

OXFORD

INTERNATIONAL
AQA EXAMINATIONS

INTERNATIONAL GCSE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

(9270)

Exam guidance

Introduction

The Oxford AQA International GCSE English Language specification gives teachers freedom of choice, allowing them to design a course that will suit their students both in content and in pace. It facilitates exploration of a wide range of multicultural reading sources, originally published in English, and encourages practice and experimentation in writing for a range of purposes. The compulsory Paper 1 and the optional Paper 2 provide a rigorous summative assessment of students' skills and abilities in reading and writing through two distinctly different examination papers. This document focuses on how best to prepare your students for these exams.

The exam papers

Paper 1 (Compulsory): Literary non-fiction and composition

60% of International GCSE English Language assessment

2 hours

80 marks

Section A: Reading – literary non-fiction

Students will be given a single prose text for close study. It will be literary non-fiction eg autobiography, biography, letters, memoir and travel or adventure writing. The text will be designed to appeal to a multicultural audience and reflect the international nature of this specification. The text will be divided into sections with questions. **At least one** question will relate to the whole text. There is no pre-defined number of questions, nor do the questions have a pre-defined focus. They will be linked with the reading Assessment Objectives (AO1) and will target relevant aspects of the text. As such, the selected passage will determine the nature of the questions.

Section B: Writing – composition

There will be three tasks from which students choose one:

Descriptive, imaginative, argumentative and/or discursive.

Students will be assessed on the writing Assessment Objectives (AO2).

Paper 2 (Optional): Source based reading and directed writing

40% of the International GCSE English Language assessment

2 hours

80 marks

Section A: Source based reading

The stimulus material will consist of 5–6 sources, some of which may be brief or solely visual. Sources may be fiction or non-fiction and will be linked thematically. The sources will be selected to appeal to a multicultural audience and reflect the international nature of this specification. Questions will be posed on individual sources and pairs of sources. **At least one** question will require students to consider two texts. As with Paper 1, there is no pre-defined number of questions nor do the questions have a pre-defined focus. They will be linked with the reading Assessment Objectives (AO1) and will target relevant aspects of the source or sources. As such, the selected sources will determine the nature of the questions.

Section B: Directed writing

Writing will be linked with the reading sources from Section A.

There will be a choice from two tasks.

Form, purpose and audience will be specified in each task.

Students will be assessed on the writing Assessment Objectives (AO2).

Assessment Objectives (AOs)

The Assessment Objectives for reading (AO1) and writing (AO2) provide the basis for the preparation of your students for their exams. They define the skills you should focus on developing with your students and will help you to devise lesson content and ensure progression:

AO1: Reading 50%

R1: Read and understand texts, selecting and utilising material appropriate to purpose.

R2: Collate and synthesize detail from one or more sources, making cross-references and comparisons as appropriate.

R3: Develop and sustain interpretations of writers' ideas and perspectives.

R4: Explain and evaluate how writers use linguistic, grammatical, structural and presentational features to achieve effects and engage and influence the reader.

AO2: Writing 50%

W1: Communicate clearly, effectively and imaginatively; use and adapt forms and select vocabulary appropriate to task and purpose in ways that engage the reader.

W2: Use a range of sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect.

W3: Organise information and ideas into sentences, paragraphs and whole texts; use a variety of linguistic and structural features to support cohesion and overall coherence.

W4: Demonstrate technical accuracy in grammar, punctuation and spelling.

Developing reading skills

Careful consideration is given to the selection of texts for both papers. They are chosen on the basis of quality, accessibility and range. There is no fixed format in the questions on reading; they arise naturally from the texts and are designed to enable students across the ability range to best demonstrate the skills they have acquired. A given question may draw on a single or multiple aspects of reading skill as defined in AO1. For, example a lower tariff question may target R1, asking students to identify relevant points. Another question may target R1 and R3 with students having to identify points and infer meaning or develop interpretation of these.

