



Course report 2023

Higher English

This report provides information on candidates' performance. Teachers, lecturers and assessors may find it useful when preparing candidates for future assessment. The report is intended to be constructive and informative, and to promote better understanding. You should read the report in conjunction with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

The statistics in the report were compiled before any appeals were completed.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2022: 34,027

Number of resulted entries in 2023: 35,514

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	9,558	Percentage	26.9	Cumulative percentage	26.9	Minimum mark required	67
B	Number of candidates	9,289	Percentage	26.2	Cumulative percentage	53.1	Minimum mark required	57
C	Number of candidates	8,101	Percentage	22.8	Cumulative percentage	75.9	Minimum mark required	48
D	Number of candidates	5,848	Percentage	16.5	Cumulative percentage	92.3	Minimum mark required	38
No award	Number of candidates	2,718	Percentage	7.7	Cumulative percentage	100	Minimum mark required	N/A

Please note that rounding has not been applied to these statistics.

You can read the general commentary on grade boundaries in the appendix.

In this report:

- ♦ 'most' means greater than 70%
- ♦ 'many' means 50% to 69%
- ♦ 'some' means 25% to 49%
- ♦ 'a few' means less than 25%

You can find more statistical reports on the [statistics and information](https://sqa.my/) page of SQA's website.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

This question paper performed as expected. The two passages provided appropriate challenge in terms of content and language. The passages focused on the subject of prequels and sequels in the media, considering such topics as financial exploitation, reinterpretation of characters, market demands on production and streaming, as well as exploring the audience's relationship with media artefacts.

The eight questions on passage 1 provided opportunities for candidates to apply a range of skills, for example analysis of language, including word choice, sentence structure, imagery and tone, as well as examination of the writer's ideas. The final question, on both passages, required candidates to identify three key ideas on which the writers of the two passages agreed, and to support their choices with evidence from the passages.

Question paper: Critical Reading

This question paper performed as intended and gave candidates the platform to respond effectively to the texts they had studied throughout the course. However, as in 2022, a number of markers reported fewer high-scoring critical essays, with many essays scoring in the 10 to 12-mark range.

As in previous years, the emphasis in the Scottish text questions was on analysis. The first three questions in each option required candidates to comment on the use of language and literary techniques to convey central concerns, such as characterisation and thematic development, and to create, for example, tension.

The final 10-mark questions required candidates to discuss an element of the writer's work, for example an aspect of characterisation, theme, or a specific technique such as use of contrast, in relation to both the text printed in the question paper and the wider work, or other works.

In terms of uptake, the most popular genre was poetry. The most popular option, overall, was Carol Ann Duffy, followed by Norman MacCaig, *Men Should Weep* by Ena Lamont Stewart, Iain Crichton Smith and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde*. In poetry, after Carol Ann Duffy and Norman MacCaig, the most popular choice was Liz Lochhead, followed by Don Paterson. A small number of candidates chose Robert Burns and Sorley MacLean. In drama, after *Men Should Weep*, *The Slab Boys* by John Byrne was the more popular choice. A small number of candidates chose *The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black, Black Oil* by John McGrath. In prose, after Iain Crichton Smith and *Jekyll and Hyde*, the next most popular choice was *The Cone-Gatherers* by Robin Jenkins. A small number of candidates chose the short stories of George Mackay Brown, and the novel *Sunset Song* by Lewis Grassie Gibbon.

Candidates chose a range of texts for their critical essays. Performance was similar across the different genres. Although, as in 2022, many candidates wrote about shorter texts, such

as short stories or non-fiction essays, there was noticeable movement towards choosing longer texts, such as novels and plays. These choices worked well for many candidates.

Popular choices in drama included the works of William Shakespeare, especially *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, Tennessee Williams, especially *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Arthur Miller, especially *The Crucible*, *A View from the Bridge* and *All My Sons*. In prose, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* was a particularly popular novel, along with William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and George Orwell's *1984*. Popular short story choices included *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *The Telegram* by Ian Crichton Smith. In non-fiction, the works of George Orwell were chosen by many candidates, especially *A Hanging*, along with *Dachau: Experimental Murder* by Martha Gellhorn.

As many candidates chose poetry for the Scottish text option, there were fewer essays on poetry. Among poems chosen, Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess*, *Havisham* by Carol Ann Duffy and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ozymandias* were popular. The works of Sylvia Plath, Seamus Heaney, Wilfred Owen and Norman MacCaig were also evident. A number of candidates chose to write their essay on a media text. In this genre, a wide range of choices was evident, including *The Godfather*, *Psycho*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Shutter Island* and *Parasite*. A very small number chose to write on language. All questions were chosen by some candidates.

