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GCSE

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 2 Writers' Viewpoints and Perspectives  
Report on the Examination

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## General Comments

There was a significant increase in the number of entries in November 2018 in comparison to the number of entries in November 2017 – from 25,000 in 2017 to 34,000 in 2018. This is possibly a consequence of the increased number of 17 and 18 year old students re-sitting the exam. The majority of students were performing at Level 2 and Level 3, with fewer students performing at the upper end of the ability range than in the June series. However, the full range of ability was in evidence.

The source texts appeared to be well-received and provided both challenge and accessibility for a range of student abilities, engaging their interest and providing a wealth of material for students to comment on. It was clear that students were well-prepared for the demands of the re-sit exam and responded well to the different expectations for each task, each according to their ability.

## Sources

The two source texts were based on the theme of transport, and on cycling in particular. Source A was an article from The Guardian newspaper in which the writer presents his views on the so-called ‘war on the roads’ between cyclists and motorists. It is informative and persuasive in purpose, and was effective in engaging the interest of students. The main thrust of the argument was clear: motorists should show more respect and heed the safety of cyclists more than they currently do. The vast majority of students were able to access these ideas and respond to the writer’s sense of quiet outrage that his life should be put in danger by motorists for such minimal gains. However, there were more subtle ideas, such as the concept of gambling with life and death, the physics of forces and impact, and the legal and ethical responsibility of drivers. These offered students something more abstract and conceptual to engage with and potentially reach the highest levels by applying a framework and offering perceptive interpretations.

The news article contained a wide variety of both structural and linguistic methods for students to engage with. The writer shifts structurally from a focus on the general to a focus on the specific, incorporating personal anecdotes to illustrate and validate his argument. He presents counter-arguments by explaining why the idea of a ‘war on the roads’ is a red herring, and ends the article with a section of forceful rhetoric, imploring drivers to think more carefully before they act in a way which puts drivers at risk. Rhetorical devices are littered throughout the article, and there are some useful metaphors, such as the rolling of the dice, which many students picked up on.

Source B was a magazine article from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an entertaining first-hand account of an aristocratic woman’s early experiences of cycling in London. The writer has a distinctive and engaging voice, and adopts a light-hearted and ironic tone throughout. She presents a mostly chronological account of her experiences of learning to cycle, and her attempts to conquer her nervousness on the roads. She introduces the idea of a battle between cyclists and the drivers of hansom cabs, and offers several anecdotes to illustrate her point. Again, the main thread of the article was clearly accessible to all, with very few misinterpretations of the text.

The text includes some interesting shifts in perspective, and a range of literary devices and imagery to provide a rich source of material for students to comment on. The writer shifts from an earnest and serious tone in places, to a frivolous and ironic tone in other parts of the article. There are many examples of imagery being used to animate her experiences, and these were clearly accessible for students to deal with at their own level. The final line ‘...but what is life if your new

white gloves are ruined?’ perplexed some, who struggled to explain the comparison made, but it offered students the opportunity to engage with the writer’s use of irony, hyperbole and humour.

There were a number of comparisons to make between the two texts, as they were very closely matched in terms of content, theme and perspective. Students found it easy to find connections between the experiences of the two writers and their points of view, and many were able to make the historical comparison that very little has changed in the intervening 100 years. Equally, students were quick to pick up on the differences of tone between the two writers, as Source A was serious and factual, whereas Source B was more light-hearted and humorous.

### **Question 1**

Question 1 was attempted by almost all students, but whilst the majority scored 3 marks or more, less than half achieved the full 4 marks, as opposed to over three-quarters in November 2017. The reason for the reduction in students achieving full marks is one particular statement (A) which the majority of students who scored 3 selected in error. Students misread the opening line of Source A: ‘Ask most people who ride a bike regularly in the UK...’ and selected the first statement: ‘Most people in Britain ride a bike regularly.’ Having already selected one incorrect statement, students tended to choose three out of the four correct statements (C, D, E, F) as their answer.

