

English – Group 1

The range and suitability of the work submitted

The work ranged as widely as in recent years, from Chaucer, Shakespeare and Cervantes to Amy Tan, Toni Morrison and Rohinton Mistry. Twentieth-century fiction proved, as usual, the most popular field: Tolkien remained a favourite author and, although not all of the essays on *The Lord of the Rings* rose above the routine, there was one analysis of its language which was outstanding. The more adventurous candidates came up with original comparisons, such as *The Joy Luck Club* and Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*, and tackled challenging texts like *As I Lay Dying* and *The Crying of Lot 49* with considerable success. Well-chosen and illuminating comparisons between novels produced some of the best work: there were excellent essays on language in *A Clockwork Orange* and Perec's *A Vowel*; on the grotesque in *Nicholas Nickleby* and Roald Dahl's *Mathilda*; and on novels by Victor Hugo and George Eliot. There was an artful comparison of *Jane Eyre* and *Falling Leaf*, a memoir about growing up in China in the 1930s; but another excellent essay on *Jane Eyre*, which focused on the use of setting, showed what can be achieved by a sensitive close reading of a classic text in relation to a precisely defined research question. The same was true of a fine essay on 'Bad fathering in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*'. There were far fewer essays on poetry and drama but here, too, the best students could shine: there was, for instance, an excellent study of the ghost in *Hamlet*. Shakespeare was often approached in relation to film versions of the plays and, although this is quite legitimate and can produce interesting work, candidates interested in cinema need to be steered away from writing essays that discuss films without any reference to a literary text.

Some schools and supervisors still seem unaware of the requirement that at least one of the texts discussed must have originally been written in English, and there were otherwise good essays on, for example, Kafka or magical realism in South American novels, that had to be penalized with a score of 0 for criteria J and K. There were one or two schools that served their candidates badly by guiding them all towards tackling similar questions from a narrow range of texts, often ones that had clearly been studied in class. It is also difficult to produce good essays on well-worn topics such as a comparison of *Brave New World* and *Ninety Eighty-Four*, even though dystopian fiction clearly engages the imagination of many students. In general, however, most examiners were pleased and impressed by the range of research questions attempted this year.

Candidate performance against each criterion

General assessment criteria

Criterion A Research Question

Most candidates were able to define their research question adequately, although there were still some topics that were framed in far too general terms. Significantly, these were invariably *not* formulated as questions: for instance 'Violence in Shakespeare's Tragedies', or 'Jane Austen and Romance'. Candidates who presented their topic as a statement or thesis rather than as a question were more liable to lose their focus, often simply asserting their thesis without analysing its implications and then reiterating it in their conclusion. Research questions that were actual questions seemed to encourage a more interrogative and analytical treatment of the texts. The best essays did not simply state the research question in the title but also made it part of the introduction.

Criterion B Approach to the research question

The approach adopted was usually sensible and appropriate, but weaker candidates often made the mistake of padding out their introduction with a potted biography of their chosen author(s). This adds nothing to the argument or to the illumination of the text and should be avoided. Another weakness of approach was an over-reliance on secondary sources, which were used as a substitute for the candidate's own reading of the primary text rather than as a source of new perspectives.

EXTENDED ESSAY REPORTS – MAY 2003

Criterion C Analysis/interpretation

The most common weakness here was a descriptive and expository treatment of a text rather than a sensitive and perceptive literary analysis: i.e. too much character description and plot summary instead of an examination of how the text works. The discussion of poetry suffered particularly in this respect, often amounting to little more than a paraphrase of the ideas presented in a poem.

Criterion D Argument/evaluation

The better candidates had a clear line of argument, though sometimes the effort at clarity led to a certain repetitiveness. A common weakness lay in the inadequate use of supporting evidence from the primary text: ideas would be asserted but not properly backed up and substantiated by quotation and analysis. Only the best candidates were able to use close reading effectively to support an argument. Over-reliance on secondary sources was another weakness, leading to arguments that were little more than a collage of ideas and opinions derived from published criticism.

