

OXFORD

INTERNATIONAL
AQA EXAMINATIONS

INTERNATIONAL GCSE ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

(9280/W)

Report on the examination

November 2022

REPORT ON EXAMINATION: INTERNATIONAL GCSE ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE 9280 UNIT WRITING NOVEMBER 2022

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

The November Writing paper once again produced a range of interesting, successful responses. Examiners continue to be impressed by the creativity and technical qualities of students. This report will draw attention to the successes and areas for development emerging from this series. As with previous reports it will begin with general points about assessment.

At the heart of any successful response answer is question focus. This means the ability to answer the precise question given in all its details. During training, examiners are instructed to check that students are addressing the task fully and, in questions 2 and 3, check that the mandatory bullets are met. It continues to be the case that question focus and task relevance are very good for the vast majority of students and that where students underperform, it is often the case that the 'why' bullet point in tasks has been dealt with in a cursory way, or sometimes avoided altogether.

As stated in the summer 2022 report, it is essential that students understand what they are being tested upon, and which writing skills are being assessed at which point in the paper. The previous report contained an overview which is reprinted here and is worth sharing with students:

Question 1 tests the ability to write brief description; Questions 2 and 3 are more demanding in the sense that they have mandatory bullet points and may concern things that students have experienced themselves or perhaps require them to project themselves into a less familiar situation; Question 4 tests longer form writing skills, where coherence becomes more of an issue in the sense that developing and holding together an argument/explanation is at stake. In terms of technical accuracy, spelling and punctuation accuracy are the focus of Question 1 while other tasks additionally assess variety of vocabulary and grammatical structures.

As CPD sessions and reports have previously stated, this paper invites students to demonstrate not only their technical skills, but crucially their ability to write coherent and creative responses to the tasks provided. When awarding marks, examiners are asking themselves:

- Has the question been addressed in all of its details?
- Is the phrasing clear or is there some delay?
- How effective is the content?
- How accurate is spelling, punctuation and grammar?
- How varied is spelling, punctuation and grammar? (in Questions 2, 3 and 4)

This basic checklist is also worth sharing with students and may also provide a starting point for their own self-assessment of class work and exam preparation.

QUESTION 01

The first picture-based task is an opportunity to demonstrate descriptive skills. The key is to select some details from the image and develop a description from them. There is no requirement to cover lots of details, in fact, over-writing is very often counterproductive. For the given image in this series, some responses focused on the dramatic elements of the scene, focusing on the violence of the waves or threat to the train. Other students made more of the houses, their colours, and people in the picture, sometimes speculating on their emotions. All of these (and other) methods of describing are perfectly valid ways of describing.

The first judgement made by an examiner is whether the student writes clearly (Band 3) or whether there is some delay in meaning (Band 2). Responses that succinctly and clearly describe something of the scene are very often more successful than lengthy ones packed with ambitious vocabulary. It is clarity rather than florid prose that is being rewarded here.

It is worth restating that only spelling and punctuation are assessed for the language mark in Question 1. Therefore, students who use full stops accurately, along with accurate spelling, will reach full marks. It is usually best to avoid using colons and semi-colons in this task, along with unnecessarily complex words, as these run the risk of being misused or misspelt and therefore prevent access to full marks. Clear, intelligible description with accurate spelling and use of full stops is the best way forward.

QUESTION 02

Examiners reported reading some lively and authentic responses to Question 2. This task invited students to write a letter to friend, advising them how to prepare for exams. The second bullet ('why the students should study hard') was often a determining factor in marks. Better responses offered reasons connected with future careers, family pride and self-esteem, often making reasonably detailed cases. Less successful answers offered scant justifications, e.g., '...because you will get a good grade' or sidestepped this bullet. Doing so makes it impossible to gain a mark in the top band. It is doubly important for students to tackle the 'why' bullet as it naturally invites them to write in complex sentences, and in doing so they begin to demonstrate variety, which is a key part of the judgment of language use. When students write complex sentences, it also allows them the chance to show accurate use of commas (where needed), which again bolsters their language mark.

The summer 2022 report drew attention to the use of long opening paragraphs that can sometimes get in the way of a response. It stated:

There were instances where students spent a lot of time writing social, introductory material, e.g., 'I hope you have all performed well in your recent exams and have made lots of plans for your summer break'. While such introductions help to establish a voice and sense of audience, it's important that the task itself is promptly addressed and the balance between task-focused material and social content is sensible, especially in a task with a tight word count.

