

A LEVEL

Moderators' report

ENGLISH LITERATURE

H472

For first teaching in 2015

H472/03 Summer 2023 series

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Introduction

Our moderators' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

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General overview

H472/03

The non-examined 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 non-examined component 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 count 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 count 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 count 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 non-examined assessment 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 which work 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 the marks in the given level.

Centres are responsible for internal standardisation of assessments.

Candidates who did well generally:	Candidates who did less well generally:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • structured clear and developed arguments • showed clear awareness of poetic, narrative or dramatic form • maintained a literary analytical approach, • blended their address to the relevant Assessment Objectives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relied on a narrative approach • paid little attention to poetic, narrative or dramatic form • concentrated on plot and character • paid less attention to the relevant Assessment Objectives.

Administration

The work of moderators was helped enormously by the professionalism and care of so many centres who submitted folders which had been carefully marked, organised and dispatched on time with all relevant paperwork complete.

There were, however, a number of occasions when the work of moderation was hampered by late submissions, clerical errors, incomplete coversheets and missing copies of the extracts for Task 1. As the moderator's working document and the final record of the candidate's attainment, it is essential that the coversheet is completed fully and accurately, including candidate name and number, the texts and their authors with the post-2000 text indicated, accurate word count and the correct marks for the tasks. The coversheet should also include a summative comment which balances the strengths and weaknesses of the folder to justify the mark given, and it is most helpful if these comments relate directly to the Assessment Objectives.

Word Count Guidelines

Since the beginning of this specification, a number of centres have pushed against the word count guidelines of 3000 words, but this year many abandoned the guidelines altogether, with a large number of overlong folders, reaching as many as 7000 words. On the other hand, some centres and candidates had worked meticulously in honing and editing their arguments to fit within the suggested 3000 words. It is clearly unfair to compare the potential development of argument in two folders of such different lengths.

There are two things to consider here. One is that every 300 words over the guidelines is the equivalent of an extra 12 minutes added onto a timed exam. The other is that it is expected that candidates will be able to complete their work and address all the Assessment Objectives within 3000 words, so exceeding the guidelines will affect the assessment of AO1. All the folders of excessive length would have benefited from editing. For example, several Task 1 responses contained substantial discussion of contexts and different readings which are not assessed and therefore could have been removed with no detriment. Lengthy Task 2 responses often lacked taut and focused argument, precision or clear purpose. Training candidates to write to a specific length is one of the learning opportunities of the component, so allowing them to submit work that is beyond the guidelines does them a disservice.

Marking and Internal Moderation

In most centres, marking had been carried out assiduously, with careful attention to the Assessment Objectives and the Marking Criteria. Detailed engagement with the writing demonstrated the professionalism of the work carried out and this usually led to marks that were close to the nationally agreed standards. Short evaluative comments alongside the AO marks in the margin are much more helpful in deciding the mark than ticks or just references to 'AO2', 'AO4' and so on. These evaluative comments then guide the summative comment and help find the appropriate Level for the mark.

Moderators did see some work which had no annotations at all, as well as some where engagement was minimal. This made it unclear how the mark had been given and made it more difficult to support the marking judgements.

Equally, there were some submissions where there was no evidence of internal moderation, while others merely recorded some altered marks. Again, this made it difficult to recognise the justification for the changes. In more successful centres, it was clear that some essays had been marked by two (or more) different teachers, with clear signs of debate about the folders, which made it apparent why marks were agreed or altered.

Texts and Tasks

The non-examined assessment is designed to provide candidates with an opportunity for individual research and study. Some centres embraced this wholeheartedly, with their candidates making entirely free choices of appropriate texts and formulating tasks which allowed them to explore their interests in those texts. These submissions clearly communicated the candidates' excitement and personal engagement and led to fresh, stimulating work throughout the mark range. Other centres taught two texts, but encouraged candidates to find their own text for Task 1 or their own companion text for Task 2. Others taught three texts, but allowed candidates to choose how they would be represented in the folder, again allowing candidates to pursue connections and tasks which particularly interested them. Another advantage of allowing choice is that candidates can choose a text or texts which suit not only their interests but their level of confidence in the subject, with more able candidates opting for denser, more complex texts and less confident candidates choosing material which they find more accessible. It is important for all candidates to choose texts which will allow them full access to the Assessment Objectives at an appropriate level.

