

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

GCE Ordinary Level

Papers 1115/01, 1120/01, 1123/01 and 1124/01

Composition

General comments

The writing tasks in this component of the syllabus met with enthusiastic responses from candidates across the whole ability range. It was obvious that many Teachers and candidates had worked hard in preparation for the examination and Examiners commented on a slightly improved level of communication achieved. The overall standard of written English appeared to be similar to that seen in previous years. Whilst there were relatively few scripts at the highest level, very poor scripts were rarely seen.

Many candidates showed their ability to write confident, well-planned essays, which engaged and held the reader's interest, with original, thoughtful material, generally clearly expressed. It was particularly pleasing to note that there were fewer obviously prepared essays this year. Many candidates developed their essays at some length, sustaining a fair level of accurate writing and relevant content, although some candidates wrote at too great a length; long answers often deteriorated in accuracy and presentation. Lengthy compositions in **Part 1**, sometimes resulted in short, hurried or unfinished responses in **Part 2**, forfeiting marks that would have been gained with better planning and use of the time available. Meaning was rarely in doubt, even where candidates struggled with verb forms and tense sequences, idioms and sentence structures, pronouns and prepositions, punctuation and paragraphing, which are the aspects of English that appear to present most difficulty to candidates in this examination. Linguistic inaccuracy sometimes prevented candidates from achieving the high marks that their ideas and planning might suggest.

Some worrying trends were so frequently seen across the whole range of Centres as to merit a special mention: the inappropriate use of the modal 'would' for the simple 'will', particularly, but not only, in responses to **Question 1**; lack of variety in sentence structures, with the tendency to use short, simple sentences throughout or to write involved, overlong sentences with excessive use of coordinates; the failure to indicate or paragraph direct speech or, equally confusing for the reader, the tendency to preface the spoken words with 'that', and, finally, the growing use of the ampersand and of e-mail/text message abbreviations e.g. 'u', '4u', 'u r', though the latter was not so noticeable this year as last, perhaps indicating that Teachers have warned candidates against this practice after reading the most recent reports on the examination. It is to be hoped that Teachers will point out these deficiencies to future candidates for this examination.

Some rubric offences were reported but most candidates divided their time sensibly between the two tasks and made a genuine effort to address the chosen topic. Candidates writing from personal experience or conviction, as always, produced the most lively and original responses, using a wide vocabulary with some precision and showing their ability to vary the tone and register of their writing to suit the subject matter.

Whilst candidates in most Centres produced neatly presented scripts in clear, precise handwriting, in some regions presentation was untidy, crossing out was frequent and handwriting was extremely difficult to read, which was not helpful to Examiners.

Comments on specific questions

Part 1

Question 1

Describe the sights and sounds during the mid-day break in your school.

This was quite a popular choice, particularly for weaker candidates, since the topic was within the personal experience of every candidate for the examination. They were able to draw on a range of influences, moods and sensations that brought a graphic sense of realism to their essays. Many candidates began and ended the piece with the peace and quiet of students at work, while the main part of the essay was full of pace and vigour. The best essays managed to reflect this contrast, in the style, vocabulary and rhythm of their prose, showing the value of the descriptive essay for candidates who have a keen sense of observation. Most candidates wrote well by using the two essential parts of the question to structure their essays and giving equal emphasis to the sounds and to the more powerful visual elements. Genuine feelings of relief at the start of the break and sadness at the end were well conveyed and some candidates took the opportunity offered to introduce humour in their sharp observation of behaviour. They were candid about the noise, the fights, the greedy queues for food, the games, the attitude to Teachers and the flirting that goes on. The heat, dust and chaos of the playground contrasted sharply with the study or gossip in the scanty shade available under the trees. Unfortunately, in some cases, the instant recognition and familiarity of the theme led to a careless reading of the wording of the question: some candidates ignored the descriptive requirements and wrote stories, often rather sensationalist, of incidents at the school, in which sights and sounds played little part save as elements arising from the story, such as the ambulance or police siren.

