

# A-LEVEL ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERATURE

Paper 1: Telling Stories  
Report on the Examination

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## General Comments

Students showed that they were generally well prepared for this new exam paper in that the vast majority:

- completed all 3 questions
- included relevant ideas
- wrote at some length and produced reasonably developed answers
- showed an understanding of how to comparatively approach Question 1
- showed knowledge of their set texts and poetry.

Quality of responses obviously varied enormously, with students gaining marks from low Level 1 to top Level 5. However, there were relatively few students who scored very low marks. There were hardly any rubric infringements and very few incomplete papers. Some students chose to answer the questions in reverse order or not in the order on the exam paper. Whilst this was acceptable and did not appear to negatively affect some students, it was clearly an issue for other students who ran out of time (and probably energy) on questions worth more marks that they had left until last. It therefore makes more sense to advise students to tackle the questions in the order in which they appear on the paper.

## Assessment Objectives

### AO1

This AO assesses 3 distinct strands:

1. Selection and analysis at appropriate language levels
2. Use of concepts, methods and terminology
3. Expression and presentation of ideas.

- Those who achieved well on this AO were able to explore an aspect of their text through clearly identifying language levels and exploring patterns within them, using precise linguistic terminology to identify particular features. There is no hierarchy of methods or language levels on this specification, so students who chose a purposeful approach and were able to linguistically analyse their texts were able to access good marks.
- Interestingly, a number of students who struggled to use many precise linguistic terms in their Section A and B answers, often did much better in Section C. In general, Section B answers were likely to contain the least precise language analysis.
- Some terms were not well understood:
  - Juxtaposition – often used to denote any kind of contrast
  - Oxymoron – often used to denote any kind of contrast in words
  - deixis - often misapplied as a number of students labelled any kind of spatial or temporal reference as 'deixis'. For example, in Question 1, 'France(.)May nineteen sixty eight' was often cited as an example of temporal deixis and 'Champs de Mars' spatial deixis. Students and teachers may find the following link helpful in discussing deixis: <https://thedefinitearticle.aqa.org.uk/tag/deixis/>

### AO2

This AO assesses 3 distinct strands:

1. Maintaining a focus and selecting appropriate detail
2. An ability to interpret
3. Analysis of narrative techniques / construction of poetic voice and authorial craft.

- Students who did well on this AO provided an interpretation based on clear methods of analysis and gave close, text-based evidence to support their ideas.
- Students who did not make appropriate selections from the texts on which to base their discussion inevitably found it more difficult to access higher marks.
- Some students included very little comment on narrative point of view or poetic voice which is an important aspect of this AO.

### **AO3**

This AO assesses 3 distinct strands:

For Section A

1. Factors associated with mode
2. Generic conventions including different ways of storytelling afforded by different genres
3. The influence of contextual factors (production and reception) on the negotiation and shaping of meaning.

For Section B

1. Features of the extract and the wider novel associated with the fantasy genre
2. Genre conventions
3. The influence of contextual factors (production and reception) on the negotiation and shaping of meaning.

- Some students carefully and relevantly integrated comments about context and genre into their discussion.
- Many students tacked on comments on context and genre in a way that was not well integrated. In Question 1, this was usually done in a broad way at the beginning of their answers. In Section B, comments on genre and context were often not well embedded in the student's line of argument.
- Some students made little or no reference to genre or context in their Section B answers, beyond perhaps briefly labelling the text 'dystopian' or 'gothic'.
- It is worth reiterating that students can approach 'context' in a number of equally valid ways: social, historical, biographical, literary, as well as contexts of reception.

### **AO4**

This Question 1 AO assesses students' abilities to explore connections between texts and highlight similarities and differences – in the context of discussing the representation focus of the question.

- The vast majority of students had clearly been well prepared to use a comparative approach in their answers. Very few failed to make any connections.
- Those who were able to explore representations through comparing linguistic details of the texts were often more able to attract higher marks.

### **Section A – Question 1**

There are three marks awarded for this question on the following assessment objectives:

AO1 (15 marks) – Apply concepts and methods from integrated linguistic and literary study as appropriate, using associated terminology and coherent written expression.

