

# Principal Examiner Feedback

## Summer 2010

GCSE

GCSE English A (1203)  
Paper 4H The Craft of the Writer (higher)

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## GCSE English 1203 4H

### Introduction

The papers offered a good level of challenge and stimulus to candidates at all levels, and performance covered the full range of what would be expected. At the upper end, candidates write, often at great length, in a way which demonstrates that they have been fully engaged and have responded with insight and perception to the demands of the course and examination papers. The tendency to cover only one poem when two are required continues to be a feature of some weaker candidates' responses, although this has been mentioned regularly in Examiners' Reports.

Both on poetry and prose, candidates showed themselves willing and able to think about the effects of language used by writers. The extent to which they did so successfully was again a key determinant of their overall success. Many candidates supported their comments by quoting textual evidence, producing responses which were at best well-focused. The tendency in some cases to succumb to 'feature spotting' remains an issue which Centres should continue to address. There are candidates who have learned a number of technical terms which they determinedly include at the slightest provocation, sometimes regardless of how such an effect contributes to their understanding and appreciation of the text, or how the examples might be relevant to the question set. While it is very encouraging to see that candidates have been made to think of such devices as enjambment and end-stopping, they are sometimes tempted to rather implausible or fanciful explanations of the effects of these. Also, candidates sometimes think they will gain credit for mentioning what the writer does not do, as in the comment "He does not use iambic pentameters or onomatopoeia".

Examiners' reports again comment on the positive response to the Writing tasks set, with candidates often revealing subtle and varied writing skills. A number of examiners clearly regard their marking of this Section as particularly enjoyable - partly because it is here that candidates most often demonstrate individuality, imagination and flair.

There are some recurrent points made by examiners each year. These are listed again below, in the hope of continued improvement in these areas:

In Section A, candidates should appreciate that their response should be equally balanced between two poems, whether the second is named or is one of their own choosing. A simple plan, covering both poems, is a good way of ensuring that they do not simply forget that they are asked to write on two poems, as sometimes seems to happen.

There remains widespread confusion over the difference between poems, plays and stories, with candidates frequently mixing the terms appropriate to each genre, such as 'stanza' and 'paragraph' and 'poem' or 'play' for 'prose'.

Centres should continue to stress to candidates the importance of clear handwriting which is not too small and which is in black, preferably, or blue-black ink. The actual quality of handwriting in some instances is such as to make responses virtually illegible.

The importance, especially for Writing questions, of checking work carefully for technical accuracy is stressed annually. Some candidates have acquired the skill of

leaving sufficient time to look over their writing and make improvements, but many do not undertake this valuable process at all.

While spelling is often mostly good, examiners continue to comment on the persistence of real confusion over common homophones: this year, 'your' for 'you're' was noted particularly often.

## Paper 4H

All questions discriminated well, and contained responses covering the full target range of grades (as well as some which fell outside that range).

### Section A

The poems in each of the three selections were all ones on which candidates generally made a suitable response. All questions elicited some exceptional answers, in which candidates revealed a level of understanding and interpretation of outstanding quality, with detailed analysis of language effects and sometimes employing effectively (with apt examples) sophisticated technical language. Such maturity of response contrasted with other responses where the grasp of meaning was insecure.

This Section again produced much excellent writing, with many candidates responding maturely to the poems and engaging thoughtfully with the texts. The sensitivity of their interpretation was often impressive. Many made a very good attempt to show how the poets' use of language enhanced the meaning of the poems. Even less strong candidates were usually able to pick out some poetic devices, such as alliteration, and offer examples. This suggested that teaching has often been successful in encouraging such comment. Examiners once again noted that candidates were generally capable of an individual response, geared towards the demand of the question - although some answers plainly demonstrated the effects of strong teaching which could on occasion seem over-directive, and which sometimes led to prepared responses on the poems which paid scant regard to the specific wording of the question.

