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# A-LEVEL ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

7707/2 Exploring Conflict  
Report on the Examination

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## Exploring Conflict: General comments

As ever, this paper was a pleasure to mark with students' enjoyment of both of their set texts for Section A and Section B evident in their responses. Whilst a shorter exam than Paper 1, the demands of Paper 2 are high on students as they have to demonstrate a variety of skills – transforming texts creatively, being self-critical in analysing their own work and also analysing the stylistic choices of other writers.

All five Assessment Objectives appear on Paper 2 and students who were aware of how these were assessed in their individual tasks performed the best. For others, it was a shame that there was sometimes a lack of awareness of how they would gain marks. For example, in the Critical Commentary where there was little discussion of the base text for AO4 and, in Section A, a lack of understanding that AO3 marks would credit an understanding of genre and contexts of production and reception.

## Section A: Writing about society

The most popular set text to adapt was *The Great Gatsby*, with the other literary text, *The Kite Runner*, the second most popular choice. *Into the Wild* was the most popular non-literary text, but far fewer responses were seen on *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*.

As a general reminder, the word count suggestions for both the Recreative Writing (approximately 300 words) and the Critical Commentary (approximately 400 words) are there only as a guide and these do not have to be rigidly adhered to. Some students seemed to be spending much effort on tallying their word counts very visibly. While it is good practice to be aware of these, there is no rubric infringement for either exceeding them or going below the word count suggestions on each task. Shorter recasts – especially those even below the suggested word count – were often self-penalising as there was less scope for using the base text and in exploring the new point of view presented with development and imagination. In a minority of instances, recasts that were overly long may have affected overall paper timings, particularly impacting the commentary which was sometimes too brief.

## Recreative writing

Students seem to enjoy the recreative writing task and, at the highest levels, examiners were reading engaging and interesting narratives that demonstrated well-developed creative skills. At the lower level of achievement, students still seemed to enjoy the task but they produced more literal and chronological retellings of the extract which were less focused on developing a new point of view from the base text.

Most students opted to shape their piece into an interaction between the account giver and account receiver. This allowed for shaping of dialogue alongside consideration of thought processes and these interactional exchanges allowed for creation of interesting character dynamics/relationships. Dialogue was used most effectively when it added to the retelling and characterisation. In the best recasts seen, dialogue allowed Daisy to reveal her true feelings about Gatsby and Tom Buchanan in the voice created for her. In *The Kite Runner* recasts, dialogue was used most effectively to signal General Taheri's concern in maintaining his honour in front of his old army colleague – speech features such as ellipsis were used to signal subtly what he was choosing to reveal (or hide) about Soraya's past difficulties. At other times, the amount of dialogue

was a distraction in the recasts and resulted in a less interesting and more superficial narrative as the inner thoughts of the account giver were not presented.

There was a wide variety of genres this year. Many students opted to present their account in the form of a letter, particularly for *The Kite Runner* with Taheri sending a letter to his colleague to inform them of Soraya's marriage to Amir. Students who opted to construct a letter for *The Great Gatsby* thought about possible friends of Daisy either prior to or after her wedding. Some students wrote two letters by Daisy, one in the flush of her romance with Gatsby and one after her marriage to Tom. This worked effectively to illustrate her transition and thoughts about one romantic encounter to another. As a genre, letters were fairly successful; there was some thoughtfulness about who the letter would be sent to, and allowed for some clear focus on key events in the retelling. Other successful genre choices were telephone calls – used most in responses to *The Great Gatsby* and *Into the Wild*.

Less successful genre choices included emails to the McCandless family for the *Into the Wild* account, where content was either presented in a prosaic way, not allowing for much imaginative detail, or included Kalitka's feelings which were not appropriate for concerned and anxious parents. Monologues were also popular (especially for *The Great Gatsby*) but were often less successful, showing very little awareness of who the account receiver might be. Similarly, diary entries were sometimes used with very little recognition that there might be an audience for the account.

For most tasks, students who had carefully considered the implication of the receiver of the account produced stronger recasts. In *The Great Gatsby*, recipients of the account were primarily female friends and sometimes Jordan was a more specific choice, which worked well as she was clearly familiar with much of what had happened in Daisy's early relationship with Gatsby. Those who considered the direction for the receiver to be a 'close' friend could play with what Daisy would reveal or keep to herself about her feelings for the two men in her life. The audience for *Into the Wild* was the McCandless family and most used this to their advantage by considering the different reactions of Walt and Billie to the news Kalitka gave them.

One of the problems of representing a major character, as opposed to a minor or excluded participant, is that students have to use the more developed characterisation offered by the base text writer and then make it their own. There were challenges for students in writing from the perspective of Daisy, a major included participant in *The Great Gatsby*. For some, this created opportunities to develop what they saw as Fitzgerald's characterisation of her as shallow and materialistic. For others, it allowed them to consider an alternate point of view, either exploring an inner self unrevealed in the novel or to foreground her as trapped by the early twentieth century society she inhabited. It seemed a little easier for those presenting General Taheri, perhaps because of Hosseini's rounded characterisation of him in the base text.

