



Notes and guidance: NEA guidance

Language in action

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Overview

The NEA component appears in the A-level only; there is no NEA in the AS-level. The NEA requires students to produce two different kinds of work:

- a language investigation (2,000 words, excluding data and quotations)
- a piece of original writing and commentary (750 words each, excluding quotations)

Overall, the NEA forms 20% of the overall marks of the A-level. The language investigation is marked out of 50 and the original writing and commentary out of 50 (25 for each).

Language Investigation

The language investigation is probably the closest piece of work to a dissertation that an A-level English Language student will produce. It gives students the chance to investigate a language topic of their own choice, collect data and analyse it in order to answer questions that they have posed.

A language investigation is a student-led enquiry into an aspect of language. The choice of topic is free; it doesn't have to arise from a taught area of the course (such as child language or regional variation, for example) but will need to be about some aspect of English language use.

The student will need to ask questions about language (informed by their study of language on the course and their understanding of language analysis). They will need to collect data and analyse it linguistically, drawing conclusions that help them answer their research questions. The work is then written up as a report, using the following sections (and any suitable subsections and subheadings that help structure the report):

- Introduction
- Methodology
- Analysis
- Conclusion
- References
- Appendices

Some examples of language investigation titles that have been used in the past and been successfully carried out by students include:

- An investigation into how different newspapers over time have represented migration, using front page stories from UK national papers in the 1930s and 2020s.
- An investigation into the different linguistic strategies employed by teachers in the same subject area with different year groups.
- An investigation into the ways in which contestants on Dragon's Den use language to pitch their ideas to the dragons.
- An investigation into the changing uses of language to represent male grooming products in UK magazines.
- An investigation into representations of Multicultural London English on a range of online discussion forums.
- An investigation into politeness strategies used in interactions in a customer service centre for a supermarket.

- An investigation into the ways in which different age groups use specific features in social media group chats.
- An investigation into how a member of the family code-switches between a heritage language and English, and how this is linked to what the person is talking about and her attitudes to those topics.

Many examples of investigations can be found in the Teacher Online Standardisation (TOLS) folders that are made available each year (see later) and recommendations for successful ones are given in the Lead Moderator's Report after each series of exams and NEA.

Language Investigation Assessment

The investigation is marked using the following AOs:

- AO1 – 15 marks
- AO2 – 15 marks
- AO3 – 20 marks

(Total marks 50)

These AOs are more clearly defined in the specification, but one way of viewing them for this task might be to see them as follows:

- AO1 What students do: their application of appropriate language methods, their analysis, their written expression and line of argument.
- AO2 What students understand about language, including others' ideas and research, broader ideas from language study, along with an understanding of how to conduct a linguistic investigation.
- AO3 What students interpret and understand from the language being used. In other words, the significance of the language in the data, its meanings, representations and contexts.

The weighting of the AOs might have implications for the ways in which you supervise this work and the focus that students offer. With AO3 having the most prominence (20/50 marks), you might want to encourage students to consider the different contextual factors of language production and reception in more detail.

AO3 is also connected to the creation of meanings and representations, so it is a good idea to encourage students to consider the possible effects of language choices along with identifying and labelling those features (something credited in AO1).

The weightings for AOs might also lead you to encourage students to show the importance of meaning creation in the data that they select.

More detailed guidance about how to assess the different AOs can be found in the Lead Moderator's Reports for each year.

Word count advice: Language investigations

The upper limit for the language investigation is 2000 words (excluding data and quotations).

To meet this, students might need to think carefully about the amount of data they collect and how they can select the most relevant material for their investigation question to be answered. In practice, this might mean selecting a manageable and carefully defined data set, and making sure that the research question is focused enough to prevent overly long and/or diffuse analysis.

The structure of the analysis will also need to be considered and students might be encouraged to write using concise and focused analytical sentences, well-chosen subheadings and clear, contextualised examples from the data (which of course, will not count towards the overall word count).

Some example work is provided through the TOLS folders on AQA Centre Services.

Original writing and commentary

The original writing is a student-led piece of original writing, with work loosely grouped under the following headings:

- The power of persuasion
- The power of storytelling
- The power of information

In practice, nearly any kind of writing can be submitted so long as it loosely fits one (or more) of these criteria.

The student needs to submit a single piece of writing for their own original writing and then write a reflective commentary in which they analyse, discuss and evaluate the similarities and differences between their own piece and the style model they have used. More details about the style model can be found below.