Criterion E Conclusion

Most essays presented a conclusion, often marked out by a sub-heading, and the best were thoughtful and aware of unresolved questions. However, some conclusions merely stated the obvious, or confined themselves to a couple of casual sentences, or simply repeated points made in the introduction rather than producing a new synthesis.

Criterion F Abstract

There was some improvement in the writing of the Abstract though there were still candidates who treated it as a kind of introduction or who failed to define the three required elements clearly enough. Weak Abstracts sometimes consisted simply of cut and paste sections from the introduction and conclusion.

Criterion G Formal presentation

Formal presentation was generally good and often excellent. The main weakness was the setting out of references for quotations, which was often sloppy and inconsistent. Candidates should note that the standard contraction of 'page' is p. not pg. Bibliographies sometimes failed to mention all the works referred to in the essay and often failed to give the original date of publication for classic texts. Some candidates overdid the use of sub-headings, which, if too numerous, have the effect of fragmenting the argument.

Criterion H Holistic judgment

Very few candidates achieved 4 for this criterion, which is where outstandingly engaged and original work is rewarded and the routine essay on Jane Austen's heroines or dystopian fiction receives a low mark.

Subject assessment criteria

Criterion J Knowledge and understanding of the literature studied and, where appropriate, reference to secondary sources

Most candidates showed a sufficient knowledge of the texts as far as plot and characters were concerned, but had a weaker grasp of historical context (far too many considered Jane Austen a Victorian novelist, for instance). Thus sometimes understanding did not go beyond the superficial, although the best students had clearly read carefully and reflected deeply in arriving at an understanding that took proper account of the formal properties and historical moment of the primary text.

Criterion K Personal response justified by literary judgement and/or analysis

Essays that relied too heavily on secondary sources and substituted received opinion for personal response were penalized under this criterion. Some candidates appeared ashamed to show their personal responses, which were concealed behind a formal and impersonal academic style that drained the life from the essay. At the other extreme there were occasional examples of empty enthusing

EXTENDED ESSAY REPORTS – MAY 2003

without any intellectual substance; but many candidates were able to steer a middle course and present their personal reading of a text in a measured and persuasive way.

Criterion L Use of language appropriate to a literary essay

A wide range of writing was displayed in this year's essays, from the barely literate to the polished and assured; but most essays were competently written, and some were fluent and eloquent and a pleasure to read. Two common and opposite weaknesses were, on the one hand, a prolix and convoluted style that strove to be academic and only succeeded in being opaque; and on the other, a casual colloquial register that was inappropriate for literary criticism.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

This year for the first time examiners received some essays that contained the supervisor's detailed marginal comments and, in some cases, the supervisor's marks entered in the columns on the back of the cover-sheet. Although it was good to see the care these supervisors had taken over their students' essays, the final draft of the essay should, of course, be submitted as a clean copy and the reverse of the cover-sheet left clear for the examiners' assessment. Supervisors' comments are most welcome but should be entered in the space provided on the inside front cover.

It is important that supervisors read the *Extended Essay Guide* carefully, and this will prevent their students embarking on inappropriate topics and falling foul of the stipulation that at least one of their chosen texts must have originally been written in English. It would also be helpful to show the candidates the assessment criteria so that they understand what is required for a good essay. Guidance on the use of Internet sources would also be invaluable, since students tend to assume that the information they find there is authoritative rather than of dubious quality and questionable value. Students should also be steered away from relying too heavily and uncritically on orthodox secondary sources and encouraged to concentrate on the primary texts and to consider how they work as literature (rather than, for instance, what they tell us about social conditions or historical circumstances).

The most important aspect of supervision is, as has been stated in previous reports, helping the candidate define a manageable and productive research question, one that leads into a close examination of a text or texts and not away from the text into biography or towards large and questionable generalizations about, for example, the Victorian Age, the Jazz Age, or the role of women in society. Most supervisors, of course, are performing this task very well and are to be congratulated on the often excellent results that have been achieved.