The enterprise of such centres led to moderators reading some thoughtful essays on a wide variety of authors. While canonical poets such as Carol Ann Duffy, Robert Frost, Seamus Heaney, Thomas Hardy, Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath had a solid presence among the submissions, candidates also wrote with insight on the work of Kaveh Akbar, Inua Ellams, Imtiaz Dharker, Louise Glück, Seán Hewitt, Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, Jo Shapcott and Lemn Sissay, among others. Moderators were delighted to see such interested engagement with contemporary poetry. A similar range was evident in the prose texts, with familiar names like F Scott Fitzgerald, EM Forster, Kazuo Ishiguro, James Joyce, Ken Kesey and Ian McEwan rubbing shoulders with Philip K Dick, Bernardine Evaristo, Lawrence Hill, Madeline Miller, Celeste Ng, Maggie O'Farrell, Kamila Shamsie, Ali Smith, Colson Whitehead and Hanya Yanagihara. It was good to see that candidates were still enthralled by the plays of Edward Albee, Alan Bennett, David Mamet, Arthur Miller, John Osborne and Tom Stoppard, but it was also evident that they found compelling drama by Ayad Akhtar, Eve Ensler, Lorraine Hansberry, Suzan-Lori Parks, Lulu Raczka, Polly Stenham, Sophie Treadwell and Laura Wade, for example. Sometimes less successful here were dramatisations of novels, such as the recent stage version of Andrea Levy's novel *Small Island*. These were usually discussed in terms of plot and character with minimal reference to their recreation as plays.

Candidates who had been allowed to explore literature for themselves in some way usually produced lively and energetic responses, often very alert to the ways in which literature reflects contemporary concerns and contexts.

Creating some freedom in the choice of texts and tasks not only fits with the spirit of the component's design, but also tends to raise candidates' attainment because of the personal ownership of the work. It is understandable why some centres wish to play safe, teaching the same texts each year with the same narrow range of questions (*The World's Wife*, *Feminine Gospels*, *Atonement*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The History Boys* and *Jerusalem* feature very frequently). However, this often results in essays being structured in very similar ways, using the same references, contexts and critics, which limits the enterprise and learning opportunities for candidates as they follow a well-trodden path.

Features of Sampled Work

Task 1 Close Reading/Recreative

Both the Close Reading and Recreative option for Task 1 require close detailed analysis, which is why the assessment of AO2 is dominant. The Close Reading task balances that analysis with an informed view of how the chosen extract relates to the rest of the text from which it is taken. The task wording should therefore reflect both aspects, while putting the emphasis on the close reading. Unusually, a substantial number of responses in this series did not make reference to the wider text, or did so in a perfunctory manner. Successful responses contextualise the selected extract or poem and blend the analysis seamlessly with the awareness of the wider text, demonstrating how key methods, techniques and concerns of the extract are reflective of the whole. Clear, specific references to other parts of the text or other poems demonstrate the characteristic features. These are used to inform the analytical discussion of the passage or poem. With poetry texts, candidates should ideally make some detailed references to between two to four other poems, dependent on length, with others mentioned in passing where they fit the developing argument. Very successful work often considers the placement of the selected poem within the structure of the collection as a whole. Since the dominant Assessment Objective is AO2, it is often surprising that candidates do not consider the form of the text at all, lacking specific references to, for example, versification, narrative voice or the structure of dialogue. This was frequently a significant weakness in Task 1 responses which had not been recognised by centres.