Portfolio-writing

This year, candidates were required to submit one portfolio piece, chosen from either broadly discursive or broadly creative work completed throughout the year. The portfolio-writing performed as expected.

Performance-spoken language

There was no requirement to assess spoken language in session 2022–23.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

Candidates engaged well with the passages, which focused on prequels and sequels in the media. They approached the task conscientiously and many performed well. Most candidates had time to complete the paper, including spending sufficient time on the final question on both passages, although some did not complete questions 8 and 9. Most candidates attempted all questions, though some candidates missed earlier questions such as question 6 and/or question 8, instead moving on to complete question 9.

Question 1: most candidates identified at least one point made by the writer about film prequels such as *Cruella*. Many identified two points. Many candidates commented on the lack of public desire for a prequel and the fact that it, nonetheless, made lots of money. Most candidates managed to use their own words to express these ideas.

Question 3: of the 'analyse' questions, this question was handled most successfully. Most candidates analysed two examples of language used to suggest that popular film characters are damaged by prequels and sequels. Many candidates analysed three examples. Popular choices were the words 'wobbly buffoon', used to describe the now comical image of the previously intimidating Darth Vader and 'costumes filled with cash', used to convey the financial motivation behind the production of prequels and sequels.

Question 5: most candidates explained two reasons why streaming services and/or film studios are so interested in ideas that have been used before. Many candidates managed to explain three reasons. Many focused on the risk involved in creating something new, as opposed to the relative security of re-using already popular material, as well as the competitive nature of modern media production. Most candidates managed to use their own words.

Question 9: most candidates identified one or two key ideas on which the writers agreed, with many identifying three key ideas. Many candidates were able to provide appropriate evidence to support their ideas. Many commented on the financial motivation for the production of prequels and sequels, as well as the negative impact these films can have on audience perception of characters and nostalgic memories of the original films.

Question paper: Critical Reading

As in previous years, candidates were well prepared for the Critical Reading question paper. In both the Scottish textual analysis and the critical essay, candidates showed detailed knowledge and understanding, as well as enthusiasm for their texts.

Many candidates performed well in the first three, lower-mark analysis questions on the extracts or texts in the Scottish textual analysis. Many candidates spent sufficient time on answering the final, 10-mark question, and made successful links between the printed extract or text and the wider work studied in class. Some candidates approached commonality by making perceptive general comments which showed good general understanding of how the question related to the text or texts studied. Some candidates

approached commonality by commenting on the text or extract included in the question paper and one other text or extract. Both approaches were valid and done well by many candidates. Many candidates structured their answers in 'commonality', 'extract/text' and 'elsewhere/other texts' sections, which helped them organise their ideas. Most opted to answer this question in a series of bullet points, an approach which worked well.

In the critical essay section, many candidates chose a suitable question and structured their essays effectively, demonstrating thorough knowledge of the texts they had studied, for example through the use of quotation and direct references to areas of content. The majority of candidates showed genuine engagement with the texts, and this was demonstrated in their evaluative stance in the essay.

Portfolio–writing

Most candidates successfully submitted a piece of writing that clearly addressed the requirement for broadly creative or broadly discursive writing. In the portfolio–writing, candidates have the opportunity to redraft and improve pieces, and the standard of written English in candidates' finished work, including technical accuracy, was generally high.

In creative writing, many candidates chose to write about personal experience, often focusing on significant life events such as challenges of mental health, a parental break-up or loss of a family member. Some candidates explored their experiences as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Some reflected on the experience of growing up in today's world, with stresses such as the pressure of social media, which was often handled with maturity. Sporting, artistic and performance achievements were explored by many candidates, with a notable level of thoughtfulness and insight. Many candidates who chose to submit imaginative writing showed awareness of genre requirements such as character and thematic development. Many achieved a high standard of writing in creation of atmosphere and setting, and in the use of structure. A number of candidates chose to submit poetry or drama. A small number of candidates chose to write in Scots, for example Doric, Shetland and Glaswegian Scots.

In discursive writing, it was clear that most candidates chose a subject which interested them and about which they felt strongly. Many chose environmental issues such as climate change, use of plastics and the development of electric cars. Some candidates chose to write about an aspect of sport and many showed maturity and thought in exploring issues around these topics. Some candidates chose complex topics such as the nature of the justice system or the significance of karma: these were handled with some sophistication.

