OCR

Oxford Cambridge and RSA

GCSE

English

General Certificate of Secondary Education **J350**

OCR Report to Centres June 2015

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General Certificate of Secondary Education

English (J350)

OCR REPORT TO CENTRES

A640 Speaking and Listening

General Comments

Speaking and Listening is now a separately endorsed unit, no longer forming 20% of the final GCSE grade in English or English Language. A few centres did not submit any documentation for unit A640, assuming that as a separately endorsed unit there was no moderation procedure required, however, the vast majority of centres were aware that in terms of the teaching, assessment and administration of the unit very little has changed as explained below:

- Units A652a and A643 are now a single unit A640
- Band 5 is now the top band, but the descriptors and mark ranges remain the same.
- The unit is now common across GCSE English Language and GCSE English, involving common mark sheets and a single moderation process.
- Advisory visits will continue to take place every three years, or more often if a centre needs extra support.
- The administration of the moderation process remains the same with centres selecting their own samples (seven per teaching group) and sending them to the moderator with other required documentation.

For this series one moderator was responsible for both unit A640, Speaking and Listening, and unit A650, Spoken Language, to reduce the number of separate moderators, with whom centres had to deal.

The Training and Guidance filmed footage, to support centres this academic year, was issued online to enable all teachers preparing candidates to access the material for assessment purposes, task setting and administration. As with the previous filmed footage, there was a complete range of activities across all three contexts, but which gave specific support to the "real-life" context and task setting. Two areas were identified as being problematic for some centres.

A large number of advisory visits have been carried out this year and the majority of centres were very welcoming and pleased to receive advice and support.

Task setting

Centres are experienced in task setting to cover the requirements of the three different contexts. It was clear that some departments and individual teachers had put a great deal of thought into designing tasks which would allow achievement across the ability range, and into providing opportunities for candidates to succeed.

Task setting is crucial in determining successful outcomes for this component, and centres are always advised to set tasks which allow the assessment criteria to be met, and are engaging and relevant for the candidates. However, centres must be made aware of the fact that some tasks can be limiting. Giving candidates the freedom to choose, for example, the subject matter of a presentation for the Individual Extended Contribution, may lead to under-performance. So using examples from this series, a presentation on "Can footballers' wages ever be justified?" allows achievement in the higher bands; a talk on "My Work Experience", with no appropriate focus, is unlikely to lead to Band 5 marks.

However more worryingly, the requirement of the "real-life context in and beyond the classroom" is still proving problematic for some centres, despite this being an established specification. It is difficult to say whether centres are not taking this requirement seriously and if so, are opting out of their responsibilities to ensure that it is covered, or whether it simply is a matter of not

understanding what is required. With the support available the latter seems increasingly unlikely. Often individual teachers do not fulfil this requirement in a centre where the rest of the department is secure with its demands. It is essential that all teachers preparing candidates for this unit are required to watch the filmed footage, where the RLC is explained very fully. The requirement that one of the basic three contexts must address this aspect is not onerous or difficult to comprehend. The repeated advice to centres is that it is not just a matter of subject matter, but rather it is a question of purpose and audience, which extends the performance "beyond the classroom". So a prepared talk delivered by the candidate, regardless of the subject-matter does not meet this requirement. It does not alter the validity by calling it "a formal talk", if the presentation is still to the rest of the class and if they are not in any role other than themselves. If the candidate is given a clear role and purpose, for example as a charity representative, the talk would move 'beyond the classroom'.

So a talk on work experience is no different to one on hockey; both are straightforward talks to the rest of the class. Similarly a police investigation into Lennie's death set in a mock police station, with candidates in role as characters from the play can never be classed as "real-life". Similarly, a group discussion on a 'real-life' issue does not satisfy the requirements of the RLC, unless the group are in role.

However many centres have embraced the "real-life" context with enthusiasm and likewise their candidates, seeing it as an opportunity to extend and demonstrate their skills. In these centres task setting is far more imaginative as a result.

There are noticeable improvements in the setting of the drama-focussed activities, with the majority of centres now using role plays and imagined scenarios rather than literature texts and set plays. Role plays are often a good way of fulfilling the demands of the 'real-life' context and allow the candidates a much more accessible route to marks in the higher bands. The extra scene or speech is often a popular valid activity, but care must be taken not to stretch the bounds of credibility or set inappropriate tasks, which do not allow candidates to achieve their potential. Hot seating Lennie from "Of Mice and Men" would be one such task, with limited verbal responses possible.

The number of centres which link Speaking and Listening activities with the work for the unit A650 Spoken Language study, remains surprisingly small. In one centre the students recorded their own group discussions, then studied them as their Spoken Language study on Language and Gender.

