

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 0396/11
Composition

GENERAL COMMENTS

Examiners reported some very imaginative and thoughtful material being submitted this session; some scripts were very enjoyable indeed to read.

There was a good differentiated range of candidates, but a significant number are entering this examination whose grasp of English is not secure at this level. It needs to be stressed that AS is a stage on from IGCSE/O Level (and equivalent) standard. The most frequent language problems were in pronoun confusion, syntax errors, uneven punctuation, lack of paragraphing, and (above all) tense confusion. (The latter was particularly marked in responses to **Questions 2** and **4**.)

There were very few rubric infringements and time seemed to be managed well by most candidates. Some did spend too long planning work, though, at the expense of developing their final piece. Candidates who do not endeavour to tackle all aspects of the questions chosen only deprive themselves of marks.

Teachers need to emphasise to candidates the importance of paying attention to

- purpose
- audience
- format
- tone

in their writing. The clues are in the questions: candidates should pay more attention to their wording. They should realise that a formulation such as 'in your writing you should...' is part of the question; they should not simply follow the general drift and ignore the specific instructions. The questions offer help and candidates should be urged to take advantage of this. Genre distinctions should be kept by the candidates using the appropriate style and format. 'Opening chapters' should be treated as such.

Common errors were in the following:

- failure to distinguish past perfect and past simple tenses
- wrong prepositions to verbs
- wrong tense use in conditionals
- not moving back a tense in reported speech
- shifting tenses in narrative frames
- pronoun confusion
- misuse of participles: past -ing forms
- syntax errors: adverbs, SVO structures

Candidates should be grammatically prepared for formal expression at this level. Many would benefit from revision of sentence types and mood.

Examiners noted a tendency to use the lower case 'i' to denote the first person pronoun (text-style) and to treat the comma as a full-stop.

COMMENTS ON INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS

Section A: Narrative/Descriptive/Imaginative

Question 1

This was a popular choice and prompted some thoughtful and evocative responses. Good answers elicited sharp and focused contrasts, whilst less secure answers tended to explore narrative rather than descriptive aspects. Examiners were sometimes disappointed by the absence of differentiation in setting and atmosphere. Some candidates had simply tacked the shopping onto a prepared narrative piece, while some concentrated on the preparations – both of which made the effect rather pedestrian.

Question 2

There were some imaginative and engaging responses, with 'soldier' interpreted in a variety of ways. Essays were effective when handled as an opening to a story, with good structure towards a dramatic/sensitive narrative. Weaker essays gave information rather than developing a narrative which built up mood and character. Often noticeable – when dialogue was used – was a laxity in use of punctuation.

Question 3

This was tackled by fewer candidates. Answers were on the whole competent but seldom inspired. Most were about fame and disaster, and sometimes the 'crucial point' was not obvious or was a bit predictable. Opportunities to create a character as well as base it on reality saw some candidates attempt stories based on figures as diverse as Adolf Hitler, Nelson Mandela and Frank Sinatra.

Question 4

This was by far the most popular choice in **Section A** and, when narrative and descriptive control were applied, produced some very successful imaginative work. When material was clearly unplanned there were some rambling and unmeasured responses. The ostensible openness of the question may have tempted some to offload 'prepared' material, failing adequately to deal with tension and the unknown. Some used the opportunity to descend into general references to 'the creature' and a 'I couldn't believe it' style of narrative. Other candidates mixed genres and created confusion by going off into preoccupations of their own inadequately linked to the task. Effective answers, by contrast, continued the style of the opening and had a mix of descriptive and narrative elements, with an effective suspenseful structure.

Section B: Discursive/Argumentative

Question 5

There were some very good and thoughtful insights offered by candidates here and some very personal essays were seen. Effective answers weighed up both viewpoints or even more bravely took one of the perspectives and built their views strongly around the selected issue. There were interesting and sometimes culturally revealing interpretations of 'state control' and 'protection', and sometimes a display of a high level of political awareness. For every candidate who just discoursed on the state of the world, there was one who carefully analysed political, economic, psychological, religious and other factors.

Question 6

This was a popular choice and stimulated some entertaining and engaging answers. Many candidates showed a good grasp of promotional type material and selected phrases and vocabulary appropriate to the task. Most negative comments however, did not particularly use a report form or style; often these had the register of comic sarcasm rather than a sophisticated response with adequate reasoning. A significant number descended into grotesque exaggeration. Those who deftly inserted the stiletto and twisted it were few and very welcome! However, mostly, the responses were full of verve and energy all the same.

