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Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

January 2020

Pearson Edexcel International GCSE
In English Language A (4EA1)
Paper 1: Non-fiction and Transactional Writing

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January 2020

Publications Code 4EA1_01_2001_PEF

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Principal Examiner's Report for 4EA1 01 January 2020

Introduction

January 2020 saw the second January series of the International GCSE English Language Specification 4EA1 and this examination paper is Unit 1: Non-fiction and Transactional Writing which is sat by all candidates.

The paper is organised into two parts.

Section A, worth a total of 45 marks, tests reading skills and is based on an unseen passage and a text from the International GCSE English Anthology with a total word count across the two extracts of approximately 2000 words. In this series, the unseen extract was adapted from *Survival at Sea* by Brett Archibald, in which the writer describes how, after falling overboard into the Indian Ocean, he survived for 29 hours in the sea. The Anthology text was the extract from *127 Hours: Between a Rock and a Hard Place* in which Aron Ralston describes his experiences of a rock-climbing accident in a canyon. Candidates are advised to spend about 1 hour and 30 minutes on this section.

Section B, also worth a total of 45 marks, offers candidates a choice of two transactional writing tasks. A particular form will always be specified and for this series the two tasks were to write a letter to a travel agent about a holiday that did not turn out as expected or an article for a magazine entitled 'Friendship is one of the greatest gifts in life.' Candidates are advised to spend about 45 minutes on this section.

The paper was well received with examiners commenting on how the unseen text was accessible to candidates of all abilities and provided ample material for the comparison question. It was clear that many candidates engaged fully with both texts and responded with interest and enthusiasm. There was evidence that most candidates had been well-prepared for the examination with most of them attempting every question but they should be reminded to read all the printed instructions on the examination paper very carefully and follow them precisely.

Section A

Questions 1-3 are based on the unseen extract and are all assessed for **AO1**: Read and understand a variety of texts, selecting and interpreting information, ideas and perspectives.

Question 1

This question, which tests the skills of selection and retrieval is intended to serve as a straightforward way into the paper and the vast majority of candidates were able to select two apt words or phrases that described the boat journey. There were a number of possible choices and all were chosen quite evenly. The phrase 'ten-hour journey' was an option but 'journey' on its own could not be accepted as it offered no further information to what was in the question.

The given line references for the question were 3-5 but a small number of candidates did not achieve the full 2 marks because they selected words or phrases from outside these lines, most commonly from the first 2 lines which they had perhaps anticipated would be the focus for the question, for example 'wonderful holiday'.

Some candidates simply copied out the whole of the given lines and could not be awarded any marks as no selection of relevant material had been made.

Question 2

This is a 4 mark question that requires candidates to interpret information, ideas and perspectives. For this examination they were asked to explain what the writer is thinking and feeling in lines 16-

24. There were a number of possible responses to this question and most candidates achieved full or nearly full marks by working through the given lines and clearly explaining the writer's thoughts and feelings about being lost at sea. Many considered how he felt 'helplessness', 'confusion' and 'hysteria' and how he believed he would be 'rescued by his friends'. A few misread or misinterpreted the early part of the section and thought that the writer was feeling fear/panic. Candidates need to follow the instruction '**In your own words**' and in this series examiners felt that candidates had been well-prepared and did this quite successfully. There were a few who included some analysis of language and structure, an AO2 skill that cannot here be rewarded, but on the whole this did not prevent them from making several relevant points which could be credited. Whilst it might be possible to gain four marks by making fewer than four points if they are well-developed, the most successful approach for candidates is to make four clear and distinct points. However, it is important to remember that the question asks for an explanation and therefore, although it is not necessary to write at length, it is not acceptable to bullet point very brief points and the response should be written in full and complete sentences that clearly show understanding and secure interpretation. A few candidates did not achieve full marks because they provided an overview of the whole extract and did not focus on the question or the given line references.

Question 3

This is the final AO1 question; it is worth 5 marks and, like question 2, requires candidates to show their understanding of the text by selecting and interpreting ideas, information and perspectives. For this examination, they were asked to describe the writer's encounters with the sea creatures, using lines 39-54. In question 3, candidates are told that they 'may support' their points 'with **brief** quotations' and many did so to good effect. One examiner noted that 'where candidates did not score full marks it was often because they merely quoted without offering any description of the writer's encounters'. Some expected long quotations to act as a substitute for their own understanding and commentary but answers including overlong quotations rarely gained full marks. An examiner noted that candidates achieving full marks 'were able to balance the weighting of exemplification and their own description of the encounters'.

Many candidates adopted the very successful approach of making five clear points, sometimes set out separately on the page, written in full and complete sentences and supported by relevant brief quotations. There is no need for comments on the language used in the quotations but examiners noted that a small number of candidates spent time on analysis of language and structure, an AO2 requirement, for which again, as with question 2, they could not here be credited. There were a number of possible points that could be made and most candidates scored 4 or 5 marks by looking at both the jellyfish and shark attacks. A few candidates did not achieve many marks because they made only a couple of points or failed to focus on the question and offered points that related to other parts of the text.

