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Principal Examiner Feedback

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In English Language (4EA1)

Paper 01: Non-fiction Texts and Transactional
Writing

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Introduction

Following two successful November series in 2020 and 2021, the second opportunity to sit this paper is moving to November and this was the final January series for 4EA1 01. The examination paper covered in this report is Unit 1: Non-fiction and Transactional Writing which is sat by all candidates.

The paper is organised into two parts.

Section A, worth a total of 45 marks, tests reading skills and is based on an unseen passage and a text from the International GCSE English Anthology with a total word count across the two extracts of approximately 2000 words. In this series, the unseen extract was adapted from *Featherhood*, a memoir in which the writer, Charlie Gilmour, describes his experience of looking after a baby magpie. The Anthology text was the extract from *H is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald in which she describes meeting for the first time the goshawk she adopts after the death of her father. Candidates are advised to spend about 1 hour and 30 minutes on this section.

Section B, also worth a total of 45 marks, offers candidates a choice of two transactional writing tasks. A particular form will always be specified and for this series the two tasks were to write a 'Letter to teenagers of the future' or a speech giving views on the statement 'Do celebrities make the best role models?' Candidates are advised to spend about 45 minutes on this section.

The paper was well received with examiners commenting on how the unseen text matched well with the Anthology text, was accessible to students of all abilities and provided ample material for the comparison question. It was clear that many candidates engaged fully with both texts and responded with interest and enthusiasm.

There was evidence that, on the whole, candidates had been well-taught for the examination, with most of them attempting every question, but they should be reminded to read all the printed instructions on the examination paper very carefully and follow them precisely. They should also be aware of the Assessment Objectives that relate to each question.

Section A

Questions 1-3 are based on the unseen extract and are all assessed for **AO1**: Read and understand a variety of texts, selecting and interpreting information, ideas and perspectives.

Question 1

This question, which tests the skills of selection and retrieval, is intended to serve as a straightforward way into the paper and the vast majority of candidates were able to select two apt words or phrases that tell the reader what animals are in the area. There were a number of possible points on the mark scheme; all were chosen but the first two points ('pitbull dogs' and 'rats') were those mostly commonly made.

The given line references for the question were 8-11 and hardly any candidates selected words or phrases from outside of these lines.

A very few candidates simply copied out the whole of the given lines and could not be awarded any marks as no selection of relevant material had been made. It is important to remember that single words or short phrases are all that is required to gain the marks. There is no need for any comment on, or explanation of, the quotations chosen.

Question 2

This is a 4-mark question that requires candidates to interpret information, ideas and perspectives. For this examination they were asked to look at lines 52-62 and describe the writer's thoughts and actions. Examiners noted that most candidates knew what was required and were able to identify the relevant information in the text. There was a good range of possible points that could be made and many candidates achieved full marks; in particular they commented on the way in which the writer looks at the bird and often linked it to the way in which the bird looks back at him, the fact that he cares for the bird and that this leaves him extremely tired. Some candidates interpreted 'dance to the magpie's tune' literally and did not understand its metaphorical meaning.

Candidates need to follow the instruction '**In your own words**' and examiners did feel that a number were struggling to do so with some candidates making only minor adaptations to the text; this was where marks were most commonly lost. It is not sufficient just to alter a verb ending or a pronoun and copying out large parts of the text is unlikely to lead to marks being awarded.

Examiners reported that the most successful approach employed by candidates was to make four clear and distinct points. However, it is important to remember that the question asks candidates to 'describe' and therefore, although it is not necessary to write at length, it is not acceptable to simply list very brief points. The response should be written in full and complete sentences that clearly show understanding and secure interpretation. For example a statement such as 'The writer is utterly exhausted' uses words from the text, is brief and does not explain the exhaustion so is unlikely to gain a mark. A better way to make the point would be to say: 'The writer's whole life is devoted to looking after the magpie which wears him out.'

A few candidates did not achieve full marks because they provided an overview of the whole extract and did not focus on the question or the given line references.

Question 3

This is the final AO1 question; it is worth 5 marks and, like Question 2, requires candidates to show their understanding of the text by selecting and interpreting ideas, information and perspectives. For this examination, they were asked to explain what we learn about the magpie using lines 63-74.

In Question 3, candidates are told that they 'may support' their points 'with **brief** quotations' and many did so to good effect. Examiners reported that most candidates

achieved at least 3 marks, with many achieving the full 5 marks. Successful candidates often worked methodically through the set section of the text identifying key points; the most commonly-made points were the fact that the bird was growing in size, and that it was lively. Other popular points were that it was curious as it liked to investigate its surroundings and that it was now looking attractive. Although examiners noted that fewer candidates than in previous series made reference to ideas outside of the specified lines, a number referred to the magpie's intelligence here.

