

## ENGLISH A1

### Overall grade boundaries

<b>Grade:</b>	E	D	C	B	A
<b>Mark range:</b>	0 - 7	8 - 15	16 - 22	23 - 28	29 - 36

### The range and suitability of the work submitted

Examiners were generally pleased with this first set of essays written to the new criteria, although there were a few cases of work submitted with the old (green) coversheets which appeared to have been written with the old criteria in mind. There has been no marked change in the general standard of the work submitted and, if anything, a slight improvement. The best essays were well up to the level of first-year tertiary work and the proportion of essays in the B category was slightly higher than in previous sessions. At the other end of the scale there were still examples, though not too many, of work so poor that it should never have been submitted.

Topics ranged widely, from Shakespeare to Stoppard and Beckett, from Jane Austen to Anne Michaels and Cormac McCarthy, and from dystopian fiction to Tolkien and J. K. Rowling. There was a preference for modern or contemporary texts, though the nineteenth century was also well represented. As usual the novel predominated, but some students took up the challenge of poetry and drama: there were excellent essays comparing Milton and Blake', and the idea of development in poems by Wordsworth and Yevtushenko; there were original attempts at theatre involving plays such as *The Changeling*, and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Where candidates chose to follow well-trodden paths by writing on such modern classics as *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Animal Farm* and *The Lord of the Flies*, the results were usually no better than satisfactory; and the same was true in the case of popular contemporary works like J. K. Rowling's, where the candidates' obvious enthusiasm and detailed knowledge tended to produce no more than uncritical expositions of theme and character. Comparisons between texts were often more profitable—for instance, the treatment of madness in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*—but only when there was a point to the comparison and the texts were made to shed light on each other. Where students wrote on canonical texts, a well-chosen research question, such as the role of conversation in two Jane Austen novels, was able to raise the essay out of the rut of the routine. A common pitfall for those interested in the socio-historical or political dimension of fictional works was to treat them simply as documentary evidence rather than examining how they work as literary texts.

There were, as always, some essays that were unsuitable because they dealt exclusively with translated texts and thus lost a minimum of eight marks no matter how accomplished and interesting they may have been. It is most important for schools to note that at least one of the texts discussed in an English A1 essay must have originally been written in English. Other unsuitable topics were those that were too general, such as broad examinations of middle

class women in 19<sup>th</sup> century novels', or non-literary, such as discussions of TV programmes or the serial-killer protagonist in four films.

## Candidate performance against each criterion

### **A: research question**

Apart from the kinds of failings outlined above, most essays satisfactorily defined a research question, although in some cases that question was better formulated in the Abstract than in the Introduction. Clearly, satisfying this criterion is an essential prerequisite of a successful essay. Students should be encouraged to integrate the question into their introduction even though it may be clearly stated in their title.

### **B: introduction**

This proved to be a problem in many essays in that the introduction made little or no attempt to provide a context for the research question and to make a case for its significance.

### **C: investigation**

Some essays consulted no sources other than the primary texts. While this was legitimate with recent texts where there is no body of published criticism, essays on well-known texts were usually better where some sources were consulted (as long as they were not just SparkNotes, Wikipedia or internet material of dubious value).

### **D: knowledge and understanding of the topic studied**

Most essays showed a good, or at least adequate, knowledge and understanding of the topic, although only the best were able to situate it in an academic context.

### **E: reasoned argument**

A common weakness here was to dwell on descriptive accounts of texts or plot summaries rather than developing an argument.

### **F: application of analytical and evaluative skills appropriate to the subject**

This was where the better students distinguished themselves from the more ordinary by presenting personal and illuminating analysis of the primary texts. Weaker essays relied on citing secondary sources for their analysis rather than engaging personally with the texts.

**G: use of language appropriate to the subject**

Most essays scored 2 or 3 here, though there were many fluent and eloquent essays at one end of the scale and stumbling and garbled ones at the other end. Many could have been easily improved by careful proof-reading before submission.

**H: conclusion**

Most essays made a fair attempt at a conclusion, though many simply restated the material of the introduction, thus forfeiting one mark.

**I: formal presentation**

A small number of essays lost marks quite unnecessarily by omitting a contents page or page numbers etc. Another problem was failure to follow a standard method of documentation for the citation of sources and the composition of a bibliography. However, many essays were very well presented, and that number would increase with careful supervision.

**J: abstract**

There were many examples of abstracts that were inappropriate because they were written as a form of introduction, setting out in the future tense what the essay would do. Some omitted, or did not state clearly enough, the conclusions.

**K: holistic judgment**

There were few very low marks under this criterion for most essays showed some intellectual initiative and understanding, and the best were impressive pieces of individual research.

**Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates**

It is important, as most supervisors already know, to ensure that one of the principal texts for the essay was originally written in English, and to instruct students in a standard method of documentation for citing sources and compiling a bibliography. Page references to the primary texts are best given in parentheses, and long strings of footnotes or endnotes referring in full to the same text are best avoided. Students should be urged to proof-read their essays carefully before submission.

Helping define a fruitful and manageable research question is the main challenge for supervisors. They are advised to steer candidates away from biographical topics (e.g. examining a writer's works as reflections of his or her life), as these almost inevitably result in essays that are merely speculative, lacking in analysis and second-hand. It may help to choose literary texts that are less well-known but of clear literary value. With classic texts it is advisable to find a topic and an approach that will prevent the candidate from having to go over too much well-trodden ground. With such texts judicious use of secondary sources may enable the argument to begin at a higher level, and it is important for supervisors to guide

candidates towards finding a balance between offering their own reading in ignorance of all secondary sources and relying so much on them that that all personal response is smothered. Students should be encouraged to look, and think, beyond basic study guides and to treat Wikipedia and internet sites with caution.

With the new criteria, the introduction may require particular attention from supervisors. Candidates should be encouraged to integrate their research question into the introduction even though it may be clearly set out in the title, and also to provide a context for their research question and some sense of why it is significant.