

Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2010

GCSE

GCSE English B (1204)
Paper 2F The Craft of the Writer (foundation)

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GCSE English 1204 2F

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 enjambement 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 2F

Section A

The poems in each of the three selections were all ones on which candidates could make a suitable response. Many candidates, however, wrote on 'At Grass' (Q3) in a way which demonstrated limited understanding of the context of the poem. Candidates often showed a reasonably sound grasp of the poems' content, but where they failed to offer comment on the poets' language they performed less successfully, with this aspect of the response proving, again, a critical discriminator. In the questions where a second poem had to be selected to go with the named poem, the quality of responses depended to a considerable extent on the ability to make a sensible choice that could be justified clearly in relation to the specific demands of the question. Mostly, candidates chose appropriately.

It was again noticeable that the relatively small proportion of entries on the Nature poems were often of very good quality, and showed that the powerful language and imagery in these poems could elicit a strong and personal response: 'Thistles' and 'Nettles' (a good pairing for Q6) generally attracted better responses than the rather more abstract ideas in the Q5 poems 'The Thought-Fox' and 'Roe-Deer'.

Question 1

Question 1 discriminated well, with better candidates able to deal soundly with both poems and at best offer perceptive analysis. Responses generally reflected a fairly confident understanding of 'Lucozade', although some weaker candidates tended to take a more descriptive and narrative approach and were unable to comment effectively on language: comments such as 'the language is easy because it's a child's view', 'The girl is afraid her mother is going to die: "I am scared my mother is going to die"', were not unusual. More candidates struggled to write about 'Death in Leamington': there was occasionally confusion about who the visitor was - some wrote of the 'actor' or 'the cleaner', others seemed to think that the narrator was the visitor. Weaker candidates also sometimes stated that the nurse's feelings did not change in any way. Although these candidates often identified appropriate examples of language for comment, they were not always able to develop their comments effectively. However, there were others who were able to explore the endings of both poems quite confidently, including questioning whether the radiance referred to at the end of 'Lucozade' was due to the mother's death or to her recovery: many students believed that the mother recovered, while others saw her death as the explanation for the change in mood.

Question 2

Question 2 also had a good range of responses. Candidates often demonstrated a sound grasp of 'Brendon Gallagher' and used the bullet points effectively to support the structure of their answers. Many candidates were able to make fairly successful attempts to comment on the use of language in the poem - a particularly popular example for comment was the repeated use of the possessive pronoun and its effects. Some, however, still confuse the death of the imaginary friend with actual physical death, and a few fail to grasp the basic idea of the child's having an imaginary friend. Many chose either 'Half Past Two' or 'Hide and Seek' as the second poem - those who chose the latter were generally more successful, with candidates showing an awareness of the creation of a child's voice in both poems, showing a

sound grasp of the poems and often selecting appropriate examples of language use to comment on. Those who wrote about 'Half Past Two' often struggled to focus on the question and to use the bullet points to guide their answers - consequently, responses were more generalised and descriptive in nature. Very occasionally, a candidate chose a totally inappropriate poem for this question, such as 'You Will Be Hearing From Us Shortly'.

Question 3

Question 3 also differentiated effectively, largely because not all candidates responded as well to the second poem 'At Grass' as they did to 'Follower'. Candidates often demonstrated good understanding of 'Follower' and used the bullet points effectively, clearly grasping the role reversal at the end of the poem. Many were able to identify appropriate examples of use of language, but sometimes this amounted to little more than feature spotting and they were unable to comment very effectively. Many were significantly less confident when discussing 'At Grass', struggling with the technical language of racing and often confusing past and present: the middle stanzas in particular caused problems for candidates who thought the paravols and squadrons of cars were in the present and not a suggestion of the crowds at the races. There was sometimes very little evidence of any real understanding and many answers were, as a consequence, very unbalanced; indeed, a few candidates opted out of even attempting to discuss this poem. Some - generally weaker candidates - thought that the horses were suffering in the present, although stronger responses commented on the idea that 'now they gallop for joy'. An examiner noted that both of these poems require a basic grasp of the technical terms used relating respectively to traditional farming and racing and felt that candidates were too often struggling with such words as 'sod', 'furrow', 'inlay' and 'artificed'. An understanding of such words as well as the overall happenings and feelings, is important if candidates are to make focused comments on the language.

Question 4

On Question 4, the choice of second poem sometimes affected the overall quality and provided a range of quality. Many candidates were able to show a generally sound grasp of 'Digging' and were able to write competently on the first two bullet points, although many found it more difficult to comment on the third - 'the ideas which the poem explores about older people' - and language comments were sometimes limited to feature-spotting (especially of onomatopoeia and alliteration) without any comment attempted; however, a significant number did comment quite effectively on, for instance, the significance of 'By God...'. There were good comments on the metaphor 'The squat pen rests. I'll dig with it.', although weaker candidates still struggle with the meaning of digging with a pen. Some candidates found it quite difficult to say much more than they had already said about 'Digging' (admiration of/respect for the father, etc). A number of candidates chose 'Warning', 'Follower' and 'Old Man, Old Man' - entirely appropriate choices - but at times their understanding of the last of these poems seemed a little less secure, with some candidates having difficulty understanding the references to loss of memory in old age. The poem 'Warning' provoked some amused and some slightly shocked reactions from candidates who showed no inhibitions at all in expressing their personal response to Joseph's poem. A few chose 'Mirror' and showed a reasonable grasp of the poem itself, but then found it very difficult to use the bullet points to maintain their focus on the question.

