



GCSE

English Literature

8702/2 Paper 1 Paper 2 Modern texts and poetry

Report on the Examination

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Introduction

The aim of this report is to provide feedback on the 2024 exam for teachers, and will:

- give an overview of general reflections that arose from the experience of marking the exam papers this year
- discuss some of the key points of each section of the paper
- provide clarification of the assessment objectives and how these are assessed
- offer some suggestions that might be useful for students to consider.

This report is written by the Lead Examiner following detailed consultation with the examination team, providing a summative overview of the thoughts and reflections of the panel on what they have seen in student responses in 2024.

General Overview

Students managed their time very effectively on the whole and this was the most successful year we have seen in terms of completing all sections of the paper. This is highly commendable given the level of challenge in terms of time management, particularly in an un-tiered context. There were some examples of responses that were quite a bit longer than they needed to be, which affected the quality of response to the Section C questions because of the lack of time left to read the questions and the poems carefully in order to construct productive responses that demonstrated their interpretative skills. Overall, however, it seems that students are developing an understanding of the idea that length is not always an indication of overall quality of response and were allowing an appropriate amount of time to complete each section.

There was an overwhelming improvement in maintaining focus on the question in all sections of the paper. Many clearly knew the texts well and felt confident in using a range of different types of reference (illustration via specific moments from the text as well as quotations) to exemplify their discussion of overall ideas or concepts. The more successful were not restricted to specific essay structures and therefore had the capacity within their answers to really explore the finer points of a text or to examine the ways in which a particular moment or method could be illustrative of a much wider idea that the writer was trying to explore. Importantly, as well as not being hindered by very narrow ideas of what constitutes a ‘reference’, these students also understood that ‘methods’ are any of the things a writer does on purpose to create meaning and, as such, were able to explore in great analytical detail the significance of a particular character, or moment, or symbol, in relation to the ideas that a writer is exploring.

There was a marked reduction in responses constrained by pre-taught structures. This allowed for interpretation of the questions and texts driven by ideas and led to holistic, thoughtful responses to the particular demands of the question. Those that did not fare so well were unable to engage with the meanings behind the text itself and produced answers that tended towards the formulaic, making it more of a challenge for some to move into Level 4 for AO1 Task and AO3. These hinted towards a more ‘rote learning’ approach, with some attempting to use a scaffolded structure for their responses and trying hard to include the information they had revised without being able to use this knowledge to effectively answer the question. Whilst this approach may be possibly helpful for some, there were lots of examples of others trying to work within set structures that restricted their ability to explain their own ideas to a level that reflected their knowledge and abilities.

Answering the paper in the given order is to be advised, as beginning with what is familiar is a boost to confidence and also acts as a reminder of what to consider when undertaking Section C. When students did offer a response to Section B or C first, it seemed to suggest that this was due to being less secure in their knowledge of the modern prose and drama texts as, if left to the end of the paper, these were often far briefer and not of the same quality as the other responses. The students who managed their time more effectively tended to undertake the paper in chronological order.

The influence of social media is even more apparent this year with some comments verging on the ubiquitous and clearly from the same sources. Students do need to make sure that if they are taking advice on what to include, they actually know what to do with these ideas in terms of the assessment objectives that are being assessed.

Section A: Modern Texts

Both questions on *An Inspector Calls* were popular and enabled students to demonstrate their understanding of character as construct as well as themes and ideas. Students moved confidently around the texts, selecting relevant moments to illustrate their ideas in response to the question. There was much less reliance on a list of pre-remembered direct quotations, although it was interesting to note how many thousands of responses included the exchange between Mr Birling and the Inspector: ‘I don’t play golf’. Perhaps this is understandable as it is such a satisfying moment in the play! We do tend to notice the influence of social media in any given year, and clearly this moment in the play has been an area of significant focus of the social media influencers in 2024 given the amount of students that used this moment in their responses to Question 2 in particular.