This question did give rise to considerable problems of tense uncertainty and inconsistency. The nature of the title invited the use of the habitual present tense; there was often movement from present to past and back again and the ubiquitous but inappropriate use of the modal 'would' caused further confusion: 'When the bell rings, we would leave the classroom and ran to the canteen.' The success of this topic lay in the fact that candidates could call on personal experience, but the liveliness of the content outstripped the accuracy of the language in many cases.

Question 2

Write about some of the disappointments you have felt in your life.

This was a very popular question, offering every opportunity for the narrative approach combined with some philosophical reflection on the function of disappointments to give greater strength of character to face future difficulties in life. 'Disappointment' was variously interpreted as sadness, upset or depression. Some essays focused on one major disappointment, while others ran the gamut of a number of frustrating experiences. Deaths of friends and relatives, repressive parents, unwanted pregnancies, rape, child abuse and disasters of various kinds seemed far too serious to qualify as examples of disappointments. More suitable, and certainly most common, were tales of failed examinations, the inability to meet parental expectations, betrayal of trust by best friends, failure to be selected for sports teams and unrequited love. The most successful responses were honest and confessional, written, perhaps, again from personal experience.

The greatest disappointment for Examiners marking essays on this topic was the very variable spelling of the word 'disappointment'! This ubiquitous error was inexcusable as the word was given on the Question Paper. There was also a tendency to take a list-type approach to the structure of the essay and to repeat the title in paragraph openings: 'My first disappointment.... . My second disappointment... . My third disappointment... . My last disappointment..... .' Fortunately, these examples did not all appear in the same essay!

Question 3

Write a story about a person who entered a competition and surprised everyone by winning.

The narrative choice is always the most popular topic on the Paper and this was no exception, some Examiners reporting it to be the selection of more than 50% of the candidates in their Centres. Competitions ranged from the expected athletics, swimming, art, music and debating contests to beauty pageants, talent shows, spelling bees and the more far-fetched 'bun-eating' competition for which contestants prepared by dieting for days beforehand! Almost invariably the surprise winner was an outcast of some kind, scorned by peers; after training secretly and gaining the trophy the victor became respected by all. Candidates clearly enjoyed writing on this topic and produced some very lively, vivid essays. Some became so involved with the building of tension and setting the scene for the contest, that the event itself was rushed at the end; others got carried away by their own stories and lost control of tenses, structures and the organisation of the direct speech, which was a vital part of the characterisation and exciting climax of the story. As the tension mounted, the number of coordinates increased and full stops disappeared. This topic also produced an inexcusable spelling error: 'competition', a word given in the question frequently appeared as 'competion'. Most candidates concentrated on the feelings and attitudes involved and wisely avoided detailed, 'blow by blow' accounts of the contest. The best candidates married characterisation, suspense and humour into well-paced convincing narratives.

Question 4

Caring for a sick person at home.

This was the least popular topic. It was not the sort of question to inspire fictional accounts so those that chose it were usually writing from personal experience. Grandparents were usually the patients needing care. The best essays were those that went beyond the narrative and articulated feelings, often very sensitively. Other candidates produced a detailed list of 'chores', although these were usually undertaken willingly and with love, not resentment at the work involved. Some showed a detailed knowledge of a variety of diseases and appropriate treatments; indeed, some read almost like nursing manuals, perhaps remembered from textbooks used in pre-nursing courses.

Question 5

Should entertainers and sports stars be paid such large sums of money? What are your views?

As always, a topic asking for reasoned argument was not a very popular choice, wisely so in the case of weaker candidates. There were problems in developing a clear line of argument, which led to confusion and repetition in content and expression. Most writers agreed with large payments but a few tried to put a case for a more even and just distribution of wealth. Some made comparisons with the earnings of teachers, doctors and nurses, whilst others used the market forces argument, pointing out that the stars are paid whatever sum their popularity and support dictates. There were some intelligent, well-argued responses but many suffered from lack of material, resulting in limited argument, unconvincing content and repetition of the points and expressions used, particularly of the phrase from the question 'Entertainers and sports stars'. As well as 'local' stars, Owen and the Beckhams were frequently mentioned, combining sport and entertainment in one example and highlighting the role of the media in spreading the fame of such performers across the world. Many candidates did not have the linguistic ability or control to express their ideas and examples clearly in an organised, well-balanced argument.