There was no intent to trick students; statements are not deliberately written as distractors to confuse students; there was no ambiguity in Statement A. Question 1 is, however, a test of reading skills, and the ability to read carefully and select information from the text is a valid assessment objective which is effectively assessed through this task.

The lesson for students is to take their time. Students are under some pressure to read and digest the two texts and respond to the five questions within the given time constraints, but rushing through Question 1 is clearly a false economy. Students should be reminded of the need to read the first few lines of Source A again, more slowly and carefully, before they make their selection of statements. It is also good practice to read through all eight statements before making any selection at all. It is worth spending a few more minutes reading and considering the possible statements carefully to ensure that full marks are achieved on this question.

Students should also be aware that, if they find a later statement which seems to be correct and would mean they had five correct statements, they should go back and check the earlier statements and make a correction if necessary. The statements are always presented in the same chronological order as the text, so it should be easy to check in a methodical and consistent way. Corrections may look messy on the page, but are preferable to selecting the wrong statement and losing a mark. The answer booklet provides clear instructions on how to make a correction.

#### **In summary**

- A significant number of students selected one incorrect statement, reducing the number of students who gained full marks
- Students should read both the extract and the statements slowly and carefully before making a selection
- Students should be prepared to make a correction if necessary

## Question 2

This was the first live series where students were asked to explore similarities rather than differences in the two texts. This does not appear to have presented significant issues, and the majority coped extremely well with the demands of this question, including a range of both similarities and differences in their response. Students either adapted intuitively to the change of focus from differences to similarities, or they had been well-prepared by centres to address both possibilities.

Within the framework offered by the Assessment Objective, students are expected to ‘synthesise evidence’ (which includes information, ideas and textual detail); this allows the selection and interpretation of similarities or differences to be equally valid. Although the focus of the question was on similarities, comments on differences were also rewarded by examiners where they were appropriate to the focus of the question.

Many students were able to identify the similarities in the attitudes of modern drivers and the Victorian hansom cab drivers, both showing a reprehensible indifference to the safety of others on the roads. They selected textual detail to support their points, often citing how the drivers passed very close to the cyclists without worrying about the consequences. Clear similarities were identified with the suggestion that their actions gave both sets of drivers a sense of triumph, and the best students were able to move beyond the similarity to explain the more subtle and perceptive difference between the aggressive but rational behaviour of the modern drivers in contrast to the sadistic pleasure and psychotic actions of the cabmen for a mark in Level 4.

The focus of the question was the behaviour of the drivers in the two texts, and there was a range of material to infer from. Students frequently commented on the violence and thoughtlessness of the drivers, and their lack of concern for the safety of others. Even the weakest students were able to infer that the drivers were careless and the most able were inclined to comment on the deliberate or conscious acts of aggression; the extent of the risks drivers were willing to take; the gamble with others’ lives which this implied and what motivated the drivers to behave in that way. It was the inclusion of these layers of interpretation – to explain how or why they behaved in particular ways – which allowed students to access the higher levels by offering a perceptive or conceptual understanding of the drivers’ behaviour.

Less able students tended to mistake the focus of the task and concentrated instead on the experience of the cyclists, failing to address the behaviour of the drivers. Whilst the drivers’ and the cyclists’ experiences are clearly linked, some students were able to bring their comments back to the actions of the drivers, even when they had set off writing about the cyclists, and were rewarded accordingly. Other students struggled to interpret the evidence they had selected and comment on what they understood about the behaviour of the drivers, and thereby failed to make it into Level 2.

In summary

- Students responded very well to the focus of the task being similarities
- Where the focus of the question is on similarities, comments on differences will also be rewarded when they are appropriate to the focus of the question.
- Interpretation of information and ideas is the key to accessing the higher levels

## Question 3

Question 3 posed a question about the language used to describe the writer’s first experience of riding a bicycle in the streets of London. The given lines were taken from the 19<sup>th</sup> century text, but

this did not present any apparent problems for students, who rose to the challenge of a text written 120 years ago with confidence and some significant success. Schools and colleges are clearly preparing students by familiarising them with a range of texts from different time periods, and the evidence is that this preparation in readiness for Question 3 in particular is proving effective.