A number of candidates explored topics of local relevance, and these were often handled well. Many candidates conducted appropriate research and structured their essays effectively. Some candidates showed genuine engagement with current national and international affairs, as well as awareness of how such issues impact on the lives of young people. A very small number of candidates chose to write discursively in Scots: this approach worked well. The overwhelming majority of candidates chose to word process their pieces, and the standard of presentation was high. Most identified any sources used.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

Question 6: some candidates found analysis of imagery and sentence structure to convey the writer's criticism of modern films challenging. Some candidates provided answers on word choice, a technique not mentioned in the question; some commented on the language used to convey fans' reaction to criticism of films, rather than the criticism itself, and missed out on these marks. Of the images handled successfully, 'like hamburgers' was a popular choice. The repetition of 'over and over and over' was a popular choice for sentence structure. Some candidates managed to make a series of successful comments and gained high marks.

Question 8: some candidates found the analysis of language to create a tone of disbelief challenging. Popular choices that were handled well by some candidates were the word choice of 'total lack of daring and ideas', the question and answer 'And what did Pattinson do next? Batman.' and the dismissive short sentence 'The third new one in 16 years.'

It was noticeable that, in questions requiring candidates to analyse the use of language features, a number of candidates had difficulty in analysing how the language features created effects, instead tending to assert the effects they created.

Question paper: Critical Reading

Some candidates tended to assert rather than analyse, both in the lower-mark questions and in the final 10-mark analysis question in the Scottish text section.

In the final 10-mark question, some candidates did not fully concentrate on the question's key focus. For example, in the Carol Ann Duffy question, some candidates did not comment successfully on the impact of loss, instead identifying examples of loss alone. In the Norman MacCaig question, some candidates did not comment on the use of contrast to explore central concerns, instead identifying examples of contrast or commenting on central concerns with no reference to contrast. Some candidates attempted to comment on commonality, but their comments were limited. Some candidates began by answering the final 10-mark question, an approach which often led to difficulties as they had not familiarised themselves with the text via the first three questions.

In the critical essay, some candidates showed understanding of their chosen texts, but did not focus sufficiently on the requirements of the question: their essays were less relevant, as a result. Some candidates wrote very short essays and were consequently unable to address the question fully. Some candidates did not deal with the requirement to 'discuss how this contributes to your appreciation and/or understanding of the text as a whole.' Some candidates spent too long on generalised comments, re-telling the narrative or describing characters in a basic way, rather than focusing on analysis and evaluation of the text. Some essays included inappropriate microanalysis, for example detailed consideration of word choice or punctuation in drama or prose texts. A small number of candidates had difficulty in choosing an appropriate critical essay question and struggled to match the text they knew to the question chosen. A small number of candidates had difficulty with following the genre requirements of the paper. Examples included using a drama text to answer on prose, or vice versa, or mixing up non-fiction and fiction texts. A very small number did not follow the instruction for the critical essay that 'Your essay must be on a different genre from that

chosen in section 1.' A very small number answered both their Scottish text question and critical essay question on the same text.

Some candidates had difficulty with time management, either writing a long essay and not finishing the Scottish text questions or writing long answers for the Scottish text questions and then not finishing the essay.

Portfolio-writing

Some candidates did not adhere to the published word limit (1,300 words). A small number of candidates went beyond 1,430 words. A small number of candidates wrote very short pieces.

In personal writing, some candidates did not spend sufficient time exploring their thoughts, feelings and reactions, instead spending too long on stating what the events were in a basic way.

In imaginative writing, some candidates concentrated on plot, developing complicated and unrealistic narratives, rather than focusing on developing characters or atmosphere.

In discursive writing, some candidates asserted their views but did not provide sufficient argument or evidence to support these.

In a small number of cases, there was evidence that candidates had conducted research, but this was not used effectively to support the candidate's viewpoint, for example the use of quotation from sources without fluent integration into the line of argument.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

As in previous years, reading good quality non-fiction, for example broadsheet journalism and travel writing, will greatly help candidates to prepare for this part of the course assessment.

It is very important that candidates show their understanding by attempting to adhere to the requirement to use their own words in questions where this is indicated. Direct lifts of words and expressions from the question and/or passage will gain no marks.

