

GCSE

English Language

Paper 2: Writers' viewpoints and perspectives

Report on the exam

Published: November 2022

Contents

Contents	Page
Summary	3
Assessment objectives	4
Question 1	5
Question 2	6
Question 3	7
Question 4	8
Question 5	9
Further support	11

Summary

Overall performance compared to last year

Performance in a November series has always historically been lower than performance in the June series for any given year and this year is no exception. The aftermath of repeated school closures and the impact of this on teaching and learning is clear to see in a continued pattern of poorer performance. The mean mark for November 2022 was 32.3, which is a slight improvement on 30.6 in November 2021. However, this is still lower than the mean mark of 36.4 marks in the last 'normal' November series in 2019.

However, there was evidence of students working at every ability level and they have been awarded appropriately for their high level skills.

Question paper and source texts

The source texts used in this series were based on the theme of sleep and the experience of not sleeping. Whilst the 19th Century text was an article written by American journalist Fanny Fern with a humorous and hyperbolic approach to the experience of being kept awake at night, the modern text by journalist Arifa Akbar was an account of her personal journey to find a cure for her lifelong insomnia. Both writers expressed clearly their views and attitudes towards their individual experiences and there were plenty of opportunities for students to engage with what is essentially a universal theme. The writing task drew on the theme of sleep but set this within the context of school and the need for radical reform to ensure that schools are explicitly addressing the needs of young people.

Assessment objectives

AO	Common student errors
AO1 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• identify and interpret explicit and implicit information and ideas• select and synthesise evidence from different texts	Lack of interpretation
AO2 <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	Misreading of the source to confuse who the writer was addressing
AO3 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Compare writers' ideas and perspectives, as well as how these are conveyed, across two or more texts	Lack of focus on methods and how the writers conveyed their perspectives
A05 <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.	Arguments were not always framed coherently with a clear purpose
A06 <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.)	Lack of punctuation including sentence demarcation

Question 1

Performance on Question 1 varies significantly from one series to the next. The percentage of students achieving 4 marks out of a possible 4 fell to just below 40%, which is clearly much higher than the 10% of students who achieved 4 marks in November 2020 but considerably lower than the 76% of students achieving full marks in November 2021. However, 90% of students achieved at least 3 marks out of the maximum 4 available, suggesting the vast majority made just one error in selecting a true statement.

The reason for the variation in marks is to do with the nature of the statements and the level of students' understanding or misunderstanding. It is not easy to predict exactly which individual words, phrases or ideas students will struggle to understand, or which pieces of information they will find challenging to retrieve accurately. The question is written with the whole range of ability in mind and is intended to discriminate between those who read carefully and accurately and those whose reading skills are less advanced or who have less nuanced understanding of the ideas and vocabulary in the text. There was a combination of explicit information and implicit ideas in the designated section of text in Source A, as has been the case in previous series.

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. Where students followed the instructions given in the question and coloured in the lozenge in the answer booklet to identify the four true statements, their answers were clear it was easy to award the marks.

Common misunderstandings

There was no obviously 'false' statement which was selected by students as 'true'; nor was there a particular statement which was routinely rejected as 'false' when it was in fact 'true'. The statement most likely to be incorrectly selected as true was that it was the first time the narrator had slept well for weeks. In fact, she says that she slept well last night and the night before that and all this week. This requires careful reading and an understanding of both tenses and the chronology of the article. Another common error was to select the statement that the writer had black velvet sheets on her bed, when the article states that she fell into a 'dark velvety sleep'. This required students to recognise a figurative rather than concrete use of language. Both are valid tests of reading skills, designed to discriminate, and they appear to have been effective.

There were more than 160 different combinations of answers offered by students. Many of these alternative combinations included the selection of five, six, seven or even eight statements as true. Selecting more than four statements will result in an automatic reduction in the student's final mark for this question.

The same advice for students is relevant in this series as in previous series: they should read through all the statements before selecting any. Remember the statements are in chronological order and should be read again and matched against the text extract in order. Once the four statements have been selected as 'true', they should be read again to check that they are correct.

Question 2

The question focused on the methods which the writers used to help cure their insomnia but which failed. Students were invited to make interpretations of the texts and make connections between the different methods used. In almost all cases, students focused on the failed methods rather than the one method (self-hypnosis) which succeeded and there were no instances reported of examiners being required to reduce the mark because of a lack of focus on failed methods.

There was plenty of relevant material to draw on, with the writer in Source A recounting a number of different ways she had tried to resolve her problems sleeping, ranging from giving up certain foods, such as coffee and sugar, to buying a new therapeutic mattress. In contrast, the writer in Source B listed a similar number of attempts to get to sleep, but these were less drastic, more temporary and less intrusive on her lifestyle.

Performance on this question was slightly lower than it has been in previous November series, with a mean mark of just below 3 marks, which is at the lower end of Level 2. This suggests that many students struggled to make any inferences or attempt to make the necessary links between the methods used by the writers to help them sleep.