AO3 (15 marks) – Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which texts are produced and received.

AO4 (10 marks) – Explore connections across texts, informed by linguistic and literary concepts and methods.

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**As a general overview, successful responses:**

- showed a clear understanding of the contexts, genres and modes of both texts
- discussed how the language was influenced by the writers' stances and contexts of production
- used a comparative framework and compared linguistic details of the texts
- covered the texts equally
- supported ideas by exploring the language of relevant examples
- applied terminology accurately
- used precise terminology and explored in detail how meanings are shaped
- made considered and relevant use of different concepts and methods of analysis
- explored mode differences in some detail
- provided interpretations that were well supported by detailed evidence from the text
- produced sustained and developed answers
- produced well expressed, clearly structured answers.

**As a general overview, less successful responses:**

- included very generalised ideas on context, genre and mode
- misunderstood the audiences of the texts – or showed limited appreciation of the original audiences
- made limited comment on mode features
- included only very broad comparisons
- did not give roughly equal consideration to each text
- did not use precise terminology or made errors in the application of terminology
- used general labels (eg 'word', 'lexical choice', 'tone', 'imagery') rather than more precise terms
- feature spotted, with very limited exploration of meaning
- made broad assertions, not supported by clear examples
- produced very brief responses
- produced answers that were poorly expressed.

Students generally responded well to this question and, although most focused on the fairly obvious contrast of the negative representation in Text A and the positive one in Text B, this still led to some worthwhile exploration of language levels and features. There were some excellent, sustained and developed responses to this task; the best answers really engaged with Text A's establishment stance versus Williams' pro-revolution romanticism, and understood the cinematic qualities of Text A as well as the conventions of 18<sup>th</sup> century letter writing. Most were able to structure their answer around valid points of comparison. Interesting connections included: unity of different classes; destroying versus building societies; women hunting and digging; lack of food versus refreshments to share; on knees in defeat versus on knees in joyful gratitude; foreign narrators. A number of students took the approach of dealing with Text A on its own first, and then writing about Text B in order to compare, but this sometimes led to rather limited marks for AO4. The following points focus on particular issues:

- the context of Text A was often not well understood. Many students suggested that because Text A was a news report it therefore must have a sole purpose to inform, must be factual and unbiased, and be intended for an adult audience interested in news. The original context for Text A was frequently not considered in much depth. Many focused on the fact that Text A is now available online and gave historians as its main audience, or that

its genre was historical documentary. Some thought that it was intended for a French audience. More subtle readings explored the stance of Pathe News and how the contexts of production and reception influenced language choices.

- some students would have benefited from exploring mode features in more detail. There was a tendency for students to make quite broad comments on mode. Most made fairly obvious points about pauses and emphasis in Text A. Few students explored the mode features of Text B in any detail.
- many students devoted a lot of time to long, general introductions on the audience, purpose, mode and genres of the texts. Often, these included very broad points or went into great detail on the audiences and purposes of the texts in their current internet contexts. These points rarely helped students to make more precise comments on how the writers shaped their texts for their original audiences. Few students discussed the varying contexts of reception for either text - which was a missed opportunity.
- there were some common AO1 errors: 'chaos' was variously identified as an adjective, adverb or modal verb; 'simmering' was often thought to be a verb not a noun; anthropomorphism was the term sometimes applied to 'housewives hunted' or any kind of 'animalistic' references.

## Section B – Imagined Worlds

There are three marks awarded for this question on the following assessment objectives:  
AO1 (10 marks) – Apply concepts and methods from integrated linguistic and literary study as appropriate, using associated terminology and coherent written expression.

AO2 (10 marks) – Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in texts.

AO3 (15 marks) – Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which texts are produced and received.

This section focuses on how language choices help to shape the representations of different worlds and perspectives in prose fiction. Students also consider genre conventions and key aspects of the contexts of production and reception.

The most popular prose text was clearly *The Handmaid's Tale* with *Dracula* being the minority choice.