In questions that require the analysis of the writer's use of language, candidates should be aware that no marks are awarded at Higher for references or quotations alone. No marks are awarded for assertion that an effect has been produced: candidates must analyse how this has been done. For example, if they choose to answer on an image, it is not enough to assert what the effect of the image is: they must analyse how this effect is achieved. If they choose to answer on a list in sentence structure, referring to the number or variety of items in the list is often a useful way forward. If answering on a question, it is not enough to state a generic function of a question, for example, to engage the reader: there must be some attempt to analyse its use in the context of the passage.

If candidates choose to answer on word choice, considering the connotations of the chosen word or expression is an effective approach. When answering on word choice, it is recommended that candidates focus on one word or a small group of words, rather than quoting a whole sentence or longer expression. This will help candidates to analyse the impact of the word or words and avoid making generalised comments that are more about explaining the meaning, rather than analysing the technique.

In analyse questions, it is important that candidates use their selections of language to answer the question. For example, if asked how the writer uses language to convey criticism of some modern media productions, the candidate's comments must link their selections to the idea of criticism.

Candidates should remember the division of marks in many Higher questions, '2 marks for detailed/insightful comment; 1 mark for more basic comment'.

Candidates should attempt to explain their analytical comments as clearly and as fully as they can. In questions asking for a response on the writer's ideas, candidates should attempt to ensure that their full understanding is expressed.

Candidates should be aware that 'at least two examples' does not mean that they are restricted to giving two points in their answer. In 4-mark analysis questions, providing four points is one effective strategy. The use of bullet points might help candidates in the structuring of answers for high-mark questions.

Question paper: Critical Reading

Most candidates showed genuine enthusiasm for their texts and sincere engagement with, for example, characters and themes. Ensuring that candidates have a broad knowledge of literature and have tackled texts of sufficient demand for Higher is important.

Candidates should be aware of the need to analyse when answering the lower-mark questions in the Scottish text section.

Candidates should read the 10-mark question carefully, and make sure that they use their textual knowledge to construct an answer which meets the demands of the entirety of the question.

Candidates should continue to make appropriate links within a longer text or between shorter texts, for use in the final question in the Scottish text section.

Candidates should be aware of the three-part requirement of the final question in the Scottish text section. This is 2 marks for showing general understanding of how the question links to the text or texts (commonality), 2 marks for analysis of the extract or text printed and 6 marks for commenting on the wider text or texts. Organising their answers in a series of bullet points within three sections might benefit candidates.

In the commonality part of the 10-mark answer, candidates should focus on general points about the writer's work in relation to the question or refer to specific texts. Alternatively, they could comment on the text or extract in the question paper and one other text or extract. They should go beyond making a basic link between the question and a text or texts for the full 2 marks. A careful reading of the question is very helpful here. For example, if the question asks about the 'impact' of an experience, they should ensure that their answer refers to this. Similarly, if the question refers to a specific technique, such as imagery or contrast, they should ensure that their answer refers to this technique, rather than making general comments about central concerns.

In the final 6 marks, which relate to the wider text or texts, when answering on shorter texts (poetry or short stories) it is acceptable for candidates to refer to one or more than one other text. When answering on the writer's wider work, candidates should be aware that restricting their comments to, for example, one other poem will not always yield sufficient material for the 6 marks available. A wide-ranging knowledge across the other shorter texts or the rest of the longer text is more likely to provide sufficient further points.

When preparing for the critical essay section, candidates should be reminded of the requirements for choosing an appropriate question. This must be from a different genre to the Scottish text section. They should make sure that they choose the appropriate genre of question for their text.

Candidates should be careful to select an appropriate critical essay question. It is important that candidates are aware that their critical essay must be relevant to the question. They should try to avoid re-telling the story or repeating information which is not relevant to the question. Preparing an essay and trying to make it 'fit' a question in the question paper is not a helpful strategy.

Candidates should be reminded that microanalysis is not always appropriate or advisable in a critical essay, particularly on a larger text. There are many acceptable approaches to planning and developing the line of argument in an essay.

Candidates should be aware that technical accuracy is important in the critical essay section. When selecting texts for the critical essay, centres should be aware of the need to support complex analysis appropriate to SCQF level 6. Shorter or less demanding texts do not always work in the candidate's favour.

Portfolio-writing

Candidates are reminded to adhere to stated word limits (1,300 words). It is possible to achieve a high standard of performance without reaching this maximum and overlong essays can become repetitive and, therefore, self-penalising. However, very short pieces are unlikely to gain high marks.

Clarity of structure should be encouraged in candidates' writing.

