

Examiners' Report

GCE O Level English Language (7161)

June 2006

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE 7161, CHIEF EXAMINER'S REPORT

General comments

As always, examiners wish to congratulate the teachers of this English Language examination for the skills with which they bring out the very best in those pupils - of such varying abilities - for whom they have responsibility: the fact that the vast majority of candidates responded with such energy, sincerity and interest to the two - very different - passages on fire on this paper, and were able to respond to the contrasts between them, is a testament to the excellent teaching which they have received.

Most teachers will now be familiar with the fact that extensive support material, relevant to previous examination sessions, is published on the Edexcel International website. Centres new to this examination might be interested to know that this includes model answers for all three sections of the 7161 paper, as well as guidance for future examinations.

Section A: Comprehension

Many pupils began really confidently here by simply selecting the correct information from 'The Fire Man', thus gaining the full three marks for **question one**. A typically good answer was: 'People like lighting fires, find it fascinating to watch the flames and get a lot of comfort from them'.

Of course, the same points were rewarded if put in a pupil's 'own words', but this did not always prove successful for the less able candidate whose vocabulary was sometimes not wide enough to express an answer with sufficient clarity and precision. As you can see from the mark scheme, responses such as: 'People like fire...'; 'They find fires pleasing...'; 'They enjoy them...' and 'They find them fascinating...' failed to score for the second point here. Some students generalised, combining two points with the same verb 'like' which was not strong enough to score, or omitted the flames as the object of fascination. If candidates are not asked to use their own words, they are not rewarded for doing so. Indeed, they can make errors which do not do justice to their comprehension skills and often waste valuable time.

Weaker candidates revealed some lack of understanding, more typically of the language in the passage rather than the question. Common mistakes included points such as: 'It makes you feel very small...'; 'Large people like lighting fires...' and 'The day is always hot and people like hot weather...'. Others gave personal reasons as to why they personally enjoyed fires ('I associate them with Bonfire Night...'; 'You can cook lovely sweet potatoes on them...'; 'They help you get rid of rubbish...' etc) which - although interesting - could be awarded no marks as they did not show the comprehension skills which are - of course - being tested in Section A of this paper.

A small but significant minority attempted to answer the question with reference to the wrong passage.

The majority of candidates, in addition to gaining two or three marks for question one, were awarded a further three marks for **question two**. One such answer which gained full marks was: 'the noise of the wind, the roar of the fire and this low frequency thumping...'. As with question one, candidates simply had to identify the relevant part of the passage in order to be fully rewarded.

A mark was occasionally lost by loosely defining 'low frequency thumping' or 'gas burning'. Therefore, answers such as 'thumping' or 'gas' were not sufficiently precise to receive a mark for point three in the scheme.

As with question one, a small number of candidates attempted to answer this question with reference to the wrong passage.

Both questions one and two specified that *three* reasons had to be given by way of an answer. Examiners were pleased to note that candidates - on the whole - realised that their first three attempts only are marked in such cases. Few lost marks here by copying out long extracts from the passage where answers could not be rewarded because the relevant points were given after several inappropriate responses had been made.

Question three relied on candidates recognising that the word 'stench' in Passage One was a synonym for 'smell'. Again - as 'own words' was not a requirement here - so: 'there was a stench of rotten meat...' or even 'rotten meat' was sufficient to gain the one mark available. Those candidates who did choose to rephrase the original here were more successful in doing so than they had been in questions one and two. The most common wrong answers were: 'Burning gas...'; 'fuel...' and 'eagles'. A small minority thought that Australia, fish or the dead body of Phil Cheney (who, presumably, was writing from beyond the grave) were the cause of the vile stench.

This section of the paper became more demanding as **question four** was reached, not least because it did require candidates to both locate appropriate material from Passage One *and* to demonstrate their genuine understanding of the passage by expressing their answers in their own words. Indeed, the main reason for low marks here was the fact that too many students simply lifted phrases - word for word - from the passage. Here too the first (in this case) four points only were marked.

