# GCSE
# English Language

**8700/2**

Report on the exam

Autumn 2020

# Contents

| Contents | Page |
|---|---|

# 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 the summer, or in November, 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 summer or November series.

This exam combined a resit opportunity for students who were unable to take the exam in June 2020 or who were unhappy with the results they received with the usual November resit opportunity. Private or home-schooled candidates made up 11% of the entry. The age profile of candidates suggests that at least half of students were in Year 13 and therefore likely to be entering as a requirement to achieve Grade 4. This suggests that the cohort is more similar to a 'normal' November cohort than a summer cohort. Overall examiners reported a very similar profile of performance to previous November series, with the majority of students working largely in Level 2. However, there was also a very noticeable minority working at higher levels too, where students were looking to confirm their achievements for the top grades.

## Data points of interest

The mean mark for this component fell from 36 in November 19 to 32 marks in November 20, with performance affected across all questions. Examiners identified generally slightly weaker responses to all questions. As noted above, the majority of students were working in the lower half of the ability range, although there was a small minority of students who were working at the very top of the ability range. This would be very typical for a November cohort in previous years. However, performance was particularly affected in response to tasks where students were expected to adopt a more technical approach. For example, students' responses to Q3 and Q4 were less likely to demonstrate a secure grasp of language features or other methods used by writers.

## Assessment objectives

| AO | Common student errors |
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| AO1 - Identify and interpret explicit and implicit information and ideas. <br><br> Select and synthesise evidence from different texts. | Failing to read each sentence in the section of text carefully, so selecting the wrong statements in question 1 <br><br> Failure to correctly distinguish between the writer of each source and their companion, leading to confused responses to question 2 |
| 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. | Selecting appropriate language features and/or textual references but failing to comment effectively on why the writer had used a particular word or phrase |
| AO3 - Compare writers' ideas and perspectives, as well as how these are conveyed, across two or more texts. | Confusion between the characters, leading to a lack of clarity in responses <br><br> Failure to comment on writers' methods |
| 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. | Failure to combine different points into a coherent argument <br><br> Dependence on made-up statistics to support an argument |
| 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). | Failure to demarcate sentences correctly <br><br> Erratic spelling and punctuation |

# Question 1

Performance on question 1 fell considerably in this series. The mean mark was 2.78 in November 20 as opposed to 3.48 in November 19. Only 10% of students achieved the full four marks on this question, although 75% of students made one error and achieved 3 marks.

The section of text contained some relatively technical language relevant to the theme of mountain climbing. There were a number of geographical terms such as 'col', 'crevasses', 'ice cliff' and 'glacier' and references to mountaineering such as 'base camp' and 'downhill'. However, this is entirely appropriate for a paper assessing a non-fiction text, and students did not need any specialist knowledge to answer the question.

## Common misunderstandings

There was no particular pattern to the type of errors made by students in response to this question. Some students selected statement A as correct: *The climbers were sheltered from the wind.* In order to dismiss this statement as incorrect, students needed to know that the phrase 'exposed and windy' meant that the climbers were not sheltered from the wind. This depends on general rather than specialist vocabulary knowledge.

A second example of a common error was the selection of statement D: *Base camp was more than 3000 feet below them*. The text states explicitly that base camp is 'nearly 300 feet below us'. To dismiss this statement as incorrect, students needed to read carefully and understand that 'nearly' means 'less than' not 'more than'.

The statement most students failed to select as true was G: *The climbers were feeling more positive now than they were before*. This required students to interpret the phrase 'we had lost the sense of hopelessness…' as meaning that the climbers were no longer feeling as negative as they had previously. It required an understanding of an implicit idea.

In preparing for Q1, students should practise reading each sentence in the short section of text carefully and in detail. They should read back through the four statements they have selected as true in order to check that they are correct and then double-check that the statements they have rejected as false are definitely incorrect.