In submissions which included both Close Reading and Recreative responses, it was sometimes only the Recreative tasks which showed awareness of form, as candidates were imitating verse patterns, narrative structures or characteristic stage directions and then commenting on them. Candidates who had looked closely at the writing of the source text often produced engaging and successful recreations, some of which were sophisticated and completely plausible. Successful commentaries were well balanced between the recreation and the source text, making specific links between them to show an analytical understanding of the original author's work and how that had been recreated. It is therefore important to keep the recreated passage relatively short, certainly no more than 350-400 words, to allow sufficient space to develop the commentary.

Assessment for learning



Task 1 Close Reading

Candidates should:

- present a coherent reading of the selected extract or poem
- use analytical detail to demonstrate their understanding of ways in which the author guides the reader or audience response
- relate the selection to the whole text, considering methods as well as content and concerns
- consider genre, form and structure as well as language in order to address AO2 fully.

Assessment for learning



Task 1 Recreative

Candidates should:

- keep the recreated passage or poem relatively brief to allow for a developed commentary
- explore the methods and concerns of the original text in the commentary
- discuss how they have reached their choices of language and structure in their own piece of writing.

Task 2 Comparative

The strongest comparative essays began with an initial overview of the texts related directly to the task, indicating the reasons for comparison, sometimes with a brief reference to relevant contexts. They then advanced the argument through carefully sequenced, directed paragraphs helped by discourse indicators. In the careful selection of key references and quotations, these essays demonstrated their understanding of the texts. As there is time for redrafting and editing, strong responses are fluently written in a literary register and have been carefully proof-read.

The task wording should help candidates focus on the 'writing' of the texts, in order to consider how the authors 'present' an issue or concern. This helps them avoid comparing the content, the concerns or the characters, with little address to how the writers' choices present them to the reader or audience. Successful essays clearly focus on a comparison of the writers' methods, using quotation not just for support and illustration, but to address them critically in analytical discussion. As the two texts at the heart of the essay will be different forms, it is very useful to prompt candidates to use that as a starting point and to discuss the different choices poets, novelists and dramatists use to shape meaning and create effects for readers and audiences.

As mentioned above, the choices of texts often led candidates to consider contemporary social and political contexts and how these fuel writers' works and responses to them. Research is needed to fully understand earlier historical contexts and avoid sweeping statements about social attitudes at different points in the twentieth century, for example. More detail and specificity allows candidates to be more successfully aware of the significance and influence of the contexts they cite. A wide range of contexts can be relevant to the argument, including socio-historical, political, gender, cultural, scientific, philosophical and literary.

The best essays are well balanced between the two texts and discuss them in tandem for at least part of the response. Less successful essays move from text to text in different paragraphs, with sometimes the only sign of comparison being 'Similarly...' or 'In contrast...' at the start of paragraphs.

On the other hand, some candidates are so focused on keeping the texts together in paragraphs that the paragraphs lose direction and become overlong, often up to two pages, which hampers the clarity of argument. This is a key area where candidates need training and practice in order to write cogently and with consistent comparison.

It may also be worthwhile spending more time exploring with candidates how to engage with alternative critical readings. Confident candidates are able to challenge different views of the texts, or balance different readings against each other, in order to explore their implications. Others might select their own range of references from the text which support a critic's view, and then develop it. This approach is much more successful than inserting a quotation from a critic as a soundbite without exploring the argument behind it, or dropping in a critic's statement at the end of paragraph as a substitute for argument. Candidates should acknowledge all secondary sources by footnotes and a bibliography. This is a requirement of the specification and encourages academic practice.

The most successful essays blend the address to the Assessment Objectives throughout the essay so that they depend on each other and are difficult to disentangle.

Assessment for learning



Task 2 Comparative

Candidates should:

- focus on writers' presentation or methods rather than characters and concerns directly,
- show clear awareness of the difference in genre between the two texts and compare the different methods and effects,
- always focus 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/MHRA referencing is preferred.

Teachers should be alert to sudden changes in the quality of candidates' writing and style.

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