



GCSE

Drama

8261/X

Report on the Examination

8261

June 2018

Version: 1.0

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Introduction

Examiners reported that they have been privileged to see some very good, often excellent, work in Component 3 in this first series of the reformed GCSE specification.

Centres have, in general, responded positively to the new specification and have shown a good understanding of its requirements and of the opportunities it provides for students to explore and express their practical theatre skills; many committed and able performers were given the opportunity to excel. Centres have, in most cases, appreciated the range of performance formats, from solo work to larger group performances that the specification offers.

Some very successful performances have been seen this year in solo, pair and group work, with solo and pair work being particularly popular.

Administration: Paperwork and submission of work

Many centres were very efficient in the completion of all necessary administrative tasks in advance of the visit by their examiner and in the prompt submission of the required pre-visit paperwork. However some errors were made by a few centres where documents were not fully completed. It is hoped that centres will learn from their experiences and any uncertainties with paperwork, administration, and/or mistakes will be avoided in the future.

Play Approval Forms, either by the standard form or by authorised email from NEA advisers, were generally efficiently completed. In any matters of uncertainty in respect of the administration of this examination, the NEA adviser should be the centre's first point of contact. When completing Outline Schedule Forms, some centres took care to ensure that time was allowed between performances for examiners to consider and record marks; in cases where students are presenting their two extracts consecutively this must also include time between each extract. The deadline of four weeks before the date of the visit for the submission of all pre-visit paperwork and associated information was observed by most centres and allowed the examiner to carry out the necessary preparation.

Programme Notes are very useful to the examiner as a means of identifying students immediately prior to and during the examination itself. The best examples of programme notes clearly identified the play and extract, the students' names and character/s played, candidate number and photographs with the students in costume and holding their name and candidate number in front of them. The least useful examples did not identify the play or made use of photos which were taken when the students were much younger. In some cases, names were not always clear because abbreviations or 'nicknames' had been used and candidate numbers were missed.

Post-examination material was, in the great majority of cases, submitted promptly, often just days after the examination visit. A small number of Candidate Record Forms were missing the appropriate authenticating signatures (from both students and teachers) and these had to be returned for completion; such omissions can delay the examiner's final paperwork tasks and means the centre have to complete this paperwork at a later date. Arranging documents in candidate number order was appreciated when carrying out post-examination checks; in addition, the provision of an attendance register or other listing of students is very helpful.

It is very important for centres to check that the recordings of their students' performances are complete and error free before being sent to the examiner; there were some examples where recordings did not include all of the students' performances. Other problems with recordings included poor quality sound and instances where stage lighting had completely obliterated the performers' faces. There is further guidance on the filming of examination work later in this report.

In summary, administrative requirements were, in general, addressed successfully.

Examiners appreciated the work of the centres in making the examination visits a positive experience and expressed gratitude for their courteous hospitality and warm welcome they received.

Statements of Dramatic Intention

The response of centres and of students to the requirement to provide Statements of Dramatic Intention varied considerably. Examiners reported that in many cases centres had found the preparation of these statements to be a real opportunity for students to clarify their thoughts; thus the statements became an integral part of the students' learning process.

The best examples saw students write with clarity and focus, providing detailed and insightful commentary in respect of what they hoped and wished to achieve. At the other end of the spectrum, a significant number of responses were very brief, sometimes no more than a few words, which indicated little understanding of either the character being performed or the context in which that character existed. It is important that students have studied their chosen play text as a whole, and then selected an appropriate extract for performance. The best examples of Statements of Dramatic Intentions indicated centres and students who had meaningfully engaged with this approach.

Students who had completed a careful and detailed analysis of their intentions were usually able to present a level of performance that matched the quality of their statement; their performance work, and thus their level of success, was enhanced by their careful and well-documented preparation.

Filming Performances

Most centres managed to record the pieces very clearly and ensured that the identification of candidates was recorded, that speech was audible and facial expressions were visible. It is important that centres are aware of the requirements for recordings published by AQA, on the GCSE Drama section of the website. Before the piece is filmed, students are required to identify themselves by name and candidate number, stating their chosen specialism, the title of the extract chosen and the role(s) they are playing. Centres also need to ensure close ups of students' design skills are recorded as part of this identification process, in addition to being captured during the performance itself.

The performances should be filmed by one camera ideally from a single position, although it is understood that this depends upon the performance configuration. The camera should, as closely as possible, provide the same perspective as the examiner. There were some examples of work where the camera did not show the entire acting area so scenes were taking place 'off camera'. Other examples saw the work being filmed entirely from the side and in a few cases the work was recorded from the very back of a large hall so the candidates' facial expressions could not be seen. Stage lighting often affects the focus of the camera being used for filming so the use of special effects needs to be carefully considered.

Practice with the camera should form part of the preparation for this exam and a quick check of the equipment before filming starts should allow centres to identify possible issues. The recording must capture everything on the stage that a student would want an examiner to give credit for. Any evidence that is not captured on the recording itself is not eligible for consideration in an appeal or re-mark.