The best answers used a good balance of short quotation and explanation, paying attention to how many marks the question is worth and making five clear and discrete points.

Question 4

This question is on Text Two, the Anthology text, and is assessed for **AO2**: Understand and analyse how writers use linguistic and structural devices to achieve their effects. It is therefore a more challenging and discriminatory question and is worth 12 marks divided over 5 levels.

In this examination, candidates were asked how the writer, Aron Ralston, uses language and structure in the extract from *127 Hours: Between a Rock and a Hard Place* to convey the difficulties that he faces. This piece contains a wide range of features of language and structure as exemplified in the mark scheme but examiners were advised that these are just examples of possible points

that could be made and instructed that they must reward any valid points that candidates make that are securely rooted in the text. There does not need to be an equal number of points on language and structure but both should be addressed as, indeed, they were by nearly all candidates.

Some candidates spent too long on an introduction that set out what they intended to do and a conclusion that summed up what they had done, neither of which contributed usefully to the acquisition of marks and time could have been spent more wisely by starting with an immediate focus on the use of language or structure.

Examiners noted that most candidates had 'been well-prepared for the exam and showed clear prior knowledge of the extract' and the majority achieved at least half marks but at the lowest level there were just a few candidates to whom the Anthology text seemed unfamiliar. At level 2, candidates were able to select quotations and use subject terminology but sometimes this led to little more than feature spotting with some comment on the generic effect of techniques such as 'short sentences create impact' or 'this encourages the reader to read on' rather than considering the effect within this particular text.

Mid-level responses offered sound explanation of the text with points supported by relevant quotations. Examiners noted that a number of candidates did not focus sufficiently on the difficulties faced by the writer with a few who appeared to be reproducing points which they had been taught but which had little connection to the question set in this paper. Whilst it may be very useful to use Sample Assessment Material and past exam papers for practice, candidates need to be reminded that the focus of the question on a particular text will vary and they should underline or highlight the key words to ensure that they keep on task. One useful mnemonic that was noticed written on a script was **Relate To The Question** and this proved to be a useful reminder!

It is important to note that there is no specified number of points that a candidate is required to make and that for the higher levels they need to be exploring and analysing features which may lead to fewer points but a demonstration of a greater depth of understanding.

The mark grid does make reference to sentence structure at level 3 and above as a feature that could be written about but it is important to remember there are many other elements of structure that students could choose to analyse. Stronger responses showed a subtle and astute understanding of how language and structure points can be interlinked with one candidate pointing out that: 'The writer uses a transition from active sentences to passive sentences. The use of active verbs such as 'I traverse', 'I press' and 'I kick' implies that at this moment in time Ralston feels in control as he is the subject of the sentence, however in the next paragraph it is 'fear' that 'shoots' his hands over his head.'

Question 5

This question provides the only assessment in the specification of **AO3**: Explore links and connections between writers' ideas and perspectives, as well as how these are conveyed. This question is the most demanding of those in Section A and, with 22 marks distributed between 5 levels, carries almost half of the total marks available for reading so it is extremely important that candidates allow time to plan carefully and then aim to make a good range of relevant points. Examiners recognise the challenge of the question and it was pleasing to note that nearly all candidates achieved some degree of success. One examiner commented that 'most candidates were able to offer some valid comparisons' and another 'was impressed with the quality of these responses.' The majority of candidates achieved at least a mark within level 3 but there were a few

who did not attempt the question and thereby missed the opportunity to gain a significant number of marks.

At the lower end, candidates tended to make obvious comparisons for example 'both extracts describe a dangerous experience' and 'both men are in a difficult situation but one is in the sea and one is in a canyon'; often these responses became narrative, sometimes with greater emphasis on one text. Candidates at this level were generally able to draw links between the writers' ideas and make some straightforward comments about language and/or structure. Some candidates copied out over-long quotations whilst a small minority used no supporting textual references; these answers tended to be more list-like and often went little further than mere identification. The more successful responses balanced their points, confidently interweaving both texts with exemplification and exploration of ideas.

The most assured responses included astute analysis of language, tone and purpose as well as content and there were insightful statements such as: 'Archibald says that "time crawls by" which would almost remind the reader of the slow movement of an infant or a snail and this is mirrored in Text Two where Ralston describes how the time during his accident "dilates"; here Ralston supports Archibald in the idea that time goes slowly when in a life-endangering situation.' The range of comparisons, depth of comment on both ideas and perspectives and the use of appropriate references were all discriminators.

There are different ways to approach this question but examiners noted that the most successful responses made each point a valid and appropriate comparison with supporting references from both extracts; this led to the balance required for marks within levels 4 and 5.

