

GCSE ENGLISH LANGUAGE 8700/1

Paper 1: Explorations in creative reading and writing

Report on the exam

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Summary

Overall performance compared to last year

Students in this cohort experienced disruption to their learning, as did those in the Summer 2022 and November 2021 series. There was a clear sense of students engaging with the text and giving real focus to the questions despite a disrupted path to their exams.

Areas where students excelled

The extract from 'The old Man and the Sea' by Ernest Hemingway focused on a meeting between an old fisherman and a boy whom he had taught to fish and with whom he had fished on the sea. Students showed clear engagement with the relationship between the two characters and how it was that the boy's perception of the old man differed to that of his parents and some more successful fisherman.

Question 1 was very successful this year with 97.7% of students gaining 3 or 4 marks.

Students who chose 'cheerful and undefeated' from the passage for Question 2 tended to show clearer understanding when they explored how the effect of these words were then contrasted with the earlier, more negative words such as 'gaunt, scars, alone'. Some students were able to explore concepts such as determination, hope and a relationship with the sea that meant that the fisherman was attracted back to the sea even when it was unforgiving. There were some strong answers that discussed Santiago's eyes as 'the same colour as the sea' indicating that Santiago was part of the sea or had the spirit of the sea within him.

Question 4 presented several details with which the students engaged, especially the fact that the boy states that it is his father who has no faith in the fisherman rather than the boy himself. Answers were structured more clearly than in previous series and there was greater focus on explaining ideas in more depth.

Some students were able to introduce themes such as trust and confidence to their discussion of the mutual respect between the two characters. These themes, well supported by textual references and discussion of how trust and confidence were shown, enabled these students to move up into the higher levels. There were some insightful ideas around the word 'serve', where students explained the boy's devotion to the old man, even if it meant that he was volunteering to catch the old man's bait for him. There were also some insightful points made about the boy's future; the old man was prepared to see the boy fish elsewhere if it meant that he was successful – at the detriment of their relationship and time spent together.

In Question 5, the narrative option, 'Write about an unlikely friendship', presented some really engaging ideas drawn from fables, children's stories and myths. It was pleasing to see students working consciously with different genres. Stories set in wartime gave some students the opportunity to write about humanity, kindness and peace which gave another layer to their writing. The descriptive option, 'Write about a fishing village', was easily accessible and students were able to draw upon holiday experiences, as well as the picture, to give a sense of the struggles of the fishing industry, as well as the impact of the winter months.

Areas where students struggled

There were a significant number of students who chose details from outside of lines 1-5 for Question 1.

As in the last series, examiners reported that there were many responses for Question 2 that were content focused only. Linguistic focus on individual words and short phrases is demanded by this question and candidates who wrote about unfocused, lengthy quotations were often unable to write about the analysis of language.

There seems to be less confidence with Question 3, writing about the effects of structure, and it was noted that some students opted to write only about one section of the extract. This limited their opportunity to write about the shifts across the extract, as well as leading them to write about less useful features of the extract such as sentence length. Students could be reminded that the structural features need to be anchored to a specific part in the text and the focus needs to be: What is the effect of that structural feature at that point in the text? Why this feature here?

There were fewer responses for Question 4 that explored the writer's methods. Without using writers' methods in a response, students are not able to gain all of the marks in a level. Analysis of language, including the skill of single word analysis, and the effects of structural features are awarded marks for this question. In past series, some students have responded to the question with a methods based approach, starting each paragraph with a focus on a writer's method, for example, 'The use of the word 'serve' shows that the boy respects the old man.' Students could be reminded of this approach for some or all of their answer.

For both Question 5 options, there were obviously some learnt lists of vocabulary, learned structures and a prescribed use of linguistic features. Although students may require such support to improve their confidence, these features are often misapplied.