Performance Extracts – Choice of text

Examiners reported seeing a wide range of texts being performed and it was felt that the choice of both text and extract played a significant role in the achievement of students. John Godber's plays continued to be popular, with many centres opting to perform extracts from *Shakers*, *Bouncers* and

Teechers. Performances of these texts were often successful, especially when there was a clear understanding of the style in which they should be performed. Some excellent students relished the opportunity to multirole and demonstrated ensemble work of a very high standard.

Other outstanding ensemble work was seen during performances of *Girls Like That* and *Monsters*, two other popular texts. A number of centres showed work that had been defined as physical theatre. Some of these performances relied heavily on abstract ensemble sequences. Whilst highly exciting work was often seen, performances produced in this style did not always provide sufficient opportunity for students to showcase a diverse range of skills, as outlined in the specification. Occasionally, students performed a choreographed dance routine that did not fulfil the marking criteria.

Other frequently used texts included *Blood Brothers*, *DNA*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, *Find Me*, *Be My Baby* and *Too Much Punch for Judy*. Many examiners reported seeing work of a very high quality when texts dealt with sensitive subject matter such as *Five Kinds of Silence*, *Chatroom* and *Things I Know to be True*. In the most successful performances students were able to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of these texts in their performance work.

Careful consideration should be given to students' choice of roles. At times students struggled with the challenge of playing someone considerably older than themselves and in some cases students found it difficult to demonstrate a diverse range of skills whilst performing more complex characters, such as those seen in the work of Harold Pinter or Mark Ravenhill. Other students rose to the challenge and produced some highly exciting performances in plays, which were stretching and challenged them to produce their best work.

Choice of Extract

Very different approaches were taken in terms of the choice of extract and group sizes. Some centres chose to keep students in the same group for both extracts; others altered group make up for each extract and had students swapping roles. Some centres had all students performing a monologue followed by a duologue or group performance; others had a wider range of group sizes. No combination was deemed to be more successful than the other and all of these approaches are valid.

Most performances fell within the minimum and maximum time limit. However there were a few occasions when the minimum time was not met. There were occasions when a larger group only just reached the minimum length, making it very difficult for students to demonstrate a range of skills. In other group performances some students only made very brief appearances and, although the piece met the minimum time requirement, the student appeared for less than two minutes. There were also instances where the length of performance was self-penalising with centres deciding to perform lengthy group pieces that resulted in some candidates running out of steam and being unable to sustain the role throughout. It should be noted that the specification states that students who fail to meet the minimum performance times will be subject to a mark of zero.

Examiners have reported some examples of centres where all groups performed extracts from the same text and, in some cases, performed the same extract. This may be a valid approach and, at times, this inspired great inventiveness as students strove to find multiple ways to interpret the same text in new and exciting ways. In one centre the drama studio was completely transformed into the barn and the forest of *Blue Remembered Hills* and both design and performance students were provided with a real opportunity to immerse themselves in the world of the play. However, in several cases, examiners felt that, when a single text was performed some students, often weaker students, were disadvantaged as they were asked to tackle complex characters and/or language that they struggled to fully understand. This approach sometimes led to examiners watching a

series of identical performances and in these instances it was felt that students often lacked creative ownership of their work and so were less committed to the performance.

Editing of texts to create extracts was mostly successful, with extracts being chosen to ensure that all students had significant moments within them. Some less successful performances were seen when very brief moments of text were linked together, which did not afford a coherent realisation of the character(s) played. There were also a number of very disjointed performances often of episodic texts, such as *Everyman*, when blackouts were used at the end of each short scene, demonstrating a lack of understanding of style.

In a number of centres extracts had been chosen which demanded the use of non-assessed students. The use of non-assessed students included playing silent characters during a monologue, being an extra in a crowd scene and reprising the same role again in a different group. Centres are reminded that the use of non-assessed students is prohibited, unless preapproved by AQA and permission will only be granted if there are extenuating circumstances. Centres are reminded to take this into consideration when initially looking at grouping students and choosing texts and extracts.

In other centres students had chosen to amalgamate roles with one student performing the lines of two or more characters in the same scene. This was seen more than once with performances of *Shakers* when three girls performed the lines of the four central characters. Centres are reminded that whilst lines can be cut from the extract, they cannot be given to another character.

Facilitating Examination Visits

Most centres had thought very carefully about how to organise the examination day to best support their students and facilitate the examining process. On some occasions centres had not factored in enough time between extracts to allow examiners to effectively assess the work and carry out their administration. There is clear guidance provided on the Schedule Outline form about how much time needs to be allowed between performances and centres are reminded that this must be adhered to.

Some teachers clearly felt under pressure to ensure that the exam fitted into the constraints of the school day. At times this meant rushing through extracts very quickly and then having long gaps where both students and the examiner were waiting. In many centres students were only permitted to leave lessons to perform and then had to return immediately. In these cases, students often struggled to fully focus at the start of their performance, because they had very limited time after entering the examination space to begin to perform.

A few centres had rehearsed the two extracts so they ran continuously and formed a single performance. Extracts are assessed separately, so it must be made clear where one extract ends and the next begins. Time must also be allowed in between the extracts for the examiner to carry out their administration. Most centres organised the schedule so that students performed one extract after another. In some other centres, all students completed their Extract 1 performance before any completed their Extract 2 performance. For some students, this seemed to present no problems, but others experienced difficulty regaining momentum following a long gap between their performances.