There were some superb explorations of what constitutes ‘social change’ and very successful treatments of how Mrs Birling is a representation of wider ideas, for example the presentation of her as a victim of patriarchal control despite her social rank. It was really wonderful to see how many students have strong opinions about the text, the characters and the overall ideas. It was fascinating to see how many were engaged with the idea of different forms of externalised power structures and how these play out in the text. They clearly like the character of the Inspector and what he stands for; similarly, they dislike Mrs Birling. This level of engagement usually makes for purposeful and focused responses.

There was a clear grasp of AO2 in terms of students writing about character as deliberate mechanism. Those who pick up on the question frame ‘how does the writer *use* the character of...’ write with clear understanding of character as a deliberate construct. The idea of places, moments and people being deliberate mechanisms used by writers to aid meaning is increasingly well-established and leads to fluent and exploratory answers that enable students to demonstrate their understanding of, and engagement with, the text. It was always the intention of this qualification to enable students rather than constrain them. The first sentence of the Statement of Importance reads ‘GCSE English Literature is the study of how writers communicate their ideas about the world.’ We don’t want to limit students by insisting on particular methods, but instead encourage them to develop an appreciation of the wide range of methods used by writers. For example, there was some really interesting discussion of Priestley’s use of narrative sequencing in terms of the effect of the non-chronological order in which events are presented, which many engaged with powerfully and had very interesting things to say about.

The other texts that were most frequently seen were *Lord of the Flies*, *Animal Farm* and *Blood Brothers*. The question on leadership for *Lord of the Flies* elicited thoughtful, detailed ideas related to wider thematic concepts and were a pleasure to read. Symbolism is very well-handled by students on this text, and they relate it to wider ideas with ease and fluency. Similarly, responses to both questions in *Animal Farm* invited some stunning responses about ideas about revolution, propaganda and manipulation. We also saw insightful, thoughtful responses to *Blood Brothers* that demonstrated a real sense of understanding of ideas about social justice and the impact of institutional power structures on individual lives. As with *An Inspector Calls*, those students who understand that the characters and moments are being used as representation of a point / idea did extremely well and demonstrated their very strong feelings about the themes inherent in the play. One element in particular that was hugely improved was the ability to talk about particular moments in terms of a writer's method; the use of the parallel scene with the policeman in *Blood Brothers* is a good example of this. *DNA* once again produced some highly engaged and focused pieces of writing, as did *A Taste of Honey* and *Pigeon English*. Although less popular as selections of text, these are always a delight to read in terms of level of engagement with the characters, ideas and themes. We saw some superb examples of response to *DNA* in particular this year; both questions were equally popular and the level of analysis of settings, moments from the play and character motivation demonstrated some stunning appreciation of ideas and writer's craft.

Section B: Taught Poetry

There seems to be a real sense that the messages and advice about comparative essay structures have started to become more widely understood. This is leading to students of all abilities being able to construct a response to two poems in relation to the focus of the question in whatever way is most helpful to them. The way that they decide to structure their response in this section is entirely up to them; they get no more marks for offering an integrated comparison than they do for demonstrating their understanding of the shared connection between the two poems and then using the poems in whatever structural manner they wish in order to answer the question. This appears to be very liberating for some and led to some insightful responses to both questions on this section of the paper.

For Question 25 in particular, we did notice quite a lot of biographical detail. It might be useful to note that it is difficult for us to award anything meaningful for this as it tends to remain as 'explicit ideas' (Level 1 AO3). A more useful approach is to focus on what the poems themselves are saying and the ideas that are explored. The focus of the question – powerful feelings about love – saw students often linking 'Neutral Tones' to 'When We Two Parted'. This led to some convincing discussions of sadness / loss / separation / disconnection. Students were less successful where they spent time writing about Hardy's depression and unsuccessful relationships or Byron's likely affair as the inspiration for these poems. Equally popular was 'Winter Swans' where there were really productive explorations of relationships under pressure and ideas of hope/hopelessness. Many were able to link their two poems through similar and contrasting attitudes and feelings, imagery, and tone. Responses were most successful when they focused on ideas and methods in detail, pointing to moments in the poem(s) or linking the end to the beginning, rather than working through poems chronologically. Almost all wrote better when only some words were put under the microscope, and analysis was developed in terms of relevant associations, representations and symbolism.