There was also still some evidence that students understood the task to be a pastiche of the original writer's style and this sometimes restricted the scope for originality and flair. This was especially true of recasts for *The Great Gatsby* with the choice of figurative language used, often in Daisy's dialogue, attempting to replicate Fitzgerald's style. Obviously this establishes opportunities to make connections in their Critical Commentary, but it can also restrict their creativity. Some students were also trying to copy too rigidly Krakauer's "new journalism" style and this restricted their choices of genre or made them make genre choices that complicated their account ie Kalitka's interview with journalists about his meeting with the McCandless family.

Overall, more successful responses:

- used the base text subtly, and with careful selection of key information and attitudes both from the extract and from the wider text
- presented characters with distinctive and convincing voices, both in light of the base text but also in the register created for them in the recast
- chose a range of narrative devices to sustain the interest of the reader: speech and thought presentation, description, setting etc.
- responded well to the given passage, showing good knowledge of the wider text and clear understanding of key characters and their relationships with each other
- responded well to the task, addressing each of the bullet point prompts to shape their writing
- considered the account receiver carefully, thinking about what their relationship might be with the account giver – eg professional relationship between Kalitka and the McCandless family, Walt and Billie as concerned parents, close friends or family members that Taheri could confide in, Taheri’s acquaintances or army colleagues, close friends of Daisy, gossiping women eager to hear about Daisy’s transgressions etc.
- offered a developed sense of the account receiver, either creating a rounder character for them or using their contributions to meet the brief of the task
- located their writing within a very specific scene, considering when and where the account would be given – eg at the flea market, at the Buchanan’s home, in the South Seas during the Buchanan’s honeymoon, at the McCandless’ home etc.
- kept control and shaped the narrative so that there was a clear sense of an appropriate ending to the writing.

Overall, less successful responses:

- gave only literal retellings of the extract, offering little new insight from the changed point of view
- responded only partially to the base text, showing very little understanding of the text, or confusing the chronology of the texts, eg. stating Baba’s death as occurring before Amir’s marriage to Soraya
- selected genres which did not allow for much imaginative detail
- responded only partially to the bullet point prompts, offering a brief or incomplete account, eg. focusing solely on Taheri’s thoughts about life in America, focusing solely on Constance’s lack of emotion in *Mr Whicher*
- relied very heavily on dialogue, with very little narrative detail, which did not always allow for development of ideas
- focused on extensive scene setting that did not add to the narrative, taking a long time to address the account details and then curtailing these abruptly when out of time
- showed very little awareness of an account receiver, sometimes making only sporadic use of second person pronoun or tag questions in monologues to suggest that there might be an account receiver present
- concluded their recast very abruptly with very little sense of having considered the narrative structure of their piece
- did not develop their narrative cohesively, sometimes moving between one detail and another very abruptly without clear signposting
- misunderstood the task by not considering the account giver or account receiver, eg. presenting a conversation between two people, neither of whom were Daisy, talking about her relationship in a style that was very similar to the account given by Jordan to Nick in the novel,

or describing Constance's appearance and lack of emotion whilst in prison without presenting this from Dr Bucknill's perspective.

### Critical commentary

As a reminder, the commentary is marked and judged as a separate piece to the recreative writing and students can still be rewarded for analysing their own decision-making in light of the base text, despite a less successful recast. Students took different approaches to the structure of their commentaries. Some chose to lead with a connection to the base text, others with their own choices followed by connections to the base text. There was no one approach that was notably the best structure, although students with seemingly pre-planned, rigid frameworks seldom produced the most effective commentaries. Such structures impacted students' ability to make careful and judicious choices from either their text or the base text as they were responding to a recreative task that they may not have practised.

More successful responses:

- thought very carefully about their own narratorial decisions, reflecting on choice of narrative voice and use of speech and thought presentation
- organised their ideas into paragraphs exploring and developing a key aspect of their narrative or language choices and making relevant and developed connections to the base text
- reflected on characterisation decisions, both in terms of the account giver and the account receiver
- reflected on key themes they chose to foreground through their narrative, eg. critical commentary of 1920s societal values/greed in *The Great Gatsby*, critique of patriarchal dominance in *The Great Gatsby* and *The Kite Runner*, an awareness of Chris' rejection of material trappings in *Into the Wild*, etc.
- made appropriate references to the base text to consider the writer's presentation of key themes and ideas, exploring character relationships and reflecting on language choices to construct their own narrative
- made careful selections from their own writing to consider intended effects and construction of meanings
- made reference to specific language features to explain their narratorial decisions.