Assessment objectives

AO	Common student errors
<p>AO1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> identify and interpret explicit and implicit information and ideas select and synthesise evidence from different texts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> selecting information from outside of the given lines choosing quotations that do not match with the point being made
<p>AO2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using long and unfocused quotations which lead students to write about content not language/structural analysis Only discussing one section of the extract for Question 3 Failing to use structural terminology when recounting the events across the extract
<p>AO4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluate texts critically and support this with appropriate textual references 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An absence of writer's methods in responses Assuming that the boy thought Santiago was a failure
<p>A05</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using contrived vocabulary or linguistic features, eg forcing all 5 senses into a description Describing details but without any structural link between them Losing control of the atmosphere or the established imagery, eg a bright sunny day that later is a 'black abyss' Lengthy sections of direct speech which become less successful
<p>A06</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It was felt that there has been a significant decline in clear, legible handwriting. Punctuation errors: incorrect semi-colons and incomplete direct speech punctuation, incomplete sentences

Question 1

Students responded very well to the question with a obvious confidence in writing concisely and focusing on the old man. Some students were able to gain four marks by writing the first half of the first sentence; many chose to separate the details on to different lines.

Common misunderstandings

Some students chose details from outside the lines. Although the straightforward nature of the passage meant that most students gained marks, there were some students who were not able to gain any marks as a result. Students could be guided to circle the correct section of the passage in order to focus them more tightly on the specific lines.

Question 2

Question two focused on how language was used to describe the old man. Students commonly discussed the simile 'as old as the erosions in a fishless desert' and the adjectives 'cheerful and undefeated.' The adjectives 'old, thin and gaunt' were also commonly discussed. Students who focused in on short phrases and individual words tended to be more successful, as in each series and students could be reminded that explaining ideas in two to three sentences can often present more understanding.

Common misunderstandings

Students who chose 'old' and 'thin' were often not able to attain more highly than low in level 2. These adjectives are difficult to analyse alone beyond the man being more elderly than the other fishermen and 'thin' led students to speculate that he was hungry or perhaps dying. 'Gaunt' led some students to write about having worked hard and having been 'worn out' by his efforts to catch fish. Students could be reminded to explore more descriptive language items, or to see these words less literally, in order to avoid speculation. Students who wrote about the simile tended to focus on one aspect of the image such as 'fishless desert' not as an image but as a literal idea. This led to answers were students were commenting on deserts having no water and fish not being able to live in deserts, so the fisherman should not try to fish there. Students could be guided to parts of a simile but then to add these parts together – in order to see the whole image. 'Blotches' was rarely discussed with success; most students saw this as an indication of illness.

Some students were able to select textual references and also subject terminology but were not secure with the comments on effect; paraphrasing of the quotation was used instead of a comment on effect.

Question 3

The passage had a linear structure, with juxtaposition between the old man and other fisherman, memories of previous fishing experiences and the differing opinions of the old man – from the boy, contrasted with his parents and groups of fisherman who either pitied the old man or laughed at his failures.

Common misunderstandings

Examiners reported that responses to this question were less successful than in previous series and that there was less confidence with the concept of structure. There were many responses which did not use structural features, but rather were content-based and so failed to gain marks.

There were a noticeable number of responses that commented only on one part of the extract. Although some students may have been affected by the time constraints, many students seemed to have opted to discuss the middle or the ending only. This is limiting to attainment, as the shifts across the text and the ideas or characters who have developed by the end are not then discussed. Additionally, the answers that responded only to one section of the text, tended then to discuss the sentence structures at a low level, for example, 'When the old man speaks he uses short sentences. This shows that he is sad.' Responses that were more successful did not discuss sentence length, which can lead to spurious comments, but instead looked at why certain events happened in that particular sequence, the changes in focus from present to past, the differences in opinion.

Question 4

Students engaged with the statement and there were increased numbers of responses that discussed both halves of the statement: 'While it seems that the old man widely seen as a failure, in this part of the story the writer shows that the boy still has faith in him and that they greatly respect each other.' Students wrote with understanding about why the old man was a failure, but also how the boy attempted to show that he still valued the old man and his skills.

Common misunderstandings

As has been seen in previous series, students can be engaged with contextual aspects that then lead them away from answering the question. In this series, some students wrote about respect for the elderly, the difficulties of old age and how very old people, 'such as those in their 80s' cannot expect to succeed as they are dying. Students could be reminded that all understanding needs to be anchored by the details taken from the text; should they find themselves writing sentences about old age in general terms, they are very likely to be writing without attracting marks.

