AQA

ASSESSMENT and

QUALIFICATIONS

ALLIANCE

General Certificate of Education

English Language and Literature 1726

Specification B

ELLB2   Themes in Language and Literature

Report on the Examination

2009 examination - June series

There were more than 8,000 candidates entered for ELLB2 this summer. The vast majority understood the nature of the tasks for the submission and worked within the rubric. Candidates and their teachers are to be congratulated for the many excellent folders, with strong writing skills and clear presentation strategies.

Part A- **the investigation task based on two selected extracts**, proved a successful vehicle for candidates to show their writing skills. The ability to sustain a good focus on the set theme proved an effective discriminator as did the ability to integrate meaningful comparisons of style. The voices of candidates who engaged with their set texts and were enthusiastic about the set themes and the ways in which they can be approached were a delight and demonstrated very clearly the high standards to which candidates and their teachers aspire. In the middle bands, many candidates showed good understanding of the set texts and of the tasks, though the ability to deal with the analysis of their chosen extracts was less confident. Their sound understanding of the set texts was better than their knowledge of the literary and linguistic issues that the unit is designed to teach and test. The weakest submissions made scant reference to the chosen extracts, relying on knowledge of the stories and the background to the set texts. Moderators reported that the single most damaging error made by weaker candidates was the over-reliance on general discussion and background information. In some weaker submissions, it was common to find the first 200-400 words of Part A entirely devoted to historical and biographical detail that did not illuminate the extracts. There is no need to include factual information on authors' lives unless it has a direct bearing on the analysis.
A number of candidates formulated their own 'essay titles'. This sometimes led to a wide discussion across the whole texts. The brief for Part A is quite clear. Candidates are encouraged to approach the task in the widest possible way but they must compare two extracts in the light of the set theme. Some titles had a key word which deflected attention from the set theme, proposing for example 'maturity' or 'childhood' as a core idea in children's literature, thus encouraging an almost total neglect of the set theme.
The productive use of research is a key factor for candidates. It is more helpful to candidates to understand the genre of utopian and dystopian writing than to labour over Thomas More's disputes with his king, which did not emerge until much later than the original publication date of *Utopia*. Similarly, the use of the Internet is to be encouraged if candidates can seek out relevant information about fantasy and its various forms but there was much undue reliance on a few sites that took a limited view of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and ignored Carroll's use of absurdity, distortion and reversal of normality. The recurrence of ideas from these sites was not always matched by acknowledgements on the candidates' cover sheets.
Overall, candidates should have given more attention to the styles of their set texts and to the differences between them. Most candidates who studied *In Cold Blood* made reference to Capote's groundbreaking work in 'new journalism' but did not explore the ways in which this was achieved through an analysis of his writing. To compare the length of sentences does not provide a satisfying comparison between the non-fiction crime novel and *Frankenstein*.
Apart from the very best work, the consideration of how language and style change over time was the weakest aspect of the whole submission and for many candidates, if there were no archaic words, there was nothing to say about the texts.

Choosing extracts for Part A
Writing successfully in Part A is highly dependent on teachers' and candidates' understanding of the principles underpinning the coursework task. Candidates must use the set theme as a principal starting point for discussion and, while other significant themes may be legitimately introduced, the set theme should be the underpinning theme for the work as a whole. The extracts must be suited to a discussion of the set theme. If candidates do not choose extracts and work with them as the basis for their investigation, they are immediately at a disadvantage when it comes to gaining marks for close analysis.
Many candidates had obviously scoured the texts looking for unusual and challenging sections of the texts. Even where candidates had chosen similar extracts, their work was uniquely

different. Moderators have expressed their thanks to centres supplying copies of the extracts and providing information as to the length of the chosen extracts.

