

ENGLISH A1

Overall grade boundaries

Grade:	E	D	C	B	A
Mark range:	0 - 7	8 - 15	16 - 22	23 - 28	29 - 36

The range and suitability of the work submitted

This was the first set of essays from the southern hemisphere written to the new criteria and in general candidates performed most satisfactorily. There was the customary wide range of topics, from Shakespeare and Spenser, Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, to contemporary science fiction and writers like Roy and McEwan. As usual the novel predominated, though a number of candidates stepped beyond the familiar to explore the work of African, Australian and New Zealand novelists. In quality the essays ranged from university level work that was critically astute, imaginatively researched, and well-written, through the routine and mediocre, to the positively inept. Fortunately, examples of the latter were rare and there were very few essays in the bottom E grade.

Among the best essays were those that challenged a widely held view, such as the assumption that Pullman's presentation of religion in *His Dark Materials* promotes atheism. In this case the candidate persuasively argued that the work is hostile only to organized religion and is at heart deeply theistic. Another candidate did well by arguing that *The Lord of the Rings* cannot be fairly categorized as fairytale or fantasy since the characterization of Gollum has the psychological subtlety that one may expect of a novel. This was straightforward and unpretentious, but distinguished by its careful close reading and clarity of argument.

Comparisons between two texts that were made to shed light on each other, such as Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* and Steven Berkoff's play of the same name, were also fruitful topics. There was a sophisticated comparison of Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* with Murukami's *Kafka on the Shore*, and a lively and eloquent examination of the use of the underworld setting in *Alice in Wonderland* and Dante's *Inferno* which displayed admirable originality and insight. An essay on 'Economics and the Control of Individualism in *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*' took a well-worn topic but brought it to interesting new life by paying close attention both to ideas and to language. Unsuccessful comparisons simply took a general common theme and used it as peg on which to hang two separate descriptive accounts: thus an essay on 'Isolation in *Lord of the Flies* and *Robinson Crusoe*' consisted merely of plot summaries without any attempt to make the texts throw light on each other.

One excellent essay subjected the different narrative strategies of Humbert Humbert and the author himself in *Lolita* to close analysis, while another subjected a work of non-fiction to astute critical scrutiny by writing about 'Travel-Writing as an Inner Journey in Robert Dessaix's *Arabesques*'. These were examples of candidates fired by a strong interest in a text who were able to combine personal engagement with close critical attention.

Another common form of interest, that inspired by the life of a writer, was, as usual, less productive precisely because it does not encourage such attention: essays on the similarities between Charlotte Brontë's and her writings, or on how Katherine Mansfield makes use of her own experience in her short stories, reduced the literary texts to barely disguised biography and did no more than recycle familiar information. Supervisors would do well to warn candidates away from such topics since they invariably lead to reductive readings and over-reliance on second-hand information rather than a fresh and illuminating critical engagement with the literature. Candidates may, of course, be drawn to literary texts for very different reasons, some of them to do with questions of history, or society, or psychology etc, but supervisors should endeavour to keep the focus of the essay on the literary features of the chosen texts. A common pitfall for those interested in the socio-historical or political dimension of fictional works was to treat them simply as documentary evidence rather than examining how they work as literature.

Candidate performance against each criterion

A: research question

Defining a manageable and productive research question is obviously an essential prerequisite of a successful essay. The majority of essays succeeded reasonably well although, in addition to the failings indicated above, some topics were too obvious—'Do Darcy and Elizabeth show pride and prejudice?'—and some too unfocused and poorly framed—'The domineering act of strong women in Hedda Gabler and Jane Eyre'—to produce decent work. Some topics were too broad: 'Allegorical Themes in The Fairie Queen' was admirably ambitious but narrowing the topic down in some way, perhaps by focusing on a particular canto, would have made it more manageable. It is also important that the research question should appear at or near the beginning of the essay, and not just on the separate title page. Candidates should be encouraged to integrate the question into their introduction.

B: introduction

Although most candidates presented some form of introduction, full marks for this criterion were uncommon, since relatively few essays satisfactorily established a context for the research question and made a case for its significance.

C: investigation

Some essays consulted no sources other than the primary texts. While this was legitimate with recent texts where there is no body of published criticism, essays on well-known texts were usually better where some sources were consulted (as long as they were not just SparkNotes, Wikipedia or internet material of dubious value). Sometimes, where only one critical source was consulted, the essay ended up simply paraphrasing it, and other candidates found difficulty in integrating published criticism into their own argument.