The starting point for teachers, therefore, is not the exam papers but ensuring that students have a wide and varied reading experience across a range of genres, using high quality international texts designed to raise reading skills and, with inherent benefits for AO2, exemplify effective writing. Such texts may already be available within a department's resources and can be usefully supplemented with newspaper and magazine articles and extracts from teachers' personal reading.

Effective questioning plays a crucial part in developing students' reading skills moving them steadily forward from identification of literal detail to collation of such detail, understanding of purpose, inference, exploration and interpretation of ideas and analysis of linguistic features. Examples of ways of doing this are given in the accompanying materials, though teachers should feel confident in their own expertise.

Reading in the exams

Examiners of English Language widely agree that the students best prepared for reading are those who have clearly experienced a wide range of texts from different genres and been encouraged to interrogate texts and develop their own ideas on them. Such students are able to engage with the focus of the questions, select and use material appropriately, and give a reasoned response.

Confidence is a key issue here. There is rarely a ‘right’ response to any given question. Whilst examiners have an expectation of the quality of responses at various levels of achievement and the skills likely to be demonstrated therein, they have no expectation of the specific content of such responses and are instructed to reward all valid answers. Students who lack confidence in their own ideas tend to give very limited answers. Those who have been encouraged to think independently show, at all levels, a greater preparedness to develop comment on, and infer and explore meaning of, selected detail.

Questions on a writer’s use of language sometimes pose specific problems for students and their teachers. Exam questions on language in this specification are not formulaic. They may focus on specific quotations, on specified lines or on the text as a whole – whichever arises most appropriately from the text. They offer potential for varied response, enabling students to demonstrate what they know and understand about language use and its effects. Students might, for example, validly comment on the use and ordering of detail, variation in sentence structure for effect, use of comparison for effect, creation of tone, and the effects of specific features, such as simile. Students who do best analyse and explore the use of language and its effects.

When assessing responses on language, examiners frequently comment that students all too often resort to ‘feature spotting’, identifying repetition, personification and the like, but failing to make constructive comment on the purpose and effect of the use of the feature. Comments are often limited to ‘it’s done for emphasis’ or ‘to make you think’. Such simple comments are often combined with unfounded assertions about the impact of ‘powerful plosives’ and ‘complex’ words. Such responses are not, as might be expected, limited to weaker candidates. Often able candidates, who demonstrate sound understanding elsewhere, fail to move out of the lower mark band on the language question.

Consider, as an example, the responses below on the use of language in the following sentence:

‘The sky was inky and the moon had arced high, casting a meek metallic light on the ground.’

A. The writer uses alliteration in ‘meek metallic’ to give it emphasis and make the reader think about the light.

(Simple identification of a technique with simple comment on effect).

B. The writer says the sky was ‘inky’ making it sound really dark. He also says it was ‘casting a meek metallic’ light. The alliteration here helps to show the colour of the moon (metallic) and suggests that its light isn’t very bright (meek).

(Explains the effects of the writer’s use of language).

C. The use of the adjective ‘inky’ to describe the sky suggests the depth and darkness of its colour with the word ‘arced’ suggesting the trajectory of the moon across this space. However, although the ‘moon had arced high’, a phrase which gives the impression of power, it casts only a ‘meek metallic light on the ground’. The word ‘meek’ suggests humility and lack of power as though the sky with its inky darkness has a much greater impact on the ground below.

(Begins to analyse and explore use of language).

You will find more examples of, and commentaries on, responses to reading questions in the specimen assessment materials and additional supporting resources.

Developing writing skills

Whilst some students embarking on their International GCSE English Language course may be able to write fluently and at length, many need to focus on developing specific aspects of the skills base before being able to do so. This can often be best achieved through short bursts of writing rather than lengthy essays. It is always best to start with where the students are, rather than where they need to be at the end of their period of study. Clear communication of ideas, engagement of reader, variation of vocabulary and sentence structure and technical accuracy can easily be covered through short writing tasks and make any desirable redrafting more manageable. Only when these skills are relatively secure, is there a need to move onto organising and imposing coherence on longer pieces of writing.

