

OXFORD

INTERNATIONAL
AQA EXAMINATIONS

INTERNATIONAL GCSE ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

(9280/W) Writing

Report on the examination

June 2022

REPORT ON EXAMINATION: INTERNATIONAL GCSE ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE 9280/W WRITING JUNE 2022

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

The Writing paper continues to be a successful and accessible paper for many students. Following the global challenges of the previous few years and their impact on education, it was very pleasing to see students once again producing some exceptional responses. The following sections contain specific comments on June 2022 tasks, but first of all, some general points about assessment are offered.

As the specification has developed, centres have clearly developed a good understanding of the ways this component is designed and assessed. Reports and CPD sessions have always highlighted that this paper invites students to demonstrate not only their technical skills, but crucially their ability to write coherent and creative responses to the tasks provided.

Tasks and papers are carefully constructed to allow students to write about the themes in the specification and demonstrate different types of writing skills. Question 1 tests the ability to write brief description; Questions 2 and 3 are more demanding in the sense that they have mandatory bullet points and may concern things that students have experienced themselves or perhaps require them to project themselves into a less familiar situation; Question 4 tests longer form writing skills, where coherence becomes more of an issue in the sense that developing and holding together an argument/explanation is at stake. In terms of technical accuracy, spelling and punctuation accuracy are the focus of Question 1 while other tasks additionally assess variety of vocabulary and grammatical structures.

At the root of good exam technique is the ability to answer a question in all its details. Examiners are instructed to first of all check that students are addressing the task and, in questions 2 and 3, that the mandatory bullets are tackled. For many students, question focus and relevance are very good. For those students who underachieve, it is often worth exploring how thoroughly the final bullet in these tasks are dealt with.

QUESTION 01

The initial picture-based task invites students to demonstrate descriptive skills. Students who scored highly did so by selecting some details from the picture that allowed them to develop their description. For example, some responses focused on the natural elements of the scene, focusing on the stillness of the lake or the presence of the mountains. Often in these responses, a metaphor or comment on the imagined peaceful atmosphere was provided. Other approaches included focusing on the boats and their colours, or even the figure in the far distance. Some students took their cue from the task set-up (stating that the image was from a travel blog) and wrote a response written in first person, as if they were present in the scene. Any of these (and other) approaches were perfectly valid ways to tackle this task.

Essentially, what is being checked in content terms is whether the student can write clearly (Band 3) or whether there is some delay (Band 2), i.e., where phrasing means that it's not fully clear what is being said. This means that writing long responses where ambitious vocabulary is used slightly awkwardly is likely to be less successful than clear, brief responses.

For the language mark in Question 1, only spelling and punctuation are assessed. Students who use full stops and commas accurately, along with accurate spelling, receive full marks. There is no need to use more complex

punctuation to score full marks. Likewise, one of the dangers of using highly complex language is that it runs the risk of misspelling.

QUESTION 02

This task concerned writing a letter asking students to help a local charity. With very few exceptions, students gave the name of the charity and its function (the first two bullets) in sensibly quick fashion. The third bullet ('why the students should help') was dealt with to varying degrees of success. Less successful answers offered simple justifications, e.g., '...because we should help other people'. It was often the case that students dealt with the second and third bullets together, with the details of the charity used as a method of persuading students why they should offer support. This was a legitimate approach, especially where it was clear that details about the charity's actions were being marshalled to act persuasively.

The quality and detail of the material offered for the third bullet often determined the mark. Better responses chose charities that allowed them to suggest reasons they should support them, often making pleas on humanitarian grounds or practical reasons. Some justified support via personal development or incentives such as school-based rewards or as a useful addition to a CV. As mentioned above, marks for language from Question 2 onwards are generated from an assessment of variety as well as accuracy of spelling and punctuation. Writing in accurately punctuated complex sentences is important here, so when students directly address the third 'why' bullet, it prompts them to produce justificatory phrases that include, e.g., 'because', 'which' etc.

