

# GCSE

# English Language

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**8700/1**

Report on the exam

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Autumn 2020

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## Summary

### Overall performance compared to last year

This has been an unusual exam series in many ways. Entry patterns have been very different from those normally seen in previous series and students had a very different experience in preparation for these exams. It is therefore more difficult to make meaningful comparisons between the range of student responses seen in this series and those seen in a normal November series. The smaller entry also means that there is less evidence available for examiners to comment on.

In this report, senior examiners will summarise the performance of students in this series in a way that is as helpful as possible to teachers preparing future cohorts while taking into account the unusual circumstances and limited evidence available.

### Areas where students excelled

There was a supernatural element to the paper one source for this series. Students engaged with the idea of a ghostly figure and the eerie atmosphere. It was a genre that presented confidence from the cohort, with far fewer non-attempted questions. There was evidence that students this year seemed more secure with the notion of the effects of writer's methods. Many more students selected subject terminology with which they felt secure and as a result, were able to explain the effects of language and structure with improved certainty. Writing about writers' methods was also more frequent in responses for question 4.

The narrative and descriptive options for the writing section were approached with more control than has been seen in previous series; candidates showed real engagement with the task and examiners enjoyed marking imaginative and inventive responses. Ideas included the gate being a portal into other realms, narrative voices believing themselves to be alive only to discover that they were ghosts and sinister, predatory forests that devoured those who entered.

### Areas where students struggled

Question 1 allows students to select small details from the source which may, in fact, be fragments from the text. However, many students selected incomplete phrases such as 'Rosie gazed vaguely at the sunlit' which did not contain enough information for a mark. Students should be advised to read to the end of a sentence, not just to the end of a line.

Many students experienced difficulties with structuring their responses to question 4. The statement was engaging, and students wrote with purpose, but many appeared to struggle to separate their conflicting ideas that the 'stranger child' was or was not a part of Rosie's imagination. This meant that their arguments were not easy to follow and, indeed, the students themselves found it difficult to navigate their points, sometimes leading to confusion. Some students had chosen to argue the opposite point of view, regardless of the evidence before them. Opting to take an opposite view, but without a secure idea, can lead to speculative or confused ideas and this was unhelpful to these answers.

## Assessment objectives

| AO  | Common student errors   |
|---|---|
| <p>AO1 - Identify and interpret explicit and implicit information and ideas.</p> <p>Select and synthesise evidence from different texts.</p>  | <p>Selecting information from outside the lines specified by the question.</p> <p>Using incomplete and therefore incorrect information from a partial sentence.</p>   |
| <p>AO2 - Explain, comment on and analyse how writers use language and structure to achieve effects and influence readers, using relevant subject terminology to support their views.</p>  | <p>Explanation of lengthy quotations for Q2, meaning that the comment was content based rather than language based.</p> <p>Failure to use structural terminology and therefore writing about content rather than structure.</p>                         |
| <p>AO4 - Evaluate texts critically and support this with appropriate textual references.</p>  | <p>Selecting textual references that do not support the idea or that are too long/unfocused.</p>  |
| <p>AO5 - Communicate clearly, effectively and imaginatively, selecting and adapting tone, style and register for different forms, purposes and audiences. Organise information and ideas, using structural and grammatical features to support coherence and cohesion of texts.</p> | <p>Writing solely about the details in the picture prompt, rather than allowing imaginative ideas to develop from it</p> <p>Writing consciously about the image and therefore struggling with the register and purpose eg 'in the image I can see'.</p> |
| <p>AO6 - Candidates must use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation. (This requirement must constitute 20% of the marks for each specification as a whole).</p>                                      | <p>Using simplistic language such as 'spooky', 'scary'.</p> <p>Uncontrolled sentence and paragraph lengths.</p>   |

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## Question 1

Students tended to select more precise details from the source this year, where the information was stated simply and clearly to gain one mark per statement. Although it is possible to attain more than one mark per statement, it is more straightforward for students to respond with less complicated ideas. Students were able to select information about Rosie with confidence.

### Common misunderstandings

Many students read to the end of the line 'Rosie gazed vaguely at the sunlit' rather than reading on to 'overgrown garden'. The end of the printed line was a distractor for some candidates and led to an incomplete statement. Some students changed the word 'sunlit' to 'sunlight', but this was not the object of the sentence. As a result, they were unable to gain a mark for this. Similarly, students stated that Rosie was 'watching her children playing' but she was in fact looking at the garden (the children happened to be playing in the garden). There were answers that stated Rosie drove *to* London, when she had driven *from* London, and so students could be advised to check the finer details of the chosen section.

## Question 2

This question, focused upon the effects of language, engaged students due to the accessibility of the language but also their apparent interest in the text itself. Although it was noticed that some answers were less successful in linking ideas to the language itself, the answers were enthusiastic. Students were generally able to pick up on the more obvious language features and attempted to say something about the 'giant malformed hand', for example, and the fact that it was 'an overgrown mess' and a 'muddle'. The use of personification with the ivy 'choking' the tree and the 'knuckles' of its branches drew extended explanations. More successful answers discussed the concepts of power and features of the supernatural within the garden. Some students were able to extend their analysis of the writer's use of personification to create a foreboding atmosphere.

