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LANGUAGE/ENGLISH
LITERATURE**

Report on the Controlled Assessment

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Principal Moderator’s Report on the summer 2015 series of controlled assessment units in:

English Unit 3 (ENG03 and NENG03)
English Language Unit 3 (ENL03 and NENL03)
English Literature Unit 3 (97153)
English Literature Unit 5 (97155)

This has been the penultimate summer series for these specifications. In the considerable proportion of centres there is clear evidence of the rising confidence in task-setting and assessment that you would expect as the specifications mature. Centre marking of the two Literature units (97153 and 97155) has been most reliable while moderator disagreement with centre marks is most likely to occur in English (ENG03 and NENG03) and is most likely to be based on the assessment of the three reading pieces in Section A.

As has been the case throughout the lifetime of these specifications, the most effective task-setting has been carefully based on an understanding of assessment criteria. An effective task guides students towards every strand in the mark scheme. Effective assessment similarly recognises the need to take every strand into account and is based upon understanding of the rungs in the assessment ladder. In most centres the wording of the tasks shows very good awareness of the need to guide candidates towards the strands of the mark scheme. In a standard, exemplified task, the opening, “Explore the ways the writer presents...” is not accidental or casual:

‘Explore’ is a word that especially suits controlled assessment because the advantages of more time and familiarity with the topic create the opportunity to move beyond the scope of ‘Explain’ or ‘Show’. It is an especially helpful word for the most able, giving them the opportunity to engage with texts in ways that are difficult within the time constraints of examination; ‘the ways’, as has often been stated in previous reports, directs the candidate towards the strands of the mark scheme which are focused on writer’s craft but also hints at variety of ideas and attitudes; ‘the writer presents’ reminds candidates that literary texts are constructed by writers, that characters are not the same as people.

If candidates, as a result of what they have been taught, understand and have absorbed the different assessment criteria, they are able to address them flexibly throughout their responses. Some candidates, however, require more help if they are to engage with all the strands in the mark scheme. In some centres candidates’ relatively low marks sometimes seem to be the result of candidates’ failure to provide evidence of engagement with the writer’s use of language, or with the significance of the contexts. Many centres have effectively addressed this by either breaking the task down into separate, discrete components, each focused explicitly on a different strand, or by adding words along the lines of, ‘In your response you should write about:’ followed by the different strands.

Centres should not, however, adopt the approach of giving candidates ‘frameworks’ or ‘scaffolds’ with starter sentences and a choice of words to include. These are not appropriate and lead to a number of candidates appearing to write almost identical responses much of which cannot be seen as the candidates’ own work. It is especially problematic where the candidates’ writing is to be assessed because the ability to structure a whole text and use relevant and engaging vocabulary is one of the skills being assessed.

One of the first things that gives moderators confidence in a centre’s assessments is reliable and well-focused annotation of the work in the sample. The annotation in many centres is now exemplary because it is concise, realistic and clearly focused on bands in the mark scheme. Moderators have reported significant improvements in centres’ annotation of candidates’ work,

especially in the two Literature specifications where the need to address more than one assessment objective has led to better-focused annotation. Many summative comments are now divided into commentaries on, in the case of English Literature Unit 3, how effectively the candidate has addressed AO1, AO2, AO3 and AO4: the comments explain the ‘best fit’ mark achieved by balancing achievement in the four AOs. When the summative comment states that, for example, AO2 has been met at the level of band 5, the moderator would hope to find the marginal annotation which pinpoints where the ‘sophistication’ in response to AO2 can be seen.

Some centres have adopted this approach in English and English Language: there is only one assessment objective per piece of work in these specifications but centres have explicitly split their comments into the different strands of the mark scheme. In English, for example, some centres have devised concise approaches to marginal annotation in which the marker, using abbreviations, identifies meaning or ideas, language or context – the four strands in the mark scheme – and accompanies the strand with an indication of which band descriptor has been met. In the case of the spoken language study in English Language, this approach is highly recommended. As previous PM reports have pointed out, there are sometimes difficulties agreeing some centre marks for the spoken language study because the centre marks do not seem to have taken all three strands of the mark scheme into account. Most often the problem lies with the ‘public attitudes’ strand. If centres adopted an approach to assessment of the spoken language study which required the marker to explicitly address the three strands in marginal annotation and comment on each strand in summation, it might lead to more consistently reliable assessment

There is a very significant correlation between good annotation and reliable assessment.

