

AS ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 0396/01
Composition

General comments

The paper seemed to cater for a wide range of ability and differentiation was clear. Many candidates were often ambitious and displayed an impressive use of technical accuracy. They were keen to use language metaphorically to achieve their aims. Imaginative work was at best marked by a clear sense of voice and an attempt at originality; other effective pieces were often strong on generic conventions. At the other end of the scale, many responses in the lower range of marks were distinguished by a highly derivative format or by a sense of a lack of effective planning. The need for technical accuracy [such as the correct use of tenses and single/plural agreement] is very marked at this level and candidates need to ensure that they keep this need in mind. The answers in the second section varied from focused and cogent material to narrative/personal responses lacking in secure thought and direction. Candidates should be versed in the use of appropriate formats – such as setting out letters and the styles of different types of articles – so that they feel confident in dealing with these should they be set on the paper. Time management was handled effectively on the whole and the major rubric infringement occurred on **Question 3** where a number of candidates did not seem to note the essential need for a drama-script in the rubric. As usual, the paper produced some excellent and enjoyable material for the most part and most candidates seemed to relish the opportunity to write their answers. There were, however, still a number of candidates who failed to write the minimum of 600 words on each piece – a self-penalising process.

Comments on specific questions

Question 1

The most effective answers here established a good balance between physical description and personality. They showed subtlety in characterisation and a strong sense of contrasting elements, often with incisive suggestions for any changes. Language was employed skilfully, combined with a strong sense of voice and a variety of sentence constructions. Responses in the middle range were often thoughtful and imaginative but could be a little florid and overwritten – a kind of ‘trying too hard’ syndrome. Less secure answers tended to offer insufficient contrast between the pieces and were drawn in to a rather narrative approach or offered an unequal balance between appearance and outlook: such answers seemed a little mechanical and stereotyped.

Question 2

This proved to be an effective and popular choice. Successful answers offered focused and controlled writing and were often moving in the ways in which they dealt with personal dramatic experiences. Such poignancy, though, did not rely on general outpourings but was accompanied by structured and effective planning. Less effective answers tended to offer general autobiographies which did not deal with a specific event, nor did they really attempt to evoke a particular sense of atmosphere. It is worth reminding candidates to highlight the key aspects of the rubric.

Question 3

This proved to be a less popular choice. There were some very effective scripts about a topic which was clearly understood and responded to. Such answers handled the assignment with great skill and used it as a medium for some excellent description and suspense building. However, there were quite a few candidates who did not seem to read the rubric properly or who did not know how to set out a drama-script [such as the need for stage directions in the present tense, for example]. This led to a degree of self-penalisation.

Question 4

This question elicited different approaches to the subject: these took in gangster stories, the horror genre or even psychological worlds. There was some intriguing and skilful use of setting, complemented by a strong sense of narrative voice and attitude in the most effective answers. Less secure answers tended to be highly derivative in content and approach: the writing here appeared mechanical and unplanned, often relying on references to vampires and werewolves.

Question 5

This was a very popular choice. Although most candidates would be limited in terms of other experiences they could compare schooldays to, they often used foresight and the words of other people as a basis for exploring the topic. Effective answers created objective and balanced consideration of the topic. However, less effective responses tended to be subjective and narrative in approach, often diffuse and sentimental without evaluating the main idea of the piece. Such answers were personal recollections masquerading as discursive writing. Candidates need to bear in mind the nature of the writing expected in this section of the paper.

Question 6

Effective answers were written in a style suitable for teenagers, employing apt strategies and vocabulary. They captured the implicit register and tone skilfully and with considerable flair. There was a clear sense of argument and exemplification in such material. Less secure answers did not really convey a clear sense of an intended audience and would have benefited from some specific examples of good reading experiences.

Question 7

This was also a popular choice. Effective answers, in particular, tended to avoid the more cliché possibilities – money, world peace, the end of all disease – and explored original ideas in a fluent and mature fashion. Arguments were measured and reasoned. Reflective and philosophical choices were commented on with a sense of voice and perception. Less secure answers seemed rather predictable and, at times, superficial in the ways they trivialised the subject.

Question 8

Discussion of environmental issues in relation to progress and development struck a chord with quite a number of candidates. Effective responses included a range of subtle arguments on both sides and were expressed clearly. They employed the correct format and constructed paragraphs clearly. Less effective answers ignored the need for a format and struggled to establish detailed arguments for the chosen scenario. They made a few obvious points which were simply mirrored in the opposing letter.