Reference has been made to the support available as regards task setting for all aspects of Speaking and Listening. The tasks illustrated on DVDs issued and online filmed footage should be used together with the commentaries and a guidance document available on the OCR website, specifically for the "real-life" context. The Controlled Assessment Consultancy is always available to centres seeking further advice on individual tasks and through this a centre's tasks may be validated. Centres with previous entries will have had direct feedback regarding task setting and task setting is always a major aspect of Advisory visits by external moderators.

Record keeping

A key part of the process is record keeping. Centres are advised to maintain on-going records for all candidates, perhaps making use of a centrally held database of marks for candidates, with written comments. Such procedures, good practice in centres, help to prevent problems arising from staff absences or changes of staff. It also helps in the selection of the final three activities to be used to form the basis for assessment. Good practice continues to be multiple opportunities, with the final selection being on an individual basis.

Many centres have their own working records, which contain feedback to candidates and candidate involvement in the process. Final submission for assessment is then on the OCR Controlled Assessment form for Speaking and Listening, which covers all the necessary elements, required by the external moderator. This year a number of centres sent bulky packages with their own working records expecting moderators to look at those rather than the CAFs provided by OCR. They often contained feedback to candidates rather than comments directed to the moderator. Centres must remember that candidates' record sheets form a vital piece of evidence in the moderation process. If there is a lack of detail in the description of activities or when comments on performance have been "lifted" directly from the band descriptors with little or no linkage to individual candidate achievement, then it is extremely difficult to carry out the moderation of a centre. Typical lack of detail in description would be "a talk to the class" or "a group discussion on poetry" or "a scene from Macbeth". The level of challenge or complexity involved cannot be judged without the specific subject matter, or in the case of the drama-focussed context, the role adopted and developed. Similarly bland, generalised comments regarding performance, where it is impossible to distinguish one candidate's performance from another, or which band descriptors are being employed, are unsatisfactory.

It is important that all the teachers preparing and assessing candidates adopt a common approach to filling in the record sheets and that good practice is enforced throughout a centre. There was often great variation within a centre, with some teachers providing detailed, helpful and pertinent comments on candidates, and others whose forms were at best perfunctory. It is a centre's responsibility to ensure that external moderators are supplied with a comprehensive set of records, with all sections completed and marks/arithmetic checked to eliminate mathematical and transcriptional errors.

Thankfully the majority of centres provided all the necessary information, with well presented records, increasingly word processed in part and wholly. However the one "rogue" teacher can undo the efficient hard work of a department.

The Application of the Criteria

The starting point for this must be achievement as set against the performance criteria, fixing first on a band and then secondly on the mark within the band range. Comments on achievement on candidates' records should make reference to the band descriptors and give a mark out of 40 for each separate context.

Worryingly it was noted that not all centres or individual teachers within centres matched band descriptors used to the marks awarded. There were discrepancies with teachers not seeming to describe performance accurately. It must be noted also that the sole intended audience for comments is the external moderator, so comments of encouragement are inappropriate: for example, "Superb!" or "Excellent, an effective role".

Good practice in awarding marks balances strengths and weaknesses, not just rewarding strengths. An explanation is given, for example as to why a candidate failed to achieve the next band when on a borderline. This aspect of the application of the criteria is particularly important, where there is bunching of marks, to distinguish separate performances.

The final mark is based on a simple mathematical calculation; the three separate marks are totalled and divided by three. Centres are advised to check the final calculations carefully as odd mistakes were discovered by moderators.

Importantly no assumption should be made as to a link between bands and the level awarded.

Internal Standardisation Procedures

The majority of centres continue to have secure, often very rigorous procedures in place to ensure internal standardisation of the marks. Good practice is to use cross moderation/marking exercises across groups, reorganisation of groups for assessment and department marking often using centre filmed material, together with using the filmed assessment evidence provided annually by OCR.

Centres are reminded that it is essential that all staff preparing and assessing candidates watch and discuss the filmed assessments. Signing the GCW351 form testifies to this having taken place, but it was apparent that this had not taken place in all centres. The internally set standard must be confirmed against OCR's Agreed Standard. This is done by assessing and comparing the marks awarded by OCR for the filmed assessments with the centre's marks, irrespective of centre size. The centre must then adjust its standard, where necessary. Centre visits by an external moderator further confirm a centre's marking.

Worryingly, some centres professing to having watched the DVDs/filmed footage went on to get the "real-life" context wrong. Also centres are warned against using out of date, old material from previous specifications. No filmed assessments have been issued on video for this specification, yet some centres claimed to have watched one.

Standardisation procedures should cover assessment, task setting (not necessarily the same tasks across all groups, but all candidates meeting all the requirements) and record keeping.

