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Examiners' Report

Principal Examiner Feedback

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In English Language A (4EA1) Paper 01: Non-Fictional Texts and Transactional Writing

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Introduction

June 2018 saw the first series of the new International GCSE English Language Specification A and this examination paper is Unit 1: Non-fiction and Transactional Writing which is sat by all candidates.

The paper is organised into two parts.

Section A, worth a total of 45 marks, tests reading skills and is based on an unseen passage and a text from the International GCSE English Anthology with a total word count across the two extracts of approximately 2000 words. In this series, the unseen extract was adapted from *The Penguin Lessons* by Tom Michell and tells of the writer's encounter on a beach in Uruguay with a penguin that has been badly affected by an oil spill and the author's subsequent decision to rescue the bird. The Anthology text was the extract from *His for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald in which she recounts her first meeting with the goshawk that she goes on to train.

Section B, also worth a total of 45 marks, offers candidates a choice of two transactional writing tasks. A particular form will always be specified and for this series the two tasks were to write a newspaper article about the importance of hobbies and interests in our busy twenty-first century lives or a speech about the harm being caused to the planet.

The paper was well received with examiners commenting on how the unseen text was accessible to students of all abilities and provided ample material for the comparison question. It was clear that many candidates engaged fully with both texts and responded sensitively and enthusiastically.

There was evidence that most candidates had been well-prepared for the examination but they should be reminded to read all the printed instructions on the examination paper very carefully and follow them precisely.

Section A

Questions 1-3 are based on the unseen extract and are all assessed for AO1: Read and understand a variety of texts, selecting and interpreting information, ideas and perspectives.

Question 1

This question, which tests the skills of selection and retrieval is intended to serve as a straightforward way into the paper and the vast majority of candidates were able to select two apt words or phrases that described the harbour. There were a number of possible choices and the most popular were 'small' and 'well-defended'. Some candidates seemed to believe that only single word answers are acceptable for Question 1 and offered 'sufficient' but, without the rest of the phrase, this was too imprecise. It is important, therefore, that candidates understand that a phrase might be several words. Where other candidates missed out on marks, it was because they had chosen a word or phrase that did not appear within lines 1-4, for example 'haven of security' which is in line 6. It

is important that for the first three questions students are encouraged to mark the relevant sections of the text.

Question 2

This is a 4 mark question that requires candidates to interpret information, ideas and perspectives. For this examination they were asked to explain what the writer thinks and feels about what he sees, using lines 7-18. There were a number of possible responses to this question and many candidates achieved full or nearly full marks by working through the given lines and clearly explaining how the writer's thoughts move from pleasure to surprise to horror and sadness. Many recognised the feelings of anger and shock at how such a dreadful situation as the oil slick could happen. It is a requirement of the question that candidates write in their own words and it was often the case that where candidates did not achieve full marks it was because they copied large amounts of the text. Whilst it might be possible to gain four marks by making fewer than four points if they are well-developed, the most successful approach for candidates is to make four clear and distinct points. However, it is important to remember that the question asks for an explanation and therefore, although it is not necessary to write at length, it is not acceptable to bullet point answers and the response must be written in full and complete sentences that clearly show understanding and secure interpretation. A few candidates did not achieve full marks because they provided an overview of the extract and did not focus on the question or the given line references.

Question 3

This is the final AO1 question; it is worth 5 marks and, like question 2, requires candidates to show their understanding of the text by selecting and interpreting ideas, information and perspectives. For this examination, they were asked to describe how and why the writer catches the bird, using lines 31-45. In question 3, candidates are told that they 'may support' their points 'with **brief** quotations' and many did so to good effect. Whilst it may be possible to achieve full marks for question 3, without making five distinct points, dependent on the quality and depth of the answer, many candidates adopted the successful approach of making five clear points written in full and complete sentences and supported by relevant brief quotations. There is no need for comments on the language used in the quotations and examiners noted that a number of candidates spent time on analysis of language and structure, an AO2 requirement, for which they could not here be credited. Most candidates gained full or nearly full marks, but where this was not the case it was because they had made only a couple of points or failed to focus on the question and offered points that related to other parts of the text. Some candidates moved away from the topic to offer their own perspectives on the issues raised in the extract but this was not a requirement of the question and therefore meant that they could not be rewarded. Some candidates expected long quotations to act as a substitute for their own understanding and commentary but answers including overlong quotations rarely gained full marks. The best answers used a good balance of short quotation and explanation, paying attention to how many marks the question is worth.

