

A LEVEL

Moderators' report

ENGLISH LITERATURE

H472

For first teaching in 2015

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Version 1

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Introduction

Our Moderators' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on centres' assessment of moderated work, based on what has been observed by our moderation team. These reports include a general commentary of accuracy of internal assessment judgements; identify good practice in relation to evidence collation and presentation and comments on the quality of centre assessment decisions against individual Learning Objectives. This report also highlights areas where requirements have been misinterpreted and provides guidance to centre assessors on requirements for accessing higher mark bands. Where appropriate, the report will also signpost to other sources of information that centre assessors will find helpful.

OCR completes moderation of centre-assessed work in order to quality assure the internal assessment judgements made by assessors within a centre. Where OCR cannot confirm the centre's marks, we may adjust them in order to align them to the national standard. Any adjustments to centre marks are detailed on the Moderation Adjustments report, which can be downloaded from Interchange when results are issued. Centres should also refer to their individual centre report provided after moderation has been completed. In combination, these centre-specific documents and this overall report should help to support centres' internal assessment and moderation practice for future series.

General overview

The non-exam assessment (NEA) is a compulsory component of the A Level English Literature qualification. It is worth 40 marks and counts as 20% of the total A Level.

The NEA comprises two pieces of work. For Task 1, candidates can choose to do either a close reading or a piece of recreative writing with commentary. For the Close Reading task, candidates critically analyse a section of their chosen text or an individual poem selected from an anthology or collection. Candidates should select a manageable section of text: approximately three to four pages of prose or drama or up to 45 lines of poetry are recommended. Any selection made from poetry should be either a single poem or one extract from a longer poem. The recommended word length for this task is 1000 words, excluding quotations. For the Recreative task, candidates produce a piece of writing on a selected passage or poem from their chosen text, with a commentary explaining the links between their own writing and the original passage. The recommended word length for the Recreative piece is 300–350 words with a commentary of 650–700 words, excluding quotations. For Task 2, candidates produce an essay exploring comparisons and contrasts between two texts, informed by different interpretations and an understanding of contexts. The recommended word length for this task is 2000 words, excluding quotations, task title, footnotes and bibliography. Across the two tasks, candidates must study one prose, one drama and one poetry text. All three texts must have been first published or performed in 1900 or later and at least one text should have been first published or performed in 2000 or later.

Guidance on preparation and marking of the NEA is included in the specification, including the marking criteria. Marking should be positive, rewarding achievement rather than penalising failure or omissions. The awarding of marks must be directly related to the marking criteria. Teachers should use their professional judgement to select the best-fit level descriptor that describes the candidate's work. Teachers should use the full range of marks available to them and award all the marks in any level for work which fully meets that level descriptor. Teachers should bear in mind the weighting of the assessment objectives, place the response within a level and award the appropriate mark. If a candidate does not address one of the assessment objectives targeted in the task, they cannot achieve all marks in the given level.

Centres are responsible for internal standardisation of assessments.

Administration

Most centres presented the sample for moderation in a prompt and organised way, with clearly bound folders of work and all necessary additional paperwork, such as the Task 1 source passages and the confirmation of Text and Task approval. It is worth, however, clarifying a few points about administration:

- The NEA cover sheet provides the account of the candidate's attainment and is the moderator's working document. It is essential, therefore, that it is filled in carefully, with correct candidate number, texts and authors, word count excluding quotations, footnotes etc., clear summative comment on the folder as a whole, and the correct marks for each task, as agreed following internal standardisation.
- Each candidate's work should be bound securely, e.g. by a treasury tag, or staple. Paperclips attach themselves to the wrong papers and come loose, whereas submitting a pile of loose sheets of paper, as some centres do, is unhelpful.
- The word length guideline is 3000 words for the whole folder. While there is no specific penalty for going beyond the guidelines, they indicate the level of precision and focus which is expected in the writing. Letting candidates submit work that is beyond the guidelines does them a serious disservice – writing to length guidelines is a key skill in which candidates should be trained.

Writing well beyond the guidelines cannot demonstrate the focused argument expected in 3000 words and will therefore be self-penalising.

- As stated in the NEA guidelines, footnotes should only be used to acknowledge secondary sources. They cannot be given marks as part of the argument.

Texts and Tasks

The NEA component is designed to provide an opportunity for candidates to explore their own reading interests and conduct independent research and so offers a clear alternative to the examined components. The most successful work seen by moderators responded to this opportunity, with fresh work throughout the mark range as candidates took ownership of their learning and pursued their own ideas with excitement and energy. There was thoughtful work on the published works of performance poets, on screenplays of contemporary films and on contemporary novels and plays. However, the work as a whole was dominated by a small handful of texts: *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The History Boys*, *Jerusalem*, *The World's Wife* and *Atonement*. Each of these texts is certainly worthy of study and there was some excellent writing on each one, but moderators frequently felt that the work was following well-worn routines and that candidates were being directed, so that they often reached taught conclusions without showing the reading and analysis that should lead to those conclusions. This was even more apparent when all candidates within a centre responded to the same, or a small number, of tasks. Often the responses were scaffolded in a very similar way, with the same range of textual and extra-textual references. The lack of individual drive in the work usually restricted the marks as there was a lack of freshness and enterprise.

