



Examiners' Report  
Principal Examiner Feedback

November 2020

Pearson Edexcel International GCSE  
In English Language A (4EA1)

Paper 1: Non-Fiction Texts and Transactional  
Writing

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## Introduction

As a result of the cancellation of the Summer 2020 examinations, an exceptional November series, including International GCSE English Language A 9-1, was offered in continuation of the summer series. 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 *Pearson Edexcel 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 *If a story moves you, act on it* by Sisonke Msimang in which she presents her thoughts and opinions about storytelling. The Anthology text was *The Danger of a Single Story* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in which the writer speaks about the power of storytelling. Candidates are advised to spend about 1 hour and 30 minutes on this section.

Section B, 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 speech with the title 'Important lessons I have learned in my life' or to write a leaflet explaining the benefits of reading. Candidates are advised to spend about 45 minutes on this section.

This has been a year with many unforeseen challenges and examiners felt that candidates entered for this series should be commended for their commitment to their studies and that the dedicated determination of teachers to ensure their students were well-prepared should also be recognised. The paper was well received with examiners commenting on how the unseen text was accessible to students 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 candidates had been well-taught 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 writer's feelings. There were a

number of possible choices and all were chosen quite evenly; some candidates wrote more than was required and some gave all possible answers.

The given line references for the question were 1-2 and very few candidates selected references from outside of these lines, but candidates are reminded that the given lines could come from anywhere in the passage.

A very few 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 thinks about storytelling in lines 13-21. Examiners noted that there was a good range of possible points that could be made and that therefore most candidates achieved full marks; in particular they picked up on the recent increase in storytelling, the technological accessibility of stories, the fact that stories can provoke strong emotions and the writer's view that stories cannot necessarily improve the world.

Candidates need to follow the instruction '**In your own words**' and in this series examiners did feel that some candidates were struggling to do so. There were also a few who included some analysis of language and structure, an AO2 skill that cannot here be rewarded, and whilst some were still able to make a range of different points, others spent too long exploring just one or two ideas or became side-tracked into offering their own views about storytelling.

Examiners reported that the most successful approach employed by candidates was to make four clear and distinct points. However, it is important to remember that the question asks candidates to 'describe' and therefore, although it is not necessary to write at length, it is not acceptable to simply list very brief points. 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 how the writer reacts to the theft of her bike, using lines 37-51.

In Question 3, candidates are told that they 'may support' their points 'with **brief** quotations' and many did so to good effect. Examiners reported that most candidates achieved at least 3 marks with many gaining the full 5 marks. Successful candidates often worked methodically through the set section of the text identifying key points; responses sometimes focused on emotions and sometimes on a mixture of emotions

and the actions which indicated emotions. Most picked up on the narrator's upset, shock and anger but fewer picked up the significance of the narrator's reference to 'mob rule' or the shift in her perspective when she was confronted by the thief's own anger and sense of injustice.

One examiner noted that 'where candidates did not score full marks it was often because they spent too long on one point, simply retold the event or focused on the reaction of the boy rather than the writer'. Some expected long quotations to act as a substitute for their own understanding and commentary but answers including overlong quotations rarely gained full marks.

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 and which may have led to a disproportionate amount of time being spent on the question.

The best answers used a good balance of short quotation and some interpretation, 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 five levels.

In this examination, candidates were asked how the writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, uses language and structure in her speech *The Danger of a Single Story* to convey her thoughts and opinions. 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 simply repeated points or summed up what they had done, neither of which contributed usefully to the acquisition of marks. Time could be spent more wisely by starting with an immediate focus on the use of language or structure and developing or extending the range of points made.

This Anthology text was set in the examination for the first time and examiners noted that, whilst most candidates seemed to have been well-prepared, responses ranged

from those that were 'thoroughly analytical' and 'moved away from the straitjacket of the PEE/PEEL approach' to 'some that merely narrated the events of the passage'.

At Level 2, candidates were generally able to select quotations and use some subject terminology but at times 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. At this level, answers were often very brief and did not deal with the whole text.

Mid-level responses offered sound explanation of the text with points supported by relevant quotations. Whilst these elements gained marks within Level 3, candidates should be advised that in order to achieve a higher mark they should be willing to consider a wider range of points on language and structure and begin to explore the features of the text in greater depth. Whilst candidates are not required to make a specific number of points, and detailed analysis may lead to fewer points being made, 'two points on language and one on structure' is a formula that is unlikely to gain top level marks.

On the whole, examiners felt that many candidates, though demonstrating 'a commendable grasp of the need to write about structure as well as language' and able to comment on the writer's use of anecdote within her speech, were more confident when writing about language choices. The most effective responses were able to explore the writer's tone, her use of humour and her overall message, with one candidate concluding their answer effectively by declaring that 'the positive and hopeful ending with the beautiful imagery of 'paradise' reinforces the idea that when we listen to more than one narrative, we are free from the danger of a single-story.'

### **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 five levels, carries almost half of the total marks available for reading so it is extremely important that candidates allow sufficient time for a developed response. Perhaps because of time constraints, there were a few candidates who did not attempt the question and thereby missed the opportunity to gain a significant number of marks. Careful time-management is crucial for success in this examination and candidates should factor in time to plan with care the points that they wish to make in order to ensure that they have a wide and balanced range.

Examiners recognise the challenge of the question and it was pleasing to note that nearly all candidates achieved some degree of success. One examiner reported that 'there is evidence that comparison as a skill has been taught well and candidates are approaching this question with confidence' and another was 'pleased to see that there

seemed to be a higher proportion of longer responses'. There was little evidence of planning, but candidates should be advised that a plan can be very helpful because it can aid them to move towards a more exploratory approach based on key elements of similarity or difference rather than producing an explanatory, chronological approach to the texts.

