

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 0396/11
Composition

Key Messages

It is recommended that to secure higher marks candidates pay particular attention to:

- planning the development of their writing
- avoiding more predictable or derivative plots (Section A) and ideas (Section B)
- using a tone appropriate to the type of writing specified by the question.

General Comments

Some very able writing was in evidence: original, thoughtful and perceptive work was seen by Examiners.

At the higher end of the range, there was skilful use of descriptive elements and structure in responses to Section A and cogent, well exemplified argument in responses to Section B. At the lower end of the range, it was most often lapses in technical areas and expression that limited the marks that could be awarded.

In the main, candidates made real efforts to meet the prescribed task, but a number needed to address the question focus and consider more carefully the nature of the guidelines of the task (as shown in words such as 'character and motivation', 'setting', 'mood', 'mystery' or 'suspense'; or a prescribed structure: e.g. opening to a novel or short story).

Audience and purpose sometimes needed to be more convincing in Section B. Tone would be a particularly useful area to address and focus upon in classroom practice for such tasks.

A significant number of candidates produced work that was well short of the lower word limit.

Comments on Specific Questions

Section A

Question 1

There were some very effective answers where responses captured the mood and setting very imaginatively, often using the present tense. There was often a fusion of descriptions of people – usually opposing sets of fans – and places. The better answers brought out vivid contrasts; less effective answers tended to make the second piece simply the negative image of the first piece ('There were cars....There were no cars').

Less effective answers seemed to offer a narrative rather than descriptive approach, with the writer at the centre, offering too narrow a perspective. In such answers there was often a tendency towards formulaic structures: steady build-up of expectations in the arriving crowd (sometimes a focus on participants, too) in the first piece, contrasting emotions of the winning and losing sides and their supporters in the second piece. These tended to be stronger on 'mood' than 'place'.

Better answers included first and third person narratives, with third person sometimes a more appropriate choice, as this could give the narratives greater range with settings. When approached with imagination, this task produced some excellent descriptions based on detailed sensory perceptions.

Question 2

This question allowed candidates to offer imaginative and carefully constructed narrative elements combined with a sense of character and motivation. The most successful answers did this very well indeed; some answers were genuinely entertaining and intriguing. Less successful ones needed to show some sense of planning and direction. Sometimes those did not make 'deception' the hinge. Some candidates ignored the question wording and wrote about a character being motivated generally.

There was an impressive mix of first and third-person narration and a range of character types, jilted lovers, duped espionage agents and mistrusting offspring of secretive parents being the most prevalent. The title certainly lent itself to some tense, atmospheric openings culminating in cliff-hangers or the introduction of problems promising further confrontation and misunderstandings.

Less effective answers tended to focus on stitched-up spies out for revenge only, with little character development and over-reliance on dialogue. A number of plots were based on somewhat clichéd ideas of sentimental love stories, which worked well if carefully and engagingly handled but which often descended into unoriginal and predictable outcomes. The problem in some scripts was that deception was not clear until the end and/or very contrived: a story not building character or motivation but something totally unrelated until the end.

Question 3

This was the most popular narrative choice. The title produced a full range of responses – from the atmospheric to the mundane. Most responses developed the idea of a threatening presence in the forest. Effective compositions created a mysterious, at times gothic, ambience and sustained this approach throughout; others produced a less effective focus of the Hansel and Gretel type, or unloaded narratives which seemed rather random in their direction and credibility.

Stronger responses were carefully crafted with a well-managed climax. A number of candidates wrote third-person narratives where the employment of the omniscient narrator allowed some explication of a suspenseful situation whilst describing a mysterious locale. Equally, when the first-person was used it made for a genuine build-up of mystery and fear, due to the restricted perspective and limited knowledge of the main character. The best answers used the forest to intrigue, leaving the reader to want to know more about the characters and the situation.