Example original writing submissions:

- An opinion piece for an online newspaper arguing the case for more funding for medical research.
- An opening to a Young Adult novel in which the main character is introduced.
- A dramatic monologue from the perspective of a wrongly convicted prisoner.
- A piece of travel writing for Lonely Planet about a location the student has visited.
- A film review for The Guardian website.
- The first chapter of a book for children about the environment.
- A script for a persuasive speech to college students about sexual harassment.
- A piece of slam poetry.

Original writing and commentary: Assessment

The original writing and commentary are marked out of 50 (25 for each). For the original writing, AO5 is used and for the commentary, AOs 1-5 are used.

Word count advice: Original writing and commentary

For the original writing and commentary, the word count is 750 for each piece. In the commentary, this excludes both quotations from the student's own piece and from the style model.

The style model

The style model should be analysed and referenced alongside the student's own piece (hence the use of the term 'both texts' in the mark scheme and the focus on 'similarities/differences' in the descriptors).

A student who doesn't submit an annotated style model, or who doesn't refer to a style model at all, in their commentary, will not be able to access any AO4 marks from any level and will severely limit their potential achievement in other AOs. A student who doesn't refer in detail to a style model is unlikely to access the higher levels of the mark scheme, so the style model is a vital part of this piece of work.

The specification states:

In preparation for the writing, students will study a range of style models before selecting and analysing one style model in detail. Students will select their own style model in consultation with their supervising teacher. Students will then use this research to inform their own piece of original writing. The commentary will allow the student to consider and evaluate the style model, the writing process and the effectiveness of the final piece of writing.

Ideally, the style model can be used as a way for the student to explore the form and genre they are writing in and to help them make decisions about the kind of text they wish to produce. There is nothing to stop students looking at several style models as part of this process, and we would encourage breadth and diversity, but only one should be submitted and referenced in the commentary.

Teacher support and guidance: Language investigation

As this will be quite an unfamiliar type of work to most students, the NEA language investigation generally requires a little more support and explanation. Some key points are addressed below.

When to carry out the investigation and how long it should take

The investigation requires students to have carried out some language study as part of their course, to be familiar with linguistic methods of analysis and to have studied some linguistic research, to be able to grasp how language can be investigated. This generally means that most teachers approach the investigation towards the end of the first year or into the second year of teaching.

Time needs to be allowed for students to formulate research questions and/or hypotheses and then to collect suitable data. In some cases, this might mean recording and transcribing talk, or in other cases gathering suitable written or multi-modal data.

Time also needs to be allowed for students to draft and refine their analysis of the data and to shape and structure their final report.

In practice, this might mean between 4-8 weeks of student time, with lesson time devoted to setting up the project, showing students examples of finished projects and encouraging them to analyse in greater depth and detail once they have started their own work on the data.

Beyond that, some students may wish to do some background reading, to broaden their range of reference points for the AO2, in order to find more specific and applicable studies and research to use, and to spend their time reflecting on and redrafting their analysis.

How to build up to a language investigation

Some centres like to set up mini-investigations for students or groups of students to do in the first year of the course, perhaps choosing areas that are related to work they are doing in class.

So, for example, if you are working on a series of lessons about language and social groups on Paper 2, students might be encouraged to collect a small amount of data and analyse it in response to a prompt question that you set (eg “How do the members of the social group that you have chosen use language in this particular context?” or “What are the specific features of language unique to this social group in the data you have collected?”).

Alternatively, if you are working on Paper 1 Meanings and Representations, you might encourage students to collect data about a particular personality or issue that is in the media spotlight and ask them to look at how language (or a particular aspect of language) is being used to represent that person/issue.

These mini-investigations can scaffold some of the work you do later on with students to encourage their own investigations.

What students need to ask in their investigations

The focus of a language investigation needs to be on a particular use of the English language, or sometimes around attitudes to language use (and how those are expressed). The question therefore needs to be a linguistic one and one that can actually be answered by the student in the time frame of the investigation and within the parameters of the mark scheme.

Investigation questions are often most effective when informed by wider ideas from language study (AO2), so when they relate to bigger questions about how people use language in certain situations or in different groups, or how an aspect of language has changed over time or is used in a particular way.

It can often be helpful for students to carry out some targeted background reading on the topic area they are thinking about choosing, to identify research that has been done in this area before, the kinds of findings that have been made and the kinds of questions that have previously been asked. These can be used (and properly referenced in the bibliography) to inform the student's own work.

For example, when considering an investigation into the ways in which young people in a certain area use a different sociolect to their parents and grandparents, it might be an idea to look at sociolinguistic studies into these areas, and the kinds of questions that linguists attempted to answer in their own research. The same might be true for investigations into child language, language change, representation and many aspects of language variation and diversity. Supporting work from the exam components can be used here but also students can be encouraged to range more widely. The better informed students are before asking their own questions, the better their questions tend to be.

