

GCSE

English Language

8700/1

Report on the exam

June 2023

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Summary

Overall performance compared to last year

Students approached this series with engagement and focus. Despite the disruption over the last few years, their determination to do their best was evident.

Areas where students excelled

The extract from 'The Life of Pi' by Yann Martel was easily accessible to students across the ability range. Students were able to explore the hyena's behaviour, as well as Pi's feelings about being trapped on a boat at sea with a hyena. Examiners reported that Question 2 enabled students to select a variety of language items and that there was increasing confidence when discussing single words and/or imagery.

Question 4 had two straightforward ideas to discuss – 'funny' or 'frightening' and this enabled students several opportunities to agree, to disagree or both to agree and disagree with the different parts of the statement. Many students were successful in explaining why the hyena was funny, including its ignoble final position; others showed equal confidence explaining why it created fear with its 'blank' eyes and its clicking claws.

Question 5 enabled students to draw on their own experiences of animals, be it from real life visits to a zoo, their own pets or from watching wildlife documentaries. As a result of this relatable topic, students included a range of animals in their stories, some in interesting or emotive situations. There were some highly engaging responses, including watching an orca swimming around a pool as an unhappy attraction, attempting to rescue a rhino from poachers and a robin who appeared to have a message. Students who were able to control the pace of their writing and to narrow their focus were more successful.

Areas where students struggled

Some students appear to be responding to the questions in an unorthodox order. Section A is designed to build the skills for Question 4, the highest tariff question in that section. Although timed conditions place certain demands on students, those students who have taken the steps through Questions 1-3 tended to have more insight into writer's methods, as well as more thorough answers for Question 4.

It was felt that there continues to be a lack of confidence with Question 3, where students do not use structural phrases to guide their comments. There appeared to be less confidence with 'why this event and why now in the text?'

In the reading section, there were fewer answers that were able to draw on thematic or conceptual ideas. Perceptive analysis can be developed by discussing ideas such as instinct or prejudice.

The descriptive option for Question 5 led some students to stay close to the image and to navigate around the image as though they were walking around the zoo. The image can always be used as a prompt, as a jumping off point into one's own ideas and with that approach the students could draw on more of their own imaginative ideas. There appeared to be a reliance for some on changing the atmosphere of the zoo to a dramatic extent. This led to neglectful, sorrowful zoos emerging from a setting which, at the start, had been bright and welcoming. Changes in

atmosphere can be effective, but this needs to have a reason and could perhaps be used more sparingly than affecting the whole setting.

Vocabulary choices tended to be more considered and therefore more successful. However, words such as 'obsidian,' 'lackadaisical,' and phrases from poetry drawn from the English Literature specification continued to creep in. Students could be encouraged to create their own versions of images and to describe a scene where everything seems to be lacking in energy. This tends to be more successful than stating the feelings of characters.

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 answers from outside of the lines, often the passage selected for Question 2. Mis-spelling words that then changed the meaning of the answer, eg hardly attackers |
| <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 phrases or whole sentences for Question 2, negating the discussion of the effects of individual words Identifying the simile, 'like the symptoms of a skin disease' but then stating that the hyena had an actual disease Forgetting to analyse any structural features Using structural features and references but lacking confidence in exploring any kind of comment about why the writer had placed that event in that part of the story. |
| <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"> Short answers which meant that the discussion could only be short and the ending of the extract was not included. Less discussion of conceptual aspects |
| <p>AO5</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"> Staying unnecessarily close to the image for the descriptive option. Dramatic changes in atmosphere which were contrived Choosing unrealistic scenarios Opaque imagery Including unnecessary amounts of direct speech Animals talking, which often became difficult to engage the reader Moving into discursive writing on animal welfare, appropriate for Paper 2 Writing that did not address either task Legible handwriting continues to be a significant challenge for some students |

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>AO6</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students 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">• Being keen to use vocabulary that did not match the tone, style or audience eg lackadaisical continues from last summer• Less confidence with varying sentence types |
|---|---|

Question 1

The students had one focus this year – find 4 things about hyenas.

Common strengths in responses

This proved very successful with the majority of students gaining 4 marks, often within the first two lines. 'Attack zebra, gnu and water buffalo', for example, gained three marks and 'attack in packs' two marks.

Although inference is not required, it was encouraging to see many students understanding the word 'hardy' and using instead words such as 'resilient' or 'tough' to describe hyenas.

The given lines for this question provided a range of clear details and students across the ability range were able to access this question successfully.

Common misunderstandings

Students who did not attain 4 marks were most likely to be choosing details from outside the given lines.

Misquoting lead to some students missing marks where others were successful with the same quotation. When a quotation is misspelt and this changes the meaning of the answer, a mark cannot be given. Some students wrote 'hardly attackers' rather than 'hardy attackers' and so therefore were not given a mark.

Question 2

This question focused on the description of the hyena and students seemed to choose more widely across the extract.

