

ENGLISH A1

This is a supplementary report following the May 2010 session and should be read in conjunction with the May 2009 extended essay report.

Overall grade boundaries

Grade:	E	D	C	B	A
Mark range:	0 - 7	8 - 15	16 - 22	23 - 28	29 - 36

The range and suitability of the work submitted

Examiners were again generally impressed by the range and variety of the topics attempted (from Chaucer to Bob Dylan, as one examiner put it), with many stronger candidates looking beyond the classical canon to find challenging texts and productive research questions. There were excellent essays on Kerouac's *On the Road* and on Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*; on 'Explorations of identity and authority in three stories by Angela Carter' and on a comparison of Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and Murakami's 'The Elephant Vanishes'; and on 'Obsession in Jean Rhys's *The Wide Sargasso Sea*' and 'Don Delillo's *White Noise* as postmodernism's memento mori'. Working within the canon, one candidate produced a brilliant essay on the depiction of French women in three Shakespeare plays, while another presented a careful and thoughtful analysis of the treatment of reason and passion in *Hamlet* and Sidney's *Old Arcadia*. In many of the best essays the research question was firmly focused on literary technique, with titles such as: 'Exploring the unreliable narrative voice and the problem of memory in Kazuo Ishiguro's *When we were Orphans*', or 'Food imagery in Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*'. Framing the investigation in this way prevents candidates from lapsing into simply re-telling the story, which is the common failing of weaker essays.

At the other end of the scale there were many essays on popular teenage fiction which rarely rose above enthusiastic but uncritical exposition of theme and character. Such texts proved insufficiently challenging for a satisfactory literary essay, though some candidates managed to lift their work a little above the mediocre by pairing the contemporary vampire story with a novel such as *Dracula*. There were, as always, a number of essays on well-worn topics such as a comparison of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with other dystopian novels, and on Jane Austen's novels. Where candidates tread these familiar paths only an imaginative research question—a recent example being the role of conversation in two Austen novels—is likely to raise the essay above the satisfactory level. As usual, a common pitfall for those interested in the socio-historical or political dimension of fictional works was to treat them simply as documentary evidence rather than examining how they work as literary texts.

There were, as always, some essays that were unsuitable because they dealt exclusively with translated texts and thus lost a minimum of eight marks no matter how accomplished and interesting they may have been. It is imperative for schools to note that at least one of the primary texts discussed in an English A1 Essay must have originally been written in English.

Candidate performance against each criterion

A: research question

Apart from the kinds of failings outlined above, most essays satisfactorily defined a research question, although in some cases that question was better formulated in the Abstract than in the Introduction. Clearly, satisfying this criterion is an essential prerequisite of a successful essay. Students should always integrate the question into their introduction even though it may be clearly stated in their title, otherwise they risk losing marks.

B: introduction

This proved to be a problem in many essays in that the introduction made little or no attempt to provide a context for the research question and to make a case for its significance. Candidates need to ask themselves why their research question is worth investigating and to give their reasons in the introduction.

C: investigation

Some essays consulted no sources other than the primary texts. While this was legitimate with recent texts where there is no body of published criticism, essays on well-known texts were usually better where some sources were consulted (as long as they were not just SparkNotes, Wikipedia or internet material of dubious value).

D: knowledge and understanding of the topic studied

Most essays showed a good, or at least adequate, knowledge and understanding of the topic, although only the best were able to situate it in an academic context.

E: reasoned argument

A common weakness here was to dwell on descriptive accounts of texts or plot summaries rather than developing an argument. Producing a well-organized and persuasive argument in relation to research findings is a difficult skill and it requires considerable practice before embarking on a final draft of the essay.

F: application of analytical and evaluative skills appropriate to the subject

This was where the better students distinguished themselves from the more ordinary by presenting personal and illuminating analysis of the primary texts. Weaker essays failed to move on from descriptive comment to analysis, or relied on citing secondary sources for their analysis rather than engaging personally with the texts. There was a tendency for candidates who wrote about poetry to discuss individual words or very brief phrases without referring to

their context. Even if the comments were valid, this led to fragmentation and a failure to address the meaning of the poem as a whole.

G: use of language appropriate to the subject

Most essays scored 2 or 3 here, though there were many fluent and eloquent essays at one end of the scale and stumbling and garbled ones at the other end. Some essays were over-ornate in their style, which tends not to impress examiners. Many could have been easily improved by careful proof-reading before submission.

H: conclusion

Most essays made a fair attempt at a conclusion, though many simply restated the material of the introduction, thus forfeiting one mark.

I: formal presentation

A small number of essays lost marks quite unnecessarily by omitting a contents page or page numbers etc. Another problem was failure to follow a standard method of documentation for the citation of sources and the composition of a bibliography. Too often footnotes repeated the full title of a primary text every time it was cited, rather than giving the full reference for the first citation and thereafter giving page references in parentheses. However, many essays were very well presented, and that number should increase with careful supervision.

J: abstract

Supervisors should note how the three required elements of the Abstract are defined in the new criteria, since one common failing was to present a summary of the argument rather than an account of how the investigation was conducted. There were also many examples of Abstracts that were inappropriate because they were written as a form of introduction, setting out in the future tense what the essay would do. Some omitted, or did not state clearly enough, the conclusions.

K: holistic judgment

There were few very low marks under this criterion for most essays showed some intellectual initiative and understanding, and the best were impressive pieces of individual research.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

It is important, as most supervisors already know, to ensure that one of the principal texts for the essay was originally written in English, and to instruct students in a standard method of documentation for citing sources and compiling a bibliography. Page references to the primary texts are best given in parentheses, and long strings of footnotes or endnotes referring in full to the same text are best avoided. Students should be urged to proof-read their essays carefully before submission. Where essays focus on a reading of a number of

poems, an appendix containing the texts of those poems is most helpful, as most supervisors seem to be aware.

Helping define a fruitful and manageable research question is the main challenge for supervisors. They are advised to steer candidates away from biographical topics (e.g. examining a writer's works as reflections of his or her life), as these almost inevitably result in essays that are merely speculative, unanalytical and second-hand. It may help to choose literary texts that are less well-known but of clear literary value. With classic texts it is advisable to find a topic and an approach that will prevent the candidate from having to go over too much well-trodden ground. With such texts judicious use of secondary sources may enable the argument to begin at a higher level, and it is important for supervisors to guide candidates towards finding a balance between offering their own reading in ignorance of all secondary sources and relying so much on them that that all personal response is smothered. Students should be encouraged to look, and think, beyond basic study guides and to treat Wikipedia and internet sites with caution. Supervisors should bear in mind that it is the student's own research into the text that is most important.

With the new criteria, the introduction may require particular attention from supervisors. Candidates should be encouraged to define what they are researching and to integrate their research question into the introduction even though it may be clearly set out in the title. They also need to be urged to provide a context for their research question and to state why it is worth investigating. Supervisors should face them with the simple question: why have you chosen this research question?