### As a general overview, successful responses:

- focused on the question
- discussed the construction and effects of narrative point of view
- supported ideas by exploring the language of relevant quotations from both the extract and other points in the novel
- applied terminology accurately
- used precise terminology and explored in detail how meanings are shaped
- made considered and relevant use of different concepts and methods (eg types of narration, modality, representation of speech and thought)
- provided interpretations that were well supported by detailed evidence from the text
- showed awareness of the conventions of gothic or dystopian fiction and explored this relevantly in their answers
- included relevant and thoughtful comments on contextual factors
- produced sustained answers
- produced well expressed, clearly structured answers.

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**As a general overview, less successful responses:**

- did not adequately address the question
- made little or no comment on narrative point of view
- made little or no comment on different points in the novel
- did not use precise terminology or made errors in the application of terminology
- used general labels (eg ‘word’, ‘lexical choice’, ‘tone’, ‘imagery’) rather than more precise terms
- feature spotted, with very limited exploration of meaning
- made broad assertions, not supported by clear examples
- did not well contextualise quotations taken from different points in the novel
- drifted off the focus of the question into more general considerations of genre
- did not consider contextual factors
- produced very brief responses with only a few superficially relevant ideas
- produced answers that were poorly expressed.

The majority of students were able to engage well with the characters and settings of their texts. However, language level selection was often less successful than with Sections A or C. A number of students answered the questions with very little linguistic focus and were therefore unable to gain higher marks for AO1. A number of students struggled to engage with AO3. There was a tendency to do little more than mention the words ‘fantasy’, ‘gothic’ or ‘dystopia’ rather than apply this in a more developed way to the detail of their texts. However, there were some answers where critics’ ideas about fantasy were effectively integrated into the analysis. Most students were able to refer to other parts of the novel but some did not ‘select’ examples from those points to analyse. Some of the different points in the novel that were chosen did not always relate to the question. Sometimes students failed to clearly contextualise their different points which made it difficult for examiners to appreciate what was being said.

**Question 2**

This was the more popular of the questions on *Frankenstein* and, in general, students showed a good understanding of the significance of Walton’s letters. There were many impressive answers where students were able to refer to a few of the letters, making effective links between *Frankenstein* and Walton and discussing their motivations. In terms of AO3, most were able to make at least some reference to gothic ideas: the monster, doubles, ideas about believability, desolate landscapes etc. Better answers also made some reference to science and the influences of Shelley’s own life experiences.

**Question 3**

Responses on the relationship between *Frankenstein* and Clerval were generally less confident. Some students wrote convincingly about the very effusive nature of *Frankenstein*’s love for Clerval. The extract is rich in figurative language and narrative techniques, although relatively few students took the opportunity to explore this in any detail. Only a minority of students considered the extract from Tintern Abbey and linked this with the idea of the sublime. Some students struggled to focus on the relationship between the characters and drifted into character studies of Clerval.

**Question 4**

A number of students were able to explore the gothic genre conventions used in the extract, with some relevant links made to different points in the novel. There was some relevant linking to contextual ideas about Victorian fears of foreign invasion, and the influence of other gothic novels. Some students confused the locations of Carfax and Whitby Abbey, thinking they were the same place. Some students referred to ‘Carfax Abbey’, the name often used in film versions of *Dracula*.

Weaker responses wrote in very general terms about Carfax and included very little linguistic analysis.

### Question 5

This tended to be the better answered of the *Dracula* questions. Many students were able to comment on Renfield's disgusting habit of eating insects and the reader response to this. Many made links to gothic ideas of 'the other' and the uncanny. Some also included ideas about Victorian fears of lunacy, science vs. religion and noted Seward's use of modern technology to record his thoughts. Renfield's links to *Dracula* were well recognised and some students commented on Dr Seward's unsympathetic attitude. Many included as their different points, Renfield's attack on Dr Seward and his death at *Dracula*'s hands, noting his unpredictability and his choice of good over evil.

Very few students made reference to reviews of the novel or critical readings.