In personal writing, candidates should try to focus on conveying thoughts, feelings and personality rather than relating events.

In imaginative writing, candidates should try to focus on developing characters and atmosphere, making effective use of language, rather than developing over-elaborate and/or unrealistic narratives.

When submitting poetry, there is no requirement to submit more than one poem. It is acceptable to submit a collection of poems, but these must be linked, for example thematically or through the use of different narrative voices. A group of poems will be considered and marked as one piece: therefore, inclusion of a weaker poem in a collection might bring the mark down. Candidates should not add an explanation or analysis of their own work: this is not taken into consideration when marking. Care should be taken when providing poetry as stimulus for writing: candidates should not be encouraged to write their own 'versions' of poems that adhere closely to the structure or content of the original.

In discursive writing, candidates must acknowledge all sources they use in preparation for pieces of writing. Taking time on the organisation and acknowledgement of sources improves presentation, helps markers and helps to develop good study habits. Encouraging personal choice can be beneficial when considering topics for discursive writing. Often local and current issues have powerful relevance for candidates. In discursive writing, sufficient research should be undertaken in order that the candidate's argument can be fully explored. Evidence should be included in an essay as part of the coherent structure, rather than added as, for example, a long quotation from a source.

Technical accuracy is very important in the portfolio-writing and candidates should be encouraged to take care when preparing their final drafts.

Centres are reminded that encouraging candidates to choose their topics for discursive and/or creative pieces tends to work in candidates' favour. A whole cohort or most of a cohort submitting pieces in the same genre is unlikely to serve all candidates well.

Centres are reminded of the requirements for supporting candidates as they work through their initial and final drafts of portfolio pieces. It is acceptable for a teacher or lecturer to provide an initial discussion with the candidate on the selection of a topic, theme, genre, leading to an outline plan and written or oral feedback on one draft of writing. It is not acceptable for a teacher or lecturer to provide, for example, model answers which are specific to candidate tasks, key ideas, or a specific structure or plan. Such an approach very often does not help the candidate.

Candidates should take the opportunity to reflect on and to redraft their piece of writing following feedback on a first draft. The final writing of the piece must be conducted under some supervision and control. This means that, although candidates may complete part of the work outwith the learning and teaching situation, teachers or lecturers must put in place processes for monitoring progress to ensure that the work is the candidate's own, and that plagiarism has not taken place.

Appendix: general commentary on grade boundaries

SQA's main aim when setting grade boundaries is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

For most National Courses, SQA aims to set examinations and other external assessments and create marking instructions that allow:

- ◆ a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional grade C boundary)
- ◆ a well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional grade A boundary)

It is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject at every level. Therefore, SQA holds a grade boundary meeting for each course to bring together all the information available (statistical and qualitative) and to make final decisions on grade boundaries based on this information. Members of SQA's Executive Management Team normally chair these meetings.

Principal assessors utilise their subject expertise to evaluate the performance of the assessment and propose suitable grade boundaries based on the full range of evidence. SQA can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the discussion at these meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more, or less, difficult than usual.

- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more difficult than usual.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been less difficult than usual.
- ◆ Where levels of difficulty are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

Grade boundaries from question papers in the same subject at the same level tend to be marginally different year on year. This is because the specific questions, and the mix of questions, are different and this has an impact on candidate performance.

This year, a package of support measures was developed to support learners and centres. This included modifications to course assessment, retained from the 2021–22 session. This support was designed to address the ongoing disruption to learning and teaching that young people have experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic while recognising a lessening of the impact of disruption to learning and teaching as a result of the pandemic. The revision support that was available for the 2021–22 session was not offered to learners in 2022–23.

In addition, SQA adopted a sensitive approach to grading for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses, to help ensure fairness for candidates while maintaining

standards. This is in recognition of the fact that those preparing for and sitting exams continue to do so in different circumstances from those who sat exams in 2019 and 2022.

The key difference this year is that decisions about where the grade boundaries have been set have also been influenced, where necessary and where appropriate, by the unique circumstances in 2023 and the ongoing impact the disruption from the pandemic has had on learners. On a course-by-course basis, SQA has determined grade boundaries in a way that is fair to candidates, taking into account how the assessment (exams and coursework) has functioned and the impact of assessment modifications and the removal of revision support.

The grade boundaries used in 2023 relate to the specific experience of this year's cohort and should not be used by centres if these assessments are used in the future for exam preparation.

For full details of the approach please refer to the [National Qualifications 2023 Awarding — Methodology Report](#).