The less successful questions tend to be ones that are either non-linguistic in focus, much too broad to be achievable, or ones that students can't hope to answer because they are asking about the 'effects of language' on audiences.

Some kinds of data can be problematic too, so this might inform guidance about the kinds of questions being asked. Song lyrics need to be considered very carefully because they are often part of a much broader art form, with its own traditions and generic conventions, and are not necessarily written to be read with literal meanings in mind, and in many cases are not written by the person who actually performs them. Likewise, while questionnaires can be a way of gathering data, if that data is simply in the form of numbers and statistics, it is very hard to analyse that in a way that allows for many marks on the mark scheme.

Again, more guidance about specific pitfalls can be found in the Lead Moderator's Report each year.

What to discuss in the methodology

The methodology section of the investigation needs to cover the ways in which the project was set up, how and why the data was collected, what decisions were made about the data (for example, why this text and not that text, why these respondents and not others, why this amount of data and not more or less), how the data was analysed, along with consideration of issues such as validity, reliability and ethics.

The methodology of each investigation will inevitably vary, depending on the nature of the questions being asked and the data being collected. Some methodologies may be directly inspired by previous linguistic research in the field, whereas others might be developed by the student in consultation with their teacher/s.

While a description of the process of gathering and selecting data is part of this section, the more significant aspects are to do with explaining the rationale behind the data collection and a discussion of the most relevant methods of analysis.

Types of data students can collect and analyse

Almost any kind of data is appropriate for analysis and exploration; written, spoken, multi-modal, literary, non-literary, modern, older, scripted or spontaneous.

Given the focus of the A-level is the English language, we would expect to see the majority of the data in English, and it is usually better to avoid translations from other languages.

However, there have been many successful projects on multilingualism where English is one of the languages being used, and there are cases where translations might be valid forms of data when being compared with English. It is best to check the specifics with an NEA adviser.

Questionnaires can be a useful part of a language investigation, but care should be taken to avoid purely quantitative data (ie simply counting the frequency of certain uses of language) because the A-level mark scheme is not designed to assess that kind of approach and requires a focus on meaning creation in AO3. It is therefore better – if using questionnaires at all – to make them part of a wider methodology and/or to collect more qualitative data through the responses.

For example, if a student wants to measure attitudes to a regional accent or sociolect among a sample of the population, it would not be a good idea to only use a Lickert scale (eg 1-5) but instead to consider longer ‘free text’ responses (perhaps alongside quantitative data). Again, if in doubt, consult your NEA adviser.

Another area to be careful with is scripted data. While many students successfully explore film scripts or the language of scripted, or semi-scripted, TV shows, others struggle to acknowledge that the data is not genuine spontaneous speech. It is very important that students acknowledge the nature of their data and respond accordingly.

For example, if the data is from a TV show or film, it will have been scripted and designed to represent characters and themes: it may well use aspects of genuine spoken discourse, but it will not be real speech and these will generally not be real people. It would therefore be inappropriate and unhelpful to apply theories around gender and spoken interaction (for example) to such data.

Likewise, even some unscripted shows – Love Island, Dragon’s Den, The X Factor, Strictly Come Dancing and Bake Off, for example – will have been heavily edited, so students need to show that they are aware of that in their discussion of the data.

Methods of analysis students can use

Any and all methods are open to students to use, but it is a good idea for them to consider the most effective ones for their own research question/hypothesis and their own data sets. The discussion of the most appropriate methods can form an important part of the student's methodology section and can then underpin a good investigation.

As discussed above, purely quantitative analysis is not recommended because it doesn't lend itself to the demands of the A-level mark scheme. That is not to say that quantitative methods can't form part of the analysis, but that students should not rely on them solely.

For example, if a student wants to explore how the language of two children between three and five years of age differs while performing the same task, or how two newspapers represent the same issue differently, it could make perfect sense to count up the number of times a certain feature occurs, but it would then be important to explore how and why that might have been the case and to analyse some specific examples of these features in context.

Teacher support and guidance: Original writing and commentary

The original writing is a good opportunity for students to demonstrate creativity and a personal voice. While many centres offer completely free choice here, some offer a more limited range of forms and genres, and that choice is down to individual centres and teachers. It can make sense to link some aspects of this part of the NEA to other areas of the course (eg the opinion piece writing for Paper 2 Section B) or to treat it as a standalone part of the course.