'Kamikaze' was a very successful named poem for the vast majority; the idea which forms the basis of the poem is evidently interesting to students, although there was a tendency for a few to become sidetracked into Japanese history, losing focus on the key ideas in the poem itself. Most did better when they focused on wider ideas and themes. There were some wonderful uses of 'Remains', 'The Émigré',

‘War Photographer’ ‘Poppies’, ‘Bayonet Charge’ and ‘Exposure’ in particular. The nature of the question enabled students to take this question in a number of productive directions. In the spirit of offering some reassurance to the little bit of hesitancy with ‘Tissue’ from some quarters, we saw examples of students using this poem in particular with great effect to talk about externalised forms of identity and how that links to sense of self. There were a number of ways to use the named poem as an invitation to write about the physical, the psychological and / or emotional effects of conflict including: guilt / individual v collective / identity / responsibility / shame / effect on those directly involved as well as the wider impact on others / imposed ideologies. All of these were handled with great maturity and sensitivity. This was overwhelmingly a section of the paper where examiners felt that students absolutely shone this year.

Section C: Unseen Poetry

Examiners were keen to stress that the unseen element of the paper was an extremely successful in terms of being totally accessible to all students in one way or another. There were many really strong comments about the philosophical thought that the first poem elicits with evidence of mature insight about our environment / the way we live / nature as a stress reliever. The best responses integrated their consideration of Kaplinski’s choice of specific words, phrases or poetic devices into their discussion of ideas in the poem. Many examined a variety of methods such as the simile of the ball, the use of listing, the repetition of ‘never’, the change in tone between the first and second half of the poem, the idea of ‘cracks in the foundation’ – some linking this moment really effectively to ‘the roof leaks’ in terms the extended metaphor of the house as illustration of how people can focus too much on the daily ‘structures’ of their lives. There were effective explorations of the relationship between daily life and the natural world, appreciating the tonal shift and what this suggested. As always, many examiners commented on how Section C seemed to liberate students’ own interpretative skills, often leading to significantly better responses than on other sections of the paper. This is perhaps because they are not trying to remember what they have learned and have the freedom to respond and express their own ideas.

The more successful responses took a few moments to read the unseen poems within the context of the question, so they had a good overview of the overall meaning and point of the poems before they started to formulate their answers to the questions. It was really clear that some had a very good understanding of the need to do this and consequently were able to move into the higher levels of the mark scheme with confidence. An opening that offered ‘here is my understanding of what this poem is about’ really helped lots of students to be successful. Those who took a more chronological approach were held back a little as they didn’t have an overview of the poem to root their response in; this led to more descriptive approaches that occasionally realised half-way through their answer that the poem is a commentary on life rather than a description of a list of daily life tasks.

There were some examples of more time being spent on 27.2 rather than 27.1, and it’s worth raising this as a point to consider given the higher potential mark for 27.1.

Assessment Objectives

AO1: response to task and use of supporting references

It’s really important to try to focus on the key ideas in the question; that’s what ‘AO1 TASK’ means. We decide this AO at the end of the response, once the student has finished answering the question. There

was a bit of a sense of ‘pre-preparedness’ evident this year, with students trying to use / adapt pre-learned responses, and especially generic introductions / thesis statements, to fit the question they had selected. Whilst the rationale for this is totally understandable given the pressures of exams, it might be useful to consider the way that we award for AO1 TASK in terms of rewarding for a clearly explained, or consistent, or developed, or exploratory approach to the ideas, themes or characters in the question. Those that knew the text well were able to adapt, sift and filter their knowledge to the demands of the particular question and generally did much better than those who had attempted to fit the answer they wanted to write to the question they had selected. Offering a pre-learned introduction including comments about *An Inspector Calls* being a ‘didactic morality play’ without showing any understanding or elaboration of this in the essay itself, is not an effective way of starting a response to the particulars of the question being asked. The whole point of a thesis introduction is that it shows understanding of the specific focus of the question and introduces ideas that will be explored in the response. Pre-learned introductions can get in the way of this. We saw thousands of ‘didactic morality play’ statements but hardly any exploration of the genre of political theatre or allegorical drama, which is the only really useful way that this phrase can be contextualised. If students want to root their response in a discussion of agit prop or morality plays, then this is of course welcome, but perhaps only say ‘didactic morality play’ when you can then say something useful and relevant about it.