While there were fewer instances of this, there are still students who spend too much time attempting small talk about holidays, families, accidents, school etc rather than getting on promptly with the task. These answers also tended to use some pre-learned social phrases which seem slightly archaic to native speakers, such as 'I hope you're in the pink of health'. Although there is nothing technically wrong with this, it doesn't really ring true for the given audience and doesn't contribute much to the overall answer.

QUESTION 03

The third task ('Write a blog about a festival or event') led to some genuinely interesting responses that explored culture in its widest sense, including material about familial, religious, musical, and sporting events. Examiners took a broad view of what might constitute an event and enjoyed rewarding students whether they wrote about significant festivals or small-scale private events. Many students wrote enthusiastically about their chosen topic.

As stated in the previous section, the 'why' bullet point was often a guide to the quality of answer. Justifying why they attended an event led to deeper thought, more grammatical complexity, and more detail. The later questions in this paper usually invite a more personal form of response and as has previously been mentioned, students who can produce interesting details in these type of tasks in accurate prose very often do well. The two middle tasks in the Writing paper see a balance between content and language marks, and so students who give plenty of time over to 'why' bullets often naturally write in complex sentences with accurate subordination, as well as accruing content marks. Variety is clearly important too by this stage in the paper, so showing a greater variety of vocabulary and sentence construction is helpful here. Many students had learned and accurately used the 'Not only... but also' set-up. Others has success by varying sentence lengths.

Colleagues often ask in training sessions about the form we ask students to use, e.g., letter, article, blog etc. It is worth restating that these forms or modes are simply vehicles to produce writing. We are interested in content and language use rather than how well a form has been mimicked. The previous report stated:

In practical terms, this means examiners do not have a checklist of structures that each form must include. This is especially true for forms such as blogs which are evolving, amorphous text types whose structural features are indistinct. Far better for students to concentrate on what is being said, rather than obsess over whether or not to use e.g., subheadings. Some answers to Question 3 used titles and some didn't. There was little correlation between these choices and the marks awarded, because it is the content examiners are interested in.

QUESTION 04

The final task on the paper gave students the chance to persuade readers that travel was ‘an exciting and beneficial thing to do’. There were some brilliant answers that contained developed arguments, offering thoughts on the way travel leads to cultural understanding, fun, jobs, and character development. As always, quality of content is important. Persuasive writing works when a thoughtful set of reasons are offered. This is more effective than packing a response with energetic, hectoring sentences which overuse adverbs, e.g., ‘I can categorically state that travel is the most brilliant, absolutely essential and undeniably number one thing that every human must do’. It’s far better to concentrate on content than follow a checklist of persuasive writing features or over-write in an attempt to persuade through force of verbal energy.

In terms of structure, most students chose to follow the bullet points offered, although it is worth noting that in Question 4 the bullets are not mandatory. As the mark scheme indicates, the ratio of marks for content/communication and language changes in the final task, with 8 marks available for content/communication and 15 for language. The very best responses to this task showed coherence; they had a ‘shape’ and felt as if the student was in charge of their material from the start. Students should look upon Question 4 as a chance to produce a controlled and ordered piece. Therefore, planning and thinking is more important here than anywhere else on the paper. When planning a response, it’s always helpful to think about not only the content, but the sequence of the content.

Although there is a dominance of language marks in Question 4, students are still being assessed on their ability to write clear prose, to spell and to punctuate accurately as well as showing variety. Colleagues often ask what is meant by the term ‘sophisticated’ in the top mark band for language. Here is the advice given in the previous report:

[‘sophistication’] doesn’t mean that highly complex, obscure words need to be used. It refers to sophistication of choice. The very best writers make the best choice of words depending on the material, their audience and the purpose. Most of the time, clarity is king and therefore any ambitious words should be carefully chosen and - most importantly - appropriate and accurately used. There is little to be gained from students writing dry, austere prose littered with supposedly impressive words unsuited to the intended reader.

One final thing to bear in mind concerns titles and opening segments of responses. Some students appear to have pre-learned titles that they adapt to the task, e.g., ‘X: friend or foe?’. It’s often the case that these seem unnatural because they don’t always neatly fit the topics given and therefore tend to affect coherence. Likewise, a similar issue arises when a pre-learned opening is adapted, e.g., ‘It is true that X is a hot potato that people argue non-stop about’ which in the case of this series’ Question 4, didn’t really fit. It’s always best for titles and openings to be as natural as possible to the specific task given.

As ever, much praise is due to the students who sat the paper this series. Examiners are often staggered by the quality of writing produced and can always find something to reward in all students’ work. Teachers and centres clearly provide some fantastic support for their students and likewise deserve plaudits for the quality of their preparation work.

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