There were, however, some excellent answers from candidates in response to this question where correct answers were given and own words were used. 'People stay in their houses for too long before trying to escape when they would have been better off staying in their houses until the fire had passed, don't wear protective clothing when trying to put out the fire and don't cut down the trees etc. around their houses...' is an example of an answer which scored the full four marks. Failure to use synonyms for - or gloss - words/phrases such as 'evacuate', 'at the last moment', 'wear shorts and sandals without socks' and 'without much clearing around them' lost a number of candidates marks. A significant minority of students showed misunderstanding of the need to keep grass as a clear area around their homes, stating that grass actually helped to spread the fire. Out of interest, people's ill-choice of appropriate clothing was the point which most commonly scored here. It is worth telling pupils that it is really worth attempting to express answers such as these in words other than those used in the passage, as to simply lift words and phrases from the passage is *never* rewarded.

Answers to **question five**, also, reflected the full ability spectrum. As with question four, lifting/copying words directly from the passage proved to be the downfall of weaker candidates, although - on the whole - it posed fewer problems for average students. One good response - which scored the full three marks - was: 'If the firemen had burnt before the areas where the forest is dense and contains fuel, the fire would have been controlled in few hours. This is because the highly flammable areas were already destroyed and burnt by the firemen. The flames would have less space to spread around and so they could have been put away quickly.' Do remember - if you're thinking that the expression here is not as lucid as it might have been - that comprehension skills *only* are being tested in Section A of this examination.

Another answer which gained full marks was: 'Fires could have been started on purpose by humans to burn all the trees and things before the unexpected fire started. There would have been nothing for the real fire to burn if this had been the case!'

Weaker candidates - or, indeed, those who simply overlooked the 'own words' instruction - failed, most typically, to gloss: 'natural fuel', 'forest floor' and 'deliberate fires'. A significant minority took 'fuel' as meaning gas, oil or petroleum so lost marks for irrelevance. As elsewhere, some candidates abandoned the passage to give their own personal advice about what could have been done. Such suggestions included firemen running training courses for Canberra residents, telling residents to move to another country and teaching them about the power of prayer. Perhaps 'own words' is interpreted as 'own ideas' in such cases which is worth noting.

Question six led candidates into Passage Two - which contained some challenging language - in a relatively encouraging way. Indeed, many students received a good mark for this question which simply required the correct answers to be lifted from the passage. Encouragingly, very few candidates penalised themselves by listing more than four points. A typical answer gaining full marks was: 'People might go to Aldeburgh to take a dip in the sea, eat fish and chips, go to a concert and to take a break from their normal busy lives.' Weaker candidates suggested possible reasons for the visit which were not indicated strongly enough in the passage: going to watch big fires; to enjoy fishing trips; to help the woman who had the oar fired through her window and to remonstrate with the fishermen clearly did not merit marks for real comprehension of the passage.

Question seven was enjoyable for examiners to mark as it allowed for really personal responses to the way in which the language in this passage was effective. Many candidates gained two marks by perceptively selecting two apt quotations, one of which described or suggested fire and one of which described or suggested wind. A very wide variety of quotations was selected, but the most popular - which gave candidates ample scope for analysis - were: 'seagulls were being blown about like bits of litter...'; 'The wind was now gusting into little gales...'; 'Not a small fire, but a mountainous one...'; 'Little pockets of gas flickered blue and green through knotholes in the wood...' and 'bright yellow flames burst from the fire's perimeter'. It was heart-warming to see greater evidence of candidates' confidence than in previous years in offering reasons as to how their chosen quotations brought the passage to life. Many detailed, observant and sensitive comments were enjoyed by markers as they read answers to this question.

A minority of candidates did not understand the word 'quotation' and paraphrased points - often rather inaccurately - thus scoring no marks for this question. Sadly, others had come pre-armed with generalisations and/or literary terms which they attempted to 'crowbar' into their analysis often - but not always - with little relevance to their chosen quotations. 'The language represents the writer's excellent use of simile, metaphor and sentence length' or 'The diction, alliteration and paragraphing helps us to understand this quotation better...' were just two such examples. This was a real shame in many cases where the candidate's own ideas - expressed in simple English - would have stood them in better stead. Some explanations simply repeated the words of the quotation: 'The quotation shows that the seagulls have to battle against the wind and are blown like litter...' or 'The quotation shows that the fire is like a mountain' being two such examples. Occasionally, a chosen quotation was invalid because of length (the whole of paragraph four or five copied out), lack of appropriateness ('the greys of the sea merged with the greys of the sky and the land.') or the fact that the content was simply too factual ('It was windy too...'; 'A fire was being lit on the beach.'). Out of

interest, a number of candidates wrongly presumed that 'as two men' in line twenty was a simile suggesting the strength of the gale.

