



Examiners' Report  
Principal Examiner Feedback

November 2020

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

Paper 1R: 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 *Getting to know Cuthbert* in which the writer, Emma Ford, is given a new bird of prey and describes her experiences of training it. The Anthology text was the extract from *H is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald, in which the writer describes meeting for the first time the goshawk she adopted after the death of her father. 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 magazine article with the title 'Animals are important to our world in many different ways' or to write the text of a leaflet explaining the work of a local charity. 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 box. 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.

### **Question 2**

This is a 4-mark question that requires candidates to interpret information, ideas and perspectives. For this examination they were asked to describe what happens when the writer takes Cuthbert, the bird, out of the box in lines 33-44. Examiners noted that there was a good range of possible points that could be made and that therefore many candidates achieved full marks; in particular they picked up on Cuthbert's attack on the writer, how the bird proceeds to eat the piece of flesh torn from the writer, how the bird and the writer look at each other and how the writer captures the bird with the towel.

Candidates need to follow the instruction '**In your own words**' and in this series examiners did feel that a number of candidates were struggling to do so with some attempting to 'adapt' simply by adjusting the pronouns used. A few did not focus exclusively on the given line references but offered an overview of the whole text. There were also a small number 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 the encounter.

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 for an explanation 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 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 explain how Cuthbert behaves within lines 55-66.

In Question 3, candidates are told that they 'may support' their points 'with **brief** quotations' and many did so to good effect although some relied on overlong quotations and offered little actual explanation. Examiners reported that most candidates achieved at least 3 marks with many gaining the full 5 marks. One examiner noted that 'a few wrote generalised summaries of Cuthbert's behaviour which made it more difficult for them to reach five relevant points if they did not mention some of the

specific examples' evidenced in the given lines. There were also some interesting interpretations of the bird's motivation and some candidates made valid own points such as that the bird was resistant to training and that it was curious.

Successful candidates often worked methodically through the set section of the text identifying key points. Most picked up on how Cuthbert conveyed her feelings, her 'tantrums' and her aggression. Fewer looked at the contrast in her behaviour which is described towards the end of the given lines.

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 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 five levels.

In this examination, candidates were asked how the writer, Helen Macdonald, uses language and structure to build up suspense and tension in the extract from *H is for Hawk*. 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.

Examiners noted that this question was 'generally well answered with the majority of students very familiar with the text, demonstrating that they had absorbed some sound teaching.' There were some candidates, however, who did not focus on the specifics of the question, i.e. the build-up of suspense and tension, but instead gave an analysis of

the text in general. There was also some reference to the italicised introduction to the extract and to background information about the author; such points might be used by candidates to support explanation of the text but in themselves cannot be rewarded.

Nearly all candidates managed to identify relevant examples of language and structure—most frequently including onomatopoeia of ‘thump’, use of minor sentences, similes and metaphors, short sentences in paragraph five, exclamation ‘Oh’, use of repetition and use of ellipses.

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.

Higher level responses offered thoughtful exploration and analysis of the text with precise and effective statements such as that of the candidate who, writing about the writer’s use of direct speech towards the end of the penultimate paragraph, felt that it ‘enhances her doubt and fear of the bird. She really didn’t want it and her stream of questions to the man show her desperation here and contribute to the build-up of tension’.

The most successful answers looked at the development of suspense and tension throughout the whole extract rather than just the opening paragraphs; a number noted that the passage ends on a cliff-hanger, leaving the reader, according to one candidate, ‘pondering on the unresolved tension’.

### **Question 5**

This question provides the only assessment in the specification of **A03**: 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 brief 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 receive a new bird in a box' and 'both writers describe the birds'; 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 offered no additional comment or explanation. Some candidates made statements such as 'Helen Macdonald uses metaphors but Emma Ford does not' which limited the development of the comparison and, almost inevitably, meant that references were not balanced across both texts. More successful candidates engaged well with the texts and were able to make confident assertions, e.g. 'A striking similarity we notice in both Ford and Macdonald is their apprehension and the nerves they feel when meeting the birds for the first time'. Such responses covered 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 and often linked this to the effect on the reader. The range of comparisons, depth of comment on both ideas and perspectives and the use of appropriate references were all discriminators. One examiner reported that 'there were some outstanding responses in which candidates offered perceptive analysis of the two texts'.

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 magazine article with the title 'Animals are important to our world in many different ways', proved to be the more popular writing option and elicited a range of interesting and often passionate responses which examiners enjoyed reading.

Amongst other things, candidates wrote about the joy which pets bring, the contribution of animals to our modern world and throughout history, and their importance to the eco-system. It was clear that some drew upon their study of another anthology text, Kari Herbert's 'The Explorer's Daughter', and wrote about the significance of the narwhal to Inughuit life. Whilst a number of candidates made use of anecdote effectively, a few allowed their personal stories to become over-extended and so began to lose sight of the intended focus of their writing. Most demonstrated at least some grasp of purpose but a few wrote a letter to the magazine in response to an article rather than the article itself and others wrote in a general essay style.

The most successful responses were lively and engaging and often combined personal experiences with references to the wider world. One candidate wrote in a concluding paragraph: 'Without animals I would never be who I am today. Animals have shaped us and changed us. All in all, animals are vital to our society: they teach us about themselves, they feed us and they teach us compassion'.

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 work of a local charity. Fewer candidates chose this task but those who did, adopted a variety of approaches with some focusing on local charities with very clear aims and others taking a broader view and writing in general about the need to support charitable causes. Examiners felt that responses that focused on the work and need for support of a specific charity were more successful as they were often very persuasive in their appeal to readers, using a range of effective techniques.

Charities written about varied from the local branches of well-known real-life international organisations to neighbourhood groups to some that candidates created for the purpose of the task.

In the mid-range, most candidates used the scaffolded bullet points effectively and were able to come up with a series of points about the work and needs of charities. It was interesting to see that the current Covid-19 situation was often mentioned as a factor necessitating more charitable work. Candidates also often demonstrated a sound awareness of the ways in which potential supporters of the charity could be reached with one candidate using sub-headings of 'Internet and online petitions', 'Influencers and Celebrities' and 'Charity Events'.

At the lower levels, there was a tendency to make some general assertions about charity with no real sense of organisation or awareness of the form and purpose of the task; errors in sentence structure and syntax sometimes led to a lack of clarity and coherence.

The best answers showed an astute understanding of the need to appeal to readers and the ways in which rhetorical devices could be used to good effect within a leaflet such as the candidate who wrote:

'When we think of the word 'children', our minds instinctively drift towards a similar scene: carefree, joyful children with not a single care clouding their thoughts. We see a future. We see hope.

But the tragic truth is: this is not the case in all countries.'

### **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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