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Principal Examiner Feedback

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Introduction

The paper is organised into three sections. Section A tests only reading and is based upon an unseen passage. The passage studied in Section A in January 2016 was adapted from *Barefoot at the Lake* by Bruce Fogle. Section B tests both reading and writing by asking candidates to respond to one of the non-fiction passages from the Anthology, in this case, *From A Passage to Africa* by George Aligiah. Section C is a single writing task that is not connected to either of the reading activities already undertaken on the paper. The paper was well received with most candidates finding it very accessible.

Section A: Reading

Questions 1-4

The passage chosen proved to be accessible to almost all candidates, with very few experiencing any difficulties in reading comprehension. Question 1 is intended to be a gentle way into the paper and tests the skills of selection and retrieval, asking candidates to identify the drink that the mother gives to the children in the passage. There was only a single mark for this question and almost all candidates were able to determine that it was "Kool-Aid". Question 2 asked candidates to select three words or phrases that showed how hot the summer described in the passage was. The mark scheme identifies seven possible responses and many candidates gained full marks but those who did not often did not choose words or phrases from the selected lines or did not directly answer the question. Question 3 asked candidates to explain how the writer's mother is presented. As a four-mark question there were many possible responses to this question and the mark scheme lists seven possible responses. Many achieved full or nearly full marks and were able to explain the way in which the mother trusted her children and gave them their freedom at the same time as being caring and loving by providing them with cooling drinks in the hot summer sun; many also recognized her neighbourliness and the demonstrative sympathy shown to Mrs Nichols. Where candidates did not score full marks some failed to give sufficient detail for full marks and others listed features without offering any explanation. It is possible to score full marks on this question without finding four distinct points, as the quality of explanation is a key part of the response. Centres should know that examiners are explicitly instructed to reward the quality of explanation rather than simply counting the number of features that have been identified.

Question 4 was the higher mark tariff question in Section A with its greater focus on the writer's technique. This asked candidates about how the writer tries to create interest in the passage and provided bullet points for additional support and structure. At the standardising meeting all markers were made aware of a range of possible interpretations and that they should credit any that were clearly founded in the text. In the published mark scheme examiners are told that they, "must reward all valid points that show an engagement with the text and an appreciation of the writer's technique rather

than have a set agenda of items that they are looking for." Weaker responses were often limited to a small number of points focusing on particular elements within the passage, such as the heat of the summer or the building of the brick house, though often providing little or no development. Many candidates were able to provide a more detailed understanding of how the writer presents an image of perfection in the opening of the passage and how this is undermined by what happens later on in the passage. Better answers showed a perceptive and well-developed response to the text with extended comments about the presentation of the summer and an awareness of sentence-level variety and textual cohesion. Some answers showed a subtle and perceptive understanding as they recognised the strong sense of nostalgia of an adult recalling their carefree childhood days and that this is what produced the idyllic opening imagery and the deep sense of loss and betrayal as the lakeside was forever changed by the building of the house. Many commented on the powerful imagery used throughout the passage, such as the lake like as an "enormous puddle of mercury" though clearly few had seen mercury and could comment on its reflective qualities. Weaker answers were often able to select a number of word-level features, such as the use of capital letters for impact in "NO TRESPASSING" but were not able to comment on other features, such as the presentation of the father. Most candidates were aware that there was a change in atmosphere by the end of the passage but less able candidates were not able to comment on the malign influence of Mr Everett and on the steady undermining of the initial purity that the writer experiences. Essentially the most successful candidates demonstrated higher skills of analysis and interpretation in evaluating the writer's techniques and did so by directly and doggedly focusing on the question. As has been said before in these reports, linked text and paraphrase does not constitute an explanation. It was a feature of better answers that they were more able to recognize the profound emotions felt by the writer throughout the passage and how this is a key source of interest for the reader. They appreciated the shaping of the passage as a whole and saw how the final two words abruptly end the idyll that has been depicted and how the life of the writer will never be the same again.

Section B: Reading and Writing

Question 5

Section B was based upon the pre-prepared text from the Edexcel Anthology for International GCSE English Language and Literature, *From A Passage to Africa*, and focused upon how the writer shows his thoughts and feelings about his experiences in Somalia. As a prepared text almost all candidates seemed to have knowledge of this text. Weaker responses sometimes presented quasi-narratives that did not focus upon the question and simply described the different elements of what the writer sees rather than focusing upon the writer's thoughts and feelings. Stronger responses were those that were able to define a range of thoughts and feelings from the initial presentation of the reporter as a predator seeking ever stronger images of pain and suffering for the readers back home to the curious reversal the writer

experiences as one unknown man forces him to re-evaluate his whole experience in Somalia. Stronger answers were then able to evidence these thoughts and feelings were presented through the use of a powerful and emotive vocabulary and a broad range of other language features.

Question 6

The writing task in Section B was closely related to the reading text in section B and asked candidates to write their contribution for an internet competition about regrets. The title was accessible to almost all candidates and produced a wide range of responses. Many wrote about not working hard enough at school and not revising properly for examinations whilst many other wrote about how they regretted not working harder to maintain certain relationships from the past. The weakest responses were often incomplete, lacking in paragraphing or structure and communicating at a basic level, often focusing solely upon a very limited range of ideas. Better responses wrote with a skilful command of the language showing a strong ability to engage the reader by helping them to understanding the importance of the situation described and the reason for the feelings of regret.

Section C: Writing

Question 7

Candidates were asked to explain their views on the statement: "Children today lack imagination, are unfit and spend too much time indoors." This proved to be accessible to most candidates. Once again, it is noted that the writing responses and particularly the final, 20 mark question, are sometimes not answered at all by some candidates. It is vital that students time their responses carefully and take note of the mark tariff, giving section C one third of the time available to them. This question produced a variety of responses. Weaker responses were often very brief and were limited in their ability to clearly express their ideas, often listing the sorts of games that young people play upon their computers and other devices. They often assumed an understanding of the world of computer gaming that was not made clear to the reader, such as the use of the abbreviation CoD to mean Call of Duty, without any explanation of what the game involved. These answers were often lacking in paragraphing and a sense of structure, which kept them in the Level 1 and Level 2 mark bands. Mid-level responses often used a reasonable vocabulary and a developing sense of text control though sometimes lacking in range and making use of slang in what was otherwise a formal piece of writing. More able responses wrote with imagination and were prepared to take issue with the stimulus line in the question describing the teenage context with clarity and empathy. The best writing showed subtlety and maturity and a control of a wide range of techniques to produce writing that connected strongly with its reader. They were often able to define the pressures that young people experience and the role of gaming in stress relief amongst other reasons. These answers showed a sophistication in control of tense, sentence structure and a genuine understanding of how to explain with

clarity and conviction to a readership that may not share your point of view or your sympathies.

Conclusion

Each section above contains specific advice about what characterises weaker and stronger candidates. Centres are strongly encouraged to practise responding to unseen passages in timed conditions. This will support students in focusing their answers on what the question has asked for and in using their understanding of literary effects as a means of addressing the question rather than being seen as an end in their own right. The same principle applies with regard to studying the Anthology texts. The best practice in writing involves time management so as to respond appropriately to the mark tariff and the time available. Candidates need to focus on developing textual cohesion through effective paragraphing and structuring their writing. At all times have the intended reader in mind and make word level, sentence level and text level choices with a clear understanding of the intended effect. Writing should be seen as a crafted artefact and students should be taught the skills of writing with this in mind whatever the task may be.

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