As with the previous question, examiners were delighted to see that the overall quality of answers to this demanding comparative task had improved from previous years. We found many responses a sheer delight to read: a pleasing number of candidates wrote detailed, sensitive and observant commentaries, justifying the reason for their preferred choice of passage and substantiating points with apt quotations. Of course, simple observations contrasting the content of the passages were rewarded, but there was considerable evidence of insight into language, style and audience in a high number of answers.

Weaker candidates, however, tended to: merely paraphrase - or even copy - the content of each passage; write comparisons in two columns, stating what their preferred passage achieved and the other didn't, which lead to some rather empty comparisons; spray literary terms at the question without specifying their target or commenting on their effect; comment on such things as 'evocative language', 'brilliant use of figures of speech' or 'excellent usage of similes and metaphors' with no examples given, or say that one passage was 'boring' which - although perfectly valid and honest lacks the sufficient depth of analysis required for 'O' Level English Language.

Section B: Summary and Directed Writing

Ironically, although the majority of candidates - for obvious reasons - preferred Passage One to Passage Two, many approached **question nine** with real energy and insight, seeming to enjoy adopting the persona of the rather unsympathetically portrayed lady whose window had been broken and relishing the dramatic possibilities of the task: a wonderful variety of well-to-do, angry, shocked and disgusted ladies were presented! Many candidates really warmed to the task of portraying her sense of moral outrage/righteous indignation at the fishermen and few found trouble in expressing this in the form of a letter. A sense of purpose was evident in many answers and - once again - examiners were impressed by the fact that students seemed to have been really well-prepared for this section of the paper. Good candidates produced really lively and entertaining letters.

It is, however, worth noting that a number of centres new to the examination (who - it must be said - had trained their pupils with incredible perception and insight in all other respects) might need to take on board the fact that examiners *really do count the words* used in each Section B answer, crossing out anything written beyond the end of the sentence in which - in this case - the 220 word limit was reached.

In terms of content, many candidates picked out quite a high number of relevant points from the passage, the full fourteen not being too uncommon. Those most typically identified were 1, 5, 6, 11, 13, 14, 16, 19, 20 and 21. A number of candidates gained point 4 for the date in the letter heading and even point one for genuine attempts to indicate a woman of wealth such as Mrs Lady Diana, Margaret Thatcher or - most commonly - Victoria Beckham! Some students failed to be precise enough when describing the key fact (point 9), as it was necessary to specify that the *fishermen* lit the fire on the *beach* to gain a mark. Many examiners, however, commented favourably on the fact that 'own words' were used more widely than in previous examinations, testament, again, to the excellent teaching which candidates have received.

Weaker candidates struggled with sustaining the purpose of the letter: though the opening of their answers stated clearly that it was a complaint, they often ended weakly with a general plea that 'someone should do something' rather than suggesting a definite desired outcome. A few misunderstood events and either

thanked the fishermen for helping put out the fire or blamed firemen (on occasions, poor old Phil Cheney!) for lack of efficiency. Some otherwise extremely competent candidates concentrated on the woman's consuming anger to the detriment of expression/content, or became inappropriately hysterical - at considerable length - on a single point such as, in one case, the hopelessness of the emergency services ('You never see a fire-engine when you want one and then three come along at once.') and in another the fact that the lady's 'make-up was severely damaged'. Others wrote diatribes against the government, corruption in general or working-class hooligans which - although conveying an appropriate tone - failed to recognise context. As always, marks for expression and accuracy varied considerably with all marks from fifteen to nought being awarded. Of course, if candidates have copied widely from the passage then it is impossible for examiners to give anything but an extremely low mark for this aspect of the task, as 'own words' must be used in order to judge the ability of the writer.