Less effective responses tended to list a series of events, some of which were quite unconvincing. Quite a few forgot they were writing with the forest as the main title. Several thought that if the final sentence mentioned it they were covered. On the other hand some relied, unhelpfully, on simply offering descriptions of a forest as though that were a means to an end: simple, sometimes effective, descriptions were delivered but did not invite the reader to sense the next chapter or the novel as a whole. Candidates need to avoid derivative and clichéd writing. Conventional horror film narratives found their way into many answers; many were influenced by zombies, monsters, wolves, serial killers and the like. Some managed unsettling and genuinely eerie content, but there were volumes of glowing red eyes and their ilk. Some candidates ignored the requirement to 'write the opening' and killed off the narrator at the end.

Question 4

This was a less popular choice but produced some rounded and clearly contrasting monologues, often involving neighbours disputing over pets, noise or gardens/property boundaries and perceived social snubs. The imaginative ones contained some careful use of vocabulary and dialect. Successful answers conveyed a clear and strong sense of different dialogue structures, tone and feelings as well as voice, often differentiated by age or gender. Some were quite thoughtful and well structured, allowing the same incidents to be seen through contrasting perspectives.

The most notable difficulties some candidates had with this task related to tense, because they did not understand the monologue form. A common pitfall was including mixtures of narrative with the delivery of the character's comments so that it became unclear at which point the speaker was addressing the audience. Some wrote play scripts. A number were a rambling stream-of-consciousness rehearsal of grievances. Distinctions of contrasting voice were not very convincing or effective in the less able scripts. A

recommendation for teaching in this connection would be to encourage candidates to practise adopting very different voices, perhaps through classroom hot-seating activities on novels or short stories, considering the same incident from a wide range of viewpoints.

Section B

Question 5

This title was a popular choice and elicited some strongly argued, rational essays underpinned by a clear sense of voice, purpose and audience. Some were able to relate the contemporary and historical significance of the Olympic Games to political and social issues and debates very well. Candidates seemed to be well informed about this topic (even if a significant number thought they originated in Ancient Rome rather than Greece), and there was a sense that some had debated the issue previously.

Responses were mostly well structured, with stronger candidates producing well developed and logical discussion. Better answers widened their arguments to include all aspects of the proposition. Appeals to global harmony were successfully made, while the economic benefits to the host country were argued.

Weaker responses were still quite clearly structured but the development of arguments was less secure. Some made digressions into the spirit of the Olympics Games, its history and traditions and its motivational properties (especially for the young – wholesome role models, etc.), with not nearly enough consideration of the central proposition – ‘a complete waste of money’ - and in them little notice was taken of the recommendation in the statement, ‘...should be abolished’.

Question 6

There were some very noteworthy attempts where candidates succeeded in adopting the appropriate format and style, while incorporating conventional modes of address and drawing on relevant and focused examples and lines of argument. Most candidates maintained a good sense of audience.

There were some excellent responses in terms of persuasion and engaging with audience. By contrast some did not have a clear enough structure for their writing while some did not find enough content to interest their readers. Other less effective answers offered reams of sensible advice unsupported by any rationale.

Sometimes there was some confusion over the audience. Some candidates began with an appropriate voice but were not able to sustain that voice throughout. Some wrote the article as a lecture in a very serious way or in a highly moral tone which failed to engage, though the ideas might have been good. The weakest responses were flawed technically and lacked engagement with their audience, except sporadically.

Good scripts featured effervescent, bubbly prose capturing the target audience, a youthful journalist dynamic in a convincing manner. They contained very knowledgeable advice concerning healthy diet and training regimes. The best engaged both the serious and the light-hearted perspectives and were holistic in response, moving beyond eating, drinking, smoking and sport to empathising with the individual emotionally. Wide ranging ideas and a lively voice characterised these answers. A recommendation for success in such tasks in the future would be for candidates to widen their focus, including both genders in their advice if appropriate.

This question required a response to form; not all answers were explicit in responding to a ‘magazine article’ – but the better ones used the second and third person, rhetorical devices and personal appeals, while ensuring that their articles had shape.

