

Examiners' Report Summer 2009

O Level

O Level English Language (7161)

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Contents

1.	7161 01	5
2.	7161 Grade Boundaries	7

O Level English Language: 7161 01

General

All three extracts proved to be accessible to the overwhelming majority of candidates and provoked some genuine, emotionally engaged responses. There is some evidence to suggest, overall, that the standard of candidates' written language is improving, although the levels of achievement covered the full range anticipated in the mark scheme.

Once again, it is important to stress that candidates should read the question paper very carefully. In particular, the rubric requiring own words indicates that very careful consideration should be given to clear understanding and reworking of the extract under consideration. Direct lifting from passages is not rewarded.

Section A

Question 1

Most candidates understood that, since three marks were available here, three distinct thoughts were required in the answer.

Question 2

A small minority of candidates failed to describe the bear's reactions before, as well as after, the cracker shell was fired.

Question 3

As with all "own words" questions, this was deliberately challenging and it was gratifying that so many candidates were able to provide apt synonyms for the author's thoughts and feelings.

Question 4

This provided problems for very few candidates, particularly since there were five acceptable answers and only three were required. A number interpreted "mates" as being "friends" or "pals" rather than sexual partners.

Question 5

This was perhaps the more difficult of the two "own words" questions because synonyms were required for a range of word classes. Alternatives could be found for all the relevant key words and phrases and the best candidates thought through their answers very carefully before committing themselves.

Question 6

Some candidates were exercised to find distinct and different answers to each of the two parts to this question but the distinctions were palpable and, again, careful thought was needed. Many candidates failed to spot that the word "trophy" was being used as a euphemism for a shot bear.

Question 7

A minority of candidates failed to understand the significance of "local hunting pressure". Most were able to provide the simple answer that there were more and bigger bears.

Question 8

A significant minority of candidates failed to read the rubric which required only passages two and three to be considered and penalised themselves from the outset.

Otherwise, it must be clearly impressed on all candidates that the higher marks are only awarded to those who comment on "writers' choice of language and expression". Furthermore, this must be specific and meaningful comment, preferably with brief quotations, rather than vague assertions that the language is "captivating" or "delightful". Even less useful are phrases like "the language was more comfortable" or "it was easier to read". The best answers were those that took account of the purpose and potential audience of each passage.

Questions such as these require answers that are planned and concise, avoiding the summarising of content. Candidates should also be prepared to make brief and meaningful comments about presentational devices such as bullet points and photographs.

Section B

Question 9

Centres will have noticed, over recent examination series, a relaxation in the need to observe a word limit. Candidates are now advised to keep to an approximate number of words. This is to encourage planning for question 9 and careful time management for the whole paper. It is also meant to help candidates to avoid using time unproductively in counting words and, most significantly, to avoid compromising the force of their written pieces by crossing out swathes of material that are often an integral part of their answer.

Candidates should be encouraged to plan, of course, and to put a clear line through their planning. On the other hand, they should not go back through their work chopping out words and phrases just to stay inside a word limit which no longer exists.

Fluency is important, as is a need, in the case of this question, to provide rhetorical flourishes to impact on the audience. Candidates who took the opportunity to allow themselves more space often produced effective examples of this:

"The blood of the polar bear reddens the snowy world".

"Let us speak up for the animals who cannot raise their voices".

Candidates also need the accommodation to address their audience appropriately and to begin and finish their speeches tellingly.

Section C

Question 10a

Although this was the least popular of the question 10 choices, it was executed with conviction and a strong sense of personal involvement. Examiners commented on some responses being "life-affirming" and "thoughtful and caring". This kind of question obviously demands careful organisation and control over paragraphing and those candidates who chose it were usually up to the task.

Question 10b

This also benefited from a degree of genuine personal engagement. Challenges can be of many kinds, of course, but the more engaging answers were those that recounted demanding personal circumstances that drew on mental, emotional and moral courage. Wildly fanciful re-workings of computer games rarely met the criteria of "interesting and effective".

Question 10c

A significant number of candidates reproduced what appeared to be prepared or memorised stories which also did not meet the above-mentioned criteria. (Surprise birthday parties seem to be particularly commonplace and devoid of real surprise these days.)

Sincerity is probably a helpful quality in producing successful answers to Section C. Language skills are of paramount importance, of course, but these should be wedded to heartfelt, real-life experiences rather than wild, clichéd fantasies.

O Level English Language: 7161 Grade Boundaries

Paper No	A	B	C	D	E
Lwr	70	62	55	50	46

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

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