Part 2

The directed writing task in this part of the paper aims to assess different skills from those tested in the continuous free writing of **Part 1**. Here the rubric suggests an audience to address, a purpose to be served and some specific information to be conveyed. As well as carrying out the instructions clearly and accurately in the required format, candidates are expected to adopt a style and tone appropriate to the task.

These aims were seldom fully accomplished by the candidates this year. This task proved a better discriminator than those in past years where virtually all candidates scored the five marks awarded for content. Failure to read the question with sufficient care and to construct the event described clearly in their own minds before beginning to write, led to many candidates missing some of the required content points. Almost all gave a suitable and properly placed headline, though many failed to distinguish between a succinct newspaper headline and a story title. Weaker candidates copied parts of the question as a heading. A number of candidates wrote their account in the form of a letter or report to the editor and did not provide a heading for the article.

Many candidates failed to notice that both the location and date of the incident were required in the second content point, or the information given was unacceptably vague. Frequently, 'near a dangerous road' was taken from the question paper as the location and was inadequate.

The description of the child was straightforward but a worrying number of candidates described the stranger as well or instead of the child.

Some candidates did not specify the help given by the stranger but merely copied 'the child was rescued and taken back home' from the question paper or reported simply that he 'walked away without giving his name', thus forfeiting the mark. Some candidates forgot or misunderstood parts of the rubric and had the stranger taking the child to the police station instead of home, or rescuing the child from the sea, a river, the forest or even from a kidnapper.

The point of the telephone contact was the most frequently omitted or, if mentioned, details of the number or how to obtain it were not given.

Most candidates made an attempt to write in a newspaper style and some went so far as to adopt the column format and even to provide pencil-drawn 'photographs'. Some could not resist making an unsuitably long and complex narrative of the event, concentrating on the circumstances of the child getting lost, rather than on details of the rescue. Paragraphing and a suitably crisp tone were seldom found in **Part 2**, which seemed to lack the detailed planning given to the **Part 1** essays, yet needed it even more. Some common faults specific to this task were references to 'a trousers', 'a jeans pant', 'a tall black hair', 'a wheatish complexion' and gender confusion: 'He left her mother in the shop.' The child's measurements also caused problems: the child might be anything from 3 metres to 2 inches in height!

Guidance for teachers preparing candidates for future examinations

There was much evidence of careful teaching and practice to be found in the scripts from all Centres. The more sensible choice of topic; evidence of writing from personal experience; fewer obviously 'prepared' essays; less use of obtrusive and inappropriate vocabulary used to impress; more careful checking and correction of completed work – all these factors were evidence that the advice given in previous reports had been heeded. Spelling was generally more accurate, even in the work of weaker candidates. There was some improvement in the use of punctuation and paragraphing to organise the text for the reader. However, sentence separation faults and the use of the comma splice still mar the coherence of many scripts and the failure to indicate, punctuate and paragraph direct speech adds to the confusion. Examiners found it necessary to re-read such scripts to establish communication.

Candidates should be warned that, whilst slang, colloquial contractions and regional 'patois' may add to characterisation when used in direct speech, they are entirely inappropriate in the more formal style and register of English prose composition. A 'write as you speak' approach demeans the subject matter and suggests a casual, careless attitude in the writer.

Further advice might be given on the wise use of the limited time available in the examination. The practice adopted by some candidates of writing **Part 2** first may be mis-guided: to follow a directed writing piece of suitable length (200-300 words) with an under-developed or even a short **Part 1** essay is not in the candidate's interest, as the mark allocation, clearly stated on the Question Paper, shows. Very short answers in either section incur a penalty. Practice in writing timed essays in preparation for the examination should give candidates the confidence to tackle the two sections in the order and within the time limits recommended on the Question Paper and thus to avoid serious lack of balance in essay length.

