



Course report 2024

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 with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

We compiled the statistics in this report before we completed the 2024 appeals process.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2023: 35,514

Number of resulted entries in 2024: 36,300

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	9,635	Percentage	26.5	Cumulative percentage	26.5	Minimum mark required	67
B	Number of candidates	9,110	Percentage	25.1	Cumulative percentage	51.6	Minimum mark required	57
C	Number of candidates	8,322	Percentage	22.9	Cumulative percentage	74.6	Minimum mark required	48
D	Number of candidates	6,227	Percentage	17.2	Cumulative percentage	91.7	Minimum mark required	38
No award	Number of candidates	3,006	Percentage	8.3	Cumulative percentage	100	Minimum mark required	N/A

We have not applied rounding 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 statistical reports on the [statistics and information](https://sqa.my/) page of our website.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

The two passages provided appropriate challenge in terms of content and language. The passages focused on the subject of our relationship with cars, focusing on aspects such as health, the environment and the impact of cars on social spaces, as well as considering alternative solutions to car use explored by city designers.

The eight questions on passage 1 gave candidates opportunities 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. In the final question, on both passages, candidates had to identify three key ideas on which the writers of the two passages agreed, and to support their choices with evidence from the passages.

This question paper performed as expected. The topic and level of reading demand was similar to passages from the last few years.

Question paper: Critical Reading

As in previous years, the emphasis in the Scottish text questions was on analysis. In the first three questions in each option, candidates had 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 require candidates to discuss an element of the writer's work, for example an aspect of characterisation, theme, or a specific feature such as use of conflict, in relation to central concerns in both the text in the question paper and the wider work or other works.

Overall, the Scottish text section of the question paper performed as intended and gave candidates the opportunity to respond to the text they studied during the course. However, question 12 on *Men Should Weep* proved more demanding than intended and the impact of this was taken into account when setting grade boundaries.

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, the short stories of 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.

The critical essay section of the question paper performed as expected. Many essays gained marks in the 10–12 mark range.

Candidates chose a range of texts for their critical essays, with most choosing to write on either drama or prose fiction. Performance was similar across the different genres. There was a noticeable increase in the number of candidates studying longer texts, such as novels and plays. These choices worked well for many candidates as they allowed them to demonstrate their wider reading skills. Some candidates wrote about shorter texts, such as short stories or non-fiction essays. A number of candidates chose to write about media texts, especially films.

Popular choices in drama included the works of William Shakespeare, especially *Othello*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, Tennessee Williams, especially *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Arthur Miller, especially *The Crucible*, *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons*. In prose, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* was a particularly popular novel, along with J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Iain Banks' *The Wasp Factory*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and Graeme Armstrong's *The Young Team*. Popular short story choices included *The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin and *Flowers* by Robin Jenkins. In non-fiction, many candidates wrote about the works of George Orwell, especially *Marrakech* and *A Hanging*, along with *Dachau: Experimental Murder* by Martha Gellhorn and Donna Tartt's *Team Spirit*.

As many candidates chose poetry for the Scottish text option, there were fewer essays on poetry. Popular choices in poems included, Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess*, *Havisham* by Carol Ann Duffy and *The Rabbit Catcher* by Sylvia Plath. The works of 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, there was a wide range of choices, including *The Godfather*, *Psycho*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Shutter Island*, *Dunkirk* and *Get Out*. A very small number chose to write on language. All questions were chosen by some candidates.

Portfolio-writing

Candidates had to submit one portfolio piece for external assessment. This was chosen from either broadly discursive or broadly creative writing and completed under some supervision and control. The portfolio-writing performed as expected.

Performance-spoken language

This year marked the return of the assessment requirement for performance-spoken language. As evidenced through verification sampling, teachers and lecturers used engaging tasks, and recorded assessment decisions using SQA documentation. Candidates were consistently able to achieve the aspects of performance. The performance-spoken language performed as expected. It is assessed on an achieved/not achieved basis.

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 passage, which focused on the impact of cars on society and changing attitudes to car use. They approached the task conscientiously and many performed well. A few did not complete questions 8 and 9, but most candidates had time to complete the paper. Most candidates attempted all questions, although a small number of candidates did not attempt question 2.

Question 1: most candidates identified at least one reason why Chinese city planners were being praised. Many candidates gained 2 marks, making valid points about the limiting of cars in China and low car ownership relative to the population. Most candidates managed to use their own words to express these ideas.

