

English A1

This is a supplementary report following the May 2011 session and should be read in conjunction with the full May 2009 subject report and any subsequent reports.

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

Most examiners commented positively on the range and variety of the topics attempted in this session, while noting the persistence of unadventurous essays on well-worn topics like dystopian novels and mediocre work on popular but unchallenging topics like teenage vampire fiction. Stronger candidates were prepared to look beyond the familiar to find challenging texts and productive research questions. There was a fine, sharply critical reading of *Lolita*, an ambitious essay on T.S. Eliot and Allen Ginsberg, and an interesting and fruitful comparison of Nabokov's *Invitation of a Beheading* and Pasternak's *Dr Zhivago*. The following are examples of research questions/titles that produced successful essays:

'What is the role of magic in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*?'

'How does music in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* convey the characters' internal feuds and conflicts?'

'How effective is Charles Dickens's critique of religious hypocrisy through the portrayal of Mr Chadband in *Bleak House*?'

'How does Virginia Woolf explore the inescapable nature of time in *Mrs Dalloway*?'

'What is the importance of the rules in *The Handmaid's Tale*?'

'Spoken words and silences in *The Age of Innocence*.'

'Tash Aw's use of postmodern techniques to interrogate the reality of narrative in *The Harmony Silk Factory*.'

'The search for truth through symbolism in *The Things We Carried* and *Winesburg, Ohio*.'

On the other hand some topics were too broad and unfocused to be manageable. There were still some potentially good essays that were penalized for not including any text originally written in English. The commonest form of this kind of inappropriate topic this year was Greek mythology, and other inappropriate topics included the role of women in musicals, and discussions of films with no reference to a literary text. Where candidates trod the familiar paths of dystopian fiction or the novels of Jane Austen, only an imaginative research question—a recent example being the role of conversation in two Austen novels—was likely to raise the essay above the satisfactory level. As usual, 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 literary texts.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

It is advisable to warn students away from writing about film without reference to a literary text (comparisons between a novel and its film version are acceptable as long as the text is kept in view). Graphic novels and popular teenage fiction, like the *Twilight* series of vampire novels, are also best avoided as they are likely to produce only enthusiastic descriptive accounts of plot and character rather than critical analysis.