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GCSE

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE

8700/1: Explorations in creative reading and writing  
Report on the Examination

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8700  
June 2019

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## General comments

June 2019 saw the third major series of the new specification for GCSE English Language. There was an increase in entry of more than 27,000 students, to just over 554,000 students taking our specification.

The entry continues to represent the whole range of ability, with students entered from a wide range of centres. The specification has attracted more new centres this year, maintaining and building upon its popularity from previous series.

## Source

The source is an extract from the short story 'The Mill' by H.E. Bates. The story is from the narrative perspective of the third person and follows a linear structure. The extract focused upon an episode in a family's journey through bad weather, when some of their produce (flowers) falls off their van in the darkness. The teenage daughter, Alice, is told to find and then seek to sell the flowers, despite the darkness, rain and unfamiliar setting. Students, across the ability range, engaged quickly with the plight of Alice and with the family dynamics. There was a great deal of sympathy for Alice and her mother, and criticism of her father, from students at the lower end of the ability range, with more able students able to see the urgency of their situation, as well as their financial struggles, and so offering some explanation for the attitude of the father. There was very little evidence of students misinterpreting the text.

## Question 1

Question 1 is an assessment of AO1 and the ability of students to retrieve information from a text. Students can gain four marks by separate statements or by selecting accurate information totalling four marks across fewer statements. Question 1 served one of its functions in providing students with a straightforward retrieval task; this year's mean mark was over 3.9. This question therefore has been very successful in engaging students quickly, but also in supporting the less able, encouraging their participation in the rest of the paper. Many more students were using short, precise answers, rather than lengthy, unfocused answers.

- Question 1 continues to enable many students to gain full, or almost full, marks.
- Students are more successful if they choose the subject of the question – the van – and write statements that follow on from that subject, eg 'The van is repainted green'. Succinct answers continue to be the most successful.
- Students are reminded that inferences are not required for this question and can often prove unhelpful.
- Selecting quotations from the text continues to be an effective method of answering the question, but students should select material that refers to the subject and that makes complete sense.

## Question 2

This question assesses the student's ability to comment on the writer's use of language and to explore the effects of the language choices made. Students continue to focus well on the smaller extract placed at the start of the question and very few strayed from this. The amount of imagery and interesting vocabulary in the section meant that students across the ability range were able to access the question with confidence.

Those working at levels 1 and 2 responded to the hungry appearance of the Hartop family, focusing on the word ‘thin’ and the phrase ‘starved-faced’. These students were more successful if they went on to explain, beyond offering simple synonyms for ‘skinny’ or ‘starving’, that perhaps they had to ‘work hard’ or ‘couldn’t afford good food’. Students working at levels 3 and 4 were able to understand the metaphorical aspects of ‘starved-faced’ as well as ‘moulded in clay’ and the idea of having been ‘ironed’. Examiners report that they were impressed by less able students attempting to comment on ‘moulded in clay’ and gaining more marks by saying that the effect of this was to show that the Hartops were ‘unable to change’ or ‘the same as one another’.

A few students continue to be weighed down by technical terms and list these rather than focusing on why the writer has chosen certain words or phrases.

- Teachers are reminded that students can often be as successful in writing about the effect of a specific word choice as they are in writing about complex language features, and this more focused approach can work particularly well for lower ability students as it encourages them to explain the effect in more detail.
- The need to contextualise the selection in relation to the passage has been understood by many centres, but not all. Some students explored the effect of ‘thin’ but then went on to say that Hartop was ‘fat’ because he was ‘sprawling’. Linking the understanding together, contextualising the individual words as part of a longer passage, will often avoid misinterpretation. A more contextualised response would be, ‘The writer uses the phrase ‘moulded in clay’; this allows the reader to imagine the dull expressions of the Hartops, they only have one expression which is why they are also described as ‘hard’.’
- Students tend to find less success writing about sentence length or punctuation; selecting individual words, short phrases and/or language devices is generally more successful. Level 1 responses might comment on the effect of long sentences showing a long journey. More successful answers would comment on the effect of a list of short adjectives ‘thin, angular, starved-faced’ reflecting Hartop’s tough, unsympathetic attitude, a lack of patience or softness.

