



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
January 2012**

Communication and Culture

COMM3

(Specification 2625)

Unit 3: Communicating Culture

Report on the Examination

Further copies of this Report on the Examination are available from: aqa.org.uk

Copyright © 2012 AQA and its licensors. All rights reserved.

Copyright

AQA retains the copyright on all its publications. However, registered centres for AQA are permitted to copy material from this booklet for their own internal use, with the following important exception: AQA cannot give permission to centres to photocopy any material that is acknowledged to a third party even for internal use within the centre.

Set and published by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance.

The Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (company number 3644723) and a registered charity (registered charity number 1073334).
Registered address: AQA, Devas Street, Manchester M15 6EX.

General

This series of the exam saw a jump in the number of candidates and it is clear that some centres have devised a teaching strategy whereby students concentrate on COMM3 in the first term of A2 teaching in order to focus on coursework preparation thereafter. The evidence of candidate performance this January suggests that this is a perfectly viable approach as the distribution of marks across the assessment was not significantly different to the pattern seen last summer. Additionally, of course, these candidates have the benefit of a possible re-sit in June. On the other hand, the experience of completing the COMM4 coursework unit certainly enriches and deepens the conceptual understanding of candidates. To their credit, June series candidates often refer explicitly to insights and knowledge derived from their coursework. Necessarily, such references are largely absent in January.

The overall quality of work continues to impress and it is clear that candidates are generally familiar, comfortable and well prepared for the style and tone of the questions they encounter in the COMM3 exam. Even those who have struggled with the conceptual demands of Communication and Culture at A2 are usually able to apply a basic understanding of at least a couple of theoretical perspectives. There is still some evidence of the application of theory that is more slavish than considered in its approach. Such answers are often prefigured by planning notes in the form of a lengthy mnemonic designed to remind the candidate of each and every theoretical approach, each and every key concept. This, of course, is not at all a bad idea if it serves to overcome that perennial exam phobia: the fear that one's memory banks will be wiped clean as soon as the question paper is opened. Having successfully recalled the content of the list, more successful candidates go on to make a judicious selection of just which items on the list will be most appropriate to the demands of the question. Less successful candidates zealously and determinedly write two or three sentences on every item. This results in answers that are unnecessarily disjointed, superficial and, at worst, irrelevant and incoherent. Simply recalling a list of potentially prompts is a useful thing to do, but it is no substitute for the creative, insightful and relevant deployment of conceptual material.

The format of the examination is, by now, fairly well established. Teachers will be reassured to know that there are no plans to make any departures from this format in the foreseeable future. As long as the examination succeeds in challenging candidates and in facilitating differentiation, there is no motivation for change. However, one small caveat should be signalled and it relates to Section A. Examiners have noticed some tendency for candidates to scrutinise the two arguments in order to discover which argument represents which theoretical perspective. Teachers should advise their students that theoretical approaches and key concepts are essential tools in the task of unpicking and evaluating the merits of the arguments, but it is not necessarily the case that the arguments will simply reflect two competing perspectives in the style of, say, *Marxism versus Postmodernism* or *Postcolonialism versus Market Liberalism*.

Section A

Question 1

January's topic was celebrityisation; a concept which appeared to be familiar and accessible to the great majority of candidates. Most were able to supply colourful and wide-ranging examples of contemporary (and, occasionally, historical) celebrities to illustrate ideas and arguments. Many candidates clearly possess exactly the sort of detailed, comprehensive knowledge of stars and idols that the celebrityisation concept addresses. Most had the good sense to use this knowledge sparingly and effectively, but a few were tempted to supply lengthy descriptive accounts of the life and times of a favourite celebrity.

In addition to ascribing underlying theoretical positions to the two arguments, many responses were able to make profitable use of conceptual material in the analysis and evaluation of the arguments. It was interesting to note that a number of answers discussed the relationship between celebrities and the construction of gendered identities in the context of Queer theory. Some candidates exhibited a very firm grasp of concepts, but responded to the arguments exclusively in abstract terms. Ideas and discussions that were well illustrated with references were generally more convincing. The most frequently cited celebrities were all female: Rihanna, Lady Gaga, Katie Price, Cheryl Cole and Kim Kardashian. The most frequently cited media text, by far, was *The X Factor*.

Reports on previous series of this exam have dealt at some length with the nature of evaluation in relation to Section A. There was some evidence here that teachers are referring their students to advice on how to evaluate, and answers gaining marks in Level 4 were clearly evaluative. Many responses, though, confined themselves to the briefest aside on which of the two arguments was 'preferred' or 'most convincing' without very much support for such contentions. As noted in past reports, it is very useful for candidates to identify the *criteria* against which the merits of the arguments are judged.

Section B

Section B questions in order of popularity were: Q6, Q5, Q3, Q4, Q2. There was no real significant difference in the mean marks achieved for each question.