### Question 6

*The Handmaid's Tale* was a popular choice with many centres and this was the most popular of the two questions on this text. Most students understood, at least broadly, the significance of Ofglen offering hope and resistance to Offred. Most were able to identify at least one other episode in which they met, some giving a very thorough overview of their interactions across the novel. Occasionally, students became side-tracked into looking at how Offred interacts with other women such as Serena Joy and drifted off the focus of the question. Surprisingly, very few students drew on spoken language terminology or conversation analysis, which was a missed opportunity as it was a worthwhile area to explore for those who did. Some stronger responses made good use of spoken discourse analysis when discussing the two handmaids' conversations and how these developed during the course of the novel. A number of students said very little about the dialogue in the extract and commented on other aspects such as the simile, 'like a trained pig'. This did occasionally lead to some interesting discussion on the animal imagery used throughout the novel and the dehumanisation of women, although not all students were able to maintain a relevant focus on the question. Comments on Offred's narrative voice and viewpoint were not as common as might have been expected. Students who showed an awareness of narrative point of view were often able to provide a more secure sense of overview in answering the question. Many students were able to make AO3 context points, discussing various aspects of totalitarianism and religious fundamentalism. Examiners noted how there tended to be stronger engagement with context on *The Handmaid's Tale* than with the other texts. Some effective responses made connections to the students' context of reception, with links to social and political situations from recent news. There were frequent references made to Reagan and Trump and to Atwood's own comments. Discussion on genre and how Atwood created the dystopian fantasy world of Gilead tended to be less consistent as it was sometimes appended to students' analysis rather than being integrated within it. However, a number of students made sound points about features of dystopian fiction such as surveillance, repressive regimes, fear of discovery, and the protagonist's search for an ally.

### Question 7

Many students made valid points about the repressive nature of ceremonies in Gilead and how they were an important part of the regime maintaining control. Most were able to comment on the way in which biblical references were used in the extract to oppress and control women, although closer linguistic analysis was less evident than more general interpretations. Some students misunderstood the purpose of this Prayvaganza and thought that the girls were about to become handmaids or that handmaids were about to get married. Better responses included analysis of the way the 'mothers' are presented and recognised that they are unlikely to be the biological mothers of their 'daughters'. Most students were able to refer to other ceremonies in the novel, especially the Ceremony itself, Salvaging and Particution, although not all analysed in some detail examples



from these different points in the novel. Some students struggled to select other ceremonies, referring to incidents rather than actual ceremonies. For AO3, most made at least a passing reference to a couple of dystopian genre conventions. Many were clearly aware of the dystopian nature of Gilead – theocracy, patriarchy, surveillance, restriction etc – but didn't then link this explicitly to genre conventions. Many referred to contextual factors such as Atwood's visit to Afghanistan, the rise of the religious right wing in Reagan era America, environmental concerns, Nazi Germany, China, first and second wave feminist movements. Quite a few also referred to interviews and articles by Atwood. However, these weren't always skilfully embedded with the student's line of argument, but often tended to be tacked on, with rather tenuous links.

### Question 8

There were some well organised answers to this question that began with the extract and then considered Susie's journey to 'wide wide heaven', including well-chosen quotations to explore how Sebald constructs this fantasy setting. Some students drifted off the focus on Susie's heaven and into what she could see from her heaven. Many students made valid points about the extract: Susie's choice of a loyal animal; the youth and innocence suggested by her activities; the lack of males and inclusion of mothers. The penguin snowglobe and the novel's ending were popular different points to consider. Students' AO3 points mostly revolved around the fantasy narrator, but there were also some links to Sebald's own experience of rape and the social context of America at the time. Overall, examiners noted that students seemed to have more difficulty in writing convincingly about genre in relation to *The Lovely Bones* than *The Handmaid's Tale*.

### Question 9

Examiners noted that answers to this question were often better focused than on Question 8 and included clearer references to different points in the novel. Many included Susie's insights into Harvey's childhood and commented on her ability as an omniscient narrator to have a psychological as well as spatial point of view. Comments on narrative viewpoint tended to be better than points about language. Many students noted the sexual connotations of Sebald's choice of verbs in 'thrusting' and 'fingered', and how the 'monstrous bulk' of the bulldozers reflected Mr Harvey himself. However, closer language analysis of different points in the novel was rarer. Contextual points were a little better in answers to this question. Many students commented on Sebald's own experiences of rape and on societal attitudes towards this kind of crime in the 1970s. Some touched on ideas about psychopaths and the serial killer/crime genre, which was potentially interesting but often not fully explored.

