

GCSE

English Language

8700/2

Report on the exam

June 2022

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Summary

Overall performance

The overall performance of students on this paper was as expected, despite the shifting parameters which have impacted on education and assessment over the past three years. Students have experienced considerable disruption to their education and have had limited time with teachers at KS4 to prepare for their exams. However, GCSE English Language is slightly different to other GCSE specifications in that it is based almost entirely on the assessment of skills rather than subject-based knowledge. As such, it might be expected that students would fare better in English than in other subjects and the data seems to support that expectation.

Performance in this paper has remained very steady with just a 1% fall in the mean mark since the last major series in 2019. This very slight drop in achievement could be accounted for by evidence that, in response to some questions in Section A, students were not as confident about which skills were being assessed. Equally, in response to Section B, students' writing skills were not as well-matched to the task as they might have been had they spent more time preparing. However, it must be stressed that these are minimal shifts in performance which could be seen between any large series and the next. There is no evidence in the responses seen in June 2022 of a widespread or significant drop in standards for either reading or writing.

Advanced Information provided to students and teachers for GCSE English Language was limited to identification of the genre of the two unseen sources in Section A and identification of the required form for the writing task in Section B. There was little evidence that the former information had any significant influence on students' ability to engage with the sources, although there were some generalised references to autobiographical writing which bore limited relevance to the specific sources.

In Section B, the impact of the Advanced Information was more noticeable with evidence of students using headings, subheadings, images, and even columns in some cases, in an attempt to recreate some of the genre conventions of the form of a newspaper article. In many cases, these served as a distraction to students rather than a hindrance, except in the case of subheadings which sometimes led students to leap from one topic to another in their articles, without thinking or planning for any internal coherence. This detracted from the structural integrity of their responses and prohibited their movement up through the levels accordingly.

Source texts

The source texts used in this series reflected a diversity of views on the experience of camping across the centuries. In Source A, Emma Kennedy's autobiographical account of her camping holidays in France in the 1970s offers the viewpoint of a nine year old girl through the lens of an adult writer. Kennedy shares her initial reluctance to enjoy the dismal experience of a family holiday under canvas, contrasting this view with an eventual sense of thrilled excitement as a storm lashes down upon their tent. This reversal of opinion is mirrored in Source B, where the writer's apparent enthusiasm for a primitive camping life at the start is counterbalanced by his ultimate judgement that humans do nothing but damage to nature, despite their naïvely good intentions.

Assessment objectives

AO	Common student errors
AO1 - Identify and interpret explicit and implicit information and ideas. Select and synthesise evidence from different texts.	Lack of detailed inferences and synthesis.
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.	Inferring meaning rather than commenting on effects of language use.
AO3 - Compare writers' ideas and perspectives, as well as how these are conveyed, across two or more texts.	Comparing different aspects in texts which were not 'like for like'.
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.	Development of argument not always clearly expressed.
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).	Sentence forms insufficiently varied.

Question 1

Performance on Question 1 increased significantly from June 2019 when 60% of students were awarded full marks for the question. In June 2022, that figure rose to 80%. This reflects the accessibility of the text and the preparation students have had to ensure they were able to select carefully from the eight given statements.

There was a combination of explicit information and implicit ideas in the designated section of text in Source A. There was some more complex vocabulary used in the statements which reflected the vocabulary in the source text itself, such as ‘malevolent forces’, but these did not seem to faze the vast majority of students. Some students appeared to adopt a process of elimination to arrive at their choice of four true statements which seemed to serve them well.

Common strengths in responses

The students who scored full marks were able to identify the information accurately, made effective inferences regarding the narrator’s experience and were able to track the information in the eight statements chronologically through the given extract.