At the lower end, candidates tended to make obvious comparisons for example 'both writers are African women' and 'both writers are giving TED talks about stories'; often these responses became narrative, sometimes with greater emphasis on one text leading to a lack of balance. 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 looked at the writers' perspectives as well as their ideas and balanced their points, confidently interweaving thoughts on both texts with exemplification and exploration of ideas.

The most assured responses included not only astute analysis of language and tone but also considered purpose with one candidate writing: 'While Text One was written to present the writer's thoughts and observations, Text Two was written in order to be persuasive and convince the audience to agree with the writer's views'. The range of comparisons, depth of comment on both ideas and perspectives and the use of appropriate references were all discriminators. One examiner felt that 'the very best candidates' analysis and comparison, especially of a text they had not seen before, was truly impressive'.

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. Feedback from examiners suggested that use of references was variable and might be a useful area for future focus. Some candidates use references within an almost entirely narrative response and offer no real comment, others select relevant quotations but then do little more than paraphrase them rather than offering any further explanation or expansion. More successful responses were able to select pertinent words within the lines being discussed, embed them effectively within their own sentences and, if looking at language features, offer some astute analysis.

## **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 five 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 five levels)

### **Question 6**

This question, asking candidates to write a speech for their peers with the title 'Important lessons I have learned in life', proved to be the more popular writing option and elicited a range of interesting, thoughtful and self-aware responses which examiners enjoyed reading.

A few candidates interpreted the title very literally and wrote about subjects studied at school, but one examiner noted that 'even these still wrote in a relevant way about what their lessons were teaching them and how they were preparing them for life'. Other lessons learned included the need to work hard and revise for examinations, the importance of respect, kindness, tolerance and patience, the need to choose friends wisely and, movingly, 'the fragility of life'.

Some candidates adopted a narrative approach with a lengthy story of a single incident ending with a few lines on the lesson learned and often these responses demonstrated a limited grasp of form with little attempt to engage the audience. Indeed, whilst several examiners felt that the majority of candidates whose work they marked wrote in an appropriate style, others noted that compared to previous series, fewer responses really engaged with the idea of being a speech and fewer still embraced the task as a speech to their peers. An awareness of the conventions of the given form will help candidates to make appropriate language choices which will lead to apt register and tone.

The most successful responses recognised the need to make an immediate impact on their audience through the means of direct address, such as the candidate whose speech began: 'Good morning. Today I would like to ask you a question: what is the most important lesson that you have learned in your life? What springs to mind? Is it Pythagoras' theorem, is it to be kind?, is it to read the questions in an exam?' These responses kept form and audience at the forefront of their writing which led to lively speeches, often enhanced by light touches of humour and self-deprecation.

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 have helped to make their piece more engaging. Higher level responses demonstrated a skilful command of language and often focused on complex ideas which allowed them to reach the top levels of the mark scheme.



## Question 7

This task instructed candidates to write the text of a leaflet explaining the benefits of reading. Whilst fewer candidates chose this task, examiners felt that the quality of responses was often high and enjoyed the evident enthusiasm with which many candidates embraced reading. One noted that a good number of candidates who chose this question 'tended to be secure with the genre of leaflet writing and were able to explore their own love of reading and why it is important'.

Most candidates used the scaffolded bullet points effectively and were able to come up with a series of arguments about the benefits of reading as well as reasons why people may not read much, often laying the blame on the evils of modern technology and the growth of social media. One candidate, however, did note astutely that 'Kindles; audio books; e-books and other such methods of reading are available to those who spend too long on electronic devices to have time to read so there really is no excuse!'

At the lower levels, there was a tendency to list random assertions about reading with no real sense of organisation, with errors in sentence structure and syntax that sometimes led to a lack of clarity and coherence. Good responses explored the benefits of reading more widely and, as one candidate observed: 'Reading can transport people to whole new worlds, be they the dark lands of Mordor or the royal courts of Queen Elizabeth I, and this means that you can be cheered up or simply amused, even if the world is ending in real life'. One examiner made the very pertinent point that it appeared that high-achieving candidates chose this question 'maybe because they loved reading and therefore had access to a more complex, sophisticated vocabulary and hence their writing was more ambitious'.

Again, it was noticeable that less successful responses demonstrated limited awareness of form and audience with little to indicate that the intention was to persuade in leaflet form and one examiner reported that 'this led to some essay-like responses being unnecessarily lacklustre in tone', while others simply kept repeating the same points. Sub-headings and the occasional use of bullet-points were employed to good effect in more successful answers, along with a range of persuasive techniques.

One examiner stated that: 'The best writing showed subtlety and maturity and a control of a wide range of vocabulary that was persuasive in nature and focused for the audience'.

### **Final comment on the writing questions:**

To achieve the highest level in AO4 writing needs to be 'perceptive', 'subtle' and 'sophisticated' and there should be a clear focus on the appropriate form. For AO5 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. They should also avoid writing solely in upper case as this does not allow them to demonstrate an awareness of the correct use of capital letters.

Candidates must ensure that they do not rush the writing task, allowing time both to plan and to proof-read as unforced errors in grammar and spelling can lead to lower marks. 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
- 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 in answers to Questions 1, 2 or 3
- answer Question 2, as far as possible, in their own words and aim to offer some interpretation
- offer some interpretation of the text in Question 3 and not simply rely on quotations to make the points without comment
- 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
- references should be selected carefully and some exploration of these should be attempted

- take time to make a brief plan for the higher tariff questions (5 and 6 or 7)
- give careful consideration to the 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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