# Question 2

Students were asked to write a summary of what they understood about the different companions in the two sources: Simon in Source A and Marius in Source B. There were a number of options for students to choose from. Some focused on the knowledge and experience of the companions, inferring that Marius, as a local guide, was likely to have more detailed knowledge and understanding of the mountain and the conditions they could expect. Others focused on the caring side of the two companions, deducing that Marius appeared more kindly and sensitive in his slightly foreign way, whereas Simon was often characterised as uncaring and insensitive in his treatment of Joe. The majority of responses focused on the relationship between the writers and their companions.

The understanding of Source B was generally secure, with widespread recognition that Marius was not only helpful but pretty invaluable in enabling Gertrude to achieve her goal of climbing the mountain. However, there were variations in the interpretation of Simon's behaviour in Source A. His character is portrayed vaguely, by a potentially unreliable narrator, and therefore it is perhaps not surprising that his motivation is open to interpretation. If a student finds that there is limited textual evidence for a particular interpretation, it is perhaps worth considering an alternative interpretation.

A significant number of students argued that Simon was unconsciously or deliberately being cruel and selfish in his treatment of fellow climber Joe. Where students were able to support this interpretation with appropriate textual detail, it was accepted as a viable interpretation. Where they simply asserted that Simon was evil, with limited evidence to support their view, it was more likely to be judged an attempt. However, some responses demonstrated a clearer and more subtle understanding of Simon's character, suggesting that he was motivated not by self-interest but by a self-sacrificial sense of responsibility to save both their lives.

## Strongest responses

The best responses, in Level 4, were able to comment on Simon's leadership and strategic decision-making skills, and on his ability to motivate his companion with a shared confidence. In response to Source B, students commented on Marius' relaxed, but more cautious approach, demonstrating a quiet confidence gained from long years of experience accompanying naïve, young tourists. Comparisons often centred on the difference between Marius' professional interest in supporting his companion, and Simon's investment in a long standing partnership.

## Weaker responses

Responses to Q2 were in some cases affected by students failing to correctly distinguish between the writer of each source and their companions. Some students were confused by the names Joe and Simon, unclear which was the writer and who had broken their leg. In Source B, there was some confusion about Gertrude's gender, with a significant number failing to read the introduction carefully where Gertrude is identified as female by two personal pronouns. Students were not penalised for this, and were rewarded for the quality of their understanding about Marius' relationship with the writer despite the error.

However, students should be reminded to always read the Introduction in the text box before reading the extract, as there is frequently contextualising information to help orientate students in advance of reading an unseen text. It is also helpful if students can practise reading texts where there is more than one character (Source A from November 2017 is a useful text including Sister Brendan as well as the writer, Gervase Phinn).

# Question 3

Over the course of this specification, there has been an incremental improvement in performance on the language question. Students have increasingly demonstrated a focus on the effects of language and the mean mark has risen series by series. It is therefore noticeable when that trend is reversed as it has in this series. Examiners report that many students did not provide comment on the use of language, offering instead an inferential understanding of how Joe feels in the given extract. The comments on his pain and how he deals with it may have demonstrated understanding of the ideas, but did not meet the requirements of AO2.

The passage selected was rich in language use, with figurative and aural imagery used by the writer. Metaphors such as the wave of pain and nausea sweeping over him and the flare of agony as his knee kinked back provided students with yet more marine imagery to mine; the noun phrase 'sickening gristly crunch' was a gift in terms of the sound effects of injury, and there was even much to be said for the alliteration in the taut tugs on the trembling rope and the sibilance in the silent snow.

## Strongest responses

The best responses were seen where students explored the connotations of the individual words selected and examined the wider implications of the associative images presented. Students working at the highest levels were able, for example, to express the gruesome sound effect of a word such as 'gristly', some comparing Joe's leg to a piece of flesh or meat, and extrapolating from this a sense of how unnatural the sounds were, and how dehumanising the effect.

