



General Certificate of Education

**GCE Communication and
Culture**

COMM2

Report on the Examination

2009 examination - June series

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General

This was the first year of the awarding of the coursework unit for this new specification and was the culmination of Teacher Support meetings held across the country, continuous online dialogues between centres and Coursework Advisers, ongoing development of the AQA Teacher Resource Bank, total commitment and professionalism of teachers and finally, of course, creativity and sustained hard work of students. However, the resulting quality of the Portfolios submitted exceeded all expectations and this new unit has clearly been a success in building on the best from the legacy specification whilst providing opportunities to engage with debates new to AS studies and a chance to use technology in a more creative way. The aim of this report is to highlight good practice that has emerged from this first series whilst identifying problems that have emerged and providing recommendations for future development.

Portfolios

The overwhelming majority of centres submitted completed portfolios, containing two readings of 1500 words in total and an audio/visual presentation. Moderators reported on the wide range of Readings submitted and the engagement of candidates who had been offered the opportunity to explore the meanings in their lives, freed from the constraints of the essay. However, in some instances there was too much repetition across the readings and the presentation. It is recommended that there should, in fact, be none. This is not a rule but it might be thought of as a sound principle. For example, a candidate who contrives to centrally feature their interest in Rap Music in both the readings and the presentation are going to have to come up with some very innovatively different interpretations to avoid contravening the Spirit if not the Word of the new specification. With so much choice available such narrowing is not to be encouraged and could be seen as bad practice.

A good guiding principle is that candidates should be encouraged to use the opportunities offered by the specification to widen the scope of their studies. This in turn will act as better preparation for both the Unit 1 examination and the following A2 course. Similarly, where centres have selected just one topic under each Site (A and B) which in itself is totally permissible, they should take special care to encourage variety with the topics: Readings with almost identical titles, following a rather formulaic approach, did not help candidates achieve their best work. It is hoped that as teachers develop their practice this will not be a feature of future portfolios. Moderators would like to congratulate centres on the submission of Presentations. In most instances these were easily accessed and appropriately labelled.

The Two Readings

Whilst being the shorter of the two readings, the 500 word investigation often proved to be the most challenging. The specification clearly states that it should focus on “*something specific rather than generic*”. The most popular Sites were **Good Taste/Bad Taste** and **Looking Good, Feeling Fit**. However, these often resulted in titles which were too ambitious or too vague to be tackled in 500 words. Too many candidates produced essays on their **taste** in music offering only an account of why they liked a particular band. The **Size Zero** debate proved to be equally as popular but once again too many candidates only offered an overview of representations of celebrities in the media. Neither example provided sufficient opportunity for candidates to work with key concepts in a meaningful way and to demonstrate the analytical writing which allows access to AO3. Though responses to **Looking Good, Feeling Fit** were not obliged to address the sensitive personal issues that we might have with our bodies, it is still necessary to have some kind of personal angle on your chosen issue. The least popular site **Speak That I Might See You** often produced the most focused work which explored the impact of language on personal identity. Setting focused titles which engage with the Sites is crucial. It is good

practice if all readings state the Site, Topic and Title at the outset. Further exemplification of good practice is to make use of the first personal pronoun in investigation titles and to link it directly with identity. Compare “**The Representation of Celebrities in Magazines**” with “**How the celebrity shape affects my interpretation of my Gender Identity.**” Or alternatively, compare “**My taste in Music**” with “**AVA and Me: How the Band’s values and attitudes have impacted on my Personal Identity.**” It is important to create titles which direct students towards a consideration of identity, a vital key concept which should be at the heart of the 500 word reading. It is further recommended that centres use Coursework Advisers as a matter of routine to check titles and to refer to examples in the Teacher Resource Bank on the AQA web site. Centres are also reminded of the change in availability for both Site A and B Topics for the 2009-2010 series and should refer to the AQA specification and website for details of this.

The Exploration

Overall, explorations were relevant and clearly focused and asked candidates to move from a consideration of personal identity into an examination of their broader culture and the cultural practices within it. In doing so there was plenty of evidence of working with a range of conceptual and theoretical material. Perhaps inevitably this included elements of A2 theoretical perspectives. There is not an expectation that at AS level student should be familiar with, for example, Marxism, Feminism or Postmodernism. While it is appreciated that some candidates may be able to handle these ideas the vast majority of candidates did so unconvincingly. Asserting that ‘shopping is a hyperreal experience’ or that ‘people go shopping because of commodity fetishism’ is of little value without context or development. Other terms widely used but little understood included ideology, metanarrative, hegemony and symbolic annihilation. It would be acceptable to start to introduce the theoretical perspectives if the basic foundations set out in the specification are securely in place.