Question 7

This was a very popular question across the range of ability, prompting very keen and informed answers from candidates whatever their geographical location and cultural background. Candidates seemed to enjoy the relevance of the material and seemed very well informed about the protocol of social networking sites and the arguments for and against their existence. The best grappled with the pros and cons for the individual and society as a whole. There was an impression of clear and vocal sentiments in a large number of these essays. Most candidates seemed fully aware of the potential dangers, going beyond the threat from stalkers to consideration of malware and methods of cracking Facebook’s security protocols. Many wrote about how they would like to ban Facebook.

Occasionally, less focused answers drifted into detailed narratives about cases of assignations and their consequences, moving away from the central issues of the question. Weaker work tended to list points without much development which meant there was some repetition when candidates ran out of new ideas. Some answers on social networking sites wandered into consideration of media technology in general, considering issues such as lack of sport, the growth of laziness, not eating well and lack of health in people. The weakest responses were flawed technically and had few ideas.

Question 8

This generally produced steady and competent ideas, supported by a reasonable choice of examples and arguments. Some candidates seemed to rein in their thoughts here and perhaps played a little safe. In lower scoring answers, some had a problem with 'debate' or had few ideas, while others had speaker A cover one area and speaker B an entirely different area. This in itself was not an issue but in such answers there was little or no sense of persuasion, and the speakers tended to rely on simple assertion. Candidates here often had a reasonable or good sense of audience but were less clear about what points would support their two arguments. Though it was tackled the reasons given were not always compelling. Many adhered to the required format – a school debate – though the tone was not always right.

More successful work featured some considered and well-planned writing. Rhetorical devices such as triplets, pointed repetition of key words, questions, and appeals to an audience raised achievement. Those who did well responded in their second speech to the points made in the first.

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- technical accuracy.

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At the higher end of the range, there was skilful use of descriptive elements and structure in responses to Section A, and cogent, well exemplified argument in responses to Section B. At the lower end of the range, it was most often lapses in technical areas and expression that limited the marks that could be awarded.

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Audience and purpose sometimes needed to be more convincing in Section B. Tone would be a particularly useful area to address and focus upon in classroom practice for such tasks.

For good marks answers need to show technical accuracy. In many scripts agreement, tenses and plural endings were not secure. Here candidates very often confused tenses, especially when they chose to begin their story or description in the present tense. Very often they were unable to maintain this.

Accurate punctuation is important: candidates can make their work more effective by apposite punctuation between and within sentences, noting especially the correct use of the apostrophe and the semicolon.

Paragraphing and discourse markers are important props which add to the structure and coherent progression of ideas in a text. There was often a lack of paragraphing and signposting in responses to both sections of the paper. When conversation was used in stories, many candidates failed to start a new paragraph for each change of speaker. Other errors, such as punctuating conversation, were also frequent. Mastering this crucial skill would not only allow candidates to present their ideas in a more logical sequence, but enhance the reader's understanding of the material accordingly, helping answers to get higher credit.

Candidates need to be aware of the importance of a varied vocabulary. A teaching recommendation is that candidates should select the key words/phrases from the question and note alternatives to provide a vocabulary bank.

Candidates should make sure they write full and developed answers. There were a number of answers which were too short, giving little sense of a fully-addressed answer. There is no need to include a word count.

In discussion work, many candidates discussed the topic in very general or abstract terms. They could benefit from teaching which emphasises the need to find concrete examples to exemplify the points under discussion. Many candidates had difficulty handling impersonal writing. Often they started using 'one would think that...' and then operated an uncomfortable mixture of you/they as the need for pronouns continued and they were unsure what to use. Perhaps a more assured use of the passive voice could be recommended here. A number of candidates used adjectives where adverbs were needed. Quite a few used slang or colloquial words in fairly formal contexts. Candidates need to understand the importance of a formal register where appropriate.