As can happen with names, some students were mistaken and wrote about the boy as Santiago or as though the boy and his parents were against the old man as he was a dangerous fisherman. Such ideas of misreading often come from a very small number of details from the text used in isolation. Students might be reminded to find more details from the text, but also to see how the chosen textual details link together. Some students were confused by the differing versions of the memory where the boy and the old man went fishing together. Some students took the idea of the boy being 'nearly killed' as the fisherman being dangerous.

Question 5

Descriptive option: Write a description of a fishing village

This response used the prompt of an image showing a fishing village with a bright rainbow in the sky.

Strongest responses

The strongest answers clearly drew upon their own experiences of fishing, or being on holiday and visiting a fishing village. Students engaged with the equipment such as crates and fishing boats in particular and drew on the idea of age and success/failure from the extract for Section A. Successful answers had a clear sense of atmosphere and, if there were any changes to the atmosphere, there was a clear reason for this change, signalled either by an event or by a stated change in season or time of day.

Some students personified the sea as either friend or foe and were able to carry this through their answers with appropriate imagery. Some answers chose to write about the old man from the extract and imagined his successes before the failure that is presented in the passage. There was some successful use of the other details from the image, such as the painted houses and how they might be a 'beacon' or 'bunting' depending upon the atmosphere of the response. Use of the rainbow was often successful, sometimes after a storm and a treacherous time at sea, or as a symbol of celebration after a successful fishing season.

There was more development of fewer ideas in the more successful answers, and therefore these students were able to present clearer images.

Weakest responses

Weaker responses tended to stay within the details of the image and listed what could be seen. The image is meant to be a prompt and students are therefore invited to add their own ideas and the wider scene as suggested by their imagination.

Some students misunderstood the purpose of the task and wrote instead advertisements for holidays in a fishing village or discussed fishing as a hobby. This means that it is difficult for students to show appropriate skills for description. There was a reliance on the second person narrative voice, 'you can see there is rainbow, you know that there is fish in the sea.' Almost immediately, this became unhelpful to the descriptive flow.

Question 5

Narrative option: Write a story about an unlikely friendship

This option seemed to be as popular as the descriptive task and students had a wide range of ideas. 'Unlikely' caused some difficulty for some students and, instead of writing about mismatched friends, they wrote about characters who did not like one another and would never be friends.

Strongest responses

The more successful responses had a clear sense of the setting for the unlikely friendship. There were a number of responses that had a setting based in conflict: WW1 in the trenches, a border crossing, rivals in a sporting competition. Such ideas often give clear, defined events that mean

that students are able to control their writing and do not include foregrounding information that is often superficial and less engaging. It was interesting to see some students being confident with their choice of genre; there were responses that drew on fable or myth as a frame for their narrative.

As with each series, more successful answers focus on fewer events in more detail. There were fewer examples of contrived vocabulary and more examples of students selecting vocabulary with understanding of its effect and how it matched the atmosphere of the response. For AO6 there was some evidence of students using a wider range of punctuation and also of sentence types used for effect.

Weakest responses

Students who wrote less successful answers tended to write wide ranging responses that showed the background to characters and to the unlikely friendship. Such answers explained how long characters had been at school together, the parties they had been to, and how much they were different to one another, and then moved to the moment of the unlikely friendship being formed. By writing a 'back story' students often find themselves writing very briefly, without being able to form any kind of atmosphere, setting or characterisation with which to engage the reader.

Although some students find more confidence in a scaffolded response to their practice pieces, they could be encouraged to be more discerning with their use of structure and linguistic features in the exam. Some students used sensual imagery, but it is not often that all five senses are useful in a narrative. There was evidence of using different structural features, such as the contrast between light and dark, but some students lost control of these shifts and they became contradictory, for example, a bright and sunny day with piercing sun that breaks in to a house and becomes a black abyss. Changes in time, from past to present for example, were not always clearly signalled, leading to some confusion in the narrative.

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.

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