say, *Boule de Suif*. Again, whichever author was chosen, the most successful essays were the ones which realised the full implications of the question. In this case the phrase *dans quelle mesure* was key and some of the best answers analysed those aspects of the character which were constant throughout the work as well as those which had changed.

Answers on a poet were relatively rare – Prévert was the most frequent choice, with a few students discussing Baudelaire – and of the playwrights studied, Molière, Sartre and Ionesco were the most

popular. The vast majority of those answering on this topic chose 13 (b). There were some excellent answers to 13 (a), especially from those who had studied a poet, where the more successful students compared the poems in terms of poetic technique as well as the themes. In 13 (b) some students failed to distinguish between themes and messages; what was required here was to analyse what the poet/playwright is telling us rather than what the themes of the work(s) are. Another weakness in some cases was to make a list of the messages without really commenting on them. However, when there was analysis it was often very perceptive. Many students put the messages in their context, discussed them in that context and then discussed their relevance to today's world. The second part of the question was rarely forgotten and produced some really interesting and thoughtful answers. A number of students argued that some messages could be seen as both positive and negative depending on when the play/poetry was written whereas others argued that they depended on the gender of the person reacting to the messages. Such an approach was usually the mark of the more able student.

Undoubtedly the most widely studied Cultural Topic of all is the work of a film director, with Kassovitz being by far the most popular choice, though Truffaut, Jeunet and Malle were also quite commonly offered. It should be noted that although the study of more than one film is certainly useful in terms of giving a broader picture of the director's work and to provide a wider range of examples, full marks are available to a student who has studied just one film, as, for example, with Kassovitz and *La Haine*. Essays on an architect were very rare indeed, though quite a number of students had studied an artist, Monet being the most popular, or a musician. In the latter case I must again refer to the Cultural Topics FAQ section of the AQA website "*If a singer (or a band) is to be studied as a musician, then they must compose their songs in the target language. It is only the work written by the musician(s) which can be used as source material. Teachers must also be satisfied that there is sufficient source material to allow the kind of depth of study required to enable students to answer likely essay questions.*" Furthermore, in answering 14 (a) – which was the more popular of the alternatives – an analysis of techniques must take into account the relevant medium and for a musician this means some discussion of aspects of musicality rather than just the themes of the songs. This was also an occasional weakness among those who had studied a film director and simply discussed the themes of the film(s). Having said all that, there were some excellent essays which firstly discussed what the artist's objectives were and then analysed a whole range of techniques with specific reference to the ways in which they enabled the artist to achieve those objectives. Those who chose to answer 14 (b) tended to agree with the quotation and then analyse how the work(s) studied has an immediate impact on the public. Such a response could achieve full marks, provided that the analysis was sufficiently detailed, but the best answers often disagreed with the statement and analysed how a deeper study of the work(s) could reveal aspects which were not apparent at first sight. As is stated above with reference to the study of a region, if a student is asked to discuss a quotation in the essay, he/she does not automatically have to agree with it and the best essays often challenge in a reasoned and well-justified way part or all of the statement made. That is perhaps a thought students might like to keep in mind for future examination series.

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