Many candidates adopted the very successful approach of making five clear points, sometimes set out separately on the page, written in full and complete sentences and supported by relevant brief quotations. Some relied on integrated quotations to make a point but explanations are needed to act as evidence of understanding and quotations should only be used to support these points. For example 'We learn that the magpie 'scrabbles energetically' simply uses the quotation to try and make the point but 'We learn that the magpie moves in a lively way as we are told that it 'scrabbles energetically' offers some interpretation and shows understanding.

There is no need for comments on the language used in the quotations, but examiners noted that a small number of candidates spent time on analysis of language and structure, an AO2 requirement, for which they could not here be credited and which may have led to a disproportionate amount of time being spent on the question.

The best answers used a good balance of short quotation and some interpretation, paid attention to how many marks the question is worth and made five clear and discrete points.

Question 4

This question is on Text Two, the Anthology text, and is assessed for **AO2**: Understand and analyse how writers use linguistic and structural devices to achieve their effects. It is therefore a more challenging and discriminatory question and is worth 12 marks divided over five levels.

In this examination, candidates were asked how the writer, Helen Macdonald, uses language and structure in the extract from *H is for Hawk* to present the two birds.

This piece contains a very wide range of features of language and structure as exemplified in the mark scheme, but examiners were advised that these are just examples of possible points that could be made and instructed that they must reward any valid points that candidates make that are securely rooted in the text. There does not need to be an equal number of points on language and structure, but both should be addressed as, indeed, they were by nearly all candidates. It was evident to examiners that most candidates had a secure knowledge of this text and could approach the question with confidence but there were certainly a few who did not seem very familiar with it and so found the question particularly challenging.

Examiners commented that the majority of responses offered at the least some

understanding of the text. At the lower levels, candidates either identified features of language (and sometimes structure) but offered little explanation of their effect or described and made general comments on the text. At times there was limited focus on the question with some only writing about the first bird or making just a passing reference to the second. At this level, some candidates offered a straightforward narrative account of the text with vague observations such as 'the writer used short sentences for impact'. For those that did comment on the second bird, a common textual reference was the likening of its exit from the box to 'a Victorian melodrama' but, although some were aware of what this connoted, a number of candidates struggled to explain the analogy successfully with one commenting that this showed the bird was 'boring and lifeless with no interesting attributes'.

Mid-level candidates tended to work through the text, made a sound range of points and selected apt textual references for support, but often did not move on to analyse closely the impact or connotations of individual words and phrases or fully consider the effect of the structural features. Many candidates looked at the use of onomatopoeia; 'thump' was the most commonly used quotation but other examples such as 'whirring' and 'clatter' were largely overlooked. The various descriptions of the first bird were considered, with stronger responses examining the idea of 'gold' conveying how precious the bird could be. Although spelling is not assessed in this question, examiners noted that 'angel', a word in the text, was frequently misspelled as 'angle'.

The most successful responses engaged with the text with real enthusiasm, delving into the effects of semantic fields for example the use of 'drenched'/'flooded'/'irrigated' and exploring how the sibilance in 'syrupy slow' slowed down pace emphasising how time had lengthened for the narrator. Examiners noted that where candidates performed particularly well, they showed real insight when comparing the ways in which the birds were presented. At this level, candidates were discriminating in their use of quotations, linking different parts of the text.

Some candidates tended to spend too long on unnecessary introductions and conclusions that simply repeated the points already made; the focus should be on making a range of relevant points, not simply reiteration. There were also some candidates who referred to the italicised introduction in their answer or to knowledge they have of the author which is not included in the extract, writing at some length about the death of the writer's father and her feelings about this; unless points are firmly linked to what is in the extract they cannot be credited.

Question 5

This question provides the only assessment in the specification of **AO3**: Explore links and connections between writers' ideas and perspectives, as well as how these are conveyed.

This question is the most demanding of those in Section A and, with 22 marks distributed between five levels, carries almost half of the total marks available for reading so it is extremely important that candidates allow sufficient time for a

developed response. Perhaps because of time constraints, there were a few candidates who did not attempt the question or who wrote very brief responses and thereby missed the opportunity to gain a significant number of marks. Careful time-management is crucial for success in this examination and candidates should factor in time to plan with care the points that they wish to make in order to ensure that they have a wide and balanced range.

Examiners recognise the challenge of the question and it was pleasing to note that nearly all candidates achieved some degree of success with one examiner noting that 'nearly all candidates were able to find aspects of the two texts to compare'. Some candidates had made a brief plan which often contributed to a more thoughtful, exploratory approach based on key elements of similarity or difference rather than an explanatory, chronological approach to the texts.