AO2: the use of methods to create meanings

Students’ wider understanding of what is meant by writers’ methods has liberated them: there has been a welcome move away from putting lots of words under the microscope (where they struggle to write about effects and to link writers’ choices to ideas and intentions) to now writing about anything writers do to convey meaning. The result has been some original and developed considerations of characterisation, settings, atmosphere, motifs and symbolism. There was real evidence of understanding of the idea of character as construct. There was also interesting and convincing consideration of settings in a number of the texts, for example, the different parts of the island in *Lord of the Flies* in connection with Ralph and Jack and their contrasting styles of leadership. Likewise, students who wrote about Kelly’s use of settings in *DNA* – the street, the field and the woods - appreciated how these were used to convey ideas about both power and control, and peer pressure. Equally effective was how Priestley’s use of the dining room (with all of the accoutrements) expresses ideas about social class, elitism and the microcosmic portrayal of the bourgeoisie.

Those who have been liberated from the idea that there is a requirement to address structure and / or form have really benefited this year. Meeting the text where it is by considering what *this* writer is doing in *this* text and why, enables a flexible response to the particular focus of the question in Section A, to the named poem, and to the unseen poems. Writing about structure as a matter of course remains unhelpful unless there is something really purposeful to say and can often lead to generic, vague comments.

There seems to be a move away from labelling word class, which is fantastic to see as it was largely a redundant exercise that we have consistently commented on in previous reports. Furthermore, the message that we interpret subject terminology as ‘the language of the subject’ has evidently been more widely internalised as there were far fewer examples this year of students attempting to include obscure literary terminology into their responses that they didn’t know what to do with. Instead, there is a real shift towards a more holistic understanding of the writer as the maker of the text and that everything in the text is a conscious construct, open to analysis and interpretation.

Those who did not fixate on methods in isolation but considered the writer’s intended meanings first, meant they were less inclined to reference method and then stop short of

comment. There was a real sense of improvement here and we saw far fewer examples of ‘technique-spotting’.

AO3: themes, ideas, perspectives, contextual factors

Handling of AO3 was significantly better this year, with less evidence of it being addressed solely as social and historical context. Students have clearly been encouraged to consider AO3 in a much wider sense: in the context of themes and ideas (driven by the question focus); in the context of the whole text; in the context of the genre. This approach is highly enabling in terms of engagement with, and insightful appreciation of, the text as a whole, often leading to developed discussion that is very firmly rooted in the text. For example, in *An Inspector Calls* many students understood that social change could mean more than an overhaul of the class system and addressed ideas of women’s suffrage and the vote, work and pay and even housing, comparing the substantial suburban house of ‘a prosperous manufacturer’ to those in ‘dingy little back bedrooms’.

There was some evidence of passionate feelings about social justice and equality that illustrated deep understanding of the themes and ideas in the texts. However, it is also important for students to understand some of the terms they are including; there was some misunderstanding of political ideas, for example confusing communism with socialism. Where AO3 was less effective this was often due to discussion of, for example, Golding’s careers in the Navy and teaching as his inspirations for his ideas on leadership, or an analysis of key figures from the Russian Revolution, or Priestley’s war journalism and relationship with the BBC. Students are far better off considering wider themes and ideas – the ‘relevance’ of the text – than trying to tack on explicit contextual factors. As we mentioned in the report last year, focusing on the aims of this qualification – of understanding how texts can transcend their particular contexts and explore the universality of the human condition – can hopefully help to understand what we mean by AO3.