Reading and writing are generally not distinct activities in the English classroom. Extensive reading of engaging and well written texts clearly has a part to play in developing good writing skills; for example: the study of an opening paragraph of a novel can lead to writing which sets the scene through effective selection of detail and creates atmosphere through aptly chosen vocabulary; the study of a newspaper editorial can lead to writing focused on tone and the use of emotive language and rhetorical devices for effect; the study of a short story can lead to discussions about structure such as chronological versus non-chronological order, use of flashback, use of dialogue to reveal essential information etc. The possibilities are endless.

The skills defined in the Assessment Objectives are common to all modes of writing. Linguistic features such as the use of metaphor or rhetorical question can be as effective in discursive writing as in descriptive. Students are rarely helped by a formulaic approach to writing where rhetorical devices/discursive markers equals writing to argue and noun phrases, simile and metaphor equals writing to describe. The aim of the teacher should be to equip students with the skills needed to write well and then help students to apply them as appropriate to the given purpose of a task.

Writing in the exams

In both papers, students have an hour in which to complete their writing. Students need to be taught how to best use the time available to them. An hour provides sufficient time for students to plan, write and check their responses, yet far too many students simply start writing with little idea of how they will develop and organise their ideas.

Examiners are agreed that planning in an exam plays an essential part in enabling students to demonstrate their best skills in writing. Effective planning helps students develop detail appropriately and structure their writing. Techniques for planning in an exam need to be taught and should be varied to allow for individual student preferences. Once a student understands that planning is not simply a list of 'things to do' (eg paragraphs/varied sentences/good vocab etc) but something which provides a viable route through their writing, they start to gain control of their writing and to organise and structure their ideas and detail.

Students are not given a guide as to length of writing, the size of handwriting being such a variable factor. However, it is expected that the essay will be suitably developed and structured. Students who offer very brief responses (three paragraphs or less as a rough guide) are inevitably limiting their potential achievement.

The mark scheme is in two parts:

Part 1: 30 marks. There are six bands with each band containing three bullet points directly relating to W1, W2 and W3. The first of these is focused on communication, the second on use and variety of sentences structures, and the third on organisation and coherence. Examiners are instructed to consider each of these three aspects when determining the appropriate mark.

Part 2: 10 marks. There are five bands with each band containing three bullet points focused on W4 and assessing technical accuracy in grammar, punctuation and spelling. Examiners are instructed to consider each of these three aspects when determining the appropriate mark.

Students write best when they have something they want to write about. This is why there is choice of writing task in both papers. It is the demonstration of their skills, rather than the selected mode of writing, which determines their achievement. This is particularly relevant in Paper 1 where, on occasion, all students in a class or even a centre have clearly been directed in advance to do the 'describe' question or the 'discussion' task. As long as students have been helped to develop the skills defined in the Assessment Objectives, which are common to all modes of writing, they should be allowed freedom of choice.

Examiners have no set expectations of what a response to a specific task should look like. There is no preconceived 'best' or 'ideal' structure for a piece of writing. A chronological story can be imaginatively structured through the way the writer focuses on events in different ways – controls the movement from one action to another, from one character to another – steers the reader down different paths and sometimes round blind corners. Similarly, use of 'flashback' with a non-chronological structure can be both imaginative and effective. It is not the technique itself that gains the higher mark – it is the **use of** the technique that counts. The key is to give all students the tools to structure stories and descriptions and discussions in different ways. They are then in a position to choose what will best suit their selected topic in the exam.

You will find exemplar responses and examiner commentaries to writing tasks in the specimen assessment materials.

GET HELP AND SUPPORT

Visit our website for information, guidance, support and resources at oxfordaqaexams.org.uk

You can contact the English subject team directly at:

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