Question 3: many candidates successfully analysed examples of language used to convey the impact of cars on Chinese life. Many made accurate comments on word choice features such as 'towering', 'kingdom' and 'choked', as well as on the writer's use of lists.

Question 4: many candidates successfully analysed examples of imagery and sentence structure used to convey the writer's negative view of the car. Under imagery, many candidates made valid comments on 'pushed aside', 'curse' and 'suffocating'. Under sentence structure, there were valid comments on short, blunt sentences, repetition and lists.

Questions 5: most candidates managed to explain one or two reasons why the writer believes that the age of the car is over; many explained three. Popular choices were cost, impact on health and decreasing numbers in car ownership. Some candidates did not use their own words in explaining ideas and were unable to gain marks.

Question 7: most candidates managed to explain one or two measures taken in cities to reduce car use; many explained three. Many candidates focused on banning cars from city centres, making car movement prohibitively expensive and encouraging environmentally friendly forms of transport. As with question 5, some candidates did not use their own words and were unable to gain marks.

Question 9: many candidates successfully identified at least two key areas of agreement about the negative impact of cars on society. Of the six possible agreements, 'health', 'communities' and 'dominance/influence' were popular choices. Many candidates were able to provide appropriate evidence to support their ideas.

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 interest in and 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 comments, which showed good general understanding of how the question related to the text or texts studied. Most 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 were 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. In the 'elsewhere' section (particularly for longer texts), an approach that proved successful for many candidates was the use of reference instead of an over-reliance on quotation. This is exemplified in some of the [Understanding Standards](#) materials. Most opted to answer this question in a series of bullet points, an approach that worked well. Candidates who were prepared with a broad knowledge of their text(s) and a good understanding of the central concerns/themes were able to respond well to the challenge of the 10-mark question.

In the critical essay section, many candidates chose a suitable question and demonstrated knowledge of the texts they had studied. Most candidates showed engagement with the texts, and this was demonstrated in their evaluative stance in the essay. Candidates who performed well in critical essay demonstrated the ability to construct a relevant response to their chosen question and dealt with both parts of the question. Some candidates successfully displayed their knowledge and understanding through a line of argument that was a direct response to the question, using quotation and reference to enhance this argument. This approach helped candidates to structure their essays and stay relevant to the question.

Portfolio-writing

Most candidates successfully submitted a piece of writing that clearly addressed the requirement for broadly creative or broadly discursive piece 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, experience of bullying, a parental break up or loss of a family member. Some candidates explored their experiences as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Many 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, and this worked well for some candidates. A small number of candidates

chose to write in Scots, for example Doric, Shetland and Glaswegian Scots. This choice often enhanced the candidate's writing.

In discursive writing, it was clear that most candidates chose a subject that interested them and about which they felt strongly. Markers noted that candidates chose a wide range of topics, which they handled in a genuine and enthusiastic way. Many chose environmental and technological issues such as climate change, and the risks and benefits of generative artificial intelligence. Some candidates chose to write about an aspect of sport, for example funding or the importance for young people's health and many showed maturity and thought in exploring issues around these topics. Some candidates chose complex topics such as the importance of bilingualism and our relationship with aspects of the media. These were handled with some sophistication. Some 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. Most candidates chose to word process their pieces, and the standard of presentation was high. Most identified any sources used.

Performance—spoken language

Teachers and lecturers offered a wide range of engaging tasks for the performance—spoken language, very often linked to candidates' wider context of learning. For example, presentations linked to discursive essay topics being covered in the portfolio—writing, or a group discussion linked to aspects of literature being studied for the Critical Reading question paper. These integrated approaches to assessment are good practice and worked well for candidates.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

Question 2: some candidates found explaining the function of specific lines in the development of the writer's argument challenging. Many candidates were awarded 1 mark; fewer were awarded 2 marks. Some candidates explained the movement from eco-friendly transport to car dominance in China, in general terms. Some candidates approached the question as a traditional 'link' question. Either approach was acceptable.

Question 8: some candidates found analysing the writer's use of language to create a forceful tone challenging. Popular choices that were handled well by candidates included word choice of 'extinct', the image 'a page has been turned' and the repetition of 'it is time'.