A few candidates used 'language' appropriate only for modern day text-messaging for this task, 'CU in court' and 'don't want 2 bover U' being two such examples. As with all English examinations, some examiners' days were brightened by inaccurate spelling/attempts to slightly change parts of speech: a number of things which shot out of the fire 'shattered the widow upstairs' or caused 'the breaking of wind'. More bizarrely, a number of fishermen found it necessary to throw 'wooden pullets' and 'broken nuts' into the fire. As we have said before, these examples are included for mild amusement only, as these tiny errors - in themselves - make no difference to the overall mark.

Section C: The Essay

As always, this was an extremely enjoyable section of the paper to mark as - on the whole - the personalities of candidates were revealed through their individual creative writing styles. Although, of course, the standard of essays varied considerably, there were some quite superb pieces of writing submitted for each of the essay titles, and almost none which did not manage to communicate something of interest to the reader. There were some candidates - although, pleasingly, fewer than usual - who had learnt essays (or opening paragraphs/set phrases) beforehand and failed to apply them relevantly to the given titles. One can understand attempting to arm very weak candidates in this way, but when bright candidates respond with such a lack of spontaneity, the results can, sadly, be disastrous. The most usual reasons for candidates receiving lower marks than they might have expected in this section were: a lack of/limited relevance to the chosen title; errors in grammar, syntax, sentencing, tense and expression; short paragraphs which did not develop ideas with sufficient detail, example or imagery; a lack of variety in vocabulary and/or sentence structure; essays which began without a sense of 'where they were going' and were - as a result - poorly-structured and those which were far too brief.

Question ten (a) - Write a story (true or imaginary) in which you and your family are threatened by a natural disaster - proved a popular choice clearly reflecting the tragic number of natural disasters which have occurred in recent times. There were many harrowing, heart-rending stories of the (then) most recent tsunami, the earthquake of September '05 in Pakistan and floods in Bangladesh. Many of these narratives - judging by their passionate tone and the inclusion of such specific, vivid details - suggested that many of them were true. It was a humbling experience to read so many real-life accounts of natural disasters which had - quite clearly - threatened, frightened or destroyed so many families. Other well-devised stories - which ranged from the thoughtful account of a tragic incident to the 'cracking good yarn' - centred on such things as tornadoes, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, unexpected snowstorms and avalanches. One novel approach was to describe the

story of Noah's escape in the ark as narrated by his son. Most candidates opted to write in the first-person here which - on the whole - worked extremely well.

Marks for this question were sometimes lost - although examiners were as generous as they could be - when the *natural* element of the disaster was ignored. A cigarette thrown from the window of a car which starts a fire in a wood - although an act of human thoughtlessness - could be seen, perhaps, as initiating a natural disaster; the deliberate gunning-down of a drug's baron by a rival gang of heroin pushers couldn't. Another weakness was the fact that some candidates took more than three-quarters of the essay to actually get to the natural disaster. In such cases, such things as breakfast, packing, washing and travelling were described with rather flat detail leaving little time for the disaster itself. Of course, the more sophisticated writers included some such preliminary details to provide ironic contrast with what was to follow; with weaker candidates, however, this had the effect of diminishing the tension of the main event with more imagery lavished on, say, the consumption of a cup of coffee at an airport café than on the life-threatening turbulence - sometimes described in just a sentence or two - which decimated their family.

Question ten (b) - 'The Crowd' or 'The Audience'. Describe a group of people who have gathered to watch or listen to something together - was a slightly less popular choice than the other two essay titles but inspired some detailed, poignant and sometimes hilarious responses which were a joy to read. Imagery was - in many cases - used to excellent effect, as were a range of other literary devices. It was selected by a number of very able students who used it as a 'springboard' to indulge in the writing of shrewd character sketches on selected members of a crowd or audience. There were some wonderfully philosophical comments on the unity of a group of people who had gathered for the same purpose in spite of their diverse natures, and many deftly-drawn cameos of specific individuals. Many examiners commented on the fact that the most imaginative, original and engaging essays were produced in response to this title. Some, indeed, were quite outstanding. One candidate chose to write about the crowd at the Colosseum awaiting the arrival of the Emperor, another described the author/director of a play watching the audience at his 'first-night' performance and another adopted the persona of the victim of an accident who watched and listened to the crowd who had gathered round her as she lay dying, her senses fading as she drifted in and out of consciousness. In addition to these, there were a number of highly-perceptive views of theatre audiences observed from the perspective of artistes in mid-performance; delightful descriptions of crowds who had gathered to watch cricket or football matches; lively accounts of audiences at a variety of different concerts and rather splendidly familiar scenes of pupils sitting in dull (most commonly Maths!) lessons or school assemblies.