Part B - **the creative task,** produced some excellent work, with missing and extra chapters, film scripts, entertaining and intelligent pastiches, as well as the more conventional memoirs and diary entries. Many pieces used locations as the starting point for a new text. Thornfield Hall was later renovated as a must-have venue for weddings. The Clutter house revealed its secrets. Minor characters were given a voice. Different viewpoints emerged. Members of the Inquisition, characters who have no voice in Poe's *The Pit and The Pendulum*, congratulated themselves on their thirst for justice. There were several guides to a theme park based on Wonderland. The internal assessment of Part B was generally in line with the standards indicated in the mark band descriptors though a number of centres over-rewarded work which, though original and creative, did not link with the set theme and did not illuminate the set texts. A horror story that has no bearing on the set pairing is not working within the brief. Some work of mediocre quality was often not fully recognised or appropriately penalised. Some candidates did little more than re-tell the story, supposedly from another point of view, without creating a credible voice for the character.
Only rarely did a candidate fail to submit a piece of work for Part B. Candidates should remember to give the relevant word count for Part B. A number of candidates submitted commentaries which are not required and for which there is no specific credit available.
The main issue for a number of pieces was that they did not take their starting point in the set theme. Supervising teachers would have been more aware of this if the pieces had been annotated in accordance with the specification.

Choice of set texts
As regards the popularity of the five pairings of set texts, there are three which attracted very large numbers. There are no absolute figures to support moderators' impressions that the combination of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and I*n Cold Blood* by Truman Capote may well have been the most popular in terms of raw statistics as there were also very significant numbers for *Jane Eyre* paired with *Wide Sargasso Sea.* Both of these pairings produced excellent work. The contrast between the styles of writing in earlier periods and modern approaches to narrative was obviously very successful in engaging candidates' interests. The attraction for candidates of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* is not surprising. The notion of fantasy had a very strong appeal and many candidates had done some thorough research on the features of the genre and the ways in which these are adapted by both Lewis Carroll and J.K. Rowling, and there was some truly imaginative work on both of these texts for the creative pieces in Part B of the submission.

Poe's *Selected Tales* and *The Big Sleep* by Raymond Chandler continue to produce the intelligent and sophisticated responses that were characteristic of answers on NTB2 on the earlier specification. Candidates took advantage of the wider range of choice presented by the collection of stories. The theme of justice was well explored in Part A. Part B provided good openings for meetings between Marlowe and Dupin. The sailor's own version of his orang-utan's misdemeanours was another popular choice. The invention of Carmen's psychiatrist, in a sequel chapter, was another recurring idea.

Though there were fewer submissions based on *Utopia* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* this pairing produced some excellent work. Given that More's work was originally written and published in Latin, centres have a choice of translations. Paul Turner's translation into modern English (Penguin Classics 1965) offers candidates an easy access to the text while Ralph Robinson's translation, first published in 1551, offers splendid opportunities for comparison of changes in language over time but candidates were not disadvantaged by the choice of either translation. Where candidates referred to more than one translation, their work was often considerably enhanced.

Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes and *The Lost Continent* attracted the least number of candidates. Most, however, seemed comfortable with and wrote well about Stevenson's character and Modestine got more than her fair share of attention. They were less confident with his sense of humour. As for Bryson, there was an overall impression that while his humorous side was easily recognised, his more thoughtful and serious messages were not well grasped.

Annotation and accuracy in the award of marks
In awarding marks for Part A, centres rightly gave credit in the top band to candidates whose work was excellent but supervising teachers were reluctant to identify weaknesses in less skilful work. There was a tendency for centres to over-reward work which dealt well with themes and character at the expense of features of crafting and narrative technique. High marks were given to analyses that were over-general, offered limited focus on the set theme and were cursory in their discussion of linguistic and literary features. Internal assessment tended to focus on strengths and did not always successfully identify a balance of strengths and weakness. Significant omissions and instances of superficiality were not always recognised in submissions where candidates had written fluently but with a relatively narrow agenda. Centres which had rigorous internal standardisation arrangements, with internal moderation sheets on which colleagues exchanged views in a series of jottings, were less prone to this leniency. It was noticeable that scripts which were annotated with evaluative comments were much more accurately assessed than those which carried random comments, generally of a descriptive kind. Some centres offered only summary comments on the *Candidate Record Form* which did not reference precise sections of the work. The least effective type of annotation is that which labels paragraphs according to AO's with no supporting comment or evidence. Such annotation is limited in usefulness and is insufficient to explain the award of marks. The following criteria might be helpful to centres in assessing the appropriateness of their annotation practice.