The importance of planning and developing ideas logically cannot be over-stated. This is particularly important in a discursive response, to avoid repetition or incoherence in arguing on abstract concepts. It is also important not to rely on repetition of phrases from the question to introduce points in a structured argument, but to vary the sentence and paragraph openings to avoid monotony and retain the interest of the reader.

Examiners noted that problems of tense consistency and verb formation remain the area of English that causes the greatest difficulty to candidates in these Centres and can detract from the clarity of communication in the work of even some of the best writers. Clearer advice is needed on the use of the habitual present for a reflective discussion or a description such as that in **Question 1**. The use of the simple past tense is recommended for narrative but caution is needed when direct speech is introduced. A clear explanation of the formation and use of the future and conditional tenses and of modal verb structures might correct the haphazard use of 'would' noted in many of these scripts. Teachers should stress the need for consistency once a tense has been selected.

As mentioned earlier in this report, Teachers must act now to eliminate the use of text-messaging abbreviations, which have no place in written English – certainly not in an examination context!

The generally accepted presentation and register of a report, a newspaper article, a speech, an eye-witness account etc. should be explained to candidates and practised in preparing for the examination, so that there is no confusion if such formats are required in the directed writing task of **Part 2**.

Final comment

Examiners commented on how much they enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity to mark scripts written by such hard-working, well-intentioned candidates, ambitious to succeed and eager to follow advice for improvement.

Papers 1115/02, 1120/02, 1123/02 and 1124/02

Comprehension

General comments

Without exception Examiners felt that the paper was ‘appropriate’, although overall performance was variable. The subject matter of the passage seemed to engage the interest of candidates from all areas. There were many strong scripts with significant numbers of scores in the high 40s, and candidates using their own words fluently, a trait especially evident in the summaries. In weaker scripts, the most common errors included wrong verb forms and tense errors, distorted syntax, omission or obvious misuse of prepositions, misunderstanding of words used (e.g. a confusion of ‘screen’ and ‘scream’, and ‘assistant’ and ‘assistance’), serious errors of agreement (a singular subject and plural verb, or vice-versa), and ingrained weaknesses of punctuation, i.e. the habitual comma replacing the necessary full stop.

Comments on specific questions

Question 1

- (a) There were two alternative answers to this question, which was designed to be an encouraging opening to the paper. These were either ‘Because Amy was slow to get up’/‘reluctant to leave her world of dreams’; or ‘Amy’s mother was afraid of missing the bus’. The question was generally well answered.
- (b) This was a more difficult question, involving candidates in the explanation of a metaphor: ‘high point’. The most common mistake was to understand ‘high point’ as a *place*, rather than as ‘the *most important event* in Amy’s mother’s week’. Here some form of the superlative was essential.

Question 2

There were various alternative answers here: ‘flashy jewellery’, ‘crudely fashioned rings’ or ‘roughly polished stones’. Examiners had some sympathy with those answers which quoted ‘spread-out on the walkways’, as this could imply that the goods were cheap, and this was allowed as a gloss. It was decided, however, that this phrase would not be accepted as a complete answer, since the question specified goods that were ‘cheaply *made*’ rather than simply ‘cheap’. Some candidates lost the mark here, since they ignored the demand of the question (printed in bold) for **one** example only.

Question 3

- (a) The majority of candidates gave the correct answer here: ‘she had made a good bargain’; ‘she had bought some cloth cheaply/at a price she could afford’. One entertaining answer suggested that Amy’s mother would be able to buy two dresses for father. Those answers, which failed to score, suggested that Amy’s mother had *sold* cloth to the stallkeeper at a price of her choosing.