### Common misunderstandings

For question 2, many students commented on the use of the adjective 'overgrown' to describe the garden. There were some successful ideas that came from this, such as it was neglected or was hiding something foreboding. However, some students focused their understanding of this word on Rosie's lack of effort with the garden. It seemed as if they drew their focus from question 1, but also took this idea away from the context of it being Rosie's 'first night' in the house. Students could be reminded that the selected passages should be read as part of the whole source, not separately.

Using long and unfocused quotations leads students to write about content rather than language. Students could be advised to use short, precise quotations to enable them to direct their analysis to the word or phrase that drew their attention and shaped their understanding.

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## Question 3

Question 3, writing about the effects of structure, showed that students are becoming more confident with the concept of structure and were able to comment on its effects without being burdened by complicated structural terminology. The source was linear in structure, but offered students the opportunity to comment upon Rosie's internal thoughts and external actions, as well as inside and outside of the house. Successful answers discussed how Rosie looked through the window and then again through a 'clearest of the panes', as well as how quickly she stepped outside to find the 'stranger child' gone.

### Common misunderstandings

Responses to this question were adversely affected by students writing about content rather than structure. Structural terminology need not be complex, but students could be reminded that 'firstly, then, finally' would begin to focus their answer on the structural shifts in a text, rather than recounting the events.

## Question 4

### Strongest responses

Both parts of the statement 'I wasn't at all surprised at the disappearance of the stranger child at the end of the extract. The writer has left us in no doubt that she is just a part of Rosie's imagination,' were equally accessible to students. Examiners reported that the students were engaged with their opinions and wrote enthusiastically about the possible identity of the child and her sudden disappearance. There appeared to be increased confidence in discussing writer's methods, as well as in using textual references across the selected lines – line 24 to the end.

### Weaker responses

Examiners reported that some students had difficulty with structuring their answers and that this led to some confusing and contradictory responses. It appeared that some students had chosen to argue both for and against the assertions in the statement, even when they did not have evidence to do so. As a result, their responses struggled to be successful. Students might be reminded that it is not necessary to find a contrary point of view. Should they find an alternative view, it would be helpful to them if they were able to support this with clear evidence from within the text. Students could also be reminded not to write alternate paragraphs, swapping between agree/disagree; they should aim for a clear answer, one that is straightforward in its argument.

As with previous series, there was confusion between the characters Rosie, the mother of the children playing in the garden, Cara, her daughter, and the female stranger child. Some students confused Rosie and Cara and some students became confused by referring to all three characters only as 'she'. The context box at the start of the extract always contains useful information and students could be reminded to make use of this before writing.

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## Question 5

### Strongest responses

The descriptive option inspired many gothic pieces in graveyards, abandoned houses and lonely tracks through the woods. Students who were able to evoke a sense of atmosphere, often using pathetic fallacy, or who had imagined a focal point beyond the stone gateway, were able to write more successfully. There were some well controlled answers that allowed both description and detail but over a few, considered ideas, rather than writing only superficially about many, uncontrolled points. As often is the case, there were a significant number of responses that used both the image and the 'event that cannot be explained'. Successful ideas included a gate that was the boundary to Hell, an archway that was the only structural survivor of a military assault, an abandoned setting that replayed eerie events each night and a forest which took its own prisoners.

The narrative option encouraged some engaging ideas such as a spirit who guarded the graves of the poor, a narrator who travelled through a graveyard only to find his/her own gravestone, portals to other realms and foreboding, hostile forests. The narrative option also encouraged some students to show their more original ideas which they appeared to enjoy writing; important buildings suddenly disappearing, narrators being lost in events from their previous lives and a narrator looking in a mirror only to discover that they had become their sibling. Stronger responses also showed a wider range of accurate punctuation and a variety of sentence types.

### Weaker responses

Less successful responses revealed that some students continue to struggle with time management. There were reports of increased numbers of very short answers, where the student had begun with some promising ideas, but had had to stop at less than half a page. Conversely, there were many responses that examiners reported showed a lack of control over the ideas; they felt that there were many hurried answers where detail and description had been forgotten. Examiners read a significant number of responses where a group of characters went on an unexplained or rather simply imagined journey which lacked structure or purpose. There were fewer gruesome ideas, which was welcome, but students could think about starting with a point of excitement, in the action, rather than introducing characters and their rather mundane preparation for a trip. Attempting to write about several characters is also challenging; students might find more success focusing only on one, or perhaps two, characters.

Examiners also reported that there were responses that relied heavily upon the extract, either by copying the details of the tree, including a spirit that suddenly disappeared, or by copying sections of description into their own response. These responses struggle to move beyond the ideas of the extract and therefore do not demonstrate many of the student's own skills. Similarly, there were responses which had clearly borrowed heavily from previously studied texts. This should be avoided as they could lead to malpractice.

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## Further support

### Mark ranges and award of grades

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

### Enhanced Results Analysis (ERA)

Use our exam results analysis tool to create and customise as many different reports for comparison as you like.

### Training courses

Attend one of our training [courses](#) and get support when you need it and however it suits you – whether that's online or in your school.



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## Contact us

Our friendly team will be happy to support you between 8am and 5pm, Monday to Friday.

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