The most effective annotation:
- *comments appropriately on the unique features of each individual submission*
- *highlights effective analysis of chosen extracts*
- *is not unduly reliant on the wording from the mark band descriptors*
- *offers judgements that are perceptive and evaluative*
- *identifies both strengths and weaknesses*
- *uses the marking criteria*
- *matches the marks awarded.*

Word limits
Good management of information within the word limit proved a useful discriminator. Candidates appear to have benefited from the tight structure imposed by the rubric. Any tendency to digress from the brief or to labour the point was reined in. A number of supervising teachers were careful to identify submissions which were overlong or too short and some centres explained how they had responded to this in their evaluation. Centres are thanked for this rigorous implementation of the rubric governing word limits. Candidates who had worked within the word limits were all too keen to quote the relevant figures. A useful formula proved to be something on the following lines: Part A - *1,674 words, including 200 words of permitted quotation from the extracts and from the wider set texts; Part B - 750 words.* This should be standard practice in future submissions.

Photocopies of chosen extracts
A surprisingly high number of candidates did not follow the guidance in referencing their chosen extracts. All too often, candidates left it to the moderator to find "the top of Page 5 down to the middle of Page 6". In some cases, this was a naïve oversight but further investigation often revealed that candidates had made use of excessively long sections of the texts or had edited the text out of all recognition. It also raises questions as to how internal assessment was

undertaken. Some candidates made reference to two chosen extracts but neglected to make them the foundation of their discussion, preferring to travel across the whole texts. In several extreme cases, candidates had clearly not even chosen extracts or had chosen a selection of several short passages, presumably to ensure the integration of preferred features. Teachers' annotation occasionally made reference to 'good use of chosen extracts' which could not be supported from a reading of the candidate's work. Centres need to be aware that it is part of the moderator's standard practice to cross-check between candidates' writing and the extracts to confirm that the work is substantially relevant to the chosen extracts. From January 2010, candidates must include photocopies of the extracts they have chosen, with START and FINISH clearly marked. Photocopies are better suited for the purpose of moderation than word-processed copies because they also supply the moderator with page references and deter candidates from injudicious editing of the text.

Evidence of Planning (the candidate's brief handwritten declaration that introduces the two tasks) is not assessed but allows the candidate to explain to the reader how the tasks are being approached. This gives the candidate the opportunity to demonstrate that the work is genuinely his or her own and supports the statement on the *Candidate Record Form*. Several centres provided other robust evidence of their anti-plagiarism policies.
An example of good practice for Part A might be along the lines of "I decided that an important element in the fantasy of both books was each writer's use of animals and after experimenting with a number of extracts, I reduced my search to mythical animals." It was occasionally unclear what the candidate was hoping to achieve in Part B. Where the text type for Part B could not be determined, it was difficult for the moderator to assess the appropriateness of the mark awarded, especially where the work was not annotated.

Administration
As with everything new, there are inevitable teething troubles. Supervising teachers who had followed the instructions in the specification and had taken advantage of AQA training sessions and the advice available from coursework advisors were in a strong position to guide their candidates effectively. Minor problems were relatively easy to resolve and centres are thanked for the prompt response to moderators' requests for further documentation and additional information.
Administration is easier if centres avoid the excessive use of **plastic pockets** from which candidates' work has to be removed in order to read it. The work of each candidate should be securely stapled or tagged.
Several centres had not fully appreciated that the arrangements for drafting are not the same as those for NTB3. **Drafts are not required.** Drafts can occasionally be a cause of confusion where the final pieces are not clearly identified. There is no specific credit for evidence of the drafting process.
Overall, the standard of neatness and clarity, especially the clear word-processing, made the task of moderation much easier. In a few instances, candidates chose an unreasonably small point size, perhaps to disguise excessive length. **Point 12 must be the minimum.** In academic writing, the overuse of emboldening, which makes continuous prose particularly hard to read, should be discouraged.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades
Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the **Results statistics** page of the AQA Website.