It was noticeable that, in questions requiring candidates to analyse the use of language features, some 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 Norman MacCaig question some candidates only identified challenging situations and did not link this to central concerns. Similarly, in the question on *Jekyll and Hyde* some candidates only identified aspects of their relationship and did not link this to any central concern. 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 through the first three questions. Many candidates did not attempt to answer, or did not manage to provide, a substantial response to the 'elsewhere' section of the 10-mark question in *Men Should Weep* on how the character of Granny is used to explore central concerns. In part, this seems to have been due to the misconception that there is a need to provide quotations to support every comment and candidates may have been lacking appropriate quotations as Granny is a less prominent character. Candidates who performed well in this question successfully linked Granny to many of the central concerns of the play (for example poverty, family/family conflict, old age, generational divide, the role of women) using references or a mixture of quotation and references.

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 attempted to structure their essays around quotations, rather than structuring a line of thought and using quotations or references to support this. Their essays tended to lack structural coherence and did not demonstrate breadth of knowledge, as a result. Some candidates wrote very short essays and were then unable to address the question fully. Some candidates did not deal with the requirement to 'discuss how this contributes to your appreciation/understanding of the text as a whole.' Some candidates focused on retelling the narrative or describing characters in a basic way, rather than 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 few 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, for example using a drama text to answer on prose 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 not finishing the essay.

Portfolio–writing

Some candidates did not adhere to the published word limit of 1,300 words. This approach did not tend to work well for the candidates as they often produced overlong pieces. A few candidates wrote very short pieces.

In personal writing, some candidates did not spend enough 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. Some candidates attempted poetry, but the results were often quite basic. For example, poems that read like standard sentences broken up into lines tended not to gain high marks. Poems are assessed in the same way as other creative pieces, with reference to, for example, language and literary techniques.

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

In some 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

The Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation paper requires candidates to demonstrate both broad and close reading skills. As in previous years, reading good quality non-fiction, for example broadsheet journalism and travel writing, greatly helps candidates to prepare for this part of the course assessment. Practising identifying key ideas in a writer's line of argument helps when preparing for the final question on both passages.

It is very important in 'Identify' and 'Explain' questions that candidates show their understanding by adhering to the requirement to use their own words. Direct lifts of words and expressions from the question and/or passage will gain no marks.

In questions that require 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 candidates 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 has been achieved.

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, we recommend that candidates focus on one word or a small group of words, rather than quoting a whole sentence or longer expression. This helps 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 analysis 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 a negative view of the car, the candidate's comments must link their selections to the idea of criticism.

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 parenthesis or short, blunt sentences, they should discuss the emphatic nature of such structural features, in the context of the passage.

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 try to ensure that their full understanding is expressed.

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

Candidates should be made 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 enthusiasm for their texts and 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. Higher English course support notes provide further advice about selection of texts suitable for study at this level.

Candidates should revise overarching ideas, themes or issues when preparing a play, novel, collection of short stories or poems for the final question in the Scottish text section.

Candidates should be made aware of the need to analyse when answering the lower-mark questions in the Scottish text section. This goes beyond asserting what the impact of a word or expression is, by demonstrating understanding of how that impact is achieved. Explaining only the meaning of a word or an expression will gain no marks.

Candidates should read the 10-mark question carefully, and make sure that they use their textual knowledge to construct an answer that meets the demands of the entirety of the question. For example, if a question asks how a relationship is used to explore central concerns, the answer must go beyond describing the relationship to exploring how the relationship is linked to central concerns (for example main themes, ideas).

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 that there is no need to quote when making these connections: relevant references are just as valid.

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, 6 marks for commenting on the wider text or texts. Candidates might benefit from organising their answers in a series of bullet points in three sections.

In the commonality part of the 10-mark question, 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 important here. For example, if the question asks about the link between a relationship and central concerns, 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.

In the final 6 marks, candidates should be aware that quotations are not needed. Learning a series of quotations and attempting to 'fit' these to the question is not beneficial to candidates. An approach based heavily on quotes learned may lack relevance to the question. References are just as valid as quotations, especially with longer texts. Using very short quotations, including one-word quotations, is unlikely to provide sufficient material to answer this part of the question well. For poetry answers, learning quotations from other poems can be a starting point, but the comments are where candidates can gain marks. Developing a broad understanding of the wider work or works is a more useful approach in preparation for this part of the question.

When preparing for the critical essay section, teachers and lecturers should remind candidates 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 carefully 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 retelling the story or repeating information that 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.