Question 4

This question will always be on Text Two, the Anthology text, and is assessed for AO2: Understand and analyse how writers use linguistic and structural devices to achieve their effects. It is therefore a more challenging and discriminatory question and is worth 12 marks divided over 5 levels.

In this examination, candidates were asked how the writer, Helen Macdonald, uses language and structure in the extract from *H is for Hawk* to interest and engage the reader. This piece is full of rich language and contains a wide range of features of language and structure as exemplified in the mark scheme but examiners were advised that these are just examples of possible points that could be made and instructed that they must reward any valid points that candidates make that are securely rooted in the text. There does not need to be an equal number of points on language and structure but both should be addressed as, indeed, they were by nearly all candidates.

Some candidates spent too long on an introduction that set out what they intended to do and a conclusion that summed up what they had done, neither of which contributed usefully to the acquisition of marks and time could have been spent more wisely by starting with an immediate focus on the use of language or structure.

At the lowest level there were just a few candidates to whom the Anthology text seemed unfamiliar but examiners commented that nearly all of the responses they saw offered at the least a clear understanding of the text. At this level candidates were able to select apt quotations to support their points and use subject terminology but sometimes this led to little more than feature spotting with some comment on the generic effect of these such as 'short sentences create impact' or 'this encourages the reader to read on' rather than considering the effect within this particular text. Weaker candidates often finished at 'oh' and cited general information on Macdonald's grief with limited links to how the piece has been written and constructed. Stronger candidates were able to discuss structure in depth for example referring to paragraph lengths and their purpose and effect on the reader or the way that listing mirrored the heartbeat or breath pattern of the writer. Many looked at the description of the first hawk and picked up on the metaphors used such as 'reptile', 'griffon', 'broken marionette', 'a fallen angel' and the best responses looked closely at the connotations of these although a large number focused on 'angel' as representing something pure and innocent and ignored the qualifying adjective 'fallen' which implies something very different and therefore meant that linking this reference to the death of her father was not particularly convincing. Successful answers often went on to look at the contrast in the description of the second hawk and picked up on the descriptions of it being 'like a Victorian melodrama' and 'a madwoman in the attack' with top level candidates referring to the use of intertextuality and also recognising the play on the word 'attack'. Those candidates who dealt with this final section of the passage gave thoughtful comments on the italicised sentences and the author's pleas to be allowed to have the first hawk. The compelling final sentence also generated many 'cliff hanger' comments.

There is no requirement for any comparison with Text Two in this question.

Question 5

This question provides the only assessment in the specification of AO3: Explore links and connections between writers' ideas and perspectives, as well as how these are conveyed.

Comparison is a new skill to be tested and this question is the most demanding of those in Section A and, with 22 marks distributed between 5 levels, carries almost half of the total marks available for reading so it is extremely important that candidates allow time to plan carefully and then aim to make a good range of relevant points.

Examiners recognised the challenge of the question and it was pleasing to note that nearly all candidates rose to this and managed to make links at some level between the two texts. One examiner commented: 'I was impressed by the way in which most candidates handled Question 5; many wrote with a degree of confidence and clarity which suggested they were well-prepared.'

At the lower end, candidates tended to make obvious comparisons for example 'both extracts are about birds' and 'both are written in the first person' and often these responses became narrative with greater emphasis on one text. Candidates at this level were, however, generally able to draw links between the writers' ideas with some degree of success and make some straightforward comments about language and/or structure. Candidates should note that the picture that accompanies Text One is there to provide a visual aid to them but is not a feature of the extract itself that needs to be commented on. More assured responses included astute analysis of language and structural features such as how both texts included a change in mood or tone which some referred to as 'a type of volta'. These candidates were also able to look at the writers' perspectives and there were insightful statements such as: 'Text One describes a serendipitous encounter whereas Text Two recounts a planned meeting' and: 'In Text One the writer saves the penguin but in Text Two the writer needs the hawk to save her from her grief'. The range of comparisons, depth of comment on both ideas and perspectives and the use of appropriate references were all discriminators.