Administration

Despite building a session on administration into the Advisory Visit, and including administration instructions on the filmed footage, there is still some confusion about how this unit is moderated. Moderators have reported a small number of centres being weeks late in sending all the relevant material, with no explanation or apology forthcoming. In some instances, thankfully a small number, moderators have received negative reactions, when legitimately asking for moderation material. It is in the interests of all parties that deadlines are kept assiduously, and that candidates' results are not put in jeopardy.

There was less confusion about the different sampling arrangements for Spoken Language and those for Speaking and Listening this year.

To summarise, Instructions to Centres on Moderation are available on the OCR website, as are all relevant forms, hard copies are sent into centres, administration procedures also form a section on the online filmed footage and in the accompanying commentary.

As centres increasingly move to systems where non-specialist examinations officers are the point of reference and dispatchers of moderation material, it is vital for the smooth running of the process that instructions regarding procedures are read, understood and carried out by all relevant parties. Examinations officers need the support of Heads of English or their deputies in all this.

Grateful thanks to all those who got it right and enabled moderators to meet their deadlines.

Conclusion

In conclusion it cannot be stressed enough that centres make use of all the support material readily available for this unit, mention of which has been made previously, but to summarise:
- Online filmed material with accompanying commentary
- Specific "real-life" context guidance document
- The Consultancy Service for Speaking and Listening
- Advisory visits with centre specific feedback
- Reports to centres on the examination series, both centre specific and the Principal Moderators' Report to Centres

The Administration procedures have been summarised previously.

Finally the Speaking and Listening Unit has always been a real strength for candidates, as witnessed by moderators making Advisory visits to centres. There is a great deal of good work being done and this is testimony to the hard work and dedication of the teachers involved in preparing and assessing candidates. Many thanks as always for your continuing commitment.

A641 Reading Literary Texts

General Comments:

It was pleasing to see that very few centres submitted folders with rubric infringements, usually *Of Mice and Men* with Duffy or Zephaniah where this was the case; it is clear that the requirements of this unit are now firmly understood. It is important, however, to clarify that the tasks must be the correct ones for the year of entry, as submitting other tasks constitutes malpractice and cannot be accepted. Assessment was generally consistent with generosity most evident in the higher bands, where close analysis of language and its effects is required. Evidence of standardisation through a second teacher's comments is required and the cover sheets are for summative comments rather than a simple recording of the tasks undertaken. These comments, together with the marginal annotation of essays, form the basis of the assessment process and communication with the moderator, and lead to the most accurate marking.

Preparation of candidates was thorough and there was evidence of clear engagement with the texts and tasks across the ability range. However, in some instances there was too much scaffolding of the responses where preparation included mind maps and essay frames with a number of key quotations provided for the candidates to add a comment, with often no more than merely a paraphrase. These responses were very similar both in content and structure. Better candidates could flesh out these bare bones with more extended comment and some sense of the text as a whole. The best candidates could provide a conceptualised view and range more freely through the text for evidence of their points.

Some moderators expressed concern last year about extremely long pieces which became repetitive or rather laboured in approach and there was some evidence that centres had taken heed of the advice given regarding length. Candidates were generally better at language analysis in the poetry pieces, and the integration of context has improved over the past two years, although some essays still incorporate bolted-on biographical explanations.

In this session it was noted that there were, as last year, instances of clerical errors, which are time consuming for the centres to amend (CW/Amend forms), and OCR would ask centres to check that marks on the folders and MS1 mark sheets are consistent especially where marks have been changed as a result of internal moderation.

Comments on Individual Questions:

Section A: Themed Tasks

It has been encouraging to see many centres making use of these tasks, sometimes for their own choice of text but often as alternatives for the set texts, with *Of Mice and Men* and *Romeo and Juliet* being the most popular choices. Whilst there were a number of responses to the writer's descriptions of characters (Task 1), the ways in which the writers made moments of conflict striking and significant had a broader appeal as it could be used across all three genres, including the most popular poetry option of Owen's war poetry. Appropriate textual references were used to support a line of argument, with some reference to the impact of the social and historical context. It was pleasing to see that the tasks elicited a stronger response to language this year, however weaker responses lapsed into a narrative account of moments of conflict with straightforward descriptions of the actions and physical appearance of characters. The more developed responses ranged widely through the text and offered relevant characters and incidents. The very best focused closely on the presentation of the key moments of conflict and, in relation to *Of Mice and Men* and *Romeo and Juliet,* the ways in which these contributed to the tragedy.

