



**AQA Certificates  
June 2012**

**English Literature  
(Specification 8710)**

**8710/2H**

***Report on the Examination***

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## Certificate in English Literature

### Principal Examiner's Report - 8710/2H - June 2012

It is worth pointing out from the outset that this year's cohort was very small, and the comments below are therefore based on a small number of entrants. Nevertheless, even within such a small entry, there was a wide range of responses in terms of questions answered and the texts chosen.

It was pleasing in the examination's first year that there were no rubric infringements and there was clear evidence that teachers had absorbed the information given at training meetings about the philosophy of the qualification. This was particularly evident in the open nature of many of the responses, and the students' use of context, which was always relevant and linked to a meaningful discussion of the texts themselves. It is perhaps worth reiterating in this first report that although context is one of the assessment objectives, it should only ever be discussed as it naturally arises from the discussion of the texts in answer to the question and little credit will be given for isolated or 'tacked on' historical details. It was pleasing in the qualification's first year that this message has clearly been received by schools.

Students answered on both sections, although section B was the most popular in terms of numbers of students. In Section A the majority of students compared *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* with *Frankenstein*, although one candidate wrote about *The Tempest* in comparison with *Frankenstein*. In Section B, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *I'm the King of the Castle* were the most popular texts chosen, although one centre had clearly also taught *Lord of the Flies* as well and some students chose to compare this with *I'm the King of the Castle*. It is worth pointing out that schools do not have to limit themselves to teaching only two texts.

It was interesting that no students had been prepared on the poetry texts in the two sections. There are obvious reasons why teachers may prefer prose texts over poetry texts, although the questions are always written to enable students to answer on any text from the list and there could have been interesting things to say about *The Prelude* and the Blake poems, for example, in response to the Section B questions. Some of the best responses came in answer to the statement in Question 3, with students unpicking the difference between 'fear' and 'difficulty' and exploring them in both texts with an impressive degree of focus. Responses to the texts demonstrated strong engagement as well as knowledge and understanding and, in the main, the texts were treated in equal balance; there were only a couple of students who focused mainly on one text.

### Assessment Objectives

Although assessment objectives 3 and 4 carry the most weight on this paper, the skills descriptors in the mark scheme are spread evenly across the AOs and it would be unwise for students to limit their responses based on such a weighting: clearly, AO1 is very important in demonstrating the level of understanding and engagement with the texts. The comments below take each assessment objective in turn and consider the way in which they were dealt with.

AO1 assesses the students' ability to respond to the task and to select relevant details from the text to support their discussion, and this was much in evidence in the responses marked. The students clearly knew the texts and were able to pick out key sections for discussion, and the best answers were those which focused on specific scenes and incidents with short quotations to support their discussion. Some students by contrast had clearly learned substantial quotations which they were determined to use in the essay whether they were relevant or not and this should be discouraged; it is clearly a challenge to write about two substantial texts in an hour and lengthy quotations make the task even harder.

Whilst AO2 has less of a weighting, it is nevertheless an important aspect of responding to literature and so should be considered, but in some cases students made little or no attempt to address the author's craft. The best answers integrated references to language and structure into their discussion, in discussing, for examples, the symbolism of the crow in 'I'm the King of the Castle' or the importance of Scout's narrative perspective. That said, there were opportunities missed to consider the significance of the effect of narrative perspective in the other prose texts, or the importance of structure. Had schools chosen to teach the poetry texts, this would have also enabled some more consideration of features of language.

AO3 tests comparison and is clearly very important for this paper. Some students did little more than discuss the two texts separately using connectives to link them. This is juxtaposition, not meaningful comparison. To achieve a mark in the higher bands for comparison the expectation is that the comparison will be sustained and will involve looking at the texts together, if not for the whole essay then certainly for significant sections of it. The best responses were those which held the texts together and compared specific details. It is not enough to have a comparative opening paragraph and conclusion. It is also important for there to be a sustained discussion of both texts; there were some imbalanced responses in which one text was dealt with superficially and raised the question of whether they had studied the novel at all or watched the film version of it.

AO4 has already been discussed. There are a range of relevant contexts to these texts which can be addressed through discussion of issues in the texts themselves and the best responses integrated a 'light touch' discussion throughout the essay, for example in considering the way in which the racism in Maycomb was a key part of the children's learning experiences in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. There was no need for heavy use of historical detail; a reference to the racism of the time was enough and illuminated the discussion without detracting from it. Questions are set with the expectation that relevant and focused responses will consider aspects of context without the need for tacked on paragraphs.

Overall, this was a successful first paper for the Specification which demonstrated considerable engagement and knowledge of the set texts. Most impressive was the students' focus on the question and the use of textual details to support their argument, which demonstrated that they had been well-prepared in constructing literary arguments and in the study of the texts for this paper.