

OXFORD

INTERNATIONAL
AQA EXAMINATIONS

INTERNATIONAL GCSE ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

(9280/W) Writing
Report on the examination

November 2019

REPORT ON EXAMINATION: INTERNATIONAL GCSE ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE 9280/W Writing November 2019

An impressively high standard of writing was produced by some students in response to the November 2019 paper. A range of different and valid approaches were adopted by students, often resulting in interesting and well-constructed responses. There were very few instances of incomplete papers or misunderstood answers. As noted in the previous report, the streamlining of the mark scheme has made it clearer how the skills in each level build on each other. Centres can be reassured that the underlying assessment philosophy and standard of marking is unchanged.

The mark scheme, training webinars and previous Reports on the Exam have reinforced the underlying principle of this paper, namely that examiners are rewarding both technical accuracy and the ability to produce engaging responses. The mark scheme reflects this approach, but as ever, it is essential to note how the balance between content and accuracy shifts towards the end of the examination. The final question allocates 15 marks to Language and therefore it makes sense for students to see this question as a place to demonstrate sentence variety, accurate sentence demarcation, accurate spelling and choice of vocabulary.

It is worth restating that students can - and do - produce effective full mark answers without writing lengthy responses. Exceeding suggested word counts never results in a reduction of marks, but students who write far beyond the word count run the risk of making more errors than they might in a concise response. Pleasingly, students seemed to be aware that task focus and relevancy are important exam skills. Examiners are expecting to see that the specific focus of each question is addressed: bullet points are given to guide the student towards content ideas and so it makes sense in questions 1, 2 and 3 for them to be followed. Where students miss one or more of the compulsory bullet points, responses cannot reach the higher levels of the mark scheme. The bullet points in question 4 are optional, but in practice, the vast majority of students follow them which usually leads to clearly sequenced writing.

In this series, a significant minority of answers were hampered by pre-learnt phrases. Such strategies can help when used thoughtfully, but a number of students all commenced their answers to question 1 with the same general phrases which had little to do with the image. It is advised that this approach is best avoided. Likewise, the overuse of idioms often sounds awkward and can lead to responses which sound unnatural. Whilst idioms are a feature of English, when used out of context they undermine rather than strengthen a response.

Here are some specific points about each question on this November's examination.

QUESTION 01

Students appeared to enjoy the descriptive task, often using varied colour terminology and prepositional phrases to navigate the detail of the image. It is worth restating that students are not obliged to cover all aspects in the image. Choosing to focus on one or two aspects and developing them in clear detail is the very often a successful approach to this question.

Only spelling and punctuation are assessed in the language aspect of this task. Complex punctuation or overly ambitious vocabulary is not required to score full marks. Indeed, many full mark answers focussed on clearly expressing details rather than trying to demonstrate a lot of complex words. It can be the case that students who try to write elaborate prose run the risk of misspelling or misuse of words which can affect clarity.

QUESTION 02

This task (which invited students to write a letter informing parents about a forthcoming school charity concert) was approached in two main ways: some students wrote from their own perspective, whereas others adopted the voice of a headteacher. Either approach was valid and examiners judged the appropriateness of formality accordingly and how well the bullets had been addressed. Of these, the quality of detail given in response to the third bullet point often distinguished the quality of the response: bullet points which invite justification ('why') are usually the ones students appear to find most challenging. Straightforward reasons such as 'you will enjoy it' were not as effective as those responses which presented thorough/imaginative reasons.

The language part of the mark scheme awards marks for variety as well as spelling and punctuation. As stated in previous reports, bullet points which invite justification can lead naturally to sentence variety as it's often the case that complex sentences are required to justify an opinion. It is advised that this may be an area which students could focus upon in preparation for future papers.

QUESTION 03

The third task invited students to write imaginatively about a careers event. For some, this meant an event in the sense of a convention or careers fair. For others, it meant any type of experience which gave an insight into a career. Examiners credited either approach and judged responses on the clarity, detail, accuracy and variety of what was produced. In less successful responses, students gave too much space over to the first three bullet points and skimmed over the fourth justification bullet point ('your opinion of the event').

As noted in the previous section, justification-style bullet points invite students to explain in detail and use a potentially wider range of structures. The ability to use complex sentences with accurate subordinating conjunctions and dependent clauses is important: responses couched in simple and compound sentences don't always show off the range of grammatical structures necessary to reach the higher levels of the mark scheme.

QUESTION 04

There were many extremely successful responses to the fourth task. It was impressive to see how many responses contained detailed and often scientific information about protecting the environment. This was clearly an issue on which students had opinions and had considered during their studies. In longer responses, structure and sequence becomes more important, so responses where the paragraphs were organised in a logical way and had a 'pathway' through the article often accessed the higher levels of the mark scheme. Less effective responses tended to be more random in approach, which suggests that planning and sequencing prior to writing may be a profitable approach.

Most students appeared to appreciate that the balance of marks between content/communication and language changes in the final task: 8 marks are available for content/communication and 15 for language use. Accurate spelling and punctuation are important throughout the paper, but in the final task, variety is more important than ever. It is pleasing to note that many students were good at producing complex sentences and also varying the rhythms of their prose. It was sometimes the case that overly ambitious vocabulary was used and so it is worth restating that clarity is always the important feature: packing an

answer with inappropriate complex words or highly formal rhetoric is not needed. It often misses the needs of the specified audience and can impact on the mark which can be awarded.

In summary, it is important to reaffirm the quality of many students' work seen in this series. Examiners are often astounded by the way in which young people demonstrate their proficiency in a second language with such ease. As ever, centres and teachers deserve much praise for their preparation of students for this series.

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In line with OxfordAQA's Fair Assessment promise, the assessment design, marking and awarding of this examination focused on performance in the subject, rather than English language ability.



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