Weaker answers concentrated more - sometimes almost exclusively - on *what* was being watched rather than on those who were watching it. The very occasional aside referring to an audience arriving at the beginning of an event and clapping/leaving at the end was not sufficient enough to give an essay real focus on, or relevance to, the title.

Question ten (c) - Write an article for a travel/tourist guide about the area in which you live. You should outline what might attract visitors and what they should avoid - was the second most popular title and produced some fascinating essays. Even less able candidates managed, or made valiant attempts, to write in an appropriate style/tone/register for an article which could be justifiably included in a tourist or travel guide, and appeared to relish the opportunity to address an audience and exploit known genre features, such as the use of the second person. Some candidates chose to structure their articles with such things as headings and sub-headings, whilst others opted for continuous prose: both these approaches were entirely appropriate.

A number of examiners felt they were being given such warm invitations to see places they had never stayed in before that they were genuinely compelled to visit them. Indeed, one enamoured marker stated in her final report: 'I'm quite an expert on Valletta' now and hope to visit it, having been taken around its historic monuments, beautiful vistas and wonderful restaurants by its devoted student population.' Of course, some candidates - with just as much appropriateness - chose to dwell on what was *wrong* with where they lived: corruption, violence, the wide availability of drugs and extreme poverty being the reasons most often cited for a naive tourist not to visit a place. There was no need to provide a balance between the good and bad aspects of a village/town/city as long as *some* mention was made of both. Those candidates living in - or choosing to describe their homes as - places akin to paradise made reference to how tourists could, in fact, destroy the very thing they had come to enjoy by dropping litter, failing to observe the secular or religious laws of the country or simply by becoming too rowdy, thus showing little respect for other cultures and areas of the world. Other drawbacks, most typically, included dire warnings against pick-pockets and wandering around alone at night, the fact that prices were too high in many hotels and restaurants, and that bottled water only should be drunk if various diseases were to be avoided.

Weaker candidates tended to lapse into a simple list of attractions without any detail or development to bring what they were saying to life. Other essays were extremely repetitive, showing little evidence of planning, or simply relied on very basic but lengthy descriptions of, say, the local McDonald's or Starbucks. In such cases, it was difficult to pick up specific features between the place in which the writer lived and anywhere else in the world - not, therefore, particularly of use to the reader of a travel guide. Occasionally, there was no mention made *at all* of what visitors should avoid. If candidates indicated to their readers that there simply *wasn't* anything to avoid this was fine, but if that part of the question was *totally* ignored, then some marks were lost. As with the other two essay titles, there was almost no misunderstanding of what was required here, although one unfortunate candidate did mistake the word 'tourist' for 'terrorist'.

On the whole, however, it was really heartening to see how genuinely passionate, optimistic and enthusiastic candidates felt about where they lived even if, in the case of some countries, the current situation was very far from favourable. Clearly, some students have the talent to go on to become professional writers. As one examiner commented on an essay written in response to this essay title: 'There was one travel writer from Cyprus who wrote a subtle piece based on a car journey round a handful of villages in a small corner of the island - The Sunday Times beckons.'

Please do remember to look out for the Support Material which will appear on the Edexcel website. As well as providing model answers and advice for future 7161 examinations, some teachers find it useful as material for classroom-based activities. We hope that this report has been of some use to you in your teaching.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE 7161, GRADE BOUNDARIES

Grade	A	B	C	D	E
Lowest mark for award of grade	63	54	46	41	35

Note: Grade boundaries may vary from year to year and from subject to subject, depending on the demands of the question paper.