Examiners reported reading some heartfelt and expertly written responses to this task. Whether students chose to write in the persona of a Headteacher/Principal or that of a fellow student was immaterial, but it was important that the language and tone were consistent with this choice. There were instances where students spent a lot of time writing social, introductory material, e.g., 'I hope you have all performed well in your recent exams and have made lots of plans for your summer break'. While such introductions help to establish a voice and sense of audience, it's important that the task itself is promptly addressed and the balance between task-focused material and social content is sensible, especially in a task with a tight word count.

QUESTION 03

The third task ('Write a blog about listening to music') produced some personal and genuinely interesting responses. Many highly successful responses resulted, due in part to the topic being close to many young people's hearts.

In Question 3 there are four compulsory bullets to address and as stated in the previous section, the final bullet point was often a guide to the quality of answer. Justifying why a particular genre or specific singer/band was enjoyed was often answered well. Some reasons were connected to the emotional impact of the music, the engagement with lyrics or the energy of the songs. Some reasons were deeply personal or family related. As stated in previous reports, practising expressing ideas and feelings is important, as the later questions in the writing paper often invite a more personal form of response. Students who can produce interesting details in these type of tasks in accurate prose very often do well.

As stated above, marks for language use (50% of the full marks in this task) are informed by accuracy but also variety. Students who give plenty of energy to justifying ideas often naturally write in complex sentences with accurate subordinating conjunctions. It is always the case that responses which justify ideas in grammatically correct prose are highly rewarded.

It is worth reiterating that the forms students are asked to write in, e.g., letter, article, blog, are simply vehicles to produce writing. Students and centres should see content (rather than form) as what is being assessed. In practical terms, this means examiners do not have a checklist of structures that each form must include. This is especially true for forms such as blogs which are evolving, amorphous text types whose structural features are indistinct. Far better for students to concentrate on what is being said, rather than obsess over whether or not to use e.g., subheadings. Some answers to Question 3 used titles and some didn't. There was little correlation between these choices and the marks awarded, because it is the content examiners are interested in.

QUESTION 04

The balance of marks between content/communication and language changes in the final task. The 8 marks available for content/communication are determined by the overall quality of the response. Unlike Questions 2 and 3, the accompanying bullets are not mandatory, but it is true to say that most students use them to shape their response.

The task concerned problems caused by social media. As with the previous task, this topic engaged the students and they had plenty of views on the topic. Many explored issues connected with social media as something that can cause cyberbullying or damages face-to-face interaction and everyday relationships. Some students focused on the sedentary nature of social media or its ability to take over your life. Likewise, the potential damage it does to study was also a popular angle.

The very best students produced responses that were controlled and well-argued. Some pieces were exceptional. Students should see Question 4 as an opportunity to produce a coherent piece of writing, one which sets out a case or explanation and has a shape to it. It's important therefore that students plan a route through their writing, making sure that the piece develops and builds, rather than just being a random collection of points. For those centres who will use the June 2022 paper as practice material, it is worth reminding students that focusing on the precise task, i.e., the problems caused by social media is essential: some responses in this series offered a defence of social media, focusing on its many positive aspects. Although these were interesting, they weren't invited by the task and were difficult to reward for content.

With the majority of the 23 marks available in Question 4 given over to language use, students should be even more alert to the need to write clear prose which not only demonstrates accurate spelling and punctuation, but also shows variety. This means demonstrating the ability to choose the most apt vocabulary and sentence structures. The term 'sophisticated' is used in the top mark band for language. This doesn't mean that highly complex, obscure words need to be used. It refers to sophistication of choice.

The very best writers make the best choice of words depending on the material, their audience and the purpose. Most of the time, clarity is king and therefore any ambitious words should be carefully chosen and most importantly, appropriate and accurately used. There is little to be gained from students writing dry, austere prose littered with supposedly impressive words unsuited to the intended reader. Fortunately, such responses were very much a minority and examiners regularly commented that this year's Question 4 responses were among the best they'd ever seen, often being lively and engaging, as befits an article about social media aimed chiefly at young people.

As mentioned at the start of this report, it was a pleasure to read some of the highly competent and brilliant responses produced by students in this series. They are a credit to themselves and the centres that have supported them so well in their preparations for this paper.

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