Common strengths in responses

The strongest responses were those where the students made clear interpretations about the methods used, for example, in Source A, that the financial investment in buying a new, expensive mattress showed the lengths to which she was prepared to go for a cure, or, in Source B, that the writer attempts to adapt her environment to fix her insomnia rather than looking to address any psychological issues. Students who achieved Level 3 were also able to make comparisons between the differing approaches they took, for example, one trying many methods showing her resilience, whilst the other resigned herself to fewer methods which showed less commitment.

To achieve the highest levels, students needed to extend their understanding in detail or to be perceptive. These answers were rare but there were some perceptive responses which identified the methods in Source A, for example, as showing a more methodical, research-based approach to her illness, shown by gradually increasing the seriousness of the methods adopted, whereas the writer in Source B was more random in her selection of methods, leaping from one idea to another with little rationale or reasoning. These perceptive responses were rewarded with marks in Level 4.

Common misunderstandings

Weaker responses were characterised by paraphrase rather than interpretation. Many students provided a full list of the different methods the writers used, with textual detail to support the response, but without any attempt to interpret the information and ideas. Students should focus on addressing the phrase ‘what you understand about’ the topic, making inferences about the methods used. Simply adding ‘which shows that the writer was determined’ lifts a Level 1 response into Level 2 with an attempt to infer. Inferences at Level 2 are by definition only partially explained, suggesting that giving up food was because sugar is bad for you, for example, or that the writer in Source B calls the methods ‘foolish’, which means she doesn’t think they will work. These inferences require a fuller explanation, to indicate how or why, to move in to Level 3.

Students are advised to read the task carefully and ensure they have 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 different methods used by the writers.

Question 3

The task in Question 3 invited students to engage with the language used in a short paragraph from Source B, the 19th century text. Students are expected to identify interesting uses of language and comment on the effect they have on the reader. The focus of the question was on how the writer described the mosquitoes and their impact.

There were many examples of language to comment on, from the simile 'nervous as a cat' to the personification used in the word 'tormentors'; the repetition in 'lain on your face...' and the metaphor 'never-ceasing war song'. Students occasionally chose words outside the given lines, such as 'demons', which were rewarded for their quality, but the mark would have been at the bottom of the level if they only chose words from outside the prescribed lines.

Performance on this question remains low. This may have been in part the result of a misunderstanding where students misread the opening lines of the given section of text. Second person narrative is less common than third or first person, but is not particularly difficult to follow. The opening paragraph to the extract clearly establishes that the writer is addressing the reader. However, it is possible that some students were guided to answer Question 3 first before reading the entire source, misreading the line 'Ah! You too have suffered', and assumed the writer was addressing the mosquitoes rather than the reader. This led to some very contrived responses with students suggesting that the mosquitoes were lying on their faces, wearing nightgowns and clenching their little fists... This is a salutary warning against any 'short cut' advice which guides students away from reading the whole text before attempting to respond.

Common strengths in responses

Students rewarded at Level 3 offered clear explanations, for example, of how the writer was engaged in a battle with the mosquitoes, the 'war-song' indicating the noisy buzz of the insects announcing their arrival, creating fear in the writer, as the approach of soldiers might do. There was also clear comment on the repetition of 'lain on your face...' suggesting how the writer has tossed and turned repeatedly during the night, trying to evade the mosquitoes and protect herself from their bites, indicating how restless she is.

The very best responses in Level 4 were often detailed, extending the idea of warfare and the ongoing battle of 'war-song' to include the idea of torture created by the personification in the word 'tormentors' suggesting the deliberate, targeted, brutality of the mosquitoes in this nocturnal attack, and the irony of using such hyperbolic language to describe such tiny foes.

Common misunderstandings

At Level 1, students tended to select examples of language and identify the language technique with general accuracy but failed to comment on what effect it created beyond a generic comment about the simile 'nervous as a cat', for example, showing us that she was nervous. At Level 2, students would typically attempt to explain something about the nature of cats – that they are easily scared, timid, fierce etc – but would fail to link their comment to the writer's experience of the mosquitoes. In other cases, at Level 1 students would pick out the word 'flying' and comment that this wasn't possible after a mosquito bite, or at Level 2 they would suggest that this was exaggeration and showed she was in pain, without explaining the effect of the hyperbole and the image of the writer 'flying' across the room.

Students are reminded that this task is analytical and they are required to explain in as much detail as they can the function of an image and how and why specific words are chosen.

Question 4

The task in Question 4 was to compare the writers' attitudes to sleep, allowing students to consider the extracts as a whole. The task requires students to engage with the writers' individual points of view and the methods they have used to convey their perspectives, as well as to compare the differences and similarities between the writers' points of view across the two extracts.