Where annotation is ineffective it is usually for the following reasons:

- the words in the margin have no connection with terms in the mark scheme.
- terms such as ‘lang’ , ‘context’ are written in the margin with no indication of which band has been exemplified in the student’s work
- terms such as ‘language’ or ‘writer’s ideas’ are written in the margin next to sections of the student’s work in which there is no evidence of engagement with those strands of the mark scheme. Some annotation asserting ‘language’ or ‘language band3’ is placed next to sections of the response in which the student has used a quotation and written an explanation of meaning without providing any evidence of engaging with how the meaning has been crafted. There can be similar problems with use of ‘writer’s ideas’ next to sections of the student’s work in which meaning has been explained. It is often an unintended consequence of students using PEE or SQI. If students are to engage with ‘writer’s ideas or attitudes’ they need to learn to develop or move beyond the constraints of those acronyms.
- key words from the bands are misplaced. This is most commonly an issue in the assessment of candidate responses to literary texts, especially in English. The move from band 3 to band 4 is an important one for candidates and centres, and the assertion of band 4 qualities such as ‘analysis’ is perhaps the most common source of disagreement between moderator and centre. Band 4 responses to literary texts will provide evidence of ‘developed’ and ‘sustained’ exploration of texts. The term ‘analysis’ is sometimes used as a kind of shorthand in centres for any kind of engagement with selected textual details but in band 4 it is linked to the idea of ‘development’; analysis is when a candidate finds patterns in a writer’s use of language.

In most centres summative comments are used to pull the threads of annotation together, giving a concise reason for the final mark. The best summative comments take into account all the relevant strands of the marks scheme and acknowledge that while the response might meet the requirements for a particular band in two strands, the other strand is either higher or lower. A comment at the end of a candidate’s spoken language study which states that there is clear

understanding of how spoken language is adapted and of features found in data would not, on its own, support a mark at the top of band 3. There is a third strand of the mark scheme – public attitudes – that might have been neglected and that would mean the mark should be lower than the top.

The skills ladder identifiable in the new specifications has similar rungs to those in the current controlled assessment mark schemes, and developing students' ability to move beyond clear explanation of the effects of writers' uses of language and structure into developed, analytical writing will remain a very important teaching focus.

The explicit direction about 'no more than 150 words' on Candidate Notes' pages has been largely effective in removing some occasional disregard for the word 'brief'. In most centres candidates are clearly aware of the need to make proper and concise notes. Where there are problems – and moderators will report problems to the Irregularities section of AQA – candidates will have greatly exceeded the 150 words or, more worryingly, will have used the Notes page to write a skeletal, cloze version of what they are going to write in the controlled assessment. Such versions are more drafts than notes and the use of pre-prepared drafts is not allowed. Another unhelpful approach to notes for pieces to be assessed for writing is the use of extensive word banks. They might ensure the candidate spells correctly every polysyllabic word, but they make it very difficult to determine the candidate's ability to spell in controlled conditions. Candidates are not allowed access to dictionaries or spellcheckers precisely because their ability to spell is being tested; a word bank is simply a pre-formed kind of spellchecker. Where any of these 'problems' with notes arise, centres should challenge their candidates and not allow them to use notes which might have an adverse effect on their marks. Some very few candidates adopt a very creative approach to their notes by using hieroglyphics, pictograms etc. They need to know that this cannot be used to circumvent the rule about 150 words: in their case 'word' means anything that represents a word.

Very occasionally moderators are sent samples of work in which there are no Candidate Notes pages. There is no rule which asserts they have to be used but if candidates choose not to use them, centres should advise the moderator. In most centres this is done effectively and simply by including a blank notes page with 'No Notes used' written on it. The only concern about missing notes that moderators might have is when the evidence of the sample of work suggests that candidates have had access to some unidentified resource.