The mean mark for Question 3 was very similar to November 2017 at just over 4 marks, suggesting most students were able to make some attempt to engage with the effect of language. Commenting on effect is the key skill for Question 3 and remains the overwhelmingly important focus for students in their response to language and should remain the focus for schools and colleges preparing students for this exam.

The lines selected from Source B related to the writer's first experience of riding her bike. They provided a range of different language techniques as well as some interesting words and phrases. There were metaphors and similes, alliteration and hyperbole, listing and the use of abstract nouns. Students tended to make very similar selections of language examples, with the image of the greyhound and the hare one of the most popular choices. Students had various degrees of success in explaining how the image showed the writer's anxiety, with only a few able to clearly identify the comparison between the writer's feelings of fear as she rode her bike chased by the hansom cabs and the fear felt by a hare when chased by a greyhound, with her sense of their approach being compared to the hare feeling the greyhound's breath.

The metaphor of the 'stormy oceans of Sloane Street' was also a favourite. Some students mistook this image as a literal description of the weather, which made it very difficult to comment clearly on the effect of the metaphor. However, other students were able to explore how this metaphor offered a comparison of the chaos and danger of the streets of London in relation to the unpredictability and mayhem of the sea in stormy weather.

It is the ability to contextualise the image and, crucially, to bring together both parts of the image and relate them back to the text which is rewarded by marks in Level 3 and above. Students often need to write in more depth about a particular image, returning to the central comparison in a metaphor or simile and explicitly linking it to what is happening in the text, in order to move into Level 3. There were examples of students whose perseverance finally paid off by attempting several times to explain how an image worked, and moving from Level 2 to Level 3 by eventually becoming 'clear' in explaining the image thoroughly.

Students struggled where they made poor choices, and those who selected 'streaming' and 'exhausted' as examples of adjectives were often left with little to comment on other than the meanings of the words. The phrase 'conquer their nervousness' was selected by very few, but would have made fertile ground for comment on the battle imagery used. Likewise, the alliteration in 'stormy oceans of Sloane Street' was largely ignored by students, although there were opportunities to explore the sound effects of the wheels swooshing along the street. A few students misinterpreted the word 'launched', suggesting that the way she threw her bike into the street indicated how frustrated she felt with cycling. The choice of language examples is the key to success in Question 3, and for the most part students made sensible and helpful choices.

In summary

- Students coped well with the 19<sup>th</sup> century text as the focus for detailed language study
- Students need to write more fully and in more detail about individual images
- It is important to contextualise comments on language effects to attain a mark in Level 3

## Question 4

One of the most obvious observations about responses to Question 4 was how short they were. Many students wrote less than two sides of the answer booklet, which was often less than they had written in response to Question 2. As the mark tariff for Question 4 is double that for Question 2, it is worth reminding students that they should be writing relatively more for Question 4 in order to have a better chance of achieving more marks.

However, a significant minority of students did not attempt Question 4 at all. Although there are clearly significant challenges for students in addressing all the key skills at the higher levels, even a very simple response which identifies the basic ideas in the texts about cycling being dangerous and an awareness that both writers thought the same thing, with perhaps a quotation or two, would go some way towards achieving 4 marks. It is always worth a try, and students should perhaps be reminded that even when time is short, and the question appears complex, a simple understanding of ideas and a basic comparison of the writers' views are always rewarded by marks.

Students who did attempt the question were often able to comment on the similarities between the two writers' perspectives on cycling in the city, helped perhaps by the very close correlation between the two texts. The focus again was on similarities, for the first time on Question 4 in a live series, and again it did not appear to distract or confuse students in the slightest. They identified how both writers complained about the behaviour of other road users and were appalled by the risks they had to take. Some students developed their response by exploring differences in their attitudes too, in that the writer of Source A took it very seriously, whilst the writer in Source B seemed to make light of her experiences.