Section B: Prose or Literary Non-Fiction

As has come to be expected, *Of Mice and Men* is the text most commonly used with very few centres opting for the other options. Candidates engaged effectively with the presentation of the ranch as a harsh and violent place, often referring thoughtfully to the impact of the Depression and consequent itinerant nature of life on the ranch, relating this to Slim's comment that loneliness leads men to "get mean." The best responses engaged closely with how key moments of violence were presented, focussing on how the language contributed to the effect and to the overall tragedy. Many responses considered how the cycle of violence escalates and foreshadows Lennie's death and the loss of the dream. The description of Curley and the way this leads to his fight with Lennie and subsequent desire to kill him were popular aspects for exploration. Only a very few candidates engaged with the "How far" prompt, taking the opportunity to explore the kindness of Slim and the friendship of George and Lennie as showing an alternative to the harshness and violence. Where this was explored, there were some sensitive considerations of why George chooses to shoot Lennie and the lack of understanding demonstrated by Carlson at the very end of the novel.

There were a very few responses to Tsotsi with some thoughtful evaluation of the ways in which Fugard presents Tsotsi's growing acceptance of his identity as David, referring to the impact of his meeting with Miriam and caring for the baby as part of his journey. The social context was often used effectively to explain how and why Tsotsi had become brutalised and there were some sensitive responses to the flashbacks to the loss of his mother and its effects on him.

There were equally few responses to Bryson and Hardy; the exploration of Bryson's encounters with two or three people tended to be heavily scaffolded and it is clear that the candidates wrote about humour in a rather detached way, with a sense that they recognised that it was entertaining in the context of the time. Responses to Hardy's short stories tended to focus more on the causes than consequences; where consequences were considered, these tended to be the more immediate, with those in the higher bands seeing the tragic nature of the outcome for the central characters.

Section C: Drama – Shakespeare

Romeo and Juliet was the text most commonly used, although there were a few responses to *Julius Caesar.* In exploring the consequences of impulsive behaviour in *Romeo and Juliet*, some candidates used a rather narrative framework for their response and did not focus sufficiently clearly upon impact. Romeo and Tybalt were the favoured characters, followed by Friar Lawrence and Juliet, and stronger responses could trace the impact of the chosen characters through the text, linked to the wider drama, thus achieving a sense of overview. Context was often used effectively: the strongest candidates wrote effectively about the impact of the feud and arranged marriages. There was some focussed analysis on the way characters acted impulsively in becoming embroiled in fights and explored Juliet's acceptance of Friar Lawrence's plans and Romeo's purchase of the poison when he believes Juliet to be dead. There were some engaging comments in relation to the 'romantic' nature of Romeo and the speed with which he moves from love of Rosaline to that of Juliet. However, very few candidates engaged with the language in their response which limited the extent to which they explored the presentation of characters' behaviour and the dramatic nature of the text, making it hard for them to access the higher bands.

The few responses to *Julius Caesar* were generally stronger overall, with most candidates considering the moment when Brutus chooses to betray Caesar and identifying death and destruction as the likely outcomes. They considered the different motives for each character's betrayal with the best responses being grounded in the language, and most powerfully the imagery, of the text, relating their exploration of key moments to the play as a whole.

Section D: Poetry

Since most candidates opted for *Of Mice and Men,* Owen was the most popular choice and evoked the most analytical responses to language. Most candidates endeavoured to focus on the ways in which Owen brings alive the experiences of soldiers in the front line in the poems, again providing useful contextual detail as a springboard for their interpretations. There was some perceptive critical analysis of the poems, but also some loose paraphrase and limited response to the form and structure. Weaker candidates were able to give some details of life at the front line with a little textual support and reference to some literary techniques but with only simple explanation or limited comments on the effects created.

The very few responses to Zephaniah showed candidates writing strongly about the feelings of anger about injustice raised in the poetry, with this theme clearly striking a chord. They found it more difficult to explore the ways in which language, form and structure are used to present the poet's ideas, and often resorted to paraphrase. Ironically it appears that the accessibility of the language makes it harder for candidates to analyse it than with Owen.

On balance, the poetry responses were often considered by moderators to be the strongest in the candidates' folders, with greater independence of thought and closer analysis of language.

A642 Imaginative Writing

General Comments

It was clear from their submissions this year that many centres had heeded the advice given in previous reports. Candidates have understood that a shorter more focused piece is likely to be more successful than a long rambling piece. This has also meant that there were fewer examples of very short responses to the satellite task; although short pieces can be successful, it is difficult to agree with a mark in Band 3 or above if there is not enough detailed development. It is also pleasing to note an improvement in the detail of annotation in the body of each candidate's work because it helps the moderators to understand how the centre has arrived at the final mark for each candidate.

It would be appreciated, however, in future sessions, if centres gave a clear breakdown on the front sheet of the marks awarded for each of the assessment objectives. When compiling their sample folders, centres should also package each candidate's work more simply; to facilitate the moderation process it is better to use a staple or a treasury tag to attach the front sheet to the two responses and their respective plans rather than putting each one in a folder or plastic pocket.