Less successful responses:

- offered a descriptive account of their piece, sometimes re-telling the narrative in a chronological way and structuring their commentary according, eg in paragraph 1, in paragraph 2 etc.
- made limited reference to specific language features to explain their decisions
- made limited or descriptive reference to the base text, sometimes extracting quotations and describing how they made similar/different choices without explaining reasons for decisions, eg. simply saying 'Fitzgerald used a homodiegetic narrator. I also used a homodiegetic narrator but instead of Nick I used xx'
- selected only language features that matched those of the writer of the base text and then offering little interpretative explanation eg. motifs and symbolism used by Fitzgerald, new journalism techniques used by Krakauer
- made broad reference to characters and themes in the base text, not always offering convincing comment, eg a misreading of Daisy and Tom's relationship

- made very broad and general reference to writer's choices in relation to their own writing, eg. 'Hosseini uses descriptive language, I also included description'
- did not reflect critically on their own writing, simply stating what they had done.

## Section B: Dramatic encounters

A *Streetcar Named Desire* was by far the most popular choice of set text, with the majority choosing Question 13 on character's social backgrounds. *Othello* was the next most popular play, with the majority choosing Question 9 on characters' betrayals. Fewer responses were seen on *All My Sons* and *The Herd*.

Students approached the questions in many ways that could be equally effective. This ranged from interweaving discussion and analysis of the extract with other salient points from elsewhere in the play, to focusing on the extract and then choosing other sections of the play to illustrate similar or contrasting interpretations and characters. Likewise, with contextual points, some students show to use opening and closing paragraphs for their main contextual points, especially about the larger aspects of genre. Other students chose to link contextual factors into their analysis when it seemed to support either their analysis of language features or interpretation of the question focus and some students choose to combine both approaches.

More successful responses:

- responded well to the question theme, considering some subtle interpretations that allowed students to explore ideas about betrayal, threat, grief, social background and alienation
- used the given passage as a springboard from which to explore the question theme in interesting and developed ways:
  - sometimes considering different characters, eg. for *Streetcar* looking at Blanche, Stanley, Stella, Mitch and even Eunice to explore social backgrounds, or *Othello*, Iago, Brabantio, Desdemona, Emilia to examine betrayal in *Othello*
  - sometimes considering different interpretations of the theme under study, eg. physical vs. psychological threat in *Othello*, intentional vs unintentional betrayal in *Othello*, the act of betrayal vs the consequences/effects of betrayal in *Othello*, feelings of alienation brought about by patriarchal values, social background, loneliness, familial separation, gendered or racial othering and loss - both of others and sense of own self in *Streetcar*
- made very careful and purposeful selections from the wider play to explore the question theme in depth
- made precise reference to specific scenes or episodes from the play to explore the theme and characters' relationships with each other
- anchored discussion in careful consideration of salient language features, exploring ideas about face, politeness, cooperative discourse and power in some depth, as well as addressing patterns in specific word classes and sentence functions
- made thoughtful reference to ideas about genre, eg. focus on tragedy and the fall of a tragic hero/heroine, reflection on Aristotelian tragedy, Machiavellian villains, as well as melodrama, Southern Gothic and plastic theatre
- made detailed reference to salient aspects of stagecraft in shaping meanings, eg. kinesics and haptics, Stanley's grin, Iago's soliloquy, Othello rubbing his forehead etc.
- selected relevant contextual details to explore the question theme further, eg. critical views, contexts of reception at different times (eg. post me-too) and socio/historic factors.

Less successful responses:

- showed limited understanding of the question theme, or responded to it in a very literal way, eg. considering only physical threat in *Othello* in Question 10, only seeing Blanche's alienation in *Streetcar*, Question 14
- drifted from the question theme, eg. exploring toxic masculinity with reference to Stanley, or Blanche's deceptions in *Streetcar*, considering Iago's character in *Othello* with only brief reference to betrayal or threatening behaviour
- offered very limited or very descriptive accounts of the given passage
- made one or two references to the wider play, but in very general terms, or offering a descriptive account of other scenes selected
- did not make the shift to discussion of other sections of the play clear and explicit, making the interpretation of the question focus harder to follow
- made limited reference to language detail, sometimes quoting without linguistic description, or listing features without exemplification
- focused all language analysis on individual word classes eg verb, noun etc.
- referred to language features vaguely eg. a semantic field (without saying what this was of), imagery, low frequency/high frequency lexis, phrases (when it was often a clause being quoted)
- made partial or no reference to aspects of genre
- made limited or no reference to aspects of stagecraft
- made general, and quite sweeping, comments about context, eg. all Jacobean were racist, overstating acceptable violence towards women in the Jacobean era/1940s
- based contextual focus on interpreting how audiences may react to what is being presented on stage.



### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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