Common misunderstandings

One ‘false’ statement was more frequently selected by students as ‘true’ than any other, which was statement E. This statement indicated that Emma Kennedy was a teenager, which was indeed false as the text states that she was only nine years old and therefore officially not a teenager. It is possible that the girl’s youth and her rebellious attitude were picked up on by students who then associated this with the stereotype of a teenager and persuaded them that statement E was true, but that would be purely hypothetical. Statements A and H were those most reliably selected as true by students.

Students should be encouraged to read through all the statements before selecting any as true. The statements are in chronological order and should be read through and matched against the text extract in order before selecting any of them. Once four statements have been selected as ‘true’, they should be read again to check that they are correct.

The most effective way to secure the four marks is to colour in the lozenge in the answer booklet to identify the four true statements correctly. There were significant numbers of students who failed to follow the instructions, which resulted in their answers being less than clear. Students regularly coloured in the whole box, scribbled out their answers, ticked their answers, wrote next to the boxes to indicate they had changed their mind, circled all the boxes and every other possible combination of misreading the instructions. In order to be sure that students’ intentions are clearly recorded and assessed, they should practise completing the boxes in the official answer booklet before the live exam.

Question 2

The question focused on the two campsites and the differences between them. Students were asked to select relevant details from each text related to the camping sites, interpret this information and infer meaning from these ideas. In addition, they were expected to synthesise the ideas and information, interpreting the differences (and any similarities) between the texts.

The focus for Question 2 is always deliberately finite in order to avoid any overlap with the focus for Question 4. However, there was plenty of relevant material to draw on regarding the camping sites. In Source A, the camp site was a long established, purpose-built modern site in France, popular with families and equipped with a range of facilities to entertain children, although these appeared rather the worse for wear. In contrast, Source B presented a site which was unspoilt and untouched, virgin forest where the Americans set out to establish their own rudimentary camp, using nothing but the materials around them to do so. Whilst one site was destined for annual holidays, created by the tourist industry with a commercial purpose, the other was simply a beautiful, natural location for a pioneering adventure for a group of American pioneers.

Performance on this question was very slightly down, with a mean mark of 3.6% this summer as opposed to 3.8 in June 2019. This means that the average student was able to make some attempt to infer and identify some differences, indicating achievement at the top of Level 2. There was a similar small decrease of 0.4 in the number of students awarded Level 4, with just 3% of students awarded marks in the highest level, which serves as a reminder of the challenges inherent in this task.

Common strengths in responses

The best responses were those where students focused very clearly on the two camping sites to the exclusion of other information and ideas. These students were often able to identify and interpret ideas about the campsite in Source A such as the condition of the facilities (the tatty pool and shabby table tennis hut) as an indication that they had been well-loved and well-used, or conversely, that the allure of the camp site had lessened as an indication that nowhere looks as sparkling as it does when we first experience it. In contrast, in Source B, students often picked up on the natural elements of the campsite (the leaping fish and lapping lake) as examples of the idyllic location.

To achieve Level 3, students were able to make comparisons between the two campsites, contrasting the beauty of Source B with the tawdriness of Source A, or the readymade shelter of tent and caravan in Source A with the need to build your own shelter in Source B. These like-for-like comparisons were judged to be clear and therefore in Level 3 because the same aspects of the campsites in each text were being synthesised: the environment and the accommodation in the two examples above.

To achieve the highest level, students need firstly to be clear in their interpretations and then to provide additional detail about their ideas and extend their understanding to include concepts such as the purpose of the campsites: to service a tourist industry which demands entertainment facilities in Source A or to provide the unspoilt conditions for a band of adventurers to develop their pioneering skills. Students working at Level 4 were often able to draw on concepts such as morality: pointing out the ethical dilemma faced by the writer in Source B whose desire to enjoy the primitive, natural life leads, ironically, to a spoiling of the very environment he described initially as 'paradise'.