A significant number of candidates did not read the precise question wording carefully enough. This was particularly marked in the task specifying 'opening to a story'. Here some candidates proceeded to write a whole story and tried to pack too much plot into too short a space. Another instruction often ignored was "in your writing create...". There was also evidence that in many scripts limited planning had taken place, especially in Section B responses where careful argumentation and explanation are important to success in the tasks set. Candidates should be advised that 5-10 minutes worth of planning would be sound practice. Also, five minutes could be set aside for the checking of work for accuracy.

Comments on Specific Questions

Section A

Question 1

This was a popular choice and candidates at the higher end of the range displayed imaginative and thoughtful ideas, capturing the moods and qualities of the settings with a good degree of flair. Some answers seemed to rely a little too much on the clipped sentence approach so that what masqueraded as sentences were, in reality, phrases separated by full stops. Most candidates understood the sense of contrast regarding both mood and place. Those who engaged fully with the question clearly understood this with a highly-structured and marked differentiation of all the senses: sight, sound, smells, taste and even touch.

Middle-range scoring candidates were able to access the basics of the city experience, sometimes engaging the reader with contrasting flashes of clear, vivid, visual representations with some aspect of sound and emotion. Less successful answers relied on a narrative focus or attempted to produce formulaic descriptions of city centres. These employed simple, factual lists of what they could see by day and then by night and tended to go through fairly monotonous detail of the day from getting up in the morning; often the second piece lacked subtlety and tended to describe the absence of what was there before and what the people who had been there earlier in the day were now doing, rather than what could actually be seen.

Question 2

This allowed candidates to focus on the worlds of crime or secret liaisons and some answers captured murky underworlds with aplomb. There were some very imaginative presentations of character and motivation, incorporating dialogue (the punctuation of which still left room for improvement in some cases) with precision and effect in that the quantity of it was not overwhelming.

The best candidates set up a scenario which determined character and motivation fairly strongly at the start and built upon it. They were also able to establish the setting and background of the characters and why/where the meeting should take place. There was also a clear sense that more was to come, leaving the reader on a plausible cliff hanger.

Some more clichéd responses were about forbidden love and tended to be complete short stories (which was not required by the task). When this happened stories usually turned into plot summaries. Some plots were totally unrelated to the title until the end and then became contrived. Less effective responses attempted straightforward narratives with few convincing clear-cut characters and/or little motivation. Sometimes, potentially good effects/plots were undermined by poor punctuation and expression, rendering the final product disjointed and ineffective.

Question 3

This was very popular. The open nature of the title allowed for varied interpretations, with candidates clearly relishing the opportunity to engage in some genre-based narration: the mainstays being apocalyptic, natural disaster, crime, and science fiction writing about worlds or dystopias set in the future. Many examples of lively writing were seen. Many candidates managed to note the demands for mystery and suspense, leaving a dénouement (if only one of sorts) until the final paragraphs.

Where thought and planning were involved the title was allowed to be the central focus, but less effective compositions tended to see it as something to tag on to the end of the material in a rather haphazard way. Those who concentrated on building up atmosphere did well; those who wanted to tell an entire (complicated) story were less successful. With the latter, the sense of the novel was not apparent. Complete episodes rather than beginnings characterised the weaker end and, with some, the 'darkness' was not at all apparent. The best responses included psychological, emotional darkness which engaged the reader immediately and promised some sense of a story yet to come.

Section B

Question 4

This was less popular but produced some quite skilful answers, displaying sharp and precise contrasts between the protagonists. Often, the underlying opposition was based on jealousy or social class and perceptions that the boss was having a far easier time than the lowest paid worker. Some answers made effective use of the blindness of a superior in understanding a lower grade colleague.

With the less effective answers, the concept/genre was often misunderstood. At times the composition took on the form of a diary, at others a conversation. The most notable problems related to tense in those who did understand the genre. Other pitfalls included mixtures of narrative with the delivery of the character's comments so that it became unclear at which point the speaker was addressing the audience. Distinctions of contrasting voice were sometimes not convincing, hence creating characters who lacked sparkle, individuality or interest.

