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Introduction

The paper is organised into three sections. Section A tests only reading and is based upon an unseen passage. The passage studied in Section A in January 2018 was adapted from *438 Days* by Jonathon Franklin and told the story of two poor fishermen, Alvarenga and Cordoba, and how their boat is caught in a fierce storm. Section B tests both reading and writing by asking candidates to respond to one of the non-fiction passages from the Anthology, in this case, *Taking on the World* by Ellen MacArthur. Section C is a single writing task that is not connected to either of the reading activities already undertaken on the paper. The paper was well received, with most candidates finding it very accessible.

Section A: Reading

Questions 1-4

The passage chosen proved to be accessible to almost all candidates, with very few experiencing any difficulties in reading comprehension. Question 1 is intended to be a gentle way into the paper and tests the skills of selection and retrieval, asking candidates to identify the month of the year in which the fishing trip takes place. There was only a single mark for this question and almost all candidates were able to determine that it was November. Question 2 asked candidates to select three words or phrases that showed how threatening the storm was in the passage. The mark scheme identifies eight possible responses and many candidates gained full marks but those who did not often did not choose words or phrases from the selected lines or did not directly answer the question; some chose the phrase 'like a ride at an amusement park' which on its own indicates no sense of danger or threat unless it is accompanied by the words, 'the boat began to tilt sideways.'

Question 3 asked candidates to explain what we learn about Cordoba. As a four-mark question there were many possible responses. Almost everyone attempted this question and was able to identify that Cordoba was inexperienced and that he was not brave in the face of the dangerous storm. Many recognised that he vomited and cried, the latter giving the opportunity for colourful depictions of his character such as being a baby or a wimp. Where candidates failed to score full marks it was sometimes due to the listing of points without explanation. Some answers focused too much upon comparison between the two men rather than being sharply focused on Cordoba. Where candidates did not score full marks some failed to give sufficient detail for full marks. It is possible to score full marks on this question without finding four distinct points, as the quality of explanation is a key part of the response. Centres should know that the mark scheme explicitly instructs markers to reward the quality of explanation rather than simply counting the number of features that have been identified and they should bear this in mind when preparing candidates for this type of question.

Question 4 was the higher mark tariff question in Section A with its greater focus on the writer's technique. This asked candidates about how the writer

tries to create interest in the events described in the passage and provided bullet points for additional support and structure. At the standardising meeting all markers were made aware of a range of possible interpretations and that they should credit any that were clearly founded in the text. In the published mark scheme examiners are told that they "must reward all valid points that show an engagement with the text and an appreciation of the writer's technique rather than have a set agenda of items that they are looking for." Weaker responses were often very short, limited to a small number of points focusing on particular elements within the passage, often providing little or no development. Most could pick out a few points for each heading. There were some really good attempts with language features and the majority could identify personification but not always give the effect. Stronger responses identified a wider range of features such as onomatopoeia and sibilance. There was much to be said about the use of imagery and the manner in which the storm is likened to a beast-like predator toying with its prey.

Many candidates were able to provide a more detailed understanding of how the writer structures the story from the early threat posed by the storm and show how Alvarenga stands up to the storm, through the moment of realisation as the storm worsens and he is forced to cut his lines and run back towards the coast. Better answers showed a perceptive and well-developed response to the text with extended comments about the use of imagery and the creation of pathos. Some answers showed a subtle and perceptive understanding as they recognised the different presentations of the storm and the use of an extended image of contest and Olympian conflict. Many commented on the imagery used throughout the passage, such as the manner in which Alvarenga literally reads the signs the storm is sending him, almost like morse code. Weaker answers were often able to select a number of word-level features, such as those relating to Cordoba's distress but were not able to comment on other features, such as the repeated use of rhetorical questions, 'Was the fuel line pinched?', or the use of onomatopoeia to describe the 'sloshing crimson pool' of the boat.

