



General Certificate of Education

Media Studies

MEST1 Investigating Media

Report on the Examination

2010 examination - January series

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General

This was the third examination on Unit 1 Investigating Media (MEST1) for the new AQA GCE Media Studies specification which has been running since September 2008. There were 3048 candidates who took the examination this series.

There were some very pleasing signs that centres and their candidates are now much better prepared for this examination and the majority are now approaching Section A effectively. However, there are still some centres that need to revise the way they prepare candidates for Section B (The Cross Media Study) if they are to perform in line with the potential often shown in Section A.

Section A: Texts, Concepts and Contexts

The Section A moving image product chosen to be analysed was an advertisement produced by *Warner Brothers* to promote the new DVD formats of Blu-Ray (*Sony*) and High Definition DVD (*Toshiba*). The product was distributed via *Warner Home Video DVDs* in early 2008 at a pivotal moment when the home cinema market was still to decide which format would win the battle to become the leading (and ultimately only) competitor in a lucrative global market. The advertisement raised interesting questions about media forms (how film trailer conventions were used to hail the audience and promote the product); media representations (how technology was represented as a modern necessity); media audiences (how audiences are persuaded to purchase the product) and media institutions (how the values of Hollywood are perpetuated).

The majority of candidates coped admirably with viewing a fast-paced product three times and having to make detailed notes on it in the first fifteen minutes of the examination. Centres had clearly made effective arrangements for the viewing of the product. Some candidates require further guidance in making sure they have recorded the specific, close details of media language that they need to support their ideas and arguments (particularly during the third and final viewing). However, most candidates though made good use of the three blank pages for notes in the answer booklet. Pleasingly, there were far less cases of candidates using general MIGRAIN type notes on the clip, and notes made tended to be much more focused on the specifics of the questions set.

The vast majority of responses were far more closely focused on the questions set than in previous series. Candidates are also now writing much more succinct responses that do not on the whole go beyond the two pages provided. In fact, very few candidates felt the need to use additional answer sheets, which in the past have tended to never really gain the extra marks relative to the extra effort undertaken.

Stamina still remains a key concern in Section A with on average, marks for each question reducing (sometimes quite dramatically) by Question 4. This may be because candidates find the key concept of Media Institutions more challenging (as in previous series) but could equally be due to poor planning and time management. Centres are once again reminded that the order of questions is therefore likely to change in future series to address this issue (moving the Institution question closer to the start). It is obviously vital though that candidates read all the questions before they embark on the three viewings and note-taking/planning. The opening paragraphs are also important to fully comprehend and do contain some important hints (e.g. the importance of 'home cinema' linking to Question 3).

Some centres are still instructing candidates to use media theory at all costs in Section A. Whilst more able candidates are able to use this with confidence and flexibility, in turn

enhancing their knowledge and understanding, weaker candidates can struggle and theory tends, in this case, to impede the clarity of their response. Ultimately, question focus can be lost which in turn lowers the level awarded. Candidates therefore need to be reminded that media theory should only be applied (not merely regurgitated) if it is relevant.

Critical autonomy is paramount for stronger responses and it was particularly encouraging that many candidates challenged or confronted the underlying premise of the questions. For example, many candidates questioned whether the positive representation of technology in the advertisement would really lead to improved audience experience.

Question 1: Media Forms

This was once again a relatively straightforward question designed to give candidates a comfortable lead into the exam. It demanded that candidates show their knowledge and understanding of the trailer conventions used by the advertisement, use terminology with confidence to describe it, and make detailed references to the text.

This was, by far the most successfully answered of all the questions. The majority of candidates were able to focus on the form of the product and comfortably identify the relevant aspects of film language (use of sound, montage, graphics and special effects) which were used by the advertisement to follow the conventions of a film trailer. Media terminology was at least proficient in most cases, if not confident, and at least solid references were made to the media product, if not detailed in Level 4 responses.

Weaker responses tended to either just describe the advertisement or over-rely on just one feature which conformed to a film trailer. Sometimes irrelevant theory was also utilised leading to a loss of question focus. In particular, candidates can tend to fall back on a repetitive use of denotation/connotation; this semiotic approach not always being made fully relevant to the question. Some also decided to refer to other Hollywood trailers that they knew and describe their features rather than focus on the product at hand. Some were also confused by the nature of the text, thinking it was an actual film trailer whilst others wandered aimlessly into territory covered by the other questions, such as how the product worked to persuade the audience.

Question 2: Media Representations

The question on Representation was designed to enable candidates to comment on the representations of technology offered by the media product, and most importantly how these representations were constructed and conveyed through media language.