A number of cases of plagiarism, nearly always from the Internet, have been reported this series to the 'Irregularities' section. Moderators will always briefly investigate instances of unusual wording in candidate responses or instances of the same wording of points appearing in the work of several candidates. A quick google will reveal sources that have been copied. Some very conscientious candidates may use Internet sources in the preparation stage of the controlled assessment and commit sections to memory before reproducing them in the high level of control writing stage. This may not be as 'wrong' as finding a way to copy during the controlled assessment but by not putting any learned sections in quotation marks or by failing to list the sites used on the appropriate section of the Candidate Record form, candidates are putting their marks in jeopardy.

Many centres have very robust IT systems in which candidates can only store their controlled assessments in 'secure' accounts. These remove the temptation to find things on the Internet during high level of control. But where candidates are using computers without the safety of 'secure' areas the importance of disabling Internet access or access to anything that might provide an unfair advantage over other candidates cannot be over-stated. Centres entering very large numbers of candidates from a wide range of classes and teachers including evening classes may need to be particularly assertive and explicit in advising candidates about what is permissible in controlled assessment and the consequences of not heeding the advice.

Moderators understand the pressures on centres and on, in particular, English departments, and hugely appreciate the time and care taken in the administration of controlled assessment. Candidates' work is invariably very well presented with cover sheets properly filled in and work presented in the correct order. Samples of work are usually thoughtfully packaged with folders in descending rank order and each folder signed. Many centres include helpful additional information such as a rank order or a letter explaining something about a particular candidate. Getting the sample together in a few days, checking the administrative details and the way the sample has been annotated are time-consuming tasks at a busy time of the academic year and the moderating team would thank centres for the work they put in, work which shows their commitment to their students.

GCSE English (ENG03 and NENG03)

The most popular texts remain 'Romeo and Juliet' and 'Macbeth' as the Shakespeare plays and the two most frequently used tasks were those on a 'major theme' or 'heroes and villains', with 'love' or 'conflict' being the usual focuses for 'Romeo and Juliet' and studies of good and bad in Macbeth or Lady Macbeth in 'Macbeth'.

The different cultures text is invariably 'of Mice and Men' with, usually either a focus on a theme such as 'loneliness' or a character, often Curley's wife.

The literary heritage poems are often war poems for the 'conflict' task but there was quite a lot of focus on the presentation of villains in, for example, some of Browning's dramatic monologues.

Perhaps following on from tasks in previous years about 'disturbed characters', there was a tendency in some centres to not only use the same focus on 'heroes and villains' in all three tasks but also to end up with a situation in which candidates' selections of characters came down to Lady Macbeth, Curley's wife and the potential poisoner from 'The Laboratory'.

As previously mentioned in this report, it is the assessment of these three responses to literary texts which most often leads to disagreement between centre marks and those of the moderator, and the most common specific area of disagreement is around bands 3 and 4.

There are usually two grounds for disagreement. The first is where the centre mark seems not to have taken all the strands in the mark scheme into account. Where a candidate's response shows clear and consistent evidence of 'understanding significant meanings' i.e. where a candidate has shown understanding of more than 'obvious meanings' by referring consistently to details in the text and providing clarity of understanding, and where there is also evidence of clear understanding 'writer's ideas', and of the writer's use of language/structure, the mark may not be 9. If there is no evidence at all or very limited evidence of the candidate addressing the strand concerning the significance of the contexts, the mark is more likely to be 8.