Question 2

Once again, it is necessary to reiterate the nature and requirements of the intersections question. The question refers to two sites of culture (and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future) but the focus is very clearly on the relationship between the two (the intersection). There were still examples of answers that dealt quite separately with the two chosen sites. In such cases where no explicit consideration is given to the relationship between the sites, the mark scheme determines that marks are unlikely to be higher than Level 2.

Some answers misinterpreted the phrase 'cultural sites' in the question, for example by exploring ideology in the context of two places such as buildings or towns. Whilst some credit could be given for good points and arguments, the preamble to Section B does clearly identify the three cultural sites.

At the top end of the range there were some superb answers to Question 2, characterised by a firm grasp of ideology as a key concept and an awareness of the subtlety and multiple interpretations of this term. The intersection between Fictions and Objects of Desire was a fruitful area for discussion with reference to the narratives and stories woven into the representation of material goods by advertising and marketing campaigns.

Question 3

The key concept identity is generally popular and well understood, so a relatively large number of candidates were drawn to this answer. Most responses were competent, at least, and often very capable indeed. However, it may be worth reminding students preparing for the exam that Question 3 refers to one chosen cultural site. It would not be fair to reward answers that range freely across all the three sites in the same way as answers that stay focused and strictly relevant.

Understandably, material usually introduced at AS level was prominent here: Goffman's dramaturgical model, the Johari Window and the self-fulfilling prophecy, for example. There is nothing at all wrong with such references and credit will certainly be given where they are utilised relevantly and effectively. However, we would expect to see this material used in conjunction with A2 theoretical approaches for candidates to score marks in the two higher levels.

It was encouraging to see that candidates are sufficiently familiar with the terms *cultural practice* and *cultural product* to recognise and exemplify the distinction between them

Question 4

The focus on cultural meanings proved accessible and facilitating for candidates who attempted Question 4. Many foregrounded instances of the different *values* placed on different spaces in different circumstances. Almost all who answered this question were clearly well equipped to provide two detailed and contrasting case studies. A good deal of autonomous learning and independent research was suggested by the number of occasions on which candidates from the same centre drew on a large range of different case study examples. It was good to see that most responses dealt with at least one example with which the writer appeared to have direct personal experience: local streets, town centres, notable landmarks or vernacular buildings, for example. A study of illustrious work on places such as Las Vegas or Disneyland certainly pays dividends and, of course, these places may well be within the direct personal experience of the candidate. Surely, though, this knowledge and understanding is apprehended even more fully if the same ideas and analytical devices are applied to environments with which students are thoroughly familiar.

We have always encouraged a broad and open-minded approach to the interpretation of Places and Spaces and it was interesting to see that quite a few candidates conducted well-informed discussions of virtual places (e.g. those featured in *Second Life* or *Grand Theft Auto*). Slightly more problematic were answers which dwelt on exclusively fictional spaces such as those featured in fantasy films. The distinction between a 'real' and a 'fictional' place is often spurious, as so many postmodernists have reminded us, but it still seems wise to draw at least one of a pair of contrasting examples from the material world, if only for the sake of making striking points of comparison.

Question 5

Mode of address, like discourse, appears to be amongst the more elusive of the key concepts indicated in the specification. It is not universally well understood and quite a few candidates neatly sidestepped this problem by writing about Fictions without any reference at all to mode of address. Others equated mode of address with audience response, offering detailed accounts of effects theory, uses and gratifications or other mass media models. Uncertainties such as these were often compensated by impressively detailed cultural analyses of stories.

The individual enthusiasms of teachers and students were evident in the wide and eclectic range of fictions on offer. Fairy tales, including Disney versions, were well represented again, but so too were *Twilight* and *Harry Potter* films, gothic novels and soap operas. Some answers were rather ambitious in selecting four or more fictional texts with the result, often, of a descent into superficial and descriptive accounts rather than in depth analysis.

The overall standard was good. We have come to expect this of Question 5, but candidates do need to be reminded that this question is not an open ended invitation to set their own agenda. It really is important to be able to demonstrate understanding, practised familiarity and an ability to apply all of the key concepts.

Question 6

Once again, this was the most popular Section B question and most candidates relished the opportunity to demonstrate their successful study of Objects of Desire by considering the cultural site from the point of view suggested by 'influenced to favour'. For many, if not most, this meant a detailed and well-illustrated discussion of the techniques of persuasion used by advertisers and marketers. The psychological techniques pioneered by Edward Bernays featured strongly and it was good to see that most candidates were able to illustrate the principles by reference to contemporary examples rather than relying exclusively on the Torch of Freedom campaign.

Some answers rather neglected the 'why' part of the question, but those which gave this full attention often referred to Veblen and the notions of conspicuous and leisure consumption; once again, usually considered in a contemporary rather than historical context. Many responses referred to Frankfurt School critiques of consumerism as well as feminist and postmodernist approaches to the manipulation of desire in capitalist economies. A minority supplemented these with a market liberal defence of the 'sovereign consumer'. All in all, responses to Question 6 showed a really impressive depth of understanding of the issues raised by the question, often complemented by shrewd and candid appraisals of the writer's own motivation to consume.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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

UMS conversion calculator www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion