
GCSE

DRAMA

8261/W: Understanding drama
Report on the Examination

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Summary of overall performance of the current series

It is pleasing to see that, in the second year of this examination paper, the vast majority of centres have evidently worked hard to prepare students for the questions they will answer. The bedrock for success in the paper is a thorough practical exploration of the chosen set text, with opportunities to explore character, dialogue, setting, context and a range of design skills from a practical viewpoint. Students should have the opportunity to practically explore the entirety of their set text, the practical study of the complete text is an essential requirement of this examination, and it was evident in students' responses where they had been provided with the opportunity to meaningfully engage with their chosen text through practical work.

Furthermore, centres are to be commended for enabling their students to access performances of quality live theatre, whether this is in a 'genuinely live' setting, or via digital or streamed performances. Students' appreciation and enjoyment of these performances – even if they did not fully engage with the demands of the question – was palpable, and it is impressive that so much effort has been made to ensure that students have an appreciation of drama in a performance setting.

Examiners also noted that, in comparison with the inaugural 2018 series, the vast majority of students attempted all questions on the paper. The assumption is that teachers have a better understanding of the demands of the paper, and have taken even more time to help prepare their students for the paper, with a focus on the amount of time students should spend on answering each of the questions. Examiners also noted that, in comparison to 2018, a significant number of students began their response by answering the question from Section C. There is no preference or suggestion as to the order in which students might answer the questions on the paper. That being said, examiners detected a shift towards the preference to answer Section C first, perhaps because the questions in this section carry the largest number of marks, and students want to attempt this question when they are still 'fresh.'

Whilst examiners noted that students seemed to be better prepared for the demands of the paper and its associated timings, there were some other issues which had started to emerge. The preference for digital/streamed performances, to enable responses to questions in Section C, remained evident. This is not, in itself, a problem, though examiners did begin to notice trends in some centres where the entire cohort of students had chosen to write about the exact same three moments from the performance. It seems unlikely that this would be coincidence however it often meant more problematically that students were not engaging with the specific demands and focuses of these questions. Likewise, in Section B, some students wrote lengthy and seemingly pre-prepared responses which were lucid and articulate, but did not connect with the specific demands of the questions. Sometimes, examiners noted, the response seemed to be geared towards the specific demands of a question from the 2018 series rather than question the student was responding to in the current paper.

It is also worth noting that digital/streamed performances must have been captured within five years of the student's GCSE course starting. So, for students completing the examination in this series, this would mean that any recordings from 2012 or later would be valid. Students who are completing the written examination in 2020 can only use recordings from 2013 or later, and so forth. This means that, for example, the National Theatre production of *Frankenstein* (directed by Danny Boyle) is no longer valid. Centres should ensure that, when selecting digital or streamed performances, that they meet this requirement. If there is any doubt, centres should contact the Drama Curriculum team at AQA.

A summary of students' performance in Section A

This section of the paper tests students' knowledge and understanding of theatre terminology, roles and responsibilities, stage positioning and configurations through four multiple choice questions.

It was pleasing to note that most students attempted to answer all the questions in this section, and did so with accuracy. The majority of students answered all four questions correctly.

The most common errors made by students were the confusion between a thrust and an end-on stage, or about the responsibilities of a stage manager versus a theatre director.

A few students did not attempt to answer any questions in this section. The presumption is that the student ran out of time in the exam, as often appeared to be the case. Centres are also reminded that students do not need to write out the response associated with the correct answer, and that a simple 'letter response' (A, B, C, D) will suffice, and potentially help students save time.

A summary of students' performance in Section B

This section of the paper tests students' knowledge and understanding of their chosen set text, asking them to consider responses from the perspective of a performer and a designer.

There are four questions in this section, with one degree of optionality in the last question, where students can choose to respond as a performer or as a designer.

The popularity of the set texts remained consistent with the 2018 series and were, in order, as follows: *Blood Brothers*, *The Crucible*, *Noughts & Crosses*, *The 39 Steps*, *Hansel & Gretel*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The vast majority of students attempted the questions in this section in order, though a significant minority chose to start with Question .4 / Question .5 first.

Centres are reminded that Question 1 is designed to test students' understanding of the play's original context (and not, necessarily, its original performance conditions) and that this understanding is demonstrated by appropriate suggestions of one of the design skills listed in the specification. The key word here is 'appropriate' and, whilst examiners were able to consider a broad range of suggestions to give credit to, it was not possible to give credit to responses which included suggestions which were not appropriate. The question itself always gives guidance and states the given context.

A summary of students' performance in Question .1

This four-mark question tests students' knowledge and understanding of the play's original context, from the perspective of a designer.

Examiners noted that successful responses to these questions were short and concise, with a strong emphasis on specific design details. Successful responses, whilst concise, were crucially packed with information which was directly linked to both the context of the play and the specific focus of the extract. Students do not necessarily need to have practical experience of the stated design skill, but it was clear where, in the more successful responses, students had given prior

consideration to design and the impact that effective design can have on the interpretation of an extract from the set text.

Once again, as in 2018, a significant number of students wrote far more than they needed to and, simultaneously, did not fully connect with the demand of the question. Less successful responses tended to focus too heavily on unnecessary context or provide superfluous explanation for decisions. The question asks students to 'describe' and does not ask students to 'explain,' though the majority of students provided lengthy explanatory paragraphs which delved into the play's socio-economic or historical context. Whilst students are not penalised for doing this, it was disappointing when students who had produced a significant amount of superfluous information then subsequently ran out of time and were unable to provide complete responses to other questions on the exam paper.

In *Blood Brothers*, the most effective responses provided a 'head to toe' description of an appropriate costume for Mickey, giving consideration to garments, fabrics, colours and the condition that these might be in, as appropriate. References to working clothes, boiler suits, donkey jackets and particular styles of jeans or trainers all helped to demonstrate understanding of the context. Less successful responses would provide an incomplete description, or suggestions of garments which might be more representative of slum housing or extreme poverty. A significant number of students suggested a costume which would be more appropriate for Mickey as a young boy (shorts, knee socks etc) and centres are reminded that students need to focus on the printed extract, rather than the play as a whole.

In *The Crucible*, the most effective responses suggested external light being brought into the set via colours and the use of gobos. A sense of location was created with the use of lighting and lighting effects to suggest candlelight and an understanding that the Puritan community would not have had electricity. Less successful responses provided confusing suggestions such as 'dark lighting' or an expressionistic approach involving pulsing, coloured or strobe lighting which did not appropriately focus on the location or temporal conditions of the printed extract.

In *Noughts and Crosses*, the most effective responses demonstrated a good understanding of 'epic' theatre and its conventions, and used the stylistic motifs of the script to enable a well-considered response. The use of projections, a composite set and a minimalism which still enabled the creation of a suitable location, were all credited by examiners. Less successful responses tended to be so minimalistic that there was essentially very little or nothing at all on stage to be able to credit. Similarly, the use of lighting and sound cannot be credited in a question where the specific focus is on creating a setting for a printed extract.

In *The 39 Steps*, the most effective responses gave a complete description of the setting for a rural Scottish hotel so that the reader could 'picture it' as they read it. This typically involved a description of walls, doorways, floor dressings and pieces of key furniture (such as a bed), as appropriate. The description of basic colours, fabrics, wood and tartan were all helpful. Less successful responses would typically give an incomplete description of the setting, and miss out key objects or items of furniture. Examiners also noted that less effective responses would include descriptions such as '1930s furniture' which do not demonstrate appropriate understanding.

In *Hansel and Gretel*, the most effective responses focused on bright colours, a sense of location and an upbeat or jovial mood being created through specific lighting effects. Less successful responses would often include a general lighting plan, or no use of specific lighting effects or colours, which would have helped, demonstrate understanding of the play's context.

Finally, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a simplistic approach was often the most successful, with students using the possibilities of costume augmentation (make-up, hair, jewellery, headbands etc) to create an appropriate 'head to toe' picture of Titania. Similarly, the most effective responses also gave an indication of Titania's status and demonstrated this through the use of colour and fabric. Less effective responses to this question typically gave an incomplete description, missing out key garments.

A summary of students' performance in Question .2

This eight mark question tests students' knowledge and understanding of how to communicate meaning through physical and vocal performance skills, in relation to the delivery of a stated line of dialogue from the printed extract.

As in the 2018 series, students generally answered this question well, and the focus on a single line or phrase of spoken dialogue enabled students to reflect on their own practical experiences of performing the play and consider how they might extrapolate their own ideas and apply them to the line in question. Successful responses saw students write an appropriate amount which considered the whole line of dialogue and its composite parts separately. Some students considered their vocal skills and then their physical skills (or vice versa), and this is a valid approach. However, examiners noted that the most successful responses were where students considered physical and vocal skills in combination, which enabled them to write about their chosen created effects in more detail and with greater sophistication. The most effective responses treated the line as a moment in a continuum, and referenced the context of the moment and what it was in response to, and then worked methodically through the line with focus on a wide range of possibilities in terms of physical and vocal dynamics. Students could suggest appropriate demonstrations of Edward's underlying fear, cautiousness and hesitation in *Blood Brothers*, or suggest Danforth's status and moral fervour in *The Crucible*. Some lively and comic moments enabled successful responses for *Noughts & Crosses* and *Hansel & Gretel*, and it was pleasing to see students working well beyond the limits of any printed stage directions and deploy creative, original and imaginative suggestions.

Less effective responses to this question tended to give a generalised or cursory 'wash' of the line, and provide one vocal suggestion for the entire line, without considering the possibilities of vocal dynamics and how these might shift in different parts of the line of dialogue. Similarly, less successful responses would misuse aspects of physical and vocal skill, and make reference to a 'loud tone' or a 'loud pitch' and demonstrate confusion about the appropriate deployment of these skills. Examiners also noted that some students were able to produce a 'coherent' response to this question a response which, if read aloud, a performer could act out. However, these coherent responses would often lack a connection to the character and the context of the extract and would not necessarily give an appropriate suggestion for the character. For example, in *The Crucible*, Danforth could be portrayed as a stomping and verbally aggressive agitator. Whilst it was, according to the student's description, possible to bring this to life on stage, it was not an appropriate realisation of this character. Examiners also noted that less effective responses tended to be disjointed and give consideration to different 'sections' of the stated line of dialogue, but without giving due consideration to the over-arching effect of the delivery of the line of dialogue.

A summary of students' performance in Question .3

This twelve mark question tests students' knowledge and understanding of the negotiation of performance space and the physical and vocal interaction with another character, practical suggestions need to be focused on creating a particular effect for the audience.

Once again, as in the 2018 series, this question was not generally well answered and appeared to be the question within this section which (otherwise successful) students struggled the most with. This is a question in which students need to consider interaction (which can be verbal as well as physical), and the use of a performance space with a constant focus on how a stated effect might be achieved.

The most successful responses included vivid detail of the interaction between characters and had a clear focus on responding to the focus of the question (tension, sibling relationship, romantic tension etc) and used the performance space as a 'grid' to enable this interaction. Examiners noted that more effective responses would take into account both characters motivation and describe the interaction with vivid detail, perhaps considering how eye contact, stillness and the lack of physical contact could also hint at the dynamics of the particular relationship. Examiners noted that the most effective responses gave consideration to the full shaded extract, as printed, and considered the dramatic action happening within it and how this might be demonstrated through performance skills and interaction. A number of students considered the shaded extract line by line and this is, of course, a valid approach, but not a requirement. It is perfectly possible to write an effective response to this question with a consideration of the action within the shaded extract, without having to consider each line, one at a time.

Less successful responses were characterised by a lack of focus on all aspects of the question, and, thus, a generalised explanation emerged which could sometimes read like a slightly extended variation on the previous question. Less effective responses seemed to suggest that a specific effect (tension, romantic tension etc) could be created by the placement of actors in stated stage positions, without expanding further on the dynamic that exists between the two performers. Similarly, examiners read responses which went into so much detail on describing the movement around the performance space in terms of stage positions, that they altogether lost focus on the effect that was being created and any meaningful interaction to achieve this. A significant number of students wrote about the use of 'proxemics' but only a very small minority wrote about this term with accuracy and insight; the majority of students misused this term and did not, in their responses, correctly suggest how it might be deployed to create a stated effect. If students lack a detailed knowledge and understanding of the printed extract from the text, it was this question which tended to reveal this. Therefore, less effective responses on *The Crucible* saw Danforth take possession of the confession or did not consider how Danforth might react to the constant interruptions by Proctor. Similarly, in *The 39 Steps*, most students wrote convincingly about the creation of comedy, but without due consideration about how any degree of romantic tension, or the change of the relationship between Hannay and Pamela might be created on stage. Examiners also noted that responses to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* were, on the whole, successful and fully engaged with the different demands of the question.

A summary of students' performance in Question .4/Question .5

These twenty mark question test students' knowledge and understanding of how performance (Question .4) or design (Question .5) skills might be deployed both in this extract and in the play as a whole. If students attempted Question .4, they were asked to focus on a nominated character. If students attempted Question .5, they could nominate their own discrete design skill in line with those listed in the specification.

This question presents students with optionality; the vast majority of students opted to answer Question .4 instead of Question .5.

It was evident this year that the majority of students gave themselves more time for this question and, accordingly, they were able to comment in detail on the extract and the play as a whole. Timings seemed to have been managed this year with the majority of students dedicating enough time and detail to this question. Successful responses tended to get the balance right by offering strong detail for both the extract and the play as a whole. There was no prescribed route to success; some students started with an explanation of moments from the printed extract and then made reference to the wider play as a whole, or vice versa. Some students would, unfortunately, lapse into (what seemed to be) pre-prepared accounts of the play's socio-economic or historical context and provide paragraphs of extraneous information before, eventually, beginning to discuss performance skills. A significant minority of students appeared to run out of time on their response to this question, seemingly in a need to move on to Section C. This was often disappointing, as it would 'cut short' what was promising to be a complete and coherent response.

Successful responses demonstrated a clear and thorough understanding of the stated character and used the extract as a starting point, and then selected pertinent and useful moments from elsewhere in the play to provide further support or, indeed, contrast. For example, a student writing successfully about Mickey in *Blood Brothers*, would make reference to his depression, agitation and rage in the printed extract, but then often compare this with his origins as a child in the early scenes in the play or provide further contrast with the scenes where Mickey is a love struck teenager. Well-chosen moments are the key for a successful response, and students could then meaningfully and purposefully write about a range of acting skills to exemplify these moments.

Concise and focused responses tended to be the more successful, and well-structured responses which avoided repetition were commented on favourably by examiners. Where students had selected appropriate moments which helped to support their interpretation, they were often able to write about a wide or extensive range of acting skills which enabled them to avoid repetition and also to access the higher end of the range of marks. Examiners also commented that successful responses tended to have been well 'timed' in the examination room with appropriate weighting given to the extract and the play as a whole. Some students wrote with more emphasis on the extract compared to the play as a whole, or vice versa. There is no preference and examiners credited what was available; the imperative was that both the printed extract and the play as a whole were referenced. Engagement with the printed extract was generally the strongest and students were able to write enthusiastically about an interpretation which was deemed appropriate, as supported by the text. Credit was given, where appropriate, to responses which were original, inventive or simply followed a logical dramatic and narrative progression.

Less successful responses to these questions tended to only focus on the printed extract and not give much (if any) consideration to the play as a whole. Therefore, less successful responses made reference to only a narrow or more limited range of performance skills, and would sometimes only make cursory references ('In the beginning of the play...') to where these might be deployed. A significant number of students wrote only about how they would use their performance skills to interpret that character in the printed extract, and then make arbitrary thematic links to the play as a whole, without providing an explanation of how performance skills might be used beyond the confines of the extract. Less effective responses struggled to find a cohesive view of the character and often focused on the narrative of the character, with a literary or 'biographical' angle, rather than a focus on how the character might be presented on stage, through performance. Examiners also reported that less successful responses tended to be grounded in an 'English literature' style analysis of the character and text with only scant suggestions as to how the character might be brought to life via a narrow range of performance skills. Whilst knowledge and understanding of the text is essential, the question itself is focused on assessing students' knowledge and

understanding of the interpretation of the character through performance, and credit could only be given accordingly on these terms

Students who opted to respond to Question .5 were in a minority, but successful responses to these questions (which were generally focused on either setting or costume) revealed a detailed understanding of the play and how these design skills might demonstrate and also enhance what was evident on the page. The most effective responses to this question were reported by examiners who said that students wrote about an extensive range of design skills, within their nominated skill set, and perhaps also had an additional practical experience of their chosen skill.

Less successful responses to Question .5 tended to be brief appear unfinished and might only give a cursory consideration to the printed extract. The range of skills referenced, in terms of theatrical design, would be limited or narrow, and less effective responses might only suggest a visual or aesthetic consideration for the extract (or play as a whole) without any apparent understanding of how design skills would enable this. Examiners also reported that less effective responses here would reveal a lack of understanding of the play via design choices which would lack appropriateness or coherence with the play as a whole.

A summary of students' performance in Section C

This section of the paper tests students' knowledge and understanding of the work of theatre makers in a live performance setting.

There are three questions in this section; one question is from the perspective of a performer, and two questions are focused on nominated design skills. Students only have to answer one question in this section.

Popular productions referred to by students when answering questions in this section were: *Billy Elliot: The Musical*, *Things I Know To Be True*, *The Woman In Black*, *Metamorphosis (Splendid Productions)*, *The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time*, *Peter Pan (National Theatre)*, *Everybody's Talking About Jamie*, *War Horse*, *An Inspector Calls*, *Macbeth (RSC; National Theatre)*, *The Comedy About A Bank Robbery*, *The Play That Goes Wrong*, *Matilda*, and *The Lovely Bones*.

As previously mentioned, it was genuinely touching to read responses where students had been moved, amused, frightened or affected by a piece of theatre; students' positivity and enthusiasm for what they had seen was palpable and often enabled them to write at length in their response. As in 2018, there was a roughly even split between centres who had seen 'genuinely live' work as opposed to those who had seen digital or streamed work. No one route was thought to be more successful than another and student's crafted responses at all levels of the mark band regardless of their chosen medium. Examiners noticed that a significant number of students had attempted a question in this section at the start of their written exam; this was not thought to be any more or less successful than had they responded to the paper in its printed sequence.

The most effective responses captured a moment from the production seen and brought it to life through vivid detail and description and then went on to analyse its impact *in line with the appropriate focus of the question*, before offering an evaluative comment to define its relative success. Examiners noted that the most effective responses managed to strike something of a balance between all three aspects of the question and provide responses which used a strong and well-crafted description as bedrock to enable pertinent analysis and astute evaluation. It did not automatically follow, however, that a strong description would pave the way for an equally strong

analysis or evaluation, but it was often the case that a strong analysis and evaluation had been pre-empted by the quality in detail and focus evident in the student's description.

It was disappointing, however, to see a significant number of students begin their response with a lengthy paragraph (or paragraphs) detailing the plot, characters and key creative team of the production seen. Whilst, as has been previously stated, students are not penalised for this, it tends to be a waste of time in what is a demanding paper. A simple statement outlining what has been seen, where and when will suffice.

A large number of students appeared to have prepared for last year's paper and crafted responses which paid little or no regard to the specific focus of the question; this impacted on their ability to access the full range of marks available and was genuinely disappointing to see.

A smaller number of students wrote about the same text as they had studied for Section B. This is a rubric infringement and students were, in these circumstances, only given credit for the section which achieved the highest number of marks.

A summary of students' performance in Question 11

This thirty-two mark question tests students' knowledge and understanding of how meaning is created in performance, with a specific focus on how performers used their performance skills to communicate emotion.

The overwhelming majority of students attempted to answer this question in Section C.