### Question 3

This question tests a student’s ability to see text as a construct; created and ordered for narrative effect. There is continuing improvement in students’ confidence with this question and more insight into the passage as ‘cinematic’. As the passage was linear in structure, students were engaged by the movement from outside to inside the van, and the use of pathetic fallacy at the start, understanding how it then becomes important to Alice’s situation at the end. Many students were able to discuss these ‘shifts’ with some confidence, with many able to discuss contrasts between Hartop and Alice, as well as the link between the weather on the outside and the atmosphere/relationships inside the van.

Less successful students retold the sequence of events, but this does support the students at the lower end of the ability range, in some cases enabling attainment into lower level 2. More successful responses were able to extend a little further and suggested reasons why an event happened at a certain point in the text. The most successful students were able to see the link between leaving the van, then looking further beyond to the houses and the ‘stars’ and suggesting that these could represent Alice’s wishes or dreams. There were some excellent answers where students identified a possible climax with finding the flowers, only to note that it was, in fact, an anti-climax for Alice and the reader, as she was still sent away to attempt to sell them.

- Answers with complex technical terms are often less successful than those that concentrate on why the detail selected is effective at that point in the text.
- Students who stray into writing about language at the beginning/middle/end often find it difficult to maintain the overall focus on structure.
- There are still a significant number of students who write that an aspect ‘interests the reader’ or ‘makes the reader want to read on’. These comments do not add any understanding to the effect of the structural feature and cannot be credited above Level 1. An example would be, ‘The writer interests the reader by talking about the van and setting the scene to make the reader read on.’
- Students are more successful if they note a structural feature at a specific point in the text and then comment on how it has developed from earlier or how it contrasts with the start or the end. For example, ‘At the start of the extract, the writer highlights the severe weather and how rain ‘swished like a sea-wave’ creating a foreboding and difficult atmosphere inside and outside of the van. Later the weather is mentioned again, ‘raining furiously’, only now the reader realises just how difficult it is for Alice to find the flowers that dropped, but also how unkind it is of Hartop to send her out in it on foot. The reader realises that the weather mirrors Hartop’s attitude and Alice is a victim to both her father’s fierce nature and the weather itself.’
- Students who are drawn to write about the bullet point that asks them what, in the passage, interests them, should be advised that this is holistic and refers to structural aspects, rather than to the passage in general.

#### Question 4

This question asks students to respond to and evaluate a statement about a section of the passage. This series there were two focus areas: Hartop being ‘hard and cruel’ and the reader feeling ‘sympathy’ for Alice. Examiners report that there was genuine engagement with this question and, pleasingly, this was demonstrated across the whole ability range. Due to the feelings of sympathy for Alice and the criticism of Hartop, students were able to comment in more detail, justifying their ideas with greater success.

Level 2 responses tended to focus on Hartop’s anger and his shouting at Alice, with reference to the exclamation mark showing that he was angry and shouting: ‘Move yourself!’ Students at this level could often understand that Hartop was selfish, angry and mean, and they therefore had sympathy entirely for Alice. Students engaged with the fact that Alice was in danger, that she was in the dark and that Hartop should have gone out into the rain himself. Level 3 responses were sometimes able to see the link between Hartop’s anger and the weather as a metaphor: ‘The violent verbs make the wind seem like a violent force, one that is inescapable as it ‘veers and smashes’ Alice. The weather is a metaphor for Hartop, his cruel attitude and the fact that he does not stop commanding her angrily.’ Students at this level were able to explore quotations and draw links across the text with how the tension increased: Alice was ‘ironed’ in the van and then pushed out into the terrible weather alone and vulnerable. There was some understanding of Hartop’s concern for valuable produce and acknowledgement that Alice had not been too concerned to be outside in the driving rain.

Teachers are reminded that there are two keywords in Level 4 and students are able to attain marks in Level 4 by offering responses which are detailed in terms of their development, extension of ideas and use of the text. This is one approach, in addition to being perceptive and conceptual, that may assist students in reaching the highest level.

Some level 4 responses were able to develop the idea of the ‘sudden stars’ and Alice’s desire for escape. More able students were also able to see a counter argument, where Hartop’s anger was prompted by the need to get some money for the family and, in some excellent examples, by Alice’s indifference. These students were often able to see that Alice did not need a great deal of sympathy as she did not pity herself being outside in the rain, that she ‘took her time’ but also acknowledged that she was looking for some hope in the darkness.