The second reason for disagreement arises from inappropriate use of key terms in the bands. A response will start to provide evidence of band 4 qualities when the candidate:

- writes 'sustained and developed interpretations' of a text. Sustaining an interpretation of a text, that, for example, Macbeth is a basically decent character led astray by his wife, is not on its own enough: the candidate has to 'develop' the interpretation, something that goes beyond simply sustaining the idea. 'Develop' means progressing, taking further, taking different factors into account.
- engages with 'writer's ideas and attitudes and provides perceptive interpretations'. It is sometimes difficult to find evidence of candidates writing about the 'writer's attitudes'. Some engagement with, for example, the conflict between Lord Capulet and Juliet might be developed into band 4 responses if candidates stood back from the textual details to consider what might be inferred about the writer's 'ideas' or 'attitude'.
- writes 'analysis of aspects of language and structure'. Identifying the word 'red' and explaining it represents danger or passion illustrated with several references to Curley's wife's clothes and make-up, is not 'analysis'. Evidence of analysis might emerge if the candidate establishes the pattern of Steinbeck's use of red by linking Curley's wife to the woman in Weed and, perhaps, by developing the analysis by considering how Steinbeck uses colour elsewhere in the novella: how Curley's wife stands out from the uniform 'denim blue' of the male characters and the monochrome whitewash of the bunkhouse.
- establishes 'convincing connections between the texts and their contexts'. There are never going to be as many words devoted to this strand of the mark scheme than the preceding

three, but there can only be evidence of ‘convincing connections’ if the candidate embeds comments about the significance of the contexts within the body of the response at the same time as engaging with textual details.

Teachers preparing candidates for English in groups where the key success criterion is to achieve marks in band 4 rather than 3, should pay very careful attention to those significant terms in the band 4 descriptors.

Candidates’ writing remains, on the whole, stronger than their reading and centres’ assessments of candidates’ writing is generally reliable. There is increasing understanding of the flexibility provided by the task bank so that responses to, for example, the task based on the title of a film, were rarely constrained by the feeling that the writing had to be based on details from the film. On the other hand, some pieces of writing about films ‘that have played an important part in their life’ became straightforward kinds of reviews which completely ignored the connection to the candidate’s life. This was a pity as the most interesting responses were invariably those in which the candidate explained why a particular film was important. The best responses to the task about the theme of ‘colour’ were those which saw the metaphorical possibilities and the least effective were those in which candidates worked their way through a list of colours writing about their connotations.. ‘Speakers’ corner’ was the latest version of ‘Don’t Get Me Started On’ and, as ever, the best responses were not just a teenage rant about a range of subjects but were interestingly and coherently structured, often deeply-felt expressions of emotion about a single topic.

GCSE English Language (ENL03 / NENL03)

Responses to the Extended Reading task were most often based on ‘heroes and villains’ or ‘differences between characters’ in ‘Of Mice and Men’. Moderators also saw some very good work based on texts which will feature in the new specifications: the task based on differences between characters led to some very good responses to the characterisation of Ralph and Jack in ‘Lord of the Flies’ and there was some outstanding work on Roger as ‘villain’ in the same novel. There were not many instances of centres using the ‘communities’ task but some used it very effectively to explore issues arising from ‘An Inspector Calls’. In some centres different texts and tasks were used with different sets of students. In other centres the same text, task and approach were used with students across the ability range and this sometimes led to very similar responses – the same points in the same order using the same quotations – an approach that tended to particularly limit higher ability students.

All six tasks from the writing task bank were quite extensively used and all of them produced, on the whole, some very effective and engaging writing. The theme of ‘Journeys’ was used to best effect when the metaphorical possibilities were explored and moderators read some very moving descriptions of ‘emotional journeys’. The best ‘re-creative’ responses were from centres in which candidates understood the flexibility of the task, that it was not a test of their understanding of a particular text. Some candidates still write too much and moderators read some responses that must have taken every available minute of the permitted time to write. This is most commonly seen in pieces of writing in response to a still image from a film: some candidates launch into very extended retellings of the scene captured in the still image. As whole-text coherence is a focus for assessment, it is very rarely in the interest of candidates to write lengthy pieces of writing. It might also help candidates’ preparation for examinations if they limit their time to around 45 minutes. The best writing emerged from centres where candidates seemed to have spent time learning about the craft of writing. The best, most rigorous assessment of writing was seen in centres where ‘techniques’ such as ‘rule of three’, ‘alliteration’, ‘simile’, ‘rhetorical question’, ‘one word sentence’ were not in themselves seen as ‘sophisticated’: some candidates, having learned about these features use them with little subtlety or little regard for their effect because they are still developing their writing skills; they are ‘attempting’ something (band 2).