Common misunderstandings

The weaker responses were often characterised by a poor focus on the task. Many students were distracted by the writers' experiences of camping and failed to focus sufficiently on the actual camping sites in the source texts. Inferences relating to the writers' experiences of camping were rewarded as 'attempts' due to the tangential nature of the students' focus. Writers' perspectives are central to the focus of the Question 4 task, and no reference to these will be rewarded at Level 3 or Level 4 in Question 2 because the Assessment Objectives are very different. To achieve Level 3 or higher, students must address the correct focus.

Students are advised to read the task carefully and ensure they have understood the correct focus. They need to make inferences related to the focus in both texts, supporting their response with appropriate textual detail. Alongside this, students should make connections between the two source texts, interpreting the similarities and differences between the camp sites.

A concrete focus for the task in Question 2 has been used before: the surfboards in 2018 and the boats in 2019. Students need to prepare for this type of task by reading not just literary non-fiction but a diverse range of other non-fiction texts which incorporate a focus on concrete issues. They need to practise asking themselves questions such as: why does Source A's campsite have a swimming pool and table tennis tables? What purpose might they serve and to whom? Who provided them and why? Why have they deteriorated, and what does this indicate about their use? This will support students in the challenge of synthesising and interpreting information and ideas from future unseen sources.

Question 3

The task in Question 3 invited students to engage with the language used in a short paragraph from Source A. Students are expected to identify interesting uses of language and comment on the effects they create. The focus of the question was on the description of the storm and the rain.

There were many examples of language use to comment on, such as the visual imagery of the circling storm, the slashing rain, the boiling soil and the plumes of dust. There were also a number of aural effects created, by alliteration and onomatopoeia, to describe the metallic sound of the raindrops falling and the low rumble of the thunder as the storm approached. Students appeared to have little difficulty in understanding the language used, and the majority selected an appropriate range of examples.

Performance on this question followed the same trend as Question 2 with a slight fall in the mean mark from 6.3 to 5.7. This may reflect the specific demands of this task with a focus on language analysis rather than inference or understanding of ideas. At the higher end of achievement, there was also a small drop in the number of students achieving a mark in Level 4, decreasing from 10% in 2019 to 6.7%, suggesting some impact from the disruption to schools.

Common strengths in responses

In the higher level responses seen by examiners, students offered clear explanations of how language examples created effects. Popular choices were the circling storm, which many students related to the behaviour of a predatory creature such as a shark, a wolf or a vulture, clearly linking the image to the effect of a threat and to making the campers feel vulnerable. Another successful choice was the use of the adjective 'slashing' to describe the rain, which students linked to the actions of a bloodthirsty killer, emphasising the violence and murderous intent of the storm.

The very best responses were able to extend their understanding of the language effects across the passage as a whole and explore the link between the images of warfare. For example, connecting the metallic sound of raindrops to the sound of bullets and the slashing of the rain as knives, with the low rumble of thunder like the approaching boots of an army of soldiers and the relentless rain as a battering ram. These comments were awarded as detailed (Level 4) as they demonstrated an accumulation of language effects and a perceptive understanding of the use of language.

Common misunderstandings

However, students sometimes struggled to select appropriate language examples. Many students chose to write about the description of the soil looking as if it were boiling, with plumes of dust rising from the ground. It's an unusual image and not necessarily easy to analyse. Students often struggled to relate the boiling soil and the rain to hot and cold temperatures. The image of the storm circling would perhaps have been a more accessible image to explore.

Students are reminded of the need to focus first and foremost on the effects of words and phrases and to avoid generalised comments such as the effect of language being to 'show what the storm is like.' There was relatively little evidence of students making inferences in their response to this task, which was an improvement from previous series. However, there was a tendency amongst some students to write about the effect on the reader too literally. Responses such as, 'The language used to describe the storm makes the reader feel terrified,' are neither accurate nor helpful.

Question 4

The task in Question 4 was to compare the writers' attitudes to camping, allowing students to consider the text extracts as a whole. The task required students to engage with the writer's individual points of view, and the methods they use to convey their perspectives, as well as to compare the differences and similarities between the writers' points of view across the two extracts.