Teachers and lecturers should remind candidates that microanalysis is not always appropriate or advisable in a critical essay, particularly on a larger text. Learning a series of quotations and attempting to 'pin' the essay onto these tends to lead to an essay lacking in coherence and structure. 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, teachers and lecturers 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.

An audio presentation and candidate evidence which demonstrate many of these points are available on SQA's [Understanding Standards website](https://www.sqa.org.uk/understanding-standards).

Portfolio-writing

We remind candidates to adhere to stated word limits, 1,300 words maximum. 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.

Teachers and lecturers should encourage clarity of structure 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 is considered and marked as one piece: therefore, inclusion of a weaker poem in a collection might negatively affect the overall mark. 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 which remain close 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, assists 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. Candidates should include evidence in an essay as part of the coherent structure, rather than added as, for example, a long quotation from a source.

When preparing candidates for assessment in 2024–25 onwards, we remind teachers and lecturers of the [new conditions of assessment](#):

'Candidates are given the opportunity to demonstrate their writing skills at the most appropriate time in the course. That is, when their writing skills have reached the level of development and maturity required for Higher English. There is no time limit for the production of this coursework, and the writing process can take place over a period of time. However, the first draft of the assessment piece must be done in class under supervision over a period of up to 4 hours. This may take place over several sessions, if required. There is no requirement for a formal timed write-up.

The early stages of the writing process can be completed outwith the learning and teaching situation. When candidates are ready to complete the first draft of the assessment piece, this must be done in class under the supervision of a teacher or lecturer and with access to appropriate resources (for example notes, outline plan, research and/or ICT, as appropriate). Following teacher or lecturer feedback on the first draft, candidates then complete the final piece of writing under some supervision and control. Note: centres should only submit the final piece of writing for external marking.'

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

We remind teachers and lecturers 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 benefit candidates.

Teachers and lecturers should support 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. Candidates should be aware that using generative artificial intelligence technology to produce all or part of their writing pieces is malpractice. Any pieces suspected of artificial intelligence involvement will be referred to SQA's Malpractice team.

Performance–spoken language

Linking tasks to the wider context of learning, for example using literature being studied for the question paper, or research linked to the portfolio–writing is very effective practice.

We remind teachers and lecturers that the evidence for this component can be gathered and evidenced over a range of spoken language opportunities throughout the course rather than in one instance.

A detailed checklist with comments making clear the basis for assessment decisions is required for performance–spoken language. For example, teachers and lecturers might provide an indication of the topic or question being addressed by the candidate, how they responded or the original point and how it was developed or disputed giving detail of some of the content and language of their response. The detail in the checklist should be in line with that exemplified on the [Understanding Standards website](#).

Teachers and lecturers must use the detailed marking instructions in the [Higher English course specification](#) when assessing candidates.

There are clear examples of assessment of the performance–spoken language available on the Understanding Standards website. This material includes detailed checklists for each exemplar, which shows the type of detailed comments required. Teachers and lecturers should refer to these exemplars when preparing candidates and conducting their ongoing internal verification. Access to these materials is available via SQA co-ordinators.

The assessment has been designed to be as flexible as possible. If candidates struggle with individual presentation, then group discussion or naturally occurring classroom discussions should be considered as a basis for assessment. If teachers and lecturers have any queries about possible assessment arrangements or modified models of assessment, they should contact the assessment arrangements team at aa@sqa.org.uk.

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.

Every year, we evaluate the performance of our assessments in a fair way, while ensuring standards are maintained so that our qualifications remain credible. To do this, we measure evidence of candidates' knowledge and skills against the national standard.

During the pandemic, we modified National Qualifications course assessments, for example we removed elements of coursework. We kept these modifications in place until the 2022–23 session. The education community agreed that retaining the modifications for longer than this could have a detrimental impact on learning and progression to the next stage of education, employment or training. After discussions with candidates, teachers, lecturers, parents, carers and others, we returned to full course assessment for the 2023–24 session.

SQA's approach to awarding was announced in [March 2024](#) and explained that any impact on candidates completing coursework for the first time, as part of their SQA assessments, would be considered in our grading decisions and incorporated into our well-established

grading processes. This provides fairness and safeguards for candidates and helps to provide assurances across the wider education community as we return to established awarding.

Our approach to awarding is broadly aligned to other nations of the UK that have returned to normal grading arrangements.

For full details of the approach, please refer to the [National Qualifications 2024 Awarding — Methodology Report](#).