D: knowledge and understanding of the topic studied

Most essays showed a good, or at least adequate, knowledge and understanding of the topic, although often there was not enough detailed reference to, and quotation from, the primary text(s). Only the best candidates were able to situate their work in an academic context.

E: reasoned argument

Common weaknesses here were to present descriptive accounts of texts, or plot summaries, rather than a developing argument, and to make assertions that were not backed up by evidence from the text.

F: application of analytical and evaluative skills appropriate to the subject

This was where the better candidates distinguished themselves from the more ordinary by presenting personal and illuminating analysis of the primary texts. Weaker essays relied on citing secondary sources for their analysis rather than engaging personally with the texts. Evaluation was again only attempted by the better candidates and was notably lacking from some enthusiastic essays on such topics as the lyrics of pop songs and works of popular fiction.

G: use of language appropriate to the subject

Most essays scored 2 or 3 here, though there were many fluent and eloquent essays at one end of the scale and stumbling and garbled ones at the other end. Many could have been easily improved by careful proof-reading before submission. Some candidates adopted a mode of contemporary critical discourse, subjecting their chosen texts, for instance, to a deconstructive reading, but although this was often intellectually impressive, it tended to obscure a sense of personal engagement with the literature.

H: conclusion

Most essays made a fair attempt at a conclusion, though many simply restated the material of the introduction, thus forfeiting one mark. It should be noted that the conclusion should not be simply a summary of the essay.

I: formal presentation

A small number of essays lost marks quite unnecessarily by omitting a contents page or page numbers etc. Another problem was failure to follow a standard method of documentation for the citation of sources and the composition of a bibliography. Footnoting was often unnecessarily copious, repeating in full the title of the primary text for every quotation (see C below). Candidates should note that the conventional abbreviation for page is p., not pg., and for pages pp. However, many essays were very well presented, and that number should increase with careful supervision.

J: abstract

Some Abstracts were inappropriate because they were written as a form of introduction, setting out in the future tense what the essay would do. Some omitted, or did not state clearly enough, the conclusions; but the one required element that was most commonly skimmed or omitted was how the investigation was undertaken.

K: holistic judgment

There were few very low marks under this criterion for most essays showed some intellectual initiative and understanding, and the best were impressive pieces of individual research.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

Supervisors, both new and experienced, are encouraged to participate in the online training sessions that are offered on the Extended Essay. They are also strongly urged to comment on their candidates' work in the space available on the inside of the coversheet. Most supervisors, of course, do this but not all, and examiners find it helpful, particularly in relation to criterion K.

It is important to instruct candidates in a standard method of documentation for citing sources and compiling a bibliography. Many essays contained strings of footnotes repeating the full title of the primary text every time it was cited: this is best avoided. One way of doing so is to present the full details in a footnote to the first quotation and thereafter to provide page references in parentheses. Candidates should be urged to proof-read their essays carefully before submission.

Helping define a fruitful and manageable research question is the main challenge for supervisors. As stated above, they are advised to steer candidates away from biographical topics (e.g. examining a writer's works as reflections of his or her life), as these almost inevitably result in essays that are merely speculative, unanalytical and second-hand. It may help to choose literary texts that are less well-known but of clear literary value. With classic texts it is advisable to find a topic and an approach that will prevent the candidate from having to go over too much well-trodden ground. With such texts judicious use of secondary sources may enable the argument to begin at a higher level, and it is important for supervisors to guide candidates towards finding a balance between offering their own reading in ignorance of all secondary sources and relying so much on them that that all personal response is smothered. Some examiners noted that relatively few essays were able to illustrate effectively a personal appreciation of the literature. Where two texts are compared, it is important that there should be some point to the comparison. Rather than simply presenting the exposition of a similar theme in the two texts, the essay should attempt to make them mutually illuminating. Candidates should also be encouraged to look, and think, beyond basic study guides and to treat Wikipedia and internet sites with caution.

With the new criteria, the introduction may require particular attention from supervisors. Candidates should be encouraged to integrate their research question into the introduction even though it may be clearly set out in the title, and also to provide a context for their research question and some sense of why it is significant. It would also be helpful if supervisors could spend some time on each criterion during their initial conversations with candidates.