Most students found this to be a liberating task, enabling them to write more freely about the two texts and to show their understanding of both ideas and methods without the more specific demands of Questions 2 and 3. This freedom was evident in the length of many students' responses, which were often three or four sides of the answer booklet. There was a very welcome and refreshingly enthusiastic response to the question, with very few examples of misunderstandings or misinterpretations of either text. A few students were unclear whether the storm or the campers themselves had caused the destruction to the forest in Source B, and a few students were unsure if the phrase 'deliciously spine-tingling' indicated that Kennedy was indeed happy at the end of Source A or just petrified.

The task, however, is a complex one, and not all students were able to combine the different skills assessed in this task and to do so clearly, explaining their response fully. The mean mark for this question bucked the trend for the other Section A questions, rising slightly to nearly 7 marks since 2019. This might perhaps suggest that performance on this question is less dependent on preparation time in class. The percentage of students reaching Level 4 also increased to 5.3%, which confirms anecdotal evidence from examiners that they saw many detailed, engaged and reflective responses from higher ability students.

Common strengths in responses

Students in Level 3 were able to clearly identify Source A's perspective as that of a young girl resistant to the charms of a family camping trip in France. Responses were judged clear (Level 3) if students could explain this point of view fully by giving some examples of her reluctance: that she felt holidays were deceptive in tricking you into thinking everything was beautiful, whereas in fact they were simply arduous and even torturous, for example. It is the fullness of the response, and the relevant examples or textual detail used to support the assertion, which lifts the understanding from an attempt (Level 2) to clear (Level 3).

The very best responses in Level 4 were able to set their response within a conceptual framework, choosing to see the two perspectives as contrasting in terms of their optimism or pessimism, for example, and often tracking the structural changes on their points of view as the extracts progressed. Higher ability students were able to make comparisons about the writers' perspectives such as the connection they portray between humans and Nature. It is when communing with the evening light by the lake in Source A, and in contemplation of the destruction of the forest in Source B, that the two writers appreciate the power of nature's impact on their lives.

Common misunderstandings

Weaker responses tended to show some understanding of the two perspectives but lacked the clarity of explanation to secure a Level 3 mark. Their comparisons were more likely to be mismatched, comparing one aspect of one source with a different aspect of the other, for example comparing the writer's euphoric response to the weather in Source A to the writer's determination to build a shelter in Source B. Assertions about Kennedy's ingratitude, for example, need to be

followed by an explanation of how or why she appears to be ungrateful to move from Level 2 to Level 3.

Some students working at a lower level compare the writers' perspectives as being 'positive' and 'negative'. This is essentially saying no more than one is good and the other is bad or one likes it and the other one doesn't. Unless there is further detail provided to indicate what, how or why the writers feel as they do, the comment is judged to be generalised and therefore Level 1.

The same can be said for comments on methods used by the writers. Students frequently referred to methods such as the shift in perspective from the start of the extract to the end without explaining that the storm was the trigger point which shifted the perspective or that the shift in perspective created a contrast between unhappiness and contentment. It is these fuller explanations which clarify the understanding and secure the mark in Level 3.

One further element which stood out, and was noted by examiners, was a tendency to write at great length. Whilst this could be a sign of enthusiasm, which is a positive sign of engagement, it was often felt that these students were repeating themselves and demonstrating the same skills multiple times. This does not help them to achieve any more marks, and students would be advised to write slightly shorter responses, ensuring they cover all the relevant skills, and then move on to the next task.

Question 5

The task in Question 5 challenged students to consider the value we place on holidays and whether a holiday needed to be expensive and faraway in order to provide rest and relaxation. This was clearly linked to the theme of camping in the two extracts, which provided students with some inspiration, if required, for their Writing response.

