

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 0396/01
Composition

General Comments

On the whole, there were some pleasing performances, with some scripts demonstrating superb imagination, technique and structure. The questions seemed to establish intended differentiation. However, Examiners felt that the technical accuracy of some candidates warranted a degree of concern: particularly noted were the confusion of tenses, subject-verb agreement and idiomatic inaccuracies. This is an AS standard paper where a strong degree of accuracy is a prerequisite for effective and skilful use of the language. Such errors impede understanding and their effect was sometimes that candidates struggled to produce effective and successful pieces of writing or to achieve the threshold pass mark.

Candidates seemed to use their time well on the whole and there was little sense of rubric infringement, except in one particular area: length of responses. Centres are reminded that candidates are required by the examination rubric to offer responses of between 600-900 words; failure to do so is self-penalising.

Candidates, in general, displayed a strong sense of appropriate vocabulary – perhaps a few, at times tending towards an overwritten or flowery style in the first section – and a secure sense of audience and purpose in the second section.

Comments on Specific Questions

Section A

Question 1

Effective answers were characterized by an ability to diverge from simple fantasy and the derivative or expected (such as tropical islands) and to involve themselves in more profound explorations: for example, a paradise in which grief caused by the loss of a family member or friend was healed or the difficulties in a relationship gave way to harmonious reconciliation. Such answers were marked by a strong sense of structure and concept, something more than pure description; they had thought and feeling behind them: an idea of the spiritual or the sense of elevated emotions or a sense of double narrative which juxtaposed material comforts against something more ethereal. Less successful answers used the format as a way of writing about a sport or hobby which the candidate was enthusiastic about or the delights of retail therapy where brand names would crop up at the expense of imaginative treatment of the topic. Such responses tended to interpret the title as an opportunity to describe in a quite simple way romantic or consumerist fantasies.

Question 2

Strong responses here attempted to point out marked differences between innocence and experience, naivety and cynicism, and then tried to reflect them in the writing style. They tended to be reflective, not just descriptive/narrative in approach: a bitter-sweet realization of how much of life is lived in School and how secure that life can actually be. This realization was worked into the answers in imaginative and, sometimes, witty and humorous ways. On the other hand, less successful answers sometimes lapsed into a kind of 'baby talk' for the first day of School: almost as if the memories of being an innocent abroad had overcome the candidates.

Question 3

There were some imaginative and interesting responses here marked by a keen sense of setting and atmosphere (through description) and character (through the narrative and perspective given). Such responses were underpinned by a strong familiarity with sci-fi conventions, their awareness of dystopian elements and their ability to employ ingredients of cognitive estrangement. There were few misconceived pieces: a few tended to simply bring out a sense of character because they became embroiled in spending too long on evoking a sense of setting.

Question 4

The most effective answers here gave a sense of fear and foreboding, especially by involving the first (or third) person into the account, a process which created a feeling of a personal or human element. There were storms at sea, on land, on farms, hurricanes, monsoons and even one depiction of pathetic fallacy. Many candidates recreated descriptive details from their varied parts of the world with subtlety and meticulous detail. Less effective responses tended to forget the requirement to show an increasing sense of power and force and remained on one note throughout the answer.

Section B

Question 5

Answers at the top of the range considered actual historical events – such as Napoleon’s and Hitler’s invasion of Russia – and explored the concept of whether people learn from history or not with focus and insight. Such answers were clearly informed by very sound knowledge – seen through detailed exemplification and explanation – and a strong persuasive voice. They distinguished between teaching and learning: history definitely teaches but do people actually listen and learn? Some answers skilfully questioned the reliability and viewpoints of particular historical accounts but balanced this approach with the idea of people needing to use a variety of sources to gauge what constitutes history itself.

Less secure answers tended to write about the candidate’s own personal history or lacked relevant and informed knowledge that they could reflect upon. The need for exemplification is essential in titles such as this.

Question 6

In general, this was tackled with some gusto and proficiency at the higher end of the range, especially by those who offered detail in their reviews – detail such as narrative and characterization or design and technique – as evidence for praise or condemnation. Imaginative contrasts were clearly established and explored in depth, supported by knowledge of what makes an effective review. Such answers were characterised by differing perspectives of the same features, showing understanding of cohesion and the unreliability of opinion. There were some very satirical and witty responses at best. Less assured responses fell into the trap of simply re-telling a story or expressing strong agreement/disagreement with the subject matter at the expense of commenting on style and craftsmanship.

Question 7

This was quite a popular choice and proved to offer some very clear differentiation amongst the candidates. Answers at the top of the range demonstrated knowledge and thought, discussing the merits and flaws in a system of punishments. Again, useful and selective exemplification was employed in such responses. Less successful answers tended to ramble and made unsupported assertions, sometimes contradicting themselves. Perhaps a little more preparation on structuring discursive, ambivalent responses to controversial topics could be useful to candidates.

Question 8

This was a popular choice and candidates seemed happy with the material required for the question and the requested style. At best, ideas were handled very well, supported by a clear sense of the target audience and the appropriate choice of register to use. Such answers were clearly structured and resisted the easy temptation to offer gushing outpourings of emotion and outrage. Less secure answers tended to offer paternal or maternal advice in ways which may not have addressed the teenage audience effectively.