The Tasks

Media

1 Write the words of a broadcast in which you give advice to young people about their relationships with older people (e.g. parents, teachers or elderly neighbours).

Candidates engaged confidently with the form and style of a broadcast. They gave advice which showed a wisdom beyond their years about how to build better relationships between older and younger people. Many used an interview or phone-in format over which the shadow of Jeremy Kyle was clearly cast and some developed a more sophisticated approach by including experts who discussed the issues in a much more theoretical manner.

2 (a) Write a letter to the producer of the broadcast in which an older person comments on the advice that has been given.

This was a particularly popular choice. Yet again candidates found the letter format very supportive and most were able to adopt a suitable tone: some were reflective pieces inspired by the content of the broadcast and others were more impassioned, often adopting effectively the voice of an older listener. Candidates in future sessions should, however, avoid simply repeating the material from the core task as this does not respond well to the opportunities offered by this task to add an extra dimension to the original response.

2 (b) Write a podcast, dramatic monologue or case study giving an account of a challenging relationship with a person of a different age group.

Many candidates used this task to present effective and emotive accounts of difficult relationships which were clearly personally and intensely felt. Most were able to use the form effectively to develop a convincing narrative but some were simply very short or very repetitive expressions of strong emotion with too little carefully considered content.

2 (c) Write an article for a local newspaper reporting on a project which successfully brings together people from different age groups.

Although fewer candidates attempted this task than the others, those who did described imaginative ways in which the generations could be brought together. It was good to see that almost none of the candidates spent so much time creating a convincing imitation of a newspaper's design that they ran out of time to write a sufficiently developed response.

Text Development

1 Choose one or two characters from a text you have read, heard or seen. Write a story about them in which they are searching for something or someone. Call your story "The Search".

Candidates of all abilities used the story form confidently and effectively in their responses to this task. Those who based their responses on Of Mice and Men and Romeo and Juliet were able to develop interesting approaches to the task but it was good to see that more and more candidates are using texts other than the set texts. Very few candidates were led by the concept of a search to produce over-long responses; most managed to develop their ideas in some detail and end their story satisfactorily.

2 (a) Write a series of entries for a blog or diary in which one of the characters from your story records their thoughts and feelings about the search.

The blog or diary form was used confidently by most candidates to construct their response to this task. In future sessions, however, candidates should avoid writing a series of very short entries because they give too little opportunity to show the detailed development required for Band 3 and above. Most candidates wisely chose to write the blog or diary entries from a perspective different from that used for the main task; this better reflects the spirit of a task which should allow candidates to cast the content of the main task in a new light.

2 (b) Write a letter to a well-known actor in which you try to persuade them to play one of the characters in a film based on your story.

This was the most popular satellite task. Supported once again by the letter format, most candidates were able to organise and develop their ideas clearly and appropriately. Some developed sophisticated and effective personas for the letter writer which enabled them to achieve the higher grades.

2 (c) Write the words of a talk to your class about the importance of never giving up.

Candidates who chose this task usually adopted effectively some of the features of a talk so that their piece could not be mistaken for a newspaper article. It is to be hoped that some centres took advantage of the opportunity for candidates actually to deliver this talk as part of the speaking and listening unit. A wide range of rhetorical features were used by many candidates with the highest attaining candidates producing pieces that were impressively mature and persuasive.

Overall

The work of most candidates was well presented and mainly accurate but illegible work sometimes made moderation difficult. Although handwriting is not assessed, centres must

ensure that candidates are not disadvantaged by poor handwriting. No special permission is required to use electronic aids to produce the final piece as long as spell-checks, thesauruses and the Internet are disabled.

The quality of candidates' responses and the advice they are being given by centres is steadily improving. Most are now engaging effectively with each task and producing appropriate responses. Spelling is generally accurate at all levels of ability and most candidates make some attempt to manipulate sentence structures for effect. Even the more able candidates, however, are not using punctuation between sentences with consistent accuracy. Paragraphing is another area that continues to cause concern: although many candidates have mastered the one word or one sentence paragraph. Even the more able are less confident about organising and linking more straightforward paragraphs.

Overall it is clear that both centres and candidates enjoyed working on these tasks. All the work submitted showed real engagement and some imagination and the very best, as always, was amusing, engaging and sometimes genuinely powerful.

A680 Information and Ideas (Foundation Tier)

General Comments

The question paper proved to be accessible and of an appropriate level of demand for the tier. Most candidates were able to engage with the two reading texts for Section A: *How to be a wildlife photographer* and *Party Animals*.

The majority of candidates appeared to have been well prepared for the examination. The spaces provided for responses were sufficient for all but a minority of candidates, who generally used the additional pages towards the back of the booklet.