The best answers, by contrast, created a clearly strong sense of different dialogue structures, tone and voice as well as feelings.

Question 5

This evoked some very personal and strongly held opinions. A good number of candidates who chose this option found plenty of apt examples to illustrate their points.

There was an opportunity for a distinctive and emotive voice here but quite a few candidates became sidetracked, losing focus on the title and drifting into a general consideration of animal welfare issues. They were limited in relevant discussion in terms of examples and exploration. Once the point had been made – that human beings do not have the right to inflict suffering of any kind on animals – the candidates did not have any means of developing the argument. Many talked about circuses or zoos rather than sport, while some made slightly unconvincing assertions such as that horse racing would lead to the extinction of horses; and human beings' use of farm animals would lead to their extinction.

The question provided for much sympathetic and thoughtful writing but almost always resulted in arguments in favour of the proposition, making little attempt at the balance which would have made for a more complex and interesting discussion. The best answers wove arguments with exemplification while acknowledging cultural counter-arguments too.

Question 6

Many candidates produced steady and effective articles combining an appropriate form of address and precise register. There was clear advice and guidance, supported by an understanding of some of the difficulties the target audience may be facing or about to face. Strong answers kept the main title in constant focus, persuading and engaging with their teenage audience.

Some weaker answers were not able to sustain that voice throughout. Some wrote the article as a lecture in a very serious way or in a highly moral tone which failed to engage, though the ideas might have been good. The weakest responses were flawed technically and lacked engagement with their audience, except sporadically. Some candidates wrote around the subject in very abstract terms; more successful answers had a number of well-structured paragraphs which discussed more specific aspects of the subject.

The most successful answers engaged both serious and light-hearted features. These were holistic in response, moving beyond topics such as eating, drinking, smoking and doing sport, to empathising with the individual emotionally. Wide-ranging ideas and lively voice marked out the best.

Question 7

The quotation prompted some strong opinions, with some understanding the reasons — often social and financial — why people might download material; they also appreciated the moral and intellectual arguments about its illegality. The title's moral dilemma made some candidates think very hard, with some admitting that they had downloaded material whilst recognising some of the condemnation this might expose them to.

Weaker answers had a limited range of ideas, with some sidetracking into technology and its advantages and disadvantages as a whole, which sometimes became repetitive. There were predictable ideas about how obsessive it made people and how it was going to hurt the entertainment industry. (Some were not sure about the word 'justified', taking it to mean 'legalised' or 'regulated'. The latter interpretation may have come from word-processing, as in justifying the margin, so the deduction was that it meant to 'regularise' downloading. The result was that the ethical element was not really dealt with.) In tackling this question, candidates would do well to focus on a range of what constitutes stealing and morality proffering some suggestions as to how they might persuade people this is so; or, otherwise, argue that downloading is a deserved freedom, or how a compromise might be reached to the satisfaction of all concerned. The best grappled with the pros and cons for the individual and society as a whole and were fully informed. These candidates had clearly grappled with the moral and ethical issues of this topic and so there were strong views decidedly expressed. There was some very penetrating understanding of the economics of different entertainment and media-industry vehicles.

Question 8

This allowed some degree of choice. Those tackling it usually focused on driving laws and drinking laws. In general, candidates who chose this topic had a good sense of audience. The question seemed to touch a nerve with a number of candidates who felt they were not allowed by their society or culture to grow up. Effective answers produced a range of exemplification and insights.

Answers sometimes took on too many 'activities' at once, to their detriment. There was a sense that some candidates were trying to cover too much ground in too little detail, with insufficient attention to developing a coherent argument using rhetorical devices and persuasive language, because they might have perceived that addressing more 'legal age limits' would find more favour with the Examiner. In some cases, the difficulty was in not being specific about current age limits and then arguing for changes — the discussion was too generalised and therefore became unfocused. Candidates sometimes confused criminality with legal age limits.