Section B

Candidates are required to answer just one writing task but it carries half of the total marks available for the paper and so they must ensure that they allow sufficient time to plan and organise their response.

There are two assessment objectives for writing.

AO4: Communicate effectively and imaginatively, adapting form, tone and register of writing for specific purposes and audiences. (27 marks spread over 5 levels)

AO5: Write clearly, using a range of vocabulary and sentence structures, with appropriate paragraphing and accurate spelling, grammar and punctuation. (18 marks spread over 5 levels)

Question 6

This question proved to be slightly more popular but it was interesting to note that responses were quite evenly divided between the questions. The task for Question 6 was to write a letter to a travel agency about a holiday that did not turn out as expected.

Most chose to write a letter of complaint and issues ranged far and wide; candidates included plenty of evidence to support their views which often contributed to sustained and effective pieces. Whilst many opted for an angry tone, there were also some who injected a successful note of humour and some original responses that talked about a holiday which turned out to be better than anticipated including a top level candidate who wrote very engagingly about how his expectations of being bored in Rome were transformed in the Colosseum where he learned 'This was a place of brutal battles, of terrible tragedy, of extreme emotion'. A large number of candidates appeared to really enjoy this question and wrote letters full of conviction and passion that one examiner remarked 'were fun to read'.

Middle-achieving candidates tended to work methodically through the bullet points of the question and did not consider using the range of rhetorical features which might help to make their piece more engaging. Higher level responses demonstrated a skilful command of the language and often focused on complex ideas such as sustainability and the changing expectations of travellers which allowed them to reach the top levels of the mark scheme.

Most candidates were confident with the formal letter format, adopted a suitable tone and employed a logical structure that explained their expectations, the reality of the holiday and often concluded with some demand for recompense. Whilst there were still some candidates who wrote out addresses of the sender and recipient, the majority recognised that it was only necessary to have a salutation and a signing off at the end.

Question 7

This task instructed candidates to write a magazine article with the title 'Friendship is one of the greatest gifts in life'. Examiners felt that this topic was very accessible to candidates, the majority of whom agreed with the statement.

Whilst at the lower levels, there was some evidence of 'rambling' or struggling to come up with a range of ideas, with errors in sentence structure and syntax that sometimes led to a lack of clarity and coherence, the most successful responses often tended to identify their target audience and include a mix of personal anecdotes and more philosophical thoughts. Many candidates focused on the positive nature of friendship and 'how friends support you both physically and emotionally, don't judge you and are there when you need them'. Most also addressed the second bullet point of what other things might be considered great gifts in life: these ranged from family and pets to education and religious beliefs; some candidates also wrote about self-knowledge, health and happiness being important.

One examiner stated that: 'The best responses showed subtlety and maturity and a control of a wide range of techniques which produced writing that connected strongly with what the candidates assumed would be the reader's experiences. They were often able to express complex ideas with clarity whilst maintaining the genre of an article.'

Final comment on the writing questions:

To achieve the highest level in AO5, writing needs to be 'perceptive', 'subtle' and 'sophisticated' and for AO6 there needs to be accuracy but also a 'strategic' use of an 'extensive vocabulary' and an assured and controlled use of a range of sentence structures 'to achieve particular effects'. Candidates should not avoid using an ambitious vocabulary because they fear making spelling errors. Those who did achieve higher level marks frequently opened their piece with an intriguing question, a powerful statement or a short sentence and proceeded to explore and develop their ideas with fluency, clarity and enthusiasm. Candidates are advised that colloquialisms such as 'gonna' and 'wanna' should only be employed in direct speech. Examiners commented that where there was evidence of planning, this often led to a clear and effective structure and greater textual cohesion and accuracy

Concluding advice

Candidates should:

- be provided with plenty of opportunities to practise reading and responding to unseen passages under timed conditions
- be aware of the different assessment objectives to ensure that they focus their answers specifically on the different question requirements

- highlight the relevant lines for Questions 1-3 in the Extracts Booklet
- answer Question 2, as far as possible, in their own words
- use the number of marks available for Questions 2 and 3 to suggest how many clear and discrete points they should make
- not spend time analysing language quoted in answers to Questions 1, 2 or 3
- underline or highlight the key words of Question 4 so that answers are appropriately focused
- consider the effects of language and structure features within the context of the given extract in Question 4 rather than offering generic explanations
- select appropriate references from the whole extract that fully support points made in answer to Question 4
- make a range of comparative points in Question 5 and link elements such as content, theme, tone, purpose, narrative voice, language; points should be balanced across both texts and supported with relevant quotations or textual references
- take time to make a brief plan for the higher tariff questions (5 and 6 or 7)
- consider given form and audience for the writing task and use these to inform register and tone
- try to use a wide vocabulary and varied sentence structures
- aim for a structured, cohesive and complete piece of writing
- allow time to proof-read their writing response in order to achieve the highest possible degree of accuracy
- read all instructions carefully
- attempt every question

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