Question 5

Question 5 received responses of variable quality, with few dealing well with the subtle ideas in both of these two poems. Often responses showed a good grasp of 'The Thought-Fox', but whilst even some of the weaker candidates could recognise the levels of meaning in the poem, they lacked the skills to express their ideas clearly. Many struggled to say anything of any real significance on 'Roe-Deer'. There is a tendency for the students to be too literal in their interpretation and hence to miss the point of the question: the writer's feelings. When they try to be more adventurous with their answers, they can sometimes become very surreal in their interpretation. One examiner commented that candidates' writing about 'The Thought-Fox' in particular was often of a commendably high standard for this tier, with a notable willingness to explore meaning and language. This pairing was, indeed, clearly attractive to some stronger candidates, who were able to identify the atmosphere and poet's/persona's reaction to the events of the poems. Indeed, some candidates were able to offer very perceptive analysis of the relationship between the 'Thought-Fox' and Hughes' creation of the poem.

Question 6

Candidates obviously had enjoyed their study of 'Thistles' and some very strong responses were provided. Almost all of the (relatively few) responses to this question wisely chose 'Nettles' as their second poem (although other reasonable possibilities existed). Most were able to demonstrate at least a fair grasp of the poems and attempted to comment on the language of war and violence, but often responses lacked detail and points were not fully developed. Some students were clearly excited by the strong imagery and the idea of vengeance.

Section B, Question 7

In Question 7, there was considerable variability between those candidates who had grasped the content and significance of both the stories dealt with and those who wrote only brief, sometimes rather narrative accounts on only one story, 'The Gold Cadillac', occasionally because they had run out of time. The most usual - and most effective - pairing was with 'Country Lovers', which enabled candidates to make good, relevant comments about racial discrimination and the lives of black and white children. Occasionally, there was slight confusion between the apartheid regime treated in the latter and the distinction between Northern and Southern states in the USA in the former of the stories. Many wrote with relevant detail and sound understanding, and there was considerable indignation about the damaging effect on the black children of the discriminatory treatment they received.

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 few ideas. Both tasks elicited a range of responses from the thoughtful and developed to the cursory and staccato. Punctuation was used by many candidates to support their meaning and generally paragraphing was reasonable. The standard of spelling overall was mostly sound, with some candidates tackling quite sophisticated vocabulary with some success. Those who had obviously planned or checked their work at the end of the examination benefited from their careful approach. It is still the case that careful attention to editing would improve the

technical accuracy of candidates' work and, with 8 of the 25 allotted marks going to Assessment Objective iii (a third of the marks), this is an important consideration.

Question 8

Question 8 was a question in which candidates' capacity to come up with concrete, specific proposals to a College or School Council was important for the quality of the writing, and this produced a strong response, with many lively and committed proposals being offered, together with a rationale. The content was often very thoughtful and generally clearly expressed. Some of these responses were a delight to read - well constructed, with some interesting suggestions for improvements and some thoughtful comments on the qualities needed by a representative. Weaker candidates' responses offered less developed reasons; suggestions were rather brief and perhaps predictable: for example, improved canteen facilities and longer breaks for morning and lunch times. Some candidates did not really establish a full letter form, although the majority were meticulous in their letter layout and adequately covered the bullet points of the rubric, in most cases using an appropriate tone and register. It is important for candidates to be taught how to vary sentence structures. Writing in the first person at this tier can result in a repetitive string of sentences beginning 'I...'

Question 9

Question 9 discriminated strongly: answers falling short of the criteria required for a higher grade on this tier were often unable to develop a clear line of writing beyond rather naïve or simple references; the stronger responses, however, elaborated their ideas in a more convincing way. Some candidates wrote very effectively about sights/places they had seen on holiday, others wrote about incidents and events (generally imaginary, although sometimes based on television programmes, sporting events etc) and only relatively few wrote science fiction/mystery stories. Better candidates often demonstrated an ability to use a range of vocabulary and structures for effect and to develop mood and atmosphere.

One examiner noted that the responses were "peppered with some excellent writing" for this tier. Those candidates who manipulated the question to suit their personal interests, for example those students who wrote reports on football matches, tended to write with considerable enthusiasm which was infectious and very enjoyable to read. Candidates, however, did not help themselves by ignoring the phrase 'quite different from anything else you have ever seen....'. Some choices were all too familiar.

Examiners' comments indicate that Centres should look out for handwriting which becomes illegible. As students work more and more with word-processed essays, this problem is becoming a more widespread one which clearly deserves attention.

GCSE English: 1204 Grade Boundaries

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

C	D	E	F
58	46	34	23

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

*	A	B	C	D	E
86	75	64	53	42	36

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

C	D	E	F
58	46	34	23

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

C	D	E	F
58	46	34	23

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

C	D	E	F
58	46	34	23

Option 6 - No Candidates

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

*	A	B	C	D	E
86	75	64	53	42	36

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

*	A	B	C	D	E
86	75	64	53	42	36

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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