Examiners reported that the most effective responses were highly detailed, both in the required description and in the demonstration of analysis and evaluation, and offered a dissection of carefully chosen moments to help fulfil the demand of the question. It was clear that centres had spent time working with students to prepare them for this question and focus on technique and structure. As a result, the most effective responses were well-written, coherent, fluid and structured appropriately. Rather than trying to cover the entirety of the production seen, the most effective responses would focus on a small number of 'moments' and unpack them with detail and care. It was noted that students who were able to write about a wide or extensive range of performance skills tended to have the theatrical vocabulary and appropriate understanding of theatrical performance to enable a successful response. It was evident that time has been spent in centres working on capturing the information seen in the performance and developing skills in analysis and evaluation. The most effective responses offered perception or insight in their analysis and could state what the emotion demonstrated had signified or suggested. Similarly, an effective evaluation went beyond the boundary of a simple judgement and offered a more developed response which stated the success but also offered a qualification of the success. There did not appear to be a correlation between the live production seen and an associated effective response; successful responses were found in relation to virtually every production seen.

Examiners did report, however, that a significant number of students either ignored or did not pay enough attention to the focus of the question; this year, the focus was on emotions communicated in performance. There was a suggestion of a pre-prepared response in what some students wrote *and this response had been prepared and created without a focus on emotions*. This, inevitably, impacted on the range of marks available. Furthermore, some examiners noticed that entire cohorts had chosen to focus on the exact same moments in the performance and reached the same evaluative conclusion.

Centres are reminded that it is a requirement of the qualification that students study the complete play/performance seen, rather than looking at only a few cherry-picked moments.

A number of students struggled to clearly articulate their responses in line with the focus on the question, sometimes being faced with a challenge because of what they had seen. For example, *The Play That Goes Wrong* produced a wealth of enthusiastic responses, but examiners reported that students writing about this particular play struggled to meaningfully engage with the emotions being communicated in performance. Centres are reminded of the guidance in the specification when choosing performances for students to watch.

A summary of students' performance in Question 12

This thirty-two mark question tests students' knowledge and understanding of how meaning is created in performance, with a specific focus on how set design could make a memorable impact.

This question was answered by a minority of students.

Examiners reported that, although responses to this question were infrequent, they were often of a high standard and had used different aspects of the set design to illuminate the student's response. *The Woman In Black* and *The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time* proved to be very popular productions referenced in response to this question, and students could articulate how and why these multi-functional sets, taking into account a number of locations, made a striking impact. Similarly, a smaller number of students focused on productions with an abstract or non-naturalistic set and were able to offer their own interpretation of the meaning and impact created by this setting. The most successful responses considered the flexibility of the set, its construction the materials used, and the colours and textures that were apparent; to suggest how this set had made an impact.

Less effective responses to this question were often narrative or overly descriptive and spent an inordinate length of time recounting the plot or explaining the physical location. Furthermore, examiners reported that some less successful responses tended to rely on a mere aesthetic description of what had been seen in performance, rather than a consideration of a theatrical designer at work.

A summary of students' performance in Question 13

This thirty-two mark question tests students' knowledge and understanding of how meaning is created in performance, with a specific focus on how costume design could suggest period, and/or location.

This question was answered by a minority of students.

Examiners reported that the most successful responses seen for this question appeared to come from students who had some practical experience of costume design and could, accordingly, write in detail and at length about colours, tones, fabrics, dyes and embellishments or adornments. Rather than just stating the garments seen on stage, the more successful responses would consider how its condition, fabric and colour/pattern might help to suggest period or location. Some productions seen, typically those with high production values and a specific time and location, as opposed to more abstract or non-naturalistic productions, provided opportunities for students to write in depth and detail about the costumes seen and what these indicated. *The Woman In Black*

and *An Inspector Calls* proved popular productions in reference to this question, perhaps because of their clear and evident setting in a specific historical place and time.

Less effective responses to this question tended to provide a more generalised or cursory overview of the 'outfits' seen on stage without enough inherent detail or specified focus on costume design as a skill in its own right. Whilst an aesthetic consideration is, of course, a requirement, the less successful responses did not meaningfully engage with either the fact that these were theatrical costumes, as opposed to 'real outfits', or the stated focus of the question itself. Once again many students drifted into what appeared to be a pre-prepared response or a dissection of how the costume was significant in terms of character these types of responses were very limited in the credit that they could be awarded.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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