### Question 1

Question 1 discriminated well. Examiners regarded it as a straightforward, focused question that enabled many candidates to write competently about each poem. Good responses kept the key words of the question in mind: "setting", "ideas", "atmosphere". These candidates commented sensitively on the sense of loneliness, transience and isolation, reinforced by references to the faded grandeur and repetition of images of stillness. There were, however, some misreadings of 'Death in Leamington' - for example, occasionally featuring a murderous nurse (with many critical or indignant about the nurse's apparently callous attitude); generally, however, the analysis was done well. The peeling 'stucco' was another favourite to reflect the atmosphere of decay with age. More able pupils offered insight and perceptive comments into how atmosphere is created and made reference to the use of light in the setting. Weaker candidates, however, sometimes lacked the vocabulary to articulate the atmosphere. When writing about 'The Send-off', some candidates stated that a siding shed is where cattle are slaughtered, rather than where they and other goods are placed before being herded onto trains. One examiner felt that candidates found the atmosphere of 'The Send-off' rather easier to engage with. 'Grimly gay' was often picked out (often allowing the candidates to introduce the word 'oxymoron'). Better candidates recognized that this phrase constituted a precise reflection of the predominant feeling of the departing soldiers. Occasionally candidates focused on comparing the poems (The word "dead" is used in

both poems.' ), in a way that limited their response and failed to appreciate the uniqueness of each poem.

### Question 2

Question 2 also had a good range of responses, with the stronger answers making appropriate choices for the second. Many candidates had a sound understanding of 'The House', though some overlooked the twist at the end which showed that he had felt a sense of belonging there. One solemnly declared that a 'dozen bedrooms could mean 10-12'. Popular second choices of poems included 'Hide and Seek', where candidates engaged readily with the changing feelings of the boy, 'Brendon Gallacher' and 'Wherever I Hang' (focusing on the writer's past home and comparing it with London). Analysis of language was variable, and some struggled to comment intelligently on the form: as one examiner observed, 'Many wrote that there were no stanzas or rhythm to the poem'.

### Question 3

Question 3 was done extremely well by many candidates. There were a number of very good responses on 'The Barn', including one candidate's idea that the barn represented Heaney's sense of entrapment in his Irish farming heritage. 'Mirror', a more complex poem, proved to be a challenge for many, and candidates should be reminded that they need to be able to answer well on both poems. Some struggled to convince with their interpretations of the mirror's fear of the woman (for example, "The mirror is afraid of darkness."), and with that focus struggled to say much that could be given credit. There was confusion about the voice and the mirror was given a wealth of feelings (not just fear) such as arrogance. Over-reliance on the first stanza meant that many candidates missed some crucial ideas about fears and the associated images from stanza 2. However, this question did allow many candidates to shine and some produced a high level of literary analysis. A weakness in a number of scripts was the failure to grasp that it was the mirror which was the first-person narrator: without this, much comment was poorly focused. There was an occasional tendency to draw a 'moral' from the poem 'Mirror', as in candidates' comments: 'We learn that we should be happy with who we are'; and 'It doesn't matter what you look like, it's what's inside that counts.' An examiner commented that 'some candidates also tried to explain the poem as a metaphor for Plath's life which could have been interesting but was not done in a deep enough way to show understanding or indeed where their evidence for this lay'.

### Question 4

On Question 4, the choice of second poem often had a strong bearing on the quality of the overall response: frequently, candidates chose another Heaney poem, but others, including 'Once Upon a Time' and 'Still I Rise', produced a good range of responses. Choices also included 'Road Not Taken' and 'Unknown Girl', where some candidates examined the 'reflection' well, but others had difficulty focusing closely enough on the theme.

The question allowed for clear and well-focused responses to 'Death of a Naturalist'. There were many well-developed and mature responses, as well as some which showed evidence of understanding but limited development of ideas and language points. Many handled the boy's differing reactions to the events he encountered with skill and sensitivity, although there was some misunderstanding of what was happening in the scene that frightened him. An isolated candidate believed 'the air

was becoming thick with a bass chorus' meant that the boy's voice was breaking - part of a more widespread wish to link this with the onset of puberty and suggesting that there was a long gap between the two visits. The many techniques employed by Heaney led to some instances of feature-spotting but most handled the language element of the question successfully. Many chose another Heaney poem to pair with the first.