The question contained fewer strands than in previous series, which allowed students to concentrate their argument on the topic in a more focused way. Indeed, this seemed to particularly support students working at the lower end of the range, who responded well to the focus of the task. The range of responses was diverse: some students agreeing, and others disagreeing, in more or less equal measure. Some took a moral or environmental view of the ethics of travelling abroad. Others were more circumspect, arguing that a wet weekend in Blackpool could hardly compare with the tropical delights of a paradise island in the Pacific.

There was some evidence of students being influenced by the Advanced Information that the task in Question 5 would be to write an article. There was a minority of students who wrote in columns, drew pictures, incorporated captions and used subheadings. In general, these served to distract students slightly from their writing, but attention to most of these formal features was no worse than unhelpful and unnecessarily time-consuming.

The exception to this is subheadings which, where they were used, had a significant impact on the internal structure of students' arguments. By their nature, subheadings allow the writer to skip between topics and to move between different aspects of their subject, as a writer of a factual report might do. If the task, however, is to construct a coherent and cohesive argument, then subheadings can seriously impede a student's ability to demonstrate that skill. Subheadings can replace the need for any meaningful link between one paragraph and the next. The result is an argument which jumps more or less randomly between aspects such as the environment, the cost and the disruption at airports without any attempt to make any cohesive connection between them. Students would be well-advised to steer clear of their use in this context.

Most students were able to engage with the ideas and present at least some successful argument. The mean mark for AO5 was at the top of Level 2 (11.4), and the mean mark for Technical Accuracy (AO6) was also high in Level 2 (8.0). This reflects almost exactly the performance on Paper 1, suggesting a very consistent pattern of achievement. The performance is slightly down on the mean mark in 2019, which, again, could reflect the impact of disruption in schools.

Common strengths

The best responses were those where the student presented a coherent response to the statement, taking one perspective and followed it through to the end. As in previous series, there was less evidence of students flip-flopping back and forth, both agreeing and disagreeing with the statement, which often results in an unclear argument. It was gratifying to read so many engaged and thoughtful responses, with students adopting an appropriate and lively tone, and often original style, to match the audience and purpose of the task. Despite the privations of lockdown, most students had sufficient experience of holidays to develop a meaningful point of view. There was also evidence that students drew on their broader experience of days out to the seaside and weekend trips to visit extended family, as well as referencing the more vicarious experiences of social influencers and the representations of holidays widespread on social media.

The highest performing students were able to take a conceptualised approach and set the issue of travel within an ethical, environmental, cultural or social media context. This lens allowed them to develop their perspective on the theme of holidays and travelling abroad, to provide more detailed and thoughtful responses which were more likely to convince or even compel. Technically, a very similar picture emerged as has been seen before: they used a wide variety of punctuation to support more complex grammatical structures and to shape sentences created specifically for effect. Technical skills were deployed deliberately to create effects and to enhance the content of their arguments.

Common misunderstandings

There were weaker responses which failed to meet the criteria for Level 2, often characterised by their brevity or their lack of focus. As we have seen in previous series, these responses tended to be very simple in their approach and offered a limited variety of ideas. They tended to be less formal in style and register and lacked any structural features to organise and develop their ideas about holidays.

Some students tended to offer responses which were more advisory or more persuasive in tone, which did not improve the clarity of their argument, suggesting, for example, that the reader should try Butlins as the answer to their holiday dreams. Others were distracted by the inclusion of pre-prepared vocabulary lists, with words such as euphoric, heinous, lackadaisical, jubilant and perplexed evident in a significant number of responses. Where these are carefully and precisely deployed, this is no cause for concern. However, there were far too many instances where these words were shoe-horned into sentences with little regard for context, meaning or tone, and the effect could only be judged 'an attempt' rather than 'clear'. There are sadly few effective short-cuts to developing a wide vocabulary.

Weaker responses also demonstrated, as ever, a lack of variety in the sentence structures attempted, and a subsequent absence of a range of punctuation. Lack of control of agreement was frequently evident in these responses as students struggled to maintain secure syntax.

Further support

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