Responses to the spoken language study often show that many centres use published resources, more than with any other task. Moderators read a large number of responses based on ‘The Apprentice’ usually focused on ‘power and authority’. Responses were often very effective because candidates had interesting data (in the form of transcripts) which they could analyse as they explored the different kinds of language used. Where there was a weakness in responses to the task it concerned, as is often the case, the public attitudes strand. In centres where the spoken language study will not be completed until the academic year beginning in September 2015, the focus in task-setting should be on how to ensure coverage of all three strands of the mark scheme. The ‘problems’ which moderators have encountered with the public attitudes strand are that it is either almost completely ignored or misinterpreted. The misinterpretation is most often encountered in tasks based on media texts where the focus can be on ‘audience reaction’ to a series of behaviours rather than on ‘public attitudes towards varieties of spoken language’. Many centres have responded successfully to previous Principal Moderator reports by building in explicit references to the strand in their task titles.

GCSE English Literature Unit 3 (97153)

In the considerable majority of cases, moderators are able to confirm centre assessments of candidates' work. There is evidence of increasingly effective pairing of texts and task-setting which guides candidates towards all four assessment objectives. In most centres the newly strengthened mark schemes have been acknowledged and higher achieving candidates have more effectively engaged with the 'whole text'. In some centres candidates very effectively and impressively explored characters' reactions to the environment of their island home in 'The Tempest' and 'Lord of the Flies': responses were cogent and wide-ranging. In a small number of centres tasks were based on responses to the presentation of Lady Macbeth in one scene from 'Macbeth' and the potential poisoner from 'The Laboratory'. This is not only a rubric infringement because of the focus on a single poem, it is also a very ineffective task because it considerably restricts the ability of candidates to meet the requirements of the new mark scheme.

In English the most common area of disagreement between moderator and centre is around bands 3 and 4 but in English Literature the most commonly reported area of disagreement is centred around band 5. Where there is a problem, usually it is not because an assessment objective has been ignored, it is because the level of the candidate's engagement with the objectives has been exaggerated. One unfortunate consequence of the 'write a lot about a little' mantra has been the tendency of some candidates to explore 'language' at single word level, to speculate on the various connotations of selected words without recognising the need to display a 'sophisticated analysis of a wide range of aspects of language'. In the most reliably assessed band 5 responses it is almost impossible to separate AO1 and AO2 as candidates' exploration of ideas is inextricably linked with analysis of language and structure. The new mark scheme which separates language and structure into two discrete features should be of some help to higher achieving candidates in particular because a focus on structure, rather than form, leads candidates into consideration of how ideas are developed in texts.

The experience of some moderators this summer would suggest there is a need for some centres to look again at the new 2015 mark scheme for this unit. The increased focus on 'whole text' needs to be taken into account especially where a poetry text – of at least 15 poems – is the text chosen for comparison. The requirement to list the poems on the candidate record form is intended to act as a reminder about 'whole text'. It is perfectly acceptable for centres to include a covering letter outlining the poems studied by candidates in the sample so that the same information is not duplicated several times. 'Whole text' will not require candidates to respond in details to a large number of poems but it does suggest a need to refer to a larger number than two or three. A comparison of how ideas of 'love' are presented in 'Romeo and Juliet' and a collection of poems might identify three or four aspects of love in the play each of which could be compared to one or two different poems. The other aspect of the new mark scheme which might need to be recognised in the interest of candidates, is the separate strand on structure.

GCSE English Literature Unit 5 (97155)

In most centres where candidates are entered for this unit, task-setting and assessment are both effective. Moderators read some work from centres in which different groups had used different tasks and different poems showing considerable variety of approach. In the best samples of work seen by moderators the importance of comparison has been recognised and built into the way candidates prepare for the task. The newly strengthened mark scheme makes it particularly clear that comparison is by some margin the most important assessment objective. This means that an approach in which a candidate explores each chosen poem in turn before making some summative comparison, is unlikely to be effective however good the analysis of individual poems. The best responses were structured on the basis of comparison and there was evidence of comparison throughout the writing.

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