### Section C

Many examiners commented on how students who had previously not really analysed language features in Sections A and B, were suddenly more focused on this in their poetry answers. This may be because language features tend to be more obvious in poetry or that language analysis is more to the fore in lessons on poetry. However, there were many excellent answers in this section. The best ones linked relevant interpretations to the examination of significant details and patterns in the poet's language. Many responses were framed as comparisons, although there is no necessity for students to compare the poems. For some students this afforded opportunities for subtle points to emerge, for the majority it had no advantage and for some probably led to more superficial analysis because they did not develop ideas on one poem before moving onto the other. Many students did not adequately consider the construction of poetic voice. A number of students simply referred to the 'homodiegetic narrator' rather than thinking about the perspective of the persona. It was encouraging to see a number of students considering phonoaesthetics, although there was a tendency to simply label words as 'euphonous' or 'cacophonous' words, without more precise phonological description or discussion. Students tended to have some difficulty explaining

how phonological or structural features worked within a poem. For example, there was a tendency to label enjambment rather than explaining how this led to emphasis on a word, or interrupted the rhythm to enhance the meaning.

### **Question 10**

A relatively small proportion of students had studied Donne and Question 10 was the least popular. 'Elegy 12' was often paired with 'A valediction: Forbidding Mourning', focusing on the idea of change through separation and how love continues even though the lovers physically deteriorate. It was clear that a number of students were really stimulated by and interested in Donne's poetry, and there were some sophisticated and thoughtful responses. However, for some students it was clearly a struggle to understand the overall meaning of the poems. For both questions, a number of students relied on simply explaining or paraphrasing meaning, rather than analysing language. As a result of not really understanding the poems, there was some clutching at straws in terms of language analysis, with students taking words or phrases out of context which led to some glaring misinterpretations. However, the gift of the picture was understood by most students and many had a sound sense of the attitudes of the speaker towards change.

### **Question 11**

Students answered capably on the more straightforward aspects of 'The Triple Fool' and usually chose 'Twicknam Garden' or 'A Jet Ring Sent' as their second poem. The construction of persona was often clearly understood for 'A Jet Ring Sent' and better responses avoided the temptation (which many didn't) to regurgitate learned material on Donne's misogyny rather than to focus on suffering caused by rejection. Many relevantly focused on the idea of suffering as a result of unrequited love. As with Question 10, there was sometimes a lack of understanding of parts of the poems. In 'The Triple Fool', the line 'set and sing my pain' was frequently misunderstood, sometimes limiting readings of the poem. Those students who had been prepared to discuss Donne's use of poetic conceits and his frequent adoption of the frustrated lover persona were usually the most successful. Some students did not consider Donne's use of conceits at all in either question.

### **Question 12**

This was the most popular of the questions on Browning. 'Johannes Agricola' was usually paired with 'My Last Duchess' or 'Porphyria's Lover'. Most students focused on the question and were able to comment on the construction of poetic voice. Indeed, it was noticeable that responses to Browning tended to be stronger on construction of poetic voice as they were almost always able to discuss his use of personas. Some struggled to analyse the language of 'Johannes Agricola' in much detail and tended to make more general comments about his state of mind. There was also a tendency for some students to go into the kind of contextual detail for which they would be rewarded in AO3 in Sections A and B. This was inevitably wasted in this section and led them away from more fruitful language analysis.

### **Question 13**

Examiners noted that Cristina did not seem to be well understood. Other poems chosen tended to be 'My Last Duchess' and 'The Lost Leader'. Students often struggled to make thoughtful and perceptive points about memories of people and many tended to just discuss presentation of attitudes towards people. Examiners commented that there was frequently inaccurate discussion of rhyme schemes and metre in these responses.