The only key concept with which AS candidates were really secure was **Identity**. This was largely based on the old models of self and intrapersonal communication used in the old specification with the introduction of some new concepts such as Subcultural identity. Of the others, **Value** was occasionally, but rather superficially, addressed in Explorations (usually of music). There were a few references to power (e.g. “We all want to be Size Zero because of media power”) but **Context**, **Representation** and **Code** were almost entirely absent as were the ‘toolkits’. This is not a criticism of the substantial achievements of this year but rather an indication that, for most of us, there is plenty to explore in the key concepts.

In terms of the selection of Site Topics, **Retail Therapy** dominated the responses. There were some cogent and insightful analyses of the shopping experience, particularly ones that focused on specific shops, often with full support from semiotic readings of the shop as text. There were some instances of advertising being used as a case study to explore Retail Therapy which is not an appropriate choice of subject matter for Site Topic. **The Writing’s on the Wall** was dominated by Banksy often countered by urban tagging and/or etchings on park benches. The critical question of whether it should count as art or vandalism was mused over, rather than challenged as to whether that was the appropriate question to ask. Readings exploring **The Songs That Saved Your Life** were in some instances disappointing. Simple, biographical accounts were too often offered, rather than an exploration of the cultural practice of making meanings out of popular music in all its variety. Once again the formulation of focused titles is crucial. Compare the title **Rock Music and Culture** with the **Influence of Urban Music on Inner City Youth**. One of the key requirements of the exploration is, as the specification reminds us, the collation and integration of secondary sources. These sources should be used to inform and develop the argument presented, to provide alternative ways of *seeing*. This is rewarded under AO4 and there were plenty of examples of some sophisticated responses which drew on a variety of sources to widen the scope of the argument presented. In contrast

to this, there were examples of candidates being given very high marks for AO4 without providing any evidence of external sources being referred to.

The Presentation

It is recognised that this provided one of the key departures from the legacy specification and of course there were some technical problems. However, the vast majority of centres produced audio-visual presentations which were easily accessed by their moderators and which worked beautifully. PowerPoint presentations dominated the mode of Presentation but interesting work was seen utilising Windows Movie-Maker as well as Microsoft Storyboard Maker. Very few podcasts or vlogs were seen. In this first year of the specification, moderators were as sympathetic and tolerant of problems and variations as possible. However, there is an expectation that centres will act on feedback given and that all presentations will be available for moderation next year, in their entirety. A minority of centres facilitated the presentation by delivering them in the legacy CMS1 style with the student standing beside a whiteboard and speaking whilst being videoed. This practice is to be discouraged. Candidates' work is difficult to moderate and the format is counterproductive. Instead, it is preferable to put the voice narration onto the PowerPoint and to submit that directly.

While teachers fretted about sound files, frequently a problem with the Presentations was in the initial conception. Titles were often unfocused beyond ***Me and My Culture*** which provides very little real focus beyond clichés about families and friends, lovingly illustrated by the family and friends photograph album.

The specification does offer support in this respect (on page 9): **“The purpose of the presentation is to deal with the struggle between ‘who we want to be’ and ‘who we’re allowed to be’: the place where the personal and cultural meet. The presentation will focus on the interrelationships between the individual and wider cultural influences. It will offer an exemplification of the ways in which identity is consciously and unconsciously ‘negotiated’ in the context of social and cultural norms”.**

Given an engagement with the ‘struggle’ of identity, the choice of two of the four key concepts of Power, Value, Identity and Representation should drive the direction and scope of the Presentation. These chosen concepts should be dealt with explicitly and the best work came when there was a genuine intellectual thrust exploring the candidate’s identity in terms of cultural practices that they engage in, looking for deeper significances in the world they inhabit. ***The Actor in Me***, and ***Me and Classical Music*** were amongst titles of really fascinating presentations which encouraged exactly this type of debate.

In the absence of ‘real’ exemplar presentations and limited access to those manufactured for the occasion it was unsurprising that marking of the presentations was nowhere near as tight as marking of the readings. As a result, with the interests of candidates in the forefront of our minds, we decided to take a tolerant view of presentation marking, preferring detailed feedback to crude regressions. Next year this will be different as we are planning to provide further INSET and standardisation events as well as copyright-free (for this is the main issue) examples from this year marked with comments.

In assessing Presentations, Moderators felt that many centres were too lenient in their acceptance of ‘competent’ work as ‘good’ and ‘good’ work as impressive. AO3 was frequently over marked with theories simply being described, not applied and certainly not being scrutinised or challenged. In terms of accessing high marks in AO3 the use of voice over is a more powerful tool of communication as opposed to dense passages of written text on a PowerPoint slide.

Conclusion

In order to build on this very successful first year, AQA will be offering a number of Teacher Support and standardising meetings. It is recognised that busy teachers are not always able to get released from their respective institutions but the meetings will address directly the issues raised in this report. Finally, it is important to recognise the scale of the hard work and commitment of teachers of this course who have tackled the new challenges presented with determination, good humour and an overwhelming desire to create the best opportunities for their students to succeed.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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