In most cases, candidates appeared to have followed the advice regarding time allocation; few responses showed evidence of running out of time. However, there were instances of candidates rushing through the Reading section and then spending an excessive amount of time on the Writing section, often to their detriment as more writing led to more errors being made.

Individual Questions Section A – Reading

No examiners reported any instances of candidates using the incorrect text for Q1, but a very few candidates used the first text to answer either Q2(a) or Q2(b).

1(a) – 1(c) These easier questions provided a relatively gentle way into the paper, though not all candidates scored all six marks. Some candidates had a limited grasp of the term 'adjectives' in Question 1(a).

1(d) Stronger responses demonstrated a clear focus on the task: 'Outline what you learn about what is needed to take good wildlife photographs.' Many were able to express points in their own words, *as far as possible*, as the question says. These candidates showed a secure understanding of a range of valid points.

Once again, less successful responses were often marked by the presence of one or more of the following:
- points made that were not relevant to the task
- points laboured or repeated
- the occasional word changed in a minimal attempt at own words
- own views on the topic offered
- analysis of the writer's use of words.

The weakest answers lifted material indiscriminately and showed an almost complete misunderstanding of the task and/or text.

Question 2

Most candidates took note of the relative weightings of Q2(a) and Q2(b) – six and 14 marks respectively. There were still, however, a minority of candidates who wrote at excessive length for Q2(a).

2(a) Stronger responses commented on the effects of such features as the heading 'Party Animals' and sub-headings 'Midnight at the oasis' and 'A noisy affair'. They explored the effects created by the two photographs, one of rhinos at a water-hole, the other of two rhinos 'nuzzling'. Many candidates referred to the attribution of human qualities to the rhinos in the phrase 'drink, gossip and play'.

Once again, the least successful responses merely identified features without comment or made generic comments about headings, photographs and captions that could be true of any magazine article, or indeed, of any media text.

2(b) The most successful responses contained clear evidence of the ability to select and analyse relevant detail, commenting on both the information given and specific words and phrases. It should be noted that the quality of analytical comment is a discriminator in this question. Stronger responses explored the words used to describe rhinos as 'party animals': they were there to 'socialise', play 'party games' and 'strut' around. Many commented on the effects of the onomatopoeia in 'squeaked and squealed' and 'roared' also to the comical reference to the 'morning after' such a heavy party night.

However, a minority of responses did not address aspects of language used in the article. The weakest responses simply described the content of the passage.

Section B – Writing Questions 3 and 4

Examiners saw the full range of performance. As ever, some candidates are apt to confuse quantity with quality. It is worth pointing out again that length of answer alone rarely secures high reward. There is no need for candidates to provide more than one-and-a-half to two sides of writing (using average size of handwriting as a guide) for their response to either question in Section B. There should certainly be no need to use the additional pages of the answer booklet. Many candidates would have benefited from more practice at planning, paragraphing and checking their work.

Stronger responses showed a clear control of generally relevant material, and offered an engaging opening, clear development of ideas and an effective ending. Both vocabulary and sentence structures were varied for effect. By contrast, less successful responses did not convey much evidence of writing purposefully for an audience. The weakest responses tended to produce rambling material or material lacking coherence to the degree that it had to be re-read, sometimes several times, before the meaning was sufficiently clear.

Common and recurring problems with punctuation included confusion between upper and lower case letters, and a failure to mark sentence divisions. There were again instances of very poor handwriting, which placed a considerable burden on readers. Legible handwriting is essential for the reader to make sense of the ideas the candidate is trying to communicate.

Question 3

There were many stimulating accounts of candidates' hobbies, including football, boxing, racing on horses and in cars, ballroom dancing and so on. Where there was a passion for the chosen hobby or interest, the writing tended to be livelier and more engaging. The best responses remembered the audience, purpose and format of writing specified in the question, and crafted their responses accordingly.

Question 4

There was a wide range of engaging responses to the topic 'Life isn't fair'. Some were adamantly against the practice of photographing their lives rather than living their lives; they deplored the increasing use of selfies and the need to share with others via Snapchat and Instagram every banal aspect of their lives, not least the meals they were about to eat. Others championed the right to do just that if they wanted to. Yet others spoke eloquently about the need to have digital memories to look back on in later life.

A680 Information and Ideas (Higher Tier)

General Comments:

The paper was well received by candidates and their teachers for what it offered in both reading and writing. Responses were detailed and relevant and candidates had generally used their time well. Even when the going got tough for some in the reading passages, compensation was possible in the writing. Many examiners sensed the enjoyment candidates had manifested in completing the paper. Very few candidates appeared to have little idea of what to do although some still confuse the requirements of Q1 and Q2/3. These latter questions were occasionally treated with the application of a list of possible rhetorical devices and a spot and attach process followed. This, assuredly, is not the way to approach these tasks. The passages should be read on their merits and the wording of the task should guide candidates to their decisions about their responses.