### Question 5

Questions 5 and 6 remain the least often chosen. Those who take this selection often justify their choice by excellent and sustained responses, commenting on language effectively and showing intelligence in their interpretation.

Question 5 received comparatively few responses and these were of variable quality. Good candidates kept sight of the key words in the question: "sight and sound", and reinforced their response with a critical vocabulary. Weaker candidates struggled to explain the situations clearly, slipped into narrative or feature spotting, and sometimes seemed to be dipping into the poem at random. Candidates often had to work hard to develop their ideas. Most candidates were able to pick out 'powerful images' in 'The Storm' but were less confident when it came to the 'ideas'. There tended to be a lack of development and real exploration. Similarly with 'Break of Day in the Trenches' there were many valid points but limited analysis. Some candidates focused solely on the rat and ignored any reference to sounds. The ideas proved quite elusive.

### Question 6

Question 6 was found difficult by a high proportion of the comparatively few who attempted it, and hence there was strong discrimination because of the subtlety of the poem 'A Blade of Grass'. However, the question received some very effective responses, especially where candidates chose a suitable second choice, such as 'Mushrooms' and 'The Flowers'. 'The Flowers' in particular was dealt with quite perceptively by a minority of the candidates. There were a few weaker responses to 'Iguana Memory' where candidates focused on what happened with little language analysis.

### Section B, Question 7

Question 7 The question this year on the style of writing as well as content. The best dealt very well with this angle. Some concentrated on the benefits of diary entries with almost complete disregard to actual content and Bennett's feeling, whilst others did the reverse. Candidates at times wrote very generally about the purpose and audience of this 'diary', without making any, or many, specific comments about Alan Bennett's thoughts and feelings about Miss S. Others spent too long on the pre-diary narrative and then did not have sufficient time to explore how the feelings developed over the course of time. Some firmly believed that Bennett hated Miss S, while others claimed that he was in love with her. Some clearly felt that he was almost a saint or martyr, and responded that they would never have acted in such a way: 'If I was Alan I would be gutted.' 'She makes his life hell and it's amazing that he doesn't kick her out'. Overall, most candidates had a good understanding of the extract and were able to select many relevant textual references to support their points. Those candidates who were able to understand this rather odd relationship referred to the last entry and the quite poignant 'I am thankful...' comment by Alan Bennett and explored the change in the feelings and relationship.

One examiner noted that in their readings of these events candidates sometimes revealed misinterpretations, such as: that Alan Bennett had given the van to Miss S; that Miss S made her own petrol because she cared for the environment; that the petrol episode showed that Bennett lived in constant danger in his own front garden; that the social worker was Bennett's wife; that the reference to Excalibur was comparing Miss S to a racing driver.

### Section C

There was good discrimination both in terms of content and in the levels of technical proficiency (AO(iii)): weaker candidates often failed to communicate in well-constructed, comprehensible and accurate English, as well as tending to write only briefly and with little development of ideas.

As in previous years, this Section produced some of the best answers from many candidates, who often respond to the tasks with passion and commitment. Outstanding essays were particularly marked on Question 9, which shows that many candidates respond very effectively when invited to write a vivid description or to call on their early memories.

### Question 8

Question 8 produced some thorough and thoughtful responses, with a number of good suggestions for saving money. Many answers concentrated on sport; anyone not interested in swimming, cycling, football or jogging would find it hard to make use of the suggestions. Some other common ideas were picnics, swimming, sleepovers and voluntary work – and (particularly for girls), cutting down on the extent of retail therapy. Examiners noted with interest the variety of tones adopted by the correspondents, which showed the capacity to adopt a definite register for writing; one noted that this ranged from sympathy with the friend's plight to holier-than-thou admonishments about the friend's fecklessness: 'Complaining isn't going to make money fall from the sky.' Sometimes the advice given was strictly pragmatic: 'Cancel any plans you have with the opposite sex . . . nothing rips a bigger hole in your pocket than chick's' [sic]. As one candidate aptly put it: 'Forget trying to live a champagne lifestyle on a beer budget.'