For some, critical concepts can add an additional level of insight to appreciation of the wider significance of a text and can lead to a level of challenge that some rise to, but that some struggle to manage. It can be a useful foundation for A Level study and, where integrated as part of the exploration of ideas, can be a really productive approach. However, some did get side-tracked by a desire to overlay contextual interpretations through a critical lens via discussion of particular theorists / theories such as Marxism, Freudian Psychoanalytical Theory, the work of Simone de Beauvoir, or Ouspensky’s theory of eternal recurrence, and lost focus on the question and the themes and ideas of the text itself.

Advice for Students

Read the questions carefully and make sure you focus on the key ideas in your response, as well as any moments or characters that are mentioned in the question. Writing a clear introduction that sets out your understanding of the task and links this to the text is a great way of beginning; it also helps you to organise your thoughts. If you’ve got a really good introduction, it can provide you with a strong foundation that you can then build on in your essay to ‘show your working out’. If you then return to your introduction at the end, this demonstrates a really close focus on the task.

Pre-learning a generic introduction, especially one that includes terms and ideas that you don’t fully understand and can’t then use / explore in your essay, is not a good idea. Always start with the actual question rather than trying to adapt a prepared response, which is rarely successful.

Remember that the point of this exam is not for you to tell us everything you know about the text you are writing about. Try to keep your focus on the key ideas in the question. The questions are an invitation for you to demonstrate your understanding of the themes and ideas of the play, or novel, or poem. We're not trying to trip you up or trick you. Imagine having a sort of metaphorical 'bag of quotes' that you have dragged into the exam with you and then systematically inserted into your responses regardless of whether you need them or not – that's what you don't need to do! We don't need you to remember precise, accurate quotations. We need you to refer to relevant moments from the text that demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of it, and that are relevant to the focus of the question.

AO2 doesn't *mean* language analysis. It also doesn't *mean* structure analysis, or form analysis. It means 'things that the writer has done on purpose and what effect these have'. So, for example, talking about characterisation as method is perfect. Remember that the characters in these texts are not real – they don't exist anywhere other than in the head of the person who created them, and they were created in order to make a deliberate point. You could also talk about settings, or the way that the plot develops, or the significance of particular moments, or beginnings and endings; these are all methods. Select the methods that you are interested in and write about those, and remember that characters, places and moments from the text are just as valid methods as specific literary techniques. Use what the writer is doing to demonstrate your interpretation of intended meaning. These two things are inextricably linked: the 'why' and the 'how' of the text is what we are interested in hearing about.

Read the questions for Section B carefully and choose a second poem that will go well with the named poem. This gives you a good foundation for answering the question. You have a printed list of the poems in the cluster you have studied on your exam paper, so spending a minute looking at that list when you have read the question and identified the key focus of the task could be very helpful and stop you from going in an unhelpful direction.

Try to allow enough time to read the Section C questions, and then the two unseen poems, carefully. Give yourself five minutes or so to breathe after Section A and Section B before you immediately start answering the Section C questions. Read the questions first; they have been written to give you a clear steer as to what the first unseen poem is about, and what the connection is between the two poems for 27.2. Take a few minutes to read the poems carefully; this will help you to formulate some ideas about how you are going to answer each question. Remember that 27.1 is worth 24 marks, whereas 27.2 is worth 8 marks, so try to spend more time on 27.1.

We understand that you get your ideas and understanding from a range of sources. However, it's important to be critical when engaging with social media/external resources that seem to offer an easier route to higher grades. Sometimes they can get in the way of your own ideas, your own understanding of the text, and the particular question you are being asked. It would be useful to learn how to know the difference between a useful and robust source and a less helpful one that might actually hold you back. When someone tells you that you must talk about the Inspector's name sounding like 'ghoul', or that *An Inspector Calls* is a 'didactic morality play', or that the Inspector is 'Priestley's mouthpiece', take a moment to think. What are you going to do with that information? Just stating it in your response doesn't really get you anywhere. You only move up through the levels when you can explain these ideas. Some of these resources might not be the effective shortcut that you hoped they might be. Often, the comments they make and advice they give is misleading and may actually hinder your chance of success because you will be regurgitating something you have been told to do rather than explaining, examining and exploring something organic that you have thought for yourself.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.