Other students working at the higher levels explored the use of the word 'flare' and there were a number of connections made: some associated the flare with a gun and images of violence or aggression; others took off in a different direction and linked the flare to an emergency situation and a sign of distress. Yet others focused on the bright orange or red colour of the flare, linking this to the blood, contrasted against the white of the snow.

These responses had common elements: a focus on the language and explaining why that word or that image in particular had been chosen by the writer, constituting an answer to the question 'Why?' These better responses were also characterised by a response to the question 'How?' by explaining clearly (L3) or in detail (L4) how those contrasting images functioned to create specific effects. There was something both analytical and/or imaginative about the best responses to Q3.

## Weaker responses

The most common issues were a failure to engage with the language per se. In most cases, students were able to identify and name language features and select textual references which were more or less accurate, but they stopped short of any comment on the words chosen. Instead, students tended to offer a comment on what the quotation told us about how Joe was feeling. This inferential understanding is perhaps a more intuitive response to the question and reflects the lack of preparation and teaching prior to the exam where a reminder about the specific approach to a language question might reasonably be expected to happen.

Many of the responses were therefore awarded a mark in Level 1, as the key skill in Q3 is the ability to comment on the effect of language. The responses were rewarded for generalised comments, simple mention of language features and simple textual details.

# Question 4

The task in Q4 is usually very straight-forward in focus, encompassing the whole of both texts. The task in this series was no exception, asking students to compare the perspectives of both writers to their adventures in the mountains. The task is deliberately broad in order to allow students to select the details which have caught their attention. Common themes which arose in these responses were the relative enjoyment (or not) of the two adventurers; their perception of the environment around them; their level of injury; and the conclusion of their expeditions. The two texts were well-matched and students clearly found plenty of material for their answers to the task.

In terms of how the writers conveyed their perspectives, there was a drop in the number of students remembering to incorporate a discussion of methods into their response, similar to the drop seen in responses to Q3. Many students were able to offer some comparison and some understanding of the ideas in the two source texts but failed to mention how these had been presented. In these cases, the guidance in the mark scheme is for the examiner to place the mark towards the bottom of the level. This has an impact on the overall profile of performance on this question, which, like the other reading questions, saw a drop in the mean mark from previous years.

Students continue to impress examiners with their ability to switch between two relatively complex and challenging non-fiction texts, piecing together their understanding of each, alongside comparative interpretations, supported by textual detail from both sources and managing to fit in an explanation of how both writers have achieved this. It is indeed a challenging task, but there were fewer students in Level 1 for this question when compared to Q3. Most were able to show some intuitive understanding of the ideas in the texts, if not their perspectives.

## Strongest responses

The best responses were characterised by an overview of the two expeditions, with students able to take a step back and see the differences between the events. Some students commented on the commercial nature of Gertrude's expedition, that she pays for the expertise of her guide, and is wholly dependent on Marius to literally pull her like a parcel up the tricky bits of the mountain. This was identified as essentially a tourist trip, and therefore relatively superficial in comparison to the professional, experienced mission established by Joe and Simon.

Other perceptive responses engaged with Gertrude's reticence at the start and her growing confidence as the adventure unfolded, comparing this emotional journey with the more extreme roller-coaster of hope and despair felt by Joe. Comments on method included some insightful analysis of the final sentences of both sources, as well as the effect of the openings. There was some welcome comment on the passing of time, and how the writers used structure to reflect the chronology of their adventures in the mountains

## Weaker responses

Students showed a generally sound understanding of both sources, but there were some persistent issues with confusion between the characters. In most cases, this did not add to the clarity of the comment, but could still be rewarded with some understanding from Level 2. Overall, however, there was a pleasing degree of empathy for all four characters, suggesting a high level of engagement with the scenarios presented. Students responded well to the drama in Source A and the slightly bewildered sense of achievement in Source B.