Common strengths in responses

'Beyond redemption', 'like symptoms of a skin disease', 'doglike' and 'suffering from a receding hairline' were popular choices and students were able to show understanding of the writer's intentions. Students seemed to be more secure with the language devices that they had found, with more accurate terminology used.

Common misunderstandings

Some students continue to use excessively long quotations for their language analysis. Preceding a long quotation with 'the phrase' is not accurate and therefore, some students found themselves responding to the content rather than the language itself. Students could be reminded that a single word taken from a long quotation is likely to be more focused on meaning and effect.

There was some misreading of 'like the symptoms of a skin disease' as if the hyena was in fact infectious.

Some students read the description of the hyena's appearance as if it actually was made up of other animals.

Writing about semantic fields is often successful when the student is able to write about some of the words within that field. Some students accurately identified a semantic field but were not confident with, or shied away from, further comment.

Question 3

The shifts in focus from the words of Pi's father, Pi's attention to the hyena's strange behaviour and then its rather sad collapse enabled many students to discuss how structure was used by the writer.

Common strengths in responses

The words recalled from Pi's father at the start of the extract enabled many students to comment on how the hyena was not a fierce predator after all. Those who made this link and then commented on the change from initial expectations, tended to reach Level 3. More successful answers also commented on Pi's attention shifting from one part of the hyena to another, from the power and strength of the hyena rocking the boat to his glance to the horizon seeking possible escape. Those students who are able to note smaller structural shifts and explain the effect of these are often more successful.

Common misunderstandings

Although the hyena ended the extract having been unwell, some students read this as the hyena having died. This led to some comments that showed misunderstanding of how the writer was using a structural climax.

The level of comment was seen to be weaker and there appeared to be more comments explaining what the student was interested in, without this being linked to structure. Students could be guided to consider how structure is used to keep the reader's interest or to create understanding. For example, Pi looks from the hyena, to the horizon and back to the hyena. Being unable to look at the horizon for longer than a moment, suggests that the hyena's threat is present and close. Looking to the horizon suggests that Pi is looking for a potential escape, only there is none.

Many students focused on the beginning of the extract only. This meant that it was difficult to show any structural shifts or understanding.

Writing about sentences was not often linked to why that sentence type at that point in the text.

Although the structural features 'beginning', 'middle' and 'end' are not assigned to specific lines in the extract, some students were incorrect in matching these to their selection of evidence.

Comments such as 'engages the reader,' 'makes the reader read on,' 'makes the reader feel like they are there,' are vague and therefore are simple comments. Students are more successful when they use more specific comments that are linked to the extract.

Question 4

Common strengths in responses

Students who seemed less confident on Questions 2 and 3 often wrote more successful answers for Question 4. The terms 'funny' or 'frightening' engaged students and there were many answers that discussed both aspects of the statement. Many students discussed the 'yip, yip, yip' sound of the hyena and could interpret this as either annoying and perhaps humorous, or frightening as the indication of an attack. Some successful answers were able to draw upon the movement of the hyena and its effect on the boat as a sign of its strength and the 'clicking' claws as building tension. The word 'seized' led many students to discuss how Pi had no control over his feelings and some extended this to Pi being trapped by his feelings and being on the boat.

The description of the hyena's eyes as 'blank and frank' enabled some students to discuss more perceptive ideas such as instinct, a complete lack of emotion or reason, although themes and concepts were included infrequently. There were some answers that were able to draw on structural aspects as a writer's method, such as the building tension leading to an anti-climax, 'I prepared for my end. For nothing.'

Some students linked the hyena's running around the boat like 'an indoor track' to that of a small, over-excited child, which led to further success. Those who wrote about this detail were often able to explain that its collapse at the end was due to its over-exertion and vomiting was only to be expected rather than feared.

The hyena's unfortunate end was discussed by many students and there were answers that argued that this was funny, but also others that saw this as pitiable.

There were fewer reports of students confusing themselves by moving frequently between agreement and disagreement. Answers seemed to be shorter than in previous years, despite the significant number of details to discuss and the accessibility of the question. An answer can come in at any level, but brief responses inhibit movement up the levels.

Common misunderstandings

Although the question itself engaged students and offered many opportunities to discuss the statement, students seemed less inclined to draw across the skills from Questions 2 and 3. Exploring language features and/or discussing the structural shifts are credited for this question. Students who were able to explain that Pi's feelings changed towards the end, that the hyena was not at all the threat he had assumed, tended to be more successful.

Some students were confused by the sentence, 'I was disappointed.' Some students interpreted this as Pi was disappointed that the hyena stayed under the tarpaulin, when in fact it started to run, while some read it as the hyena was disappointed.

Misreading the end of the source, thinking that the hyena had died, led some students to believe that Pi had defeated or killed the hyena. Sometimes students interpret an extract through the lens of a previous extract, which is unhelpful.

There were valid points made about the hyena seeming pitiable at the end of the extract, but this led some students to drift away from the statement and into criticism of the journey, the mixture of animals on the boat and Pi's inability to house the animals appropriately.