Students progressed naturally from an identification of the writers' similar perspectives to explore the different methods the writers used to present their points of view. So it was common to read that whilst both writers felt that cycling was very dangerous, the writer in Source A used facts and statistics to support his argument, whereas the writer in Source B used emotive language and vivid imagery to illustrate the same thing, with different effects. There were a reassuring number of students commenting on methods, a central expectation of this task and one of the key skills, and doing so with some confidence and success.

Where students struggled, they often failed to focus on the cyclists, and in a reversal of the issue with Question 2, wrote about the drivers rather than the cyclists. Clearly the two are intertwined in both sources, but for the students' comments and understanding to be judged 'clear' and rewarded in Level 3, they need to relate directly, not indirectly, to the focus of the question. It is possible that some students were simply repeating the same comments they had already made in Question 2 in their response to Question 4. It cannot be said too frequently that the focus of these two tasks will always be different and discrete, and it serves students very badly to repeat the content of their Question 2 response in a later question, no matter how tempting it might appear to do so. The focus and the key skills are very different and they will not benefit in any way from this strategy.

### In summary

- Even the simplest response to Question 4 is rewarded so it is better to try than leave it blank
- Students need to respond directly to the focus of the task and not repeat content from Question 2
- The focus on similar perspectives appeared to encourage more widespread comparison of methods

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## Question 5

The task was intended to invite students to explore issues around the theme of transport, linking directly to the theme of the reading sources. The letter form was picked up by almost all students, and there were varying degrees of formality in the layout of the addresses, dates and salutations. Whilst there was no particular requirement for the layout to be presented in a specific way, it gave students the opportunity to demonstrate some structural features and to establish an appropriate register for the relatively formal audience of the Minister for Transport as they began writing.

With the exception of the few students who misread the statement and wrote instead about banning cats in city centres, the vast majority of students appeared to find this an accessible and engaging task. There were a roughly equal number of students agreeing and disagreeing with the statement, either of which is a totally acceptable response to Question 5. There were arguments presented regarding the importance of public health and safety, a discussion of the benefits of public transport and some inspiring proposals for converting car park space in town centres once cars are banned. On the other hand, students argued forcefully that it would be inconceivable to ban the most useful invention that humanity had ever conceived, that it was inherently unfair to the elderly and the disabled, and that it was inadvisable for the Minister to alienate large swathes of the population by such autocratic decisions as banning cars.

Where students performed well on Content and Organisation, they produced coherent arguments either for or against the statement. They presented a single clear point of view, supported by a series of relevant and sequenced points, incorporating a variety of vocabulary and engaging the reader with a range of more or less successful linguistic devices. These letters were judged 'clear' in terms of their overall communication of their argument and were rewarded with marks in Level 3.

Where students were awarded marks in Level 2, this was in recognition that their central argument was unclear or muddled, often switching from one side of the argument to the other. Students who mishandled the inclusion of a counter-argument fell into this category as they often sabotaged the clarity of their own argument by flipping between sides and thus risked leaving the reader confused. Students who performed at Level 2 were often unable to vary their vocabulary and raise it to a more sophisticated level; they frequently used linguistic devices which were inappropriate for the context, although there is little evidence of this as an obstacle to achieving higher marks.

In terms of Technical Accuracy, there were some promising signs regarding punctuation which appeared to be wider in range and more precisely employed than in previous series. There was some pleasing evidence of sentence forms being more varied and being used to create effects, both of which will help the student to move from Level 2 to Level 3. There is a huge tariff of marks available for Technical Accuracy, which should mean that schools and colleges continue to invest time and effort in increasing students' technical skills, even at this relatively late stage of their English Language education.

The mean marks for both Content and Organisation and Technical Accuracy (AO5 and AO6) rose slightly in this November series and fell just beneath the boundary between Level 2 and Level 3, suggesting improvements are still being made by both centres and students in writing skills.

In summary

- The overall quality and clarity of the argument is the first judgement made by the examiner and determines the level in which the final mark for AO5 will fall
- Most students responded well to the task and a larger proportion reached Level 3 by producing a clear argument



- A counter-argument can be counter-productive when mishandled as it jeopardises the overall clarity of communication

### **Use of statistics**

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.