A frequent tendency was to lose focus somewhat by concentrating on the ideas of making money, for example through part-time work, selling off assets or reducing expenditure, rather than, as the question asked, suggesting low-cost activities. One examiner was particularly struck by the very imaginative and original letter written by "Shakespeare" to Christopher Marlowe which began "Fear not fellow playwright for I have discovered a cure for thy ailment of the purse...". The advice included faking his own death to escape debtors and becoming a humble farmer in France where he could live cheaply. This was a wholly engaging and amusing response. One examiner, however, commented that the range of ideas was limited and that it was surprising the activities 16 year-olds think do not involve much money – gym membership, for example, typically around £50 per month. There were, however, some interesting and sensible ideas. Most were quite well structured and had a reasonable awareness of audience and sometimes an engaging sense of humour, as with the candidate who suggested, with irony, that 'sleeping is healthy and can take a whole day' or the one who, again ironically, proposed that instead of owning and caring for their very expensive ponies, they might experience the thrill of the



'darker' side, don hoodies, hang out on street corners and scare old women and children.

Several examiners noted that the conventions of letter format were not always followed, and were struck in particular by how many wrote 'Dear friend' - perhaps an indication that in these days of text messaging, emails and tweeting few young people actually ever write a letter to a friend and so do not even know how to begin. They also fail often to distinguish appropriate informality with excessive use of a very limited number of colloquial words of approval: "fun", "stuff", "nice", "great".

## Question 9

Question 9 discriminated strongly: it inspired a wide variety of lively responses from, on the one hand, journeying to the land of the dinosaurs, to the Tudor period or to one of the world wars to, on the other, reflecting back to the first day of GCSEs. Some featured their own real or imagined pasts while others took the opportunity to explore a relative's past. Generally, examiners commented that there were some very engaging responses with a clear sense of purpose. One wrote that there were many wonderfully engaging and varied responses including the London Blitz; a school visit to Auschwitz; a medieval siege; stepping into an old Edwardian photograph; discovery of letters from the Russian Revolution ... Although historical accuracy was not crucial, students' knowledge and ability to create such convincing settings were very impressive. One outstanding response was about someone from a future age returning to our times to discover what Britain was like before global warming had taken its toll. One examiner saw this as 'the creative writer's dream question', with responses ranging from 'the weird to the wonderful'.

There were many competently written responses though there were a number where spelling and punctuation were well below the standard expected for the higher tier. Many of the most frequently used words are spelt incorrectly and paragraphing is not always used.

Some handwriting became particularly difficult to decipher, especially where candidates wrote at great deal and were running out of time. One examiner wrote: "The handwriting by some of the candidates was appalling. I know that they are rushed during the examination but they do themselves no favours if it is so badly written that it looks as if a spider has danced on the page."

The examiners' comments about handwriting and running out of time emphasise again how important the skills of planning and practice at writing to time are. Centres should look out for handwriting which, especially under time pressure, deteriorates to the point of illegibility, and should continue to stress that unfinished, rushed final questions can adversely affect a candidate's overall score and grade to an appreciable extent. As students work more and more with word-processed essays, this problem is becoming a more widespread one which clearly deserves attention.

## GCSE English: 1203 Grade Boundaries

### Option 1 - 1A, 1B, 2F, 3F

C	D	E	F
60	47	34	22

### Option 2 - 1A, 1B, 4H, 5H

*	A	B	C	D	E
82	72	62	52	41	35

### Option 3 - 1AT, 1B, 2F, 3F

C	D	E	F
60	47	34	22

### Option 4 - 1A, 1BT, 2F, 3F

C	D	E	F
60	47	34	22

### Option 5 - 1AT, 1BT, 2F, 3F

C	D	E	F
60	47	34	22

### Option 6 - 1AT, 1B, 4H, 5H

*	A	B	C	D	E
82	72	62	52	41	35

### Option 7 - 1A, 1BT, 4H, 5H

*	A	B	C	D	E
82	72	62	52	41	35

### Option 8 - 1AT, 1BT, 4H, 5H

*	A	B	C	D	E
82	72	62	52	41	35

**Note:** Grade boundaries may vary from year to year and from subject to subject, depending on the demands of the question paper.

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