### **Question 14**

This was a very popular question and led to many well-focused and thoughtful responses that showed good understanding of the poems. Many students chose 'The Captain of the 1964 Top of

the Form Team' as their second poem, which was usually a very successful choice. There were less successful choices of second poem, in particular, 'Small Female Skull', which students invariably saw as being simply about the speaker's regrets about drinking too much the night before and suffering a hangover. This inevitably led to some superficial analysis and unconvincing exploration of the theme. 'Close' was another second choice poem that was generally not well understood and although some made this broadly relevant to regret, they often struggled to interpret what was going on in the poem. Some choices of second poem made it more difficult to discuss regret, for example, 'Stafford Afternoons', 'First Love' and 'The Cliché Kid'. 'Nostalgia', 'Never Go Back' and 'The Biographer' were quite interesting alternative choices that led to some thoughtful interpretations. Some examiners commented on how a number of students did not write explicitly about poetic voice and point of view. Students who began their answers with a clear sense of this often established a firm basis on which to explore the poems. Poetic techniques such as enjambment and caesura were frequently commented on but not always with precision in terms of how meanings are shaped - and this was so in answers to both Duffy questions.

### **Question 15**

This was slightly more popular than Question 14 and produced some excellent answers. 'Litany' was generally well understood and was frequently paired with 'Stafford Afternoons', which usually proved to be a good choice. 'The Captain of the 1964 Top of the Form Team' was another poem that worked well for this question, allowing students to make relevant points about the disappointment involved in growing up and leaving an exciting childhood behind. Better responses were able to establish that the poetic voice in the poems was looking back at experiences from an adult viewpoint. This generally led to more secure explorations of the language and meaning of the poems. There was widespread appreciation of what Duffy was trying to achieve in 'Litany' with her presentation of the wives as artificial and unwilling to talk about anything in an honest way. Many students suggested that the speaker learned a number of lessons about growing up from this early experience. Many students analysed 'Stafford Afternoons' in a relevant way, although some drifted into a more general comments on the poem not linked to 'views on growing up'. Similar difficulties were faced by students who chose 'Beachcomber' or 'Never Go Back' as their second poems.

### **Question 16**

This was the least popular of the Heaney questions and, on the whole, tended to produce less successful answers. There were some answers that showed a very good understanding of 'Bogland' and were well aware of its metaphorical nature and comparisons with Irish history. However, some students struggled to interpret 'the cyclops' eye' and 'the bog that keeps crusting', leading to some rather confused explanations. Many students chose 'Broagh' as their second poem but often struggled to engage with the important phonological features of this poem and the connections between landscape and language were rarely mentioned. Some students chose 'The Tolland Man' as their second poem but often wrote as if Heaney was describing Ireland rather than Jutland and didn't make clear how Heaney saw a connection between the two places. There were a few answers where 'Personal Helicon' was explored in a relevant way as the second poem.

### **Question 17**

This was a very popular choice with most students showing a sound and sensitive understanding of 'Mid-Term Break'. The challenge for a number of students was in writing well on their second poem. Some chose to opt for literal deaths such as in 'Punishment' or 'Strange Fruit', whilst others went down the more metaphorical route of 'Death of a Naturalist'. Both of these approaches produced some successful results. Less successful choices were 'Follower', which didn't quite work, as the father isn't actually dead in the poem, and 'Digging' was attempted along the lines of death of tradition, but this again proved difficult for students to make relevant. In discussing 'Mid-term Break', students were usually clear in their understanding of the random and unexpected

nature of death. The metaphor of the red poppy bruise was often well explained. The distance between the poetic voice and the corpse of his brother and the language used to evoke this was also usually well understood and remarked on by a number of students. Some examiners commented that 'Punishment' and 'Strange Fruit' were sometimes not always well understood. Some students appeared to be confused by the link to the Billie Holliday song 'Strange Fruit' and thought that 'Punishment' was about a black girl who had been lynched. Better responses were able to discuss the poetic voice in some detail, noting the detachment in 'Mid-Term Break' and the more passionate sense of connection in some of the other poems.

### **Use of statistics**

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.

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

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

### **Converting Marks into UMS marks (*delete if appropriate*)**

Convert raw marks into Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) marks by using the link below.

[UMS conversion calculator](#)