Centres which take a more adventurous approach, allowing candidates free choice of at least one text and the opportunity to forge their own tasks, provide a more stimulating educational and literary experience. These candidates also tend to produce the most fresh, interesting and successful work, throughout the mark range.

Features of Sampled Work

The Close Reading task is designed to encourage close, detailed, analytical reading of a relatively short section of text or a single poem, putting the emphasis on AO2. That selected poem or passage also needs to be placed in the context of the wider text from which it is taken, addressing AO1. Tasks which focused on these demands in their wording, following the style of 'Comment closely on ways... saying how far it is characteristic of the text as a whole' (or similar) tended to be more successful than those tasks which were phrased more as general essays. The most successful essays gave a clear reading of the poem or passage, showing with precise, focused analysis, how it communicates successfully and how the writer's choices of language, form and structure shape the reader's or audience's response. They also showed how its concerns and methods reflect the rest of the text, with a number of deft references to different sections, scenes or poems. Less successful responses often took a narrative approach or took individual examples of vocabulary or imagery out of the context of its meaning. Overall, candidates should be encouraged to consider genre and form more fully, and to think carefully about the poetic, narrative or dramatic features of their excerpts and texts. Sometimes, terminology was used as a substitute for such discussion. For example, many essays claimed that a 14-line poem was a sonnet, without examining how that very particular poetic form is used and manipulated by the poet, and to what effect.

There were also some excellent examples of Recreative work this year. At their best, the new passages or poems demonstrated advanced understanding and appreciation of the writer's methods and concerns, skilfully imitated. The analytical commentaries focused on the original text in order to justify the creative choices. About 350 words for the recreated poem or passage, and about 650 words for the commentary provides the most appropriate balance. The most popular texts for this task were *A Streetcar Named Desire* and different collections by Duffy. Work on these tests showed some sensitive appreciation of

Duffy's characteristic concerns and poetic methods, while the work on Williams showed a thoughtful understanding of the relationships in the play, the tone of the dialogue and plastic theatre techniques. Less successful were those scenes which introduced new characters or were given a different setting.

In Comparative Task 2, candidates bring together two different texts, usually in order to compare how they present or explore a common concern. Less successful essays compare the concern itself, often focusing on key characters which reflect aspects of it. Higher level answers focus securely on the key comparison of the different methods employed in texts of different genres to explore that concern. The task will always focus on two texts of different form and genre and this should be central to the comparative essay. Moderators saw too many essays which compared plot and content, without showing awareness that the two texts communicated these in entirely different ways; in such essays AO2 was not successfully addressed. Where candidates had a strong understanding of the assessment objectives and blended their approach to them, the results were often excellent. At the top of the range were highly sophisticated, well-researched and thoughtful pieces of writing, using the comparison to draw insight from the texts. Such work also made excellent use of varied contexts: socio-historical, literary, cultural and philosophical. Biographical context can be very helpful, but it can also swamp the appreciation of the literature under discussion. Too many essays on writers such as Williams and more particularly Plath use parts of the text to illustrate the biography, limiting the literary appreciation. All contexts are used most successfully when they highlight particular areas of the texts and deepen the understanding of them. Successful consideration with other readings demonstrated very thoughtful engagement with critics' ideas, showing understanding of ways in which, the views can be justified, but also often challenging them, or balancing different views against each other. Higher ability candidates considered how the critical opinion had modified their own understanding of the texts, rather than just citing the reading, often at the end of a paragraph or as a substitute for the candidate's own argument. Films and productions can be used successfully as readings, as long as they are considered in detail, with specific reference to consider what has been altered or emphasised, and to what effect.

Marking and Annotation

Most centres marked their candidates' work with meticulous care and professionalism. Best practice included careful marginal annotations which commented on the level of achievement rather than just listing AOs. The summative comments on the cover sheets carefully balanced both the strengths and the weaknesses of the work, referring to both the level descriptors and particular features of the essays. There was clear evidence internal moderation, often with vigorous inter-departmental debate, with clear justification for any adjustments made. Such detailed consideration of the work and marking criteria usually led to final marks which were very close to national standards. Where there are different teaching sets, or different centres within a consortium, it is essential that the whole cohort is internally moderated together to make sure an accurate rank order is decided on before the submission of marks to OCR.

Raising Attainment

In Task 1 Close Reading, candidates are advised to present a coherent reading of the selected extract or poem, using analytical detail to demonstrate their understanding of ways in which the author guides the reader or audience response. In relating the selection to the whole text, they should look at methods as well as content and concerns. It is very important for essays to consider genre, form and structure as well as language in order to address AO2 fully.

In Task 1 Recreative, the recreated passage or poem should be relatively brief to allow for a developed commentary. The commentary should explore the methods and concerns of the original text in order to discuss how candidates have reached their decisions in their own piece of writing.

The comparison in Comparative Task 2 should focus on writers' presentation or methods rather than characters and concerns directly. The essays should show clear awareness of the difference in genre

between the two texts and compare the different methods and effects. The focus should always be on how characters and ideas are presented – narratively, dramatically or poetically – rather than on the characters and ideas themselves.

Avoiding potential malpractice

It is advisable to train candidates in the correct practices for acknowledgement of secondary sources used in their essays. Oxford or Harvard referencing is preferred.

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