Question 7

This produced some mixed responses. There were some very good and well argued contrasting pieces, but also some material which did not always develop exemplification in greater depth. At the top of the range some imaginative answers dealt effectively with the demands of the question, especially with respect to technology and health. The most successful candidates realised that this was a discursive / argumentative

task and that their comments had to be explained and justified, not simply listed. Responses which were thoughtful and considered were fairly balanced between optimism and pessimism.

Question 8

The two-part question allowed for structured answers, the best of which were skilfully ironic. Good answers established clear and proficient contrasts between the two letters, using illustrations perceptively and with precision. Less effective answers tended to be rather brief and occasionally unfocused. Weaker answers did not really engage what might be 'terrifying'. Some misunderstood the question and wrote two general letters about being young rather than considering the era in which we live.



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COMMENTS ON INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS

Section A: Narrative/Descriptive/Imaginative

Question 1

This title prompted some very imaginative and atmospheric writing. Strong answers created a sense of menace and danger; less secure answers tended to take a more narrative approach. Some answers spent



too long asking the same questions such as 'What was that noise?' and did not offer sustained development. The best pieces used imagination well, creating mystery and seizing the chance to describe vividly.

Question 2

This was popular and all kinds of 'New Worlds' seemed to be on show - from discovering land and space travel to the thoughts of the narrator as he was being born. There was plenty of enjoyable material in evidence. Those who used this task as an opportunity for contrast (e.g. that between a narrator's original country, and her/his final destination) often described shopping as a 'new world', producing rather mundane or forced answers. The best created a very palpable sense of setting and atmosphere.

Question 3

This was tackled by some candidates in an effective and controlled fashion. By and large they produced some steady and competent responses, with the best answers delaying a surprise or twist until the end of the piece. There was a great deal of thematic variety, ranging from adultery to murder to cheating. Many got involved with – and some seemed to excel in – describing feelings of guilt and anguish. However, some were plain declarations of love, usually ignoring 'psychology and motivation'. Most managed to write something relevant, though the biggest weakness was a tendency to leave the 'confession' element too implicit.

Question 4

This was a very popular choice. There were some very good answers which sustained the opening note of complete disorientation throughout but also some very unclear and unplanned compositions which tended to confuse tenses. Scenes from television and film were sometimes used here, which often made the account rather predictable; and the questions posed to guide the response were occasionally misused, with candidates repeating the questions along the lines of 'where am I?' and 'where am I going?' The best answers displayed the use of vivid imagery and figurative language, and effectively structured their ideas.

Section B: Discursive/Argumentative

Question 5

This was answered well on the whole, with many candidates exploring both points of view in an informed and well illustrated way. Some knew aspects of history in extremely close detail, and were able to tackle the question with understanding, apposite examples and even deep feeling. There were a good number of references to Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Most agreed with the statement. However, a small percentage of candidates wrote about peace as opposed to violence in very general terms, without focusing on the 'protest' aspect. Weaker candidates vaguely generalised about peace rather than considering what 'change' might mean.

Question 6

This was grasped well by many candidates, and they wrote organised and relevant material supported by a strong sense of purpose and audience. There was plenty of useful advice for ageing readers. Some candidates, however, forgot 'older readers' and the 'advisory' focus. Better candidates identified areas specifically, like travel/own interests or hobbies/voluntary activities, making sure that their tone was encouraging rather than condescending.

Question 7

This prompted some very strong opinions and effective compositions. Some dismissed the whole idea with relish but others displayed a fascination and sense of wonder at the very possibility of other forms of life even existing. The best answers demonstrated a strong use of analytical and persuasive language, employing scientific knowledge to discuss the meaning of 'life'. Weaker candidates found it difficult to structure an argument on this topic, with the line between fact and fiction blurring. On the whole, though, there were many very full, well-informed answers, which suggested that this topic is of great interest to candidates of this age group.



Question 8

This was very popular. There were many effective answers which explored aspects of conduct and morality in great detail. These often built on the recipe idea inherent in 'ingredients'. Answers were, on the whole, well planned and an appropriate register was employed by the majority of candidates. Some failed to capitalise on 'public speaking competition at School', which gave them a particular audience on a plate; most, though, captured the appropriate tone. Many wrote with conviction and energy, exhorting the audience to define success in their own terms. Sometimes there was a tendency to over-use inappropriate colloquialism, but in general rhetorical language was used effectively in this question.