Essentially, the most successful candidates demonstrated higher skills of analysis and interpretation in evaluating the writer's techniques and did so by directly and doggedly focusing on the question. As has been said before in these reports, linked text and paraphrase does not constitute an explanation. It was a feature of better answers that they were more able to recognise the changes in emotions felt by the writer and created for the reader throughout the passage. They appreciated the shaping of the passage as a whole and saw how the passage takes the reader from a moment of relief and resolution as it seems they will arrive back home safely, to the stark, single-line paragraph that hints at what the storm is about to unleash upon the defenceless fishermen.

Section B: Reading and Writing

Question 5

Section B was based upon the pre-prepared text from the Edexcel Anthology for International GCSE English Language and Literature, *Taking on the World*, which gives a lot of detail about the character of Ellen MacArthur and how she copes with a very difficult and dangerous task. As a prepared text almost all candidates seemed to have knowledge of this text. Many candidates were able to comment upon key elements of her character, such as her bravery and her resolute determination in the face of such a difficult task. Many candidates commented upon her resilience, patience and careful preparation. Stronger responses were those that recognised the intended impact on the reader and were able to explain the wide range of techniques being used. Weaker answers often described a very limited range of character features rather than offering any comment upon them.

Question 6

The writing task in Section B was closely related to the reading text in Section B and asked candidates to write a letter to a newspaper about the dangers of modern life. The title was accessible to almost all candidates and produced a wide range of responses with one examiner remarking that, 'This offered something for everyone.' Many wrote about mobile phones and the dangers of social media and the internet. Weaker responses tended to neglect the needs of the reader or the context of the task that was set, making little use of any language techniques and not shaping their writing to use a letter form. Other weak responses were often incomplete, lacking in paragraphing or structure and communicating at a basic level. Better responses showed with a skilful command of the language and a strong ability to engage the reader. The importance of planning was evident in those stronger responses which had a clear sense of structure and textual cohesion.

Section C: Writing

Question 7

Candidates were asked to give their views on the subject of the dominance of sport and how it distracts people from participating in a wider range of leisure activities. This proved to be accessible to most candidates, no matter what their views were upon the subject. Centres should note that the writing responses and, particularly, the final 20-mark question are sometimes not answered at all by some candidates. It is vital that students time their responses carefully and take note of the mark tariff, giving section C one third of the time available to them.

This question produced a variety of responses. Candidates were free to give their views and many candidates took a balanced approach, looking at both the advantages and the disadvantages of sport and leisure. Some answers became bogged down in sport as a professional undertaking and then talked

about swimming, playing football etc. as leisure activities other than sport. Many made the point that sport provided physical and mental health benefits although there were drawbacks such as the possibility of injury. Weaker responses were often very brief and were limited in their ability to clearly express their ideas, often repeating a narrow range of views. These answers were often lacking in paragraphing and a sense of structure, which kept them in the Level 1 and Level 2 mark bands. Mid-level responses often used a reasonable vocabulary and a developing sense of text control though sometimes lacking in range of vocabulary and variety in sentence structure. The best writing showed subtlety and maturity and a control of a wide range of techniques to produce writing that connected strongly with its reader. They were often able to express complex ideas with clarity in a manner that connected strongly with the intended reader.

Conclusion

Each section above contains specific advice about what characterises weaker and stronger candidates. Centres are strongly encouraged to practise responding to unseen passages in timed conditions. This will support students in focusing their answers on what the question has asked for and in using their understanding of literary effects as a means of addressing the question rather than being seen as an end in their own right. The same principle applies with regard to studying the Anthology texts. The best practice in writing involves time management so as to respond appropriately to the mark tariff and the time available. Candidates need to focus on developing textual cohesion through effective planning, paragraphing and structuring of their writing. Variety is a feature that should be cultivated in terms of the use of a wide and selective vocabulary and in terms of a variety of sentence types that add interest for the reader. Keeping the needs of the reader at the heart is key to successful writing.