Whichever approach is taken, it is important that students choose their own style model (it shouldn't be a taught style model used by the whole class, for example) and think carefully about the process involved, rather than write first and then try to find a suitable style model later.

The style model should ideally be in the same form and/or genre as the student's own piece, and it's usually a good idea to avoid writing on the same topic as the style model. For example, it would be best to avoid writing an opinion article on the same topic as the style model, a film review on the same film, a piece of travel writing on the same location etc.

Does there have to be a link between the investigation and the original writing?

No link is required by the specification, but if it's something individual centres or teachers would like to have, because it fits with how they want to teach the course, that is not a problem.

Can students submit two or more style models?

No, the specification and mark scheme refer to a single style model. There is nothing to stop students looking at several style models, and we would encourage breadth and diversity, but only one should be submitted.

Does the style model have to be annotated?

Yes, the specification refers to an annotated style model but the nature of this annotation is down to individual centres and teachers.

Can a student write for children in their original writing?

Yes, the specification doesn't prescribe particular forms or audiences, but writing for very young children can often be harder for students to do than they expect, and sometimes quite limiting, so the choice is best left to the individual discretion of centres and teachers.

Can a student submit a chapter of a novel or short story for their original writing?

Yes. This would be acceptable, so long as the commentary explained clearly where it would fit and how it would work, and if the style model chosen was appropriate. Any synopsis of the rest of the novel would need to be included in the commentary word count.

Can a student submit a poem or song lyric for their original writing?

Yes. This would be acceptable, so long as the supervising teacher/s agreed. There is a potential risk with work of this kind that weaker students will struggle to meet an acceptable word count, or produce work of a high enough quality, so ultimately the decision should be for supervising teachers to make.

Can a student submit a script or transcript for an interview or podcast for their original writing?

No. Students should be advised against this, as it requires them to script spontaneous or semi-planned speech, which is both unrealistic and extremely difficult.

Can a student submit a script for a TV show/film/stage performance for their original writing?

Yes. This would be acceptable, as the work would be consciously scripted to be performed (as opposed to a transcript of speech, which would only exist after the speaking had taken place).

Can a student write more words for their original writing and make the commentary shorter?

No, the specification says that each should have a word count of 750.

What is assessed in the commentary?

The commentary is designed to be a reflection on the process of producing the original writing and an analytical comparison of the student's work with the style model. Therefore, the AOs are designed to assess:

- the linguistic detail and salience of the comparisons made
- the ways in which language has been used to construct meaning in each text
- the ways in which the student discusses the connections between the texts (ie the similarities and differences and why these are significant)
- the aspects of form, genre and structure that might be relevant to both texts
- the written accuracy and structure of the commentary itself.

Additional guidance

What guidance and support are you permitted to give students for their NEA?

As detailed on page 31 of the specification:

You may provide guidance and support to students so that they are clear about the requirements of the task they need to undertake and the marking criteria on which the work will be judged. You may also provide guidance to students on the suitability of their proposed task, particularly if it means they will not meet the requirements of the marking criteria. When checking drafts of a student's work, you must not comment or provide suggestions on how they could improve it. However, you can ask questions about the way they are approaching their work and you can highlight the requirements of the marking criteria.

It is also important to note the JCQ instructions – please refer to the JCQ website (www.jcq.org.uk) for the latest guidance.

What annotations or marking am I allowed to do on a student's first drafts?

Detailed guidance is provided on the AQA website, in line with the regulations from JCQ that all awarding bodies must follow, but in short:

- No marks can be awarded to first drafts
- Annotations can be made, but this advice must remain 'at a general level'. It could perhaps take the form of questions, encouraging students to make their own decisions about how to improve their work, but that is only one suggestion.

How can I make best use of my NEA adviser?

NEA advisers are in place to assist you with guidance about this component. You will be assigned an NEA adviser in the Autumn term of each academic year and be informed of his/her name and contact details.

NEA advisers can help you with general guidance about interpreting the NEA aspects of the specification and over the suitability of certain topics or methodologies. They can't provide detailed guidance about individual investigations, approve your titles or mark work for you, but will be able to use their experience and professional expertise to work with you in supporting your students.

You can contact your NEA adviser at any point during the academic year.

Where can I find examples of marked work for the NEA?

TOLS (Teacher Online Standardisation) materials are available through AQA Centre Services. Here you will find marked NEA work, detailed marking commentaries and teaching suggestions to help you with the internal assessment and moderation of your students' work. These are normally updated with new work in October-November of each year.

Centre Services also holds NEA material from previous CPD events and NEA Feedback meetings.