- (b) Most answers to this question were correct: that 'Amy's mother did not like Amy wandering too far on her own'.
- (c) There were two possible answers here and both were credited. Candidates could say that Amy's mother made up for her strict attitude either by allowing her to visit the caves for an hour, or by pressing 'a few coins into Amy's hand'.
- (d) This question was not well done. Many candidates did not realise that they were expected to gloss 'stunned' and 'insignificant'; many were content to say that Amy felt 'uneasy', although this was too close to 'fear' which was ruled out by the terms of the question itself.

Question 4

- (a) Candidates here divided into those who pointed out in detail the resemblances between the boy and his puppets: the bright red and green clothes and the red make-up, and others who seemed to understand the similarities, but who failed to explain them because their answers were not completely explicit in their comparisons.
- (b) Generally well answered, often by direct quotation from the original text: 'his little body mimicked the movements of his puppets'.

Question 5

This was a question which was rarely answered in full. Those candidates who managed to gloss 'lifelike' correctly as either 'real', 'in real life', or 'from an actual person', did less well with 'agony', translatable as 'pain', 'being hurt', 'suffering'. And, frustratingly, the reverse was also the case.

Question 6

This should have been the simplest question on the paper, as the 'slow, red stain', in Amy's imagination, was 'blood'. Those candidates who failed to score here were led astray by lines 77-78 of the passage and quoted 'the strange, unearthly contrast of colour against the black and white backdrop of the fight'.

Question 7

The correct answer was that 'Amy thought that the *fallen/dead/defeated* puppet (1) looked like the little boy/the puppet master's assistant/the old man's assistant'. (1). Many candidates gave the second half of the answer correctly, but failed to be precise about which of the two puppets was in question.

Question 8

There were three possible answers here. 'Amy's mother was afraid of missing the bus' (again!); 'she was in a hurry/scolded Amy for being late'; 'did not notice Amy's fear'. Those candidates who failed to score concentrated on Amy rather than on her mother, drawing their material from lines 93-95 of the passage. They cited Amy's ignoring her mother's impatience and her 'sitting in silence on the journey home'. It should be emphasised to candidates that they must read the questions with care in order to avoid this kind of unnecessary mistake.

Question 9

Quite a number of answers concentrated (wrongly) on Amy's feelings about her doll. Those who realised that the question demanded a gloss on 'comforting' and 'familiarity' sometimes offered words derived from these, ignoring the 'own words' requirement. However, although many did succeed in finding a suitable expression to convey Amy's need for solace, fewer found a word for her need for the normal.

Question 10

The average score for this question was three marks: the fact that eight words are offered and candidates need choose only five does highlight the problem of choice. 'Glowed', 'fixed', 'convinced' and 'signalled', proved the most successful, and 'sharp' the most tricky. Candidates should be advised to go back to the passage set and to re-read their chosen words in context. Other reasons for failure to score were insufficient attention to the rubric: giving more than one alternative to the word to be glossed, or using the designated words in a sentence of a candidate's own invention. It is understood that this is an excellent way for candidates to practise the contextual meanings of English vocabulary, but it is not appropriate in answering the question.

Question 11

This was an interesting passage which candidates seemed to enjoy. Some candidates scored well on the points required, others got very few. Too many candidates wasted words and time in describing the cave, the old man, boxers and shadowy temples. What was needed was a concentration on Amy's emotions and perceptions in the three stages indicated by the rubric. Candidates also found considerable difficulty in distinguishing between the three stages of the puppet show: the boy with the puppets; the shadow show of the temple and the procession behind the screen; and the final fight between the two puppet-swordsmen.

The passage had a wealth of vivid, easily understood detail in paragraphs 5, 6 and 7. Many candidates were sidetracked into paying too much attention to this area of the text, so that they tended to pass over the material in paragraphs 8 and 9, where the focus was on Amy's reactions. Paragraph 10 reverted to more accessible detail, but by the time they reached it, many candidates had run out of words.

Many Examiners reported that there are still too many overlength answers: some running to two or three sides of the examination booklets. There was often no evidence of rough work or preparatory listing, nor even of rudimentary selection of material, and no word total was offered at the end. Centres should be reminded that one of the tests of a summary answer is the ability to be concise: the word limit is there for a purpose.