Successful answers often took a method-based approach but, more generally, this year saw an improvement in students across the ability range including some reference to methods in their answers, thus making it possible to attain full marks in a level. Method-based answers begin with phrases such as, ‘The writer used the phrase/word...to show how hard Hartop is...’ and then continued with this approach throughout their answer. In response to this question also, students wrote about the use of sentence length or structure. Successful approaches were precise and referred to the question. For example, a clear comment on writer’s methods could be, ‘Hartop’s cruel nature is reflected in the writer’s use of fragmented sentences such as, ‘We’ll stop at Drake’s Turn’, ‘You’ll catch up’, ‘I know something dropped’. The shortness of these sentences shows an abrupt chain of thought and Hartop’s impatience. He is keen to get on and get Alice out of the van.’

Many students were able to discuss both sympathy and cruelty, which led to more developed answers. However it is not essential to cover both halves of the statement in order to attain highly.

- All students should be encouraged to include some discussion of the writer’s methods.
- Students who noted the link between the financial hardships of the family and the pressure put upon Alice to find the flowers were often able then to extend to more perceptive points. Equally, students who could see that Hartop was equally domineering towards his wife and his daughter could make some interesting points about the family dynamics. There were some students who used historical contextual information unrelated to understanding the characters and events in the passage, and this was rarely helpful to the answer.
- Students should be reminded only to write about details within the stated lines.
- It is not essential to include a counter-argument, or to cover both halves of the statement. Some less able students could be more successful by focusing on a less complex approach.

### Question 5

Both the narrative and the descriptive options prompted some engaging pieces of writing, with examiners reporting some excellent ideas for each.

The most successful approaches used the image as a springboard into students’ imaginations, with some drawing upon exotic bazaars or markets with a wide array of produce, not limited to the range in the image. The image enabled students to draw upon the senses, as well as including people in the description, but without straying into an uncontrolled narrative. Many were able to draw upon different perspectives or time settings and some combined the idea of being abandoned in the market, or an abandoned market, neither of which hindered the response. Students at the lower ability range stayed close to the image, describing everything that they could see in the market. These responses tended to have a less controlled structure; it would be useful to take a clearer ‘journey’ through the items in the foreground, then into the background, for example. Students could be advised not to refer explicitly to the image; some students wrote ‘In the image I can see...’, which affected the register. Imagining oneself in the image would be more effective.

More able students were able to develop imaginative and descriptive scenes from details in the picture or other markets, perhaps using contrast or focusing on smaller, less obvious details. There was evidence of conscious crafting, as well as fewer students writing 5-6 pages; instead, more successful 3-4 page responses of controlled, thoughtful description were seen.

The narrative title 'Abandoned' also enabled students to write imaginatively and with some considerable skill. Responses ranged across ideas such as abandoned animals, toys or buildings, lost children, an isolated shoe, a broken heart, nuclear disasters or war-torn conflict. More poignant choices were often written using considerable sensitivity and maturity. Students at the lower end of the ability range often chose abandoned houses, hospitals or markets. Students at the higher end of the ability range were able to see the word 'abandoned' as more of a concept and applied it to a range of situations, with some excellent results.

Students appeared to be engaged with their ideas and the imaginative process. Few students were limited to level 1, and there was significant evidence of greater control, clearer narrative structure and shorter, more focused responses. Some students drifted into unpleasant scenarios such as abattoirs or execution, or focused their responses solely on severed heads or decaying carcasses. Although these may have a place within the title, students should be advised that only focusing on gore and/or death can make it hard for them to demonstrate their best skills.

- There were a significant number of responses that were hindered by contrived and ill-applied 'wow' words. Students should be advised that 'advanced' vocabulary does not add quality unless the words are used sparingly and with understanding. For example, 'plethora', 'incandescent' and 'azure' were used often, but not always with success. Students would be able to write more clearly with fewer such words and more detailed observations.
- Plots borrowed entirely from films, computer games, literature texts or a previous exam paper are not successful and should be avoided.
- Planning is important but should not dominate the student's time for this question. Examiners report seeing some excessive planning, which did not assist the final piece and clearly impinged upon the time available for the actual response.
- AO6 shows improvement both in the range of sentence types and the range of punctuation used. Students are reminded that the accurate use of apostrophes, semi-colons and colons a few times is preferable to their being used indiscriminately. Students are also reminded that there are 16 marks available for AO6 and they should therefore aim to extend their use of varied punctuation, sentences and paragraphs. Spelling of key words, correct homophones, correct apostrophes, accurate sentence and speech punctuation are all core skills for this specification.

### **Use of statistics**

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.