All five questions each elicited full marks from some candidates: a rare experience!

Few candidates had been wrongly entered in this tier and those few that had were enabled to show themselves at their best because of the accessibility of the reading material and the writing tasks. Weaker candidates in the tier are strongly advised to be as concise as possible and leave time to check the accuracy of their writing before time runs out.

Able candidates were, conversely, stretched by the paper's demands and worked hard to get each response into the top bands. Whilst there was nothing extraordinary about the Street-Porter article and the questions set on it, the Nicholas Carr article was, perhaps, not written in the same vein and, especially, tone as previous second passages. Almost all candidates were sensitive to the changing tone here, which moved from frustrated to sardonic to optimistic. The only problem seemed to be that technology moves far faster than the timescale for setting examinations: some candidates were keen to point out that the Twitter images are now obsolete.

The paper was very successful, then, in discriminating across the ability range. What it presented was fair and appropriate throughout. But many examiners reported problems with poor or illegible handwriting.

The writing gave a very clear set of choices for candidates. They could write a persuasive talk, a favourite genre for which all now seem very thoroughly prepared or a straightforward (or, indeed very much more complex) narrative, also familiar territory.

Very few candidates failed to answer all the questions although the evidence is that starting with the writing task and leaving the reading until last works for a very small minority of those who choose this methodology.

Comments on Individual Questions:

Question No:

1   The majority of responses to this question were well focused: most candidates had been rigorously prepared for this task: but those who still do not t understand what they have to do are in marked contradistinction to that majority. Candidates and teachers are obviously aware of the essentials of the task: separate thesis from example, use own words (that is, reorganise the passage so that the information fits the task) and provide a good range of different points. Above all, be concise and do not waste words on repetition and/or irrelevance. NO comment on the style of the passage is required.

The most common inclusion of excess material that was not relevant to the question was the reference to Lady Gaga and her legions and/or the introduction of tweeting in Parliament. It was insufficient to simply say "sportsmen whinge on twitter". What was required was an understanding that people (including famous people) will say on social media what they will not say to people's (the manager's) face.

Personal remarks about social media in all its many manifestations were self-penalising, as were attempts to put an alternative case: neither approach was required

 It was reported widely that fewer candidates ignored concision and wrote far too much.

2 It is important to see how poorer answers could have been improved.

No response will be more than very moderately successful if it fails to show the meaning/purpose/intention of the passage and the reasoning behind it. Candidates should be encouraged as strongly as possible to spend as long as they need to get at these essentials: they will write all the quicker and more effectively if they do. As stated in the introduction, candidates should take the passages and the questions on their merits and plan a thoughtful and relevant answer.

Responses that seek to use a pre-digested list of generic devices and attach chunks of the passage to them will be unsuccessful because the thinking processes have been sidelined. All bold headlines stand out; all coloured pictures are bright and attractive; all short snappy sentences capture your interest, and so on. Engaging with a particular passage and making a specific response to it is the way to gain marks.

Thus, what was needed here to show how Janet Street Porter makes her argument convincing, was to see her "take" on Twitter and pick out particular examples of the way effects are produced.

The main point to be made about the picture was not that it was blue "which is a cold colour", or that it stands out, or any other generic description that could apply to any picture or headline or sub-heading but that it contained a deliberate ambiguity in the twitter livery. "What are you doing?" might well be an invitation to tweet but it is also a challenge to those of Janet Street Porter's persuasion to despair at such activities. The point is worth emphasising because this is an excellent example of how to approach "presentation." It shows exactly how the picture provides a visual cue into the text and its concerns.

Almost all candidates commented on "tsunami of bilge"/"tidal wave of drivel" and the rhetorical question they embody. This was subjected to an analytical approach, which was not always sustained throughout the response. Similarly, most candidates saw and commented on the structure of the article in which the writer posits the opposing case: here that Twitter has its virtues only to reinforce her criticisms: this was a point well made. Fewer understood "bastard child" and took it to mean "insulting remark"/"strong language" rather than the literal sense in which it is intended.

The strongest responses gave relentlessly sustained analytical work, which empathised with the article's stance and opinions. These warmed to the concepts of attention seeking/ lack of self-esteem tweeters which were alleged to embody, seeing this paradox as something they agreed with and deplored their lack of intelligence and/or skills. This part of the passage provided a feast for those of an analytical bent to dine out on. Much the same energetic insights were applied to "whingers… who should keep their mouths shut" – if not the language of the classroom, then certainly of the playground.

In short successful responses were the ones which saw (amongst other things) the use of "grammar, context, considered evaluation, subtle innuendo and adjectives" and were able to comment on them with confidence.