# Question 5

The task set for Q5 was to write an article on travel, engaging with the view that our obsession with travelling ever further and faster was potentially damaging, expensive and a waste of time. The different strands of the question are intended to provide less able students with some ideas for their response, and to level the playing field to some extent in terms of cultural experiences. Students' own immediate associations with travel are likely to be varied: they might be of European holidays every summer, or of the trip by bus to college, or in some cases, the traumatic journey from war-torn Syria to the UK. Indeed, all of these featured in responses to the writing task, demonstrating the open-ended nature of the question has some success in addressing a wide range of student experiences.

For those students who struggle to generate ideas, the different strands of the question are a useful guide. However, there is a danger that less able students depend too heavily on these strands and provide a different point of view on each, thereby inhibiting their chances of offering a coherent argument in Level 3. For many of these students, a mark towards the top of Level 2 is a significant achievement. What is clear is that centres need to ensure that students are supported in developing an approach to the task in Q5 which best suits their level of skill.

Overall performance on Q5 was slightly lower across both AO5 and AO6, perhaps suggesting that students may have been less well prepared for this exam than in previous series. The construction of an argument for a newspaper article is to some extent dependent on taught elements, so may not come naturally to students after an extended break from learning.

## Strongest responses

The variety of responses reported by examiners was very broad. Whilst some students engaged with ideas about the need for a work-life balance, others focused instead on the environmental damage of flying. Given the cohort, many students were working at Level 2 and produced more or less organised arguments dealing with issues ranging from the risks of driving a car, to the unspecified dangers of being abroad. Some took inspiration from the source texts and made points about the dangers of extreme sports in general, and mountaineering in particular. A few picked up the idea of 'further and faster' in the statement and developed an argument around inter-planetary travel of the future.

Those responses rewarded with marks in Level 3 were able to take a step back and assemble an argument which encompassed an overall view on whether travel was a dangerous obsession or a necessary pleasure. Once they had a coherent overarching idea, they were able to organise individual paragraphs and points accordingly. Discourse markers helped to clarify their argument, and the phrase 'In conclusion' seemed to help many focus their final paragraph on a re-emphasis of their central thesis. If the single sentence which encompasses the argument can be introduced in the first paragraph and re-stated (however creatively) in the closing paragraph, with something akin to clarity in between, students will be closer to achieving a mark in Level 3.

There were precious few students working at Level 4, but all examiners reported how refreshing and invigorating their responses were. There were highly critical accounts of cultural appropriation and the damage caused by an exploitative tourist industry, dangerously skewing local economies and affecting local communities. Other students took an historical perspective and wrote how Christopher Columbus would be turning in his grave to think of the casual way in which modern travellers crossed the Atlantic, using Google maps to guide them around the Americas. These were confident, assured, often humorous and ironic, articles, well worthy of marks at the higher end of the mark scheme.

## Weaker responses

The weakest responses were seen where students found it difficult to combine the points they made into a single identifiable argument. Many rambled and flipped from positive points about travel to negatives, leaving the reader confused about their overall perspective. There were still too many responses which depended on an over-use of statistics, which were rarely plausible and often ludicrous. Still students are rolling out fake experts from Oxford or Harvard Universities to support their points of view. Students are advised to avoid these particular features in favour of developing a topic sentence with their own well-worded details, without relying on spurious professors for help.

Marks for Technical accuracy (AO6) saw a slight dip too, with the usual inaccuracies on display. At lower levels, students tended to fail to correctly demarcate their sentences, although in the main there was a pleasing variety in sentence forms demonstrated. Spelling was, as ever, erratic and the range of punctuation varied enormously.

Most students were able to provide evidence of an attempt to vary their use of punctuation marks and sentence forms, and to use some complex spellings. The challenge for students and teachers is to convert this partial success into a more secure and consistent display of technical skill. AO6 marks are awarded for both range and accuracy. Some students may be accurate but less ambitious or varied in their range; others may be more adventurous in trying out a wider range but falter in terms of accuracy and consistency. The holy grail is, of course, to achieve both, which is something examiners look forward to seeing in the future.

# Further support

## Mark ranges and award of grades

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