There are different ways to approach this question but examiners noted that the most successful responses made each point a valid and appropriate comparison with supporting references from both extracts; this led to the balance required for marks within levels 4 and 5.

Section B

Candidates are required to answer just one writing task but it carries half of the total marks available for the paper and so they must ensure that they allow sufficient time to plan and organise their response.

There are now two assessment objectives for writing.

AO4: Communicate effectively and imaginatively, adapting form, tone and register of writing for specific purposes and audiences. (27 marks spread over 5 levels)

AO5: Write clearly, using a range of vocabulary and sentence structures, with appropriate paragraphing and accurate spelling, grammar and punctuation. (18 marks spread over 5 levels)

Question 6

One examiner commented that this question offered 'a lovely, open subject which was accessible to all' and candidates, on the whole, responded well. Some wrote enthusiastically about their preferred pastimes- which varied widely- but occasionally forgot the wider scope of the task which encouraged them to consider the importance of hobbies and interests 'in our busy twenty-first century lives'. Stronger candidates picked up on this aspect and many outlined the benefits of hobbies in a life which has become very stressful generally with academic expectations, peer pressure and technology all featuring as contributing factors. A number of candidates explored the idea of how hobbies can help to create good mental health, a current and pertinent topic about which some seemed very well-informed. There were also welcome touches of humour such as the candidate who extolled the benefits of karting which he does 'for fun and for the feeling of being a far less skilled and far less physically fit Michael Schumacher.' The style for a newspaper article varied from the formal tone of a traditional paper to the more chatty tone of a school paper and both approaches worked successfully. Some candidates used stylistic conventions of an article such as a headline and sub-headings and this showed examiners that there was a clear awareness of form. Weaker responses often tended to ignore the given form and wrote more generally.

Question 7

This was the more popular writing question and examiners noted that they were 'very impressed by the incredible array of specific, technical knowledge of the issues of climate change, deforestation and the dangers of pollution' and felt that this was a timely issue as there has been so much recently in the news about plastics in the oceans. A lot of candidates wrote passionately and produced persuasive and informative speeches that successfully employed a range of appropriate techniques such as rhetorical questions, hyperbole, address to the audience and personal anecdotes. However, it is important to remember that this was a test of writing skills and not scientific or geographical knowledge, therefore candidates needed to bear in mind their mission to engage the reader. To achieve the highest level in AO5, writing needs to be 'perceptive', 'subtle' and 'sophisticated' and for AO6 there needs to be accuracy but also a 'strategic' use of an 'extensive vocabulary' and an assured and controlled use of a range of sentence structures 'to achieve particular effects'. Those who did achieve this level frequently opened their speech with an intriguing question ('What would you do if a crowd of people kicked down your door, stormed into your house and started destroying everything you owned?'), a shocking statement or a short sentence and proceeded to explore and develop their ideas with fluency, clarity

and conviction. Weaker responses tended to focus rather narrowly on ideas provided in Text One, opened their speech with the straightforward announcement 'I am going to give a speech on the planet' and wrote brief and unparagraphed pieces that lacked cohesion.

Concluding advice

Candidates should:

- be provided with plenty of opportunities to practise reading and responding to unseen passages under timed conditions
- be aware of the different assessment objectives to ensure that they focus their answers specifically on the different question requirements
- answer Question 2 in their own words
- use quotations to support, rather than make, points for Question 3
- not spend time analysing language quoted in Question 3
- consider the effects of language and structure features within the context of the given extract in Question 4
- avoid commenting on only a small part of the extract in Question 4
- not waste time on a general introduction or conclusion in Question 4- every sentence should be earning marks
- make a range of comparative points in Question 5, link similar elements such as content, theme, tone, purpose, narrative voice, language and support points with relevant quotations or textual references
- take time to make a brief plan for the higher tariff questions (5 and 6 or 7)
- consider given form and audience for the writing task and use these to inform register and tone
- try to use a wide vocabulary and varied sentence structures
- aim for a structured, cohesive and complete piece of writing
- allow time to proof-read in order to achieve the highest possible degree of accuracy
- read all instructions carefully
- attempt every question