Question 5

Descriptive option: Write a description of a zoo or wildlife park as suggested by the picture.

Strongest responses

This appeared to be the less favoured of the two options. The stronger responses used the image as a prompt to their own experiences and/or their imagination. Students who were able to describe an aspect of a zoo or wildlife park were able to engage the reader more easily. Although there were a range of animals in the image, selecting a few rather than taking a tour-like approach meant that they were able to build up a moment in time, or a specific event, rather than moving on quickly.

The focus on animals meant that students were able to develop ideas about an animal that they found more intriguing. There were successful descriptions of curious giraffes or meerkats, indolent, lazing lions and noisy parrots.

Weakest responses

Taking a step by step approach, as though walking around the zoo or wildlife park, meant that many students stayed in Level 2. Brief details are then open to the examiner's imagination, rather than that of the student.

Some students were keen to change the atmosphere in the zoo or wildlife park, but the extremes of atmosphere that some used tended to lead to very contrived writing. Although one might hope for a bright and sunny day, these switched without warning to descriptions full of despair, suffering and decay. This binary approach to changing atmosphere was often difficult to understand.

There were some descriptions that chose to focus upon neglected animals and images of abuse. Without some frame for these situations, the descriptions became less successful. Students could describe a collection of animals, forgotten in the grounds of a stately home, a zoo in the midst of a warzone, a collector's animals used only for a television show. By framing a description, the writing has some rationale, geographical, historical or temporal.

Some students lean towards ideas that have little or no cohesion across the whole response. Although the ideas may have some interesting words, it can be very difficult to convey one's ideas if the imagery is contrived and the ideas are unconnected. Clarity is often lost because the student has lost their direction.

Recalling one's own visit to a zoo or wildlife park sometimes led to students taking a simplistic approach; waking up, having breakfast, queuing up, seeing animals, going home. Taking a moment in time and avoiding the style of a recount could be more successful.

There were a number of descriptions that ended with a child falling into an enclosure. Although such frightening situations have been reported in the news, some students struggled to control their writing past the point of describing the child falling in. It seemed that students were unsure where to take their descriptions, and so moved into narrative. Overlap between description and narrative is seen in each series, but planning the piece can often maintain the original focus, and can also avoid rapid and unconvincing conclusions.

Narrative option: Write a story about a human meeting an animal.

This option seemed to be the more popular and students were able to draw on a wide range of animals and types of encounter. The panel enjoyed marking these narratives, which were often inventive. Animals included domestic pets, with kittens and puppies favoured by many students. There were a wide range of wild animals included, which many examiners found engaging – some were attacking, others were in a situation where they needed help. The latter tended to be more successful, as they encouraged an aspect of relationship between human and animal. Students conveyed a real sense of care, concern and empathy towards animals in a range of settings and appeared to be drawing from real life experience, hopes of interacting with a particular animal, or wildlife documentaries with a conservationist message.

Strongest responses

The more successful students had decided upon a situation and an animal, but had also chosen a theme that they wanted to explore. There were themes of rescue, extinction, a bond between human and animal, comfort, therapy and awe at discovering a new species.

The range of animals led to diverse settings: a sealion in a wildlife park pool, a bird of paradise in a jungle clearing, a squirrel nesting in a shed, a jaguar evading poachers in a rainforest, dinosaur bones in a sandstone quarry. These enabled students to have a sense of setting and time. These responses managed the timed conditions by focusing upon a moment in time, rather than trying to include journeys and other events that led to the main focus.

Students who did not aim to complete the whole narrative, but rather took the response as a chapter or a dramatic moment in a story were also able to manage the time more successfully. By focusing on a moment in time, they were then more successful in creating a clear, easily imagined narrative, rather than one that became too swift and superficial.

Some animals were written with a quality such as bravery, resilience or defiance. This also enabled more successful answers, as students were able to describe their actions and their physical appearance through a particular lens. There were some highly engaging responses. Those that became convincing and compelling had understood that the task aligned with a theme and a sense of atmosphere. Examiners enjoyed reading responses with ideas such as an elephant being returned to the wild, a bear caught in a trap to later be a tourist attraction, a dog sniffing out a landmine and a dove lying in no man's land.

Weakest responses

Talking animals tended to be a feature of less successful answers. Although this is used in animated films and even as a stream of consciousness in some films, it is very difficult to make successful in a narrative or description. Occasionally, students were able to create a wry or self-aware comment from an animal, but generally students found it difficult to manage a verbal exchange at a higher level.

Stories that involved animal attacks varied in success. Those where students were able to build up the tension were engaging; many others focused on the violence and injury but found it difficult to develop further aspects.

Being given a kitten or puppy as a surprise gift tended to be less successful because these responses became more like recounts than narratives. Writing about one's own experiences can be helpful but does need to have narrative features such as vocabulary for effect, atmosphere and setting. First person narratives tended here to be more child-like in style.

Further support

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