3   Many of the general comments above applied to this question but the essential differences between them have not always been fully understood.

Whereas Q2 will stick with one point of, or, at any rate, shades of one point of view, Q3 will have a "yes, but" alternative view at some point. This passage has the "yes but" alternative right the way through. Candidates should, therefore, be congratulated on picking up these changing nuances and commenting on them, which virtually all did. The second key difference is that this task looks for an awareness of tone and how it is presented and delivered. Most saw that as the views change, so too does the tone: three or more times in the article. Anxiety and concern give way to more confident explanation, then to doubt and scepticism and finally to resolution.

Again, a clear awareness of the fundamentals of the article was the essential starting point for successful responses. Is the Internet and all its manifestations helping or hindering our intellectual development? Well in some ways yes, in some ways no, then not very sure, but at the end the crucial punch line "we will, lose something important in ourselves and in our culture" with the memorable metaphor of "pancake people" to round it off. Again the best answers needed to include a full sense of the conclusion to make the rest of the analysis work in a comparative way.

Again, many weaker candidates sought to demonstrate "thought-provoking" without this overview of the structure and understanding of where the article gets to. The best example is the "scuba diver/jet -ski" comparison. Such candidates saw this and explained the difference "deep v shallow" or something of the sort and then suggested that it was thought provoking which, of itself it is not of course. What was needed was an account of the metaphor being simplified into a simile as a quantitative sense of the differences between reading (good) and surfing (bad) and the reasons given.

Some responses assumed that "Is Google making us stupid?" was a rhetorical question which at this point of the article it isn't: better ones saw that by the end of the article it has become one as the writer draws his conclusions.

Some candidates compromised their responses by expressing personal opinions and prejudices.

In short the article's changing tone and the way it unravels the ambiguities stretched candidates right across the spectrum of marks and as such was a success.

4   All the candidates, it was reported, are now confident and practised in the "talk to the class" and can sustain an apt tone in this genre successfully.

The vast majority of takers here went for something that was related to the reading material. Perhaps taking a cue from Janet Street Porter's vehemence, some of the strongest candidates had a field day of eloquent damnation of their peers who, it was alleged, were obsessed with status, likes and numbers of "friends". This was often done with rhetorical savagery and/or with a slow burning sarcasm. Others took social media as but one of many tokens of what was wrong with society and (a very popular line) why children today are growing up too quickly. It was touching to read these 16 year olds recalling and lamenting the early onset of adulthood when they had played out with their friends, got muddy, been unselfconscious and so on, just as the generation of 2010 had condemned them for the same thing: and no doubt the generations of 1955, 1960 and so on.

Other topics finding support included global warming and a range of other "green" issues; schools and the school system of assessment by examination; drug and alcohol abuse amongst teenagers; issues of gender equality and many more.

Strong responses were characterised by a conscious use of rhetorical devices: sarcastic rhetorical questions were popular, as were one liners followed by the pregnant pause. And all of these were brought to an effectively climactic conclusion.

Where essays were less successful they degenerated into uncontrolled rants or became inappropriately personal. Or as one very experienced examiner put it "the imperative mode was dominant". Responses that lurched from one complaint to another (and sometimes another after that) lacked an effective continuity and structure and, therefore, development was limited. Some went on far too long and became tediously repetitive and others were so brief they barely got going. Another feature of less successful work was a drifting away from genre and audience, which, again, made for inconsistency and ineffectiveness.

5 This presented candidates with, in the first instance, a straightforward opportunity for a narrative, probably their earliest and most practised writing style.

It certainly afforded all takers with the opportunity to re-shape and develop a piece of their own experience and some familiar themes were re-worked to good effect. Never has communication in sports and games of all sorts been given so much prominence and much of this kind of writing allowed or even forced candidates to go into authentic and convincing detail. One of the best was a candidate who told the story of having been badly injured when thrown from a horse and was advised never to ride again: but she and her mount persevered and won the gymkhana because they learned to communicate in a different way.

Other successful topics included accounts of various outward-bound activities, overseas expeditions and fraught telephone conversations, one of the most convincing of which was the reception of instructions about managing a successful child birth.

Weaker responses almost always took a derivative topic and worked on shaping it around the task. Quite plainly, few 16 year olds have fought on the front line in Iraq or Afghanistan and are giving themselves a high hurdle to convince examiners that they might have done. High-flying businessmen being assaulted by hit-men in Las Vegas are also likely to be past the GCSE stage.

Candidates should certainly be aware of how easy it is to lose marks when the basic mechanics of writing are ignored, as spelt out in the mark scheme. Rambling, comma spliced sentences drag AO 3/3 marks down, as do failures of person and tense agreement. Repetitious spelling error types (as opposed to the odd slip with ambitious vocabulary) do the same.

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