Strong responses were able to identify the way technology was represented as a necessity, accessible, not related to cost etc. and show how this meaning was constructed through the media language of the text. These responses therefore were able to see technology as a more abstract concept and pull it away from the product itself to be critical of it. In turn, the representation of technology was rightfully questioned and many candidates challenged the notion that the audience's eventual use of the technology would live up to such a positive (and biased) representation; notions of cost and accessibility here being major factors explored.

Weaker responses tended to just list and describe the features that the new formats offered (the enhanced picture quality, interactive features etc.), thus getting entangled with Question 3 and also avoiding any notion of how the representations on offer were actually constructed. Many found it difficult to comment on the representation of a 'thing' and wanted to push their answers

towards gender (and in some rare cases age and race). This in turn meant focus was lost and textual references weakened. It is perhaps worth centres practising the analysis of representation of other elements beyond the stalwarts of age, gender, race and class to enable candidates to think on their feet more effectively and show more critical autonomy.

Question 3: Media Institutions

This question was designed for candidates to consider how the advertisement used a range of techniques to persuade the audience that their home cinema experience would be improved.

Strong responses managed to comment on what the audience were persuaded of (e.g. improved screen resolution, in-movie experiences, increased interaction, high fidelity sound etc.) and demonstrate what techniques (e.g. binary opposition with the old DVD format, use of ironic comparison through footage anchored by voiceover etc.) were used to convince them. These answers had a clear idea of the notion of 'home cinema' cited in the question and opening paragraphs and located their ideas in the product itself (through reference to the media language used). This enabled the use of detailed textual references and confident use of terminology.

Many candidates struggled with this question, however, perhaps losing stamina or not managing their time correctly. Many answers were poorly planned and the notes taken in the first fifteen minutes viewing time failed to fully separate ideas from Question 2 responses. This often led to answers which just listed the new features of the format (as with Question 2 above) and failed to show how this meaning was constructed by the text. Other responses did try to focus on the persuasive techniques (e.g. the voiceover addressing the viewer personally) but then failed to fully link this to the improvements in home cinema being promoted.

Some candidates insisted on using audience theory to answer the question using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs or a Uses and Gratifications approach. This was successful only if linked to the argument created in response to the question set. All too often, theory lead weaker candidates up unfruitful paths meandering away from the task at hand. Some candidates also tended to start by defining the audience in terms of age, gender and class (even 'capitalists' on a few occasions) and tried to show how audience responses were in turn influenced by this context, rather than actually considering the prompt in the question of 'home cinema experience'. Few responses at these lower levels really engaged with this notion (heavily promoted in the advertisement) that viewing HD DVDs at home was as good (if not better) than the theatrical experience of cinema. Many just saw 'home cinema' as 'watching films at home' rather than really getting to grips with how institutions such as Warner Brothers are trying to promote the experience as technologically advanced and a necessity to modern audiences.

Question 4: Media Audiences

This question was designed to enable candidates to show that they are able to identify the characteristics and values of an institution within a media product. Unfortunately, this was the least successfully answered question. Many candidates found it difficult to move out of the first two levels of the mark scheme and in turn deflated their total marks for Section A.

In order to gain higher levels, candidates had to show at least some sound understanding of the values of Hollywood (e.g. commercialism, modernity, heroism etc.). However, it was disappointing (as in previous series) that many candidates struggled with the concept of institutional values. Perhaps centres need to spend longer reinforcing with students how to extract the naturalised ideologies from a media product; a demanding task for AS level but one

which is invaluable for preparation for A2 level and beyond. Again, trying to foster more critical autonomy will give students more confidence in grappling with the notion of values and ideology in any product they come across.

Most candidates were far more comfortable with isolating key characteristics of Hollywood (e.g. big budget blockbusters, special effects, objectified women, stars etc.) and the most successful were able to root their ideas firmly in the text itself. Weaker candidates found the notion of Hollywood as an institution problematic, preferring to see it as a 'sunny place' where film stars congregate. Some just listed what they saw as typical Hollywood output not really linking their ideas to the text, whilst others desperately harked back to Question 1 and repeated their ideas about film trailer conventions.

Section B: The Cross-Media Study

There was overwhelming evidence this series that many centres and their candidates are now much more confident with the case study approach. Most were also very comfortable with the cross-media nature of the study and were able to provide references from all three media platforms.