In many centres students performed to an audience of peers. It was evident that encouraging audiences were really helpful in creating a sense of occasion for the performances. Examiners commented upon how impressively audiences supported their peers. Fellow students were operating lighting, sound and recording as well as helping to strike sets. In many centres there was a clear sense of how this subject helps build teams.

Other centres opted to perform in the evening in front of larger invited audiences; whilst this is permitted, teachers must remember that, first and foremost, the performance is an examination. Some examiners reported feeling pressured to rush marking as they were made to feel that they were holding up the evening and often they were being watched as they marked by an increasingly impatient audience. Teachers are advised to inform any audience that there will be breaks between the performances to avoid any confusion or embarrassment.

In the centres that opted for performances to be delivered simply to the examiner and the teacher it was felt there was not always the sense of occasion created that can be very helpful in terms of elevating students' work.

Performance Skill – Performer

This was the skill chosen by the vast majority of students who undertook this component. On the whole, monologues were done to a high standard. Duologues and group work were more varied; many students produced compelling performances, however examiners also saw a number of students who needed a lot of support from one another when working in a pair.

Most students demonstrated that they were able to memorise text and perform it with accuracy but several students performed with the script in hand and a significant number of students required prompting.

Examiners reported that most students demonstrated a good command of a range of vocal skills; though a number struggled to show sufficient distinction in the use of pace, pitch, pause and volume. In these instances, this detracted from otherwise successful performances.

Examiners reported that students evidently took delight in delivering performances, which were amusing, thoughtful, exciting, or provided thought-provoking material for audiences. Movement skills, including gesture and facial expression, were generally confidently and accurately deployed, and the best examples of work seen saw students rise to the inherent challenges presented in their chosen play. In a small number of cases, more inhibited students were less successful at deploying an appropriate range of movement skills.

Performance Skill – Costume Design

Examiners reported a variety of findings in terms of students presenting costume design. Some students designed a simple, effective and appropriate costume for the character. Some students demonstrated skills in sewing, cutting, and adapting existing garments. Less successful examples of this skill saw students evidently performing in their school uniform when playing an adult role, or using the addition of one garment to create the costume design.

Students often presented detailed and appropriate research in their statements of dramatic intention, which helped to give the examiner an insight into the process as well demonstrating their knowledge and understanding of the play as a whole. Whilst it is not a requirement that a costume design student makes an entire costume from scratch, there were still some highly impressive examples of costumes from students who did just that.

Performance Skill – Lighting Design

Examiners reported some excellent demonstrations of this skill, where students clearly understood the task they had been set in terms of the creation of place, mood and atmosphere. The most successful students went beyond general colour washes and supported performances with different intensities, special effects, spots and side lighting to create work, which genuinely enhanced the performance, and, in turn, supported their peers who were performing. It was also obvious that the most successful lighting designers had worked collaboratively with the actors in rehearsal in order to support the action of the piece itself.

Less successful students often deployed a few basic lighting plots, such as black out to full wash or too low an intensity which made it difficult to see the actors' faces in pivotal scenes.

Effective lighting designs seen often helped to create a more polished impression; sometimes exams took place in quite intimate spaces and the addition of an effective lighting design provided a sense of atmosphere. It is appreciated that facilities vary from centre to centre, and therefore, teachers should provide an appropriate amount of guidance to students choosing this route, working with the available resources in the centre.

Performance Skill – Sound Design

The best work seen by examiners was from students who had plenty of opportunity within the chosen extracts to create a supportive and imaginative sound plot, which enhanced the action within the text. Most students who had chosen this route had thoroughly researched and experimented with their sound plot and clearly understood the need to work collaboratively with the actors in rehearsal.

Underscoring was generally used effectively to increase the tension on stage. It was, paradoxically, less effective when the sound levels increased and actors could not be heard. The most successful designs included a range of live and recorded sound effects, which created a sense of period, time and place. The best students in this option were able to manipulate sound to achieve a precise desired effect, whether the sound was live or recorded.

Most designers produced a different sound design for each extract.

Less successful designs relied too heavily on the same mood music, which was often not appropriate, throughout the performance of both extracts or simply playing the music that is advised in the text. In other cases, students simply played pre-recorded music through the sound system in the performance space without any sense of meaningful design.

Performance Skill – Set Design

Examiners reported that this design skill was seen in relatively few centres. Where it was seen, a simple stage setting was often effectively deployed. Most often the set was designed to support the performance of two extracts. Some modifications and adjustments being made to one design in order to suit the performance of the second extract. It was clear that students had been imaginative and resourceful and had deployed or adapted whatever scenery/props were available, though a small number of students had created their own props from scratch.

Performance Skill – Puppet Design

Only a few examiners reported seeing any puppet designs this year, of those seen there were some good examples that appeared to have been influenced in design by some of Handspring's professional puppet work.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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

Converting Marks into UMS marks

Convert raw marks into Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) marks by using the link below.

[UMS conversion calculator](#)