Question 4 produced some of the best responses on the paper. Despite the challenges of this multi-dimensional task, students were able to respond to the texts with some thoughtful and engaged comparisons of the writers' experiences and attitudes. In Source A, the writer is calm and methodical in a mostly chronological account of her journey, recalling the impact on her mental and physical health and celebrating, tentatively, the success of self-hypnosis. In contrast, the writer in Source B provides a frenzied, scattergun narrative that seeks to reproduce the hysterical experience of not sleeping and her haphazard attempts to get a good night's sleep.

The primary concern of examiners in this series was the failure of many students to comment on the methods used by the writers to convey their perspectives. For some students, there was confusion between the methods used to cure insomnia and the linguistic and structural methods used by the writers in their writing. Others simply focused on the perspectives without engaging with 'how' these views were portrayed, which inevitably suppresses their marks. However, the mean mark for this question has risen since last November to 5.4 marks, suggesting that performance on this question was relatively higher than Question 2 and Question 3.

Common strengths in responses

Students in Level 3 were able to clearly identify Source A's single-minded, long term suffering from insomnia and her relentless pursuit of a solution, for example. They used a range of relevant quotations to support their comments and were able to compare these to the writer in Source B's exaggerated and far less serious view of not sleeping, which was short-lived and superficial in contrast to Source A. Students at Level 3 made 'like for like' comparisons, selecting the same aspect from each source to compare, for example: how long they had suffered.

The very best responses in Level 4 were few and far between but were more abstract or conceptualised in their understanding, showing an awareness of the 'big ideas'. Some chose, for example, to write about how each source was structured and how the writers' perspectives shifted from pessimism to optimism or vice versa and how this served to subvert the expectations of the reader. Others focused on the writers' concerns with either physical or mental factors which were affecting their ability to sleep and how scientific advances in medicine and psychiatry in particular provided the modern writer with greater insight into the causes of her insomnia.

Common misunderstandings

Weaker responses tended to revert to paraphrase. Level 1 responses recounted explicit ideas from the text and made basic cross references without any evidence of independent understanding. Again, a comment from the student that the text showed the writer was annoyed or frustrated by the mosquitoes was sufficient understanding to move into Level 2. The majority of students fell into Level 2, showing some understanding of the two perspectives, but their comparisons were more likely to be mismatched, comparing one aspect of one source with a different aspect of the other. The lack of comment on methods ensured many did not move any higher in Level 2 than 6 marks.

Question 5

The task in Question 5 was based on the need for radical reform in education to suit the needs of teenagers who are different in many ways to adults. Students were well-placed, with very recent experience to draw on of school and college settings, to generate ideas and material for their writing responses. There was no shortage of possibilities for them to engage with.

The question encompassed ideas about sleep, socialising and learning which provided students with a choice of approach. Some focused on teenagers' need for sleep and the requirement for school timings to change, whereas others focused on the differences between adults and teenagers, concluding either that they were, or weren't, very different. There were also arguments that school as an institution was outmoded given recent technological advances permitting online learning, and other more political arguments that education should be more about preparing young people for life rather than rote learning of facts which were more or less redundant.

Most students engaged enthusiastically and with experience to the ideas and present at least some successful argument, with the mean mark for Content and Organisation (AO5) in the middle of Level 2. There were very few Level 1 responses. The mean mark for Technical Accuracy (AO6) was also mid-level 2 suggesting the pattern of performance was very similar to previous November cohorts.

Common strengths

The best responses were those where the student presented a coherent response to the statement which adopted a perspective which was reinforced by a solid conclusion. Students mostly adopted an appropriate tone and style for a letter to an Education Minister, although there was some uncertainty about what powers such a minister might have.

The highest performing students were able to develop their arguments beyond the practical changes they wanted to see in school and engaged with a more philosophical, political or economic perspective on the place of education in society. They tended to adopt a distinctive voice, taking a specific stance and following it through convincingly. They were often thoughtful and occasionally compelling. Technically, they used a wide variety of punctuation to support more complex grammatical structures and to shape sentences created specifically for effect.

Common misunderstandings

There were a few weak responses which failed to meet the criteria for Level 2. These tended to be very short, simple in their approach and offered a limited range of ideas. At Level 2, students typically presented their ideas in poorly structured paragraphs without a sense of overall coherence or a clear set of proposals: the letter ended with the reader unsure what was expected to happen next. There were fewer instances of pre-prepared vocabulary, which was an improvement on the summer series, but in many responses at Level 2 there was little conscious choice of vocabulary or use of linguistic devices to lift the style of writing above the mundane. Shaping and developing a series of points into a coherent argument is what is most likely to take a student into Level 3.

Weaker responses also demonstrated a lack of variety in the sentence structures attempted, and a subsequent lack of punctuation. Poor control of agreement was often evident as students struggled to maintain secure syntax, possibly a consequence of a significant number of students writing in their second (or third) language. Too frequently, basic sentence demarcation was missing.

Further support

Mark ranges and award of grades

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