Question 5 was by far the most popular with only a very small proportion of the overall entry opting for Question 6. In many ways this is a very positive sign as centres and their candidates are moving away from the textual analysis of individual texts (through concepts such as narrative) and wanting to examine the cross-media links between media products (through ideas such as synergy and convergence) and in turn really engage with and explore current media developments and debates.

The most successful case studies were those which allowed for depth across the platforms (rather than one film, poster, website etc) and variety in audiences. Music was particularly well done here; a very successful approach was the setting up of categories structured around media controlled by the artist and those which are constructed by fans or critics – this included music videos, band websites, YouTube, fan forums music press, mainstream feature articles, TV coverage etc. Film was also handled well when a contrasting set of films (in terms of audience, institutional context and genre) and their related marketing products were used as evidence. One particularly strong response, for example, used references related to *Avatar*, *District 9* and *Paranormal Activity*. Sport, Reality TV and Lifestyle once again proved to be rich with opportunities to exhibit how and why media products work across the platforms.

Stronger candidates selected well from their research in an attempt to address the question rather than just describing everything about their case study. This was also encouragingly demonstrated through less reliance on textual analysis and more emphasis on the interaction between texts, platforms and audiences.

Ultimately, centres who provided their candidates with opportunities to construct their own cross-media case studies were most successful. Strong candidates were in turn able to show high engagement in their answers as they had a greater interest in and ownership of the examples they used. They had clearly been guided well and had learnt from teacher-lead studies of key concepts, issues, theories and debates relevant to each platform and the particular topic area. They had then been able to apply this new found knowledge to their individually-chosen media products. One centre, for example, had provided students with an excellent overview of Chris Anderson's *The Long Tail* and candidates then undertook their own case study of a range of contrasting music artists to show how and why a cross-media presence was maintained.

Many centres, however, are still not preparing their students effectively for the cross-media study. Some, in fact, may be better spending more time on this section of the examination and perhaps waiting to enter candidates until the June series.

One main problem is that case studies can be far too narrow. For example, the study of just one film (most often *Quantum of Solace*) and one product from each of the other platforms. For music, sometimes just one promotional video was used and for sport, just one match (e.g. the *Wimbledon* final). Sometimes a wider range of texts/products was used but they were so similar in terms of audience and institutional context that there was little point (e.g. a Broadcast Fiction study of *Dr Who*, *The Sarah Jane Adventures* and *Torchwood*). Narrow case studies did not help candidates to fully understand the cross-media nature of media products and also limited their understanding of the topic area chosen. Centres are reminded that the cross-media study should be of a whole topic area not just one media product from that topic area.

Conversely, case studies that were far too broad in their range (e.g. 'sport in the media') also presented problems. In this instance, candidates tended to provide very generalised and even hypothetical examples. Centres are reminded that the cross-media study, although topic-lead, needs to be centred in the study of a range of specific (and hopefully contrasting) media products from across the platforms. Print examples were once again the major casualties here with no real referencing provided of film reviews or newspaper coverage. Many responses needed to communicate a greater sense of study and preparation by using detailed examples to avoid the pitfall of being too vague or generalised.

There is some evidence of completely teacher-lead case studies where every candidate in the centre uses exactly the same examples (even beyond the core texts studied). One centre, for example, used the very narrow film study of the *Indiana Jones* franchise and had prepared candidates so rigorously that they all used exactly the same print article and websites. Utilising this approach, very few students are able to demonstrate individual engagement by using even one of their own found examples. In this case, it is very difficult for examiners to differentiate between candidates and award the full range of marks.

Some odd case studies still remain. For example, the study of *Disney* as an institution, the *iPod*, *Hillsborough*, the representation of beauty products, and even the *National Lottery*. Using these narrow approaches meant that candidates had very little chance of accessing the higher levels of the mark scheme. Centres are reminded to seek guidance from AQA if they wish to deviate from the cross-media topic areas suggested in the specification.

There is also slight evidence of some centres using a historical approach to the case study. One centre had prepared its candidates to regurgitate a potted history of the soap opera since the 1930s whilst another had failed to fully pre-warn candidates not to focus too much on older documentaries (*Nanook of the North* not providing many opportunities for e-media examples). Even the original version of *Psycho* was used by one centre as part of a film case study. In order for candidates to fully understand how cross-media links are forged and to be aware of key issues and debates surrounding the topic area and three platforms, the fresher and more contemporary the examples the better.

Some centres are also under the misguided impression that material for the case study can be the candidates' own production work from MEST2. Whilst overlap between the research phase of MEST2 and the MEST1 case study is encouraged, examples of practical work undertaken are clearly not relevant in this context.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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