At the lower end, candidates tended to focus on obvious links between the texts such as both being about acquiring a bird, the appearance of the bird, the writers' responses to the birds and offered some narrative comment. Some candidates at this level retold the events of each text, sometimes with greater emphasis on one text (often, surprisingly, the unseen text), rather than focusing on comparison or examining the perspectives and experiences of the narrators. One examiner reported that there was some evidence of candidates adopting a pre-learned approach and that 'whilst there is merit in giving students techniques to help approach the question, it could be self-limiting as candidates were often merely pointing out where the two writers employed different techniques'.

The more successful responses focused almost immediately on comparing specific details of the extracts and looked at the writers' perspectives as well as their ideas and balanced points, confidently interweaving thoughts on both texts with exemplification and exploration of ideas. One examiner commented: 'Where candidates performed well they made thoughtful and assured comparisons and explored the nuances of the texts.' At the top level, responses included astute analysis of settings, language, structure, purpose and tone. The range of comparisons, depth of comment on both ideas and perspectives and the use of appropriate references were all discriminators.

There are different ways to approach this question, but examiners noted that the most successful responses made each point a valid and appropriate comparison with supporting references from both extracts; this led to the balance required for marks within Levels 4 and 5. Feedback from examiners suggested that use of references can still be variable. Some candidates use references within an almost entirely narrative response and offer no real comment, others select relevant quotations but then do little more than paraphrase them rather than offering any further explanation or expansion. More successful responses were able to select pertinent words within the lines being discussed, embed them effectively within their own sentences and, if looking at language features, offer some astute analysis. It is important to remember though that language and structure are only two of the possible elements that can be considered. Some candidates became side-tracked into exploring these features of each text

separately at the expense of drawing out comparisons.

One examiner observed that where candidates focused on the writers' use of language and structure, the most successful responses effectively linked these elements to the ideas and perspectives.

Section B

Candidates are required to answer just one writing task but it carries half of the total marks available for the paper and so they must ensure that they allow sufficient time to plan and organise their response.

There are two assessment objectives for writing.

- **AO4:** Communicate effectively and imaginatively, adapting form, tone and register of writing for specific purposes and audiences. (27 marks spread over five levels)
- **AO5:** Write clearly, using a range of vocabulary and sentence structures, with appropriate paragraphing and accurate spelling, grammar and punctuation. (18 marks spread over five levels)

Question 6

This question, asking candidates to write a 'Letter to teenagers of the future', elicited a range of interesting, thoughtful and self-aware responses which examiners enjoyed reading.

There were some responses where the required form was not evident and one or two candidates wrote a magazine article rather than a letter, possibly as a result of not reading the question in full, but examiners noted that the vast majority were able to write in an appropriate letter format. An understanding of the conventions of the given form, as well as an awareness of audience, helps candidates to make appropriate language choices which will lead to apt register and tone.

Candidates approached the task in different ways but generally used the bullet points to help structure a cohesive response. Less successful responses lacked clarity or were undeveloped, offered general statements about teenage issues such as 'life is stressful because we are sitting our GCSEs' and gave vague advice against social media. One examiner, however, noted that 'some candidates had a real sense of their place in history and how the future might look very different'. Higher level letters outlined present life, covered concerns ranging from cyberbullying to the pandemic and other world issues, sometimes apologised for the state of the planet and hoped that in the future things were better and brighter. They also gave more specific guidance about how to navigate the issues of teenage life with the most popular being 'put down your phone and get outside!'

Overall, there were some thoughtful and heartfelt letters demonstrating mature and concerned attitudes. As one candidate wrote: 'There will be many struggles trying to fix a planet of mess from generations back. But your greatest weapon against ending up

like us is each other. Teamwork and selflessness will triumph over any problem.'

Question 7

This task was the more popular of the two writing questions and invited candidates to write a speech giving views on the statement 'Do celebrities make the best role models?' One examiner observed that this task 'produced some really fabulous responses, showing just how perceptive young people can be when considering how they form their personalities, preferences and ambitions in life.'

Candidates generally displayed sound awareness of the requirements of a speech and many found engaging and original ways of introducing the topic rather than the traditional 'I am here today to talk to you about...'. In the lower to middle range, responses included some rather general statements such as 'For some people celebrities can look like good role models but maybe they're not a good role model to other people' but higher level responses developed and explored ideas in depth.

Some candidates suggested specific celebrity role models such as Marcus Rashford, Sir David Attenborough or Greta Thunberg who had attributes such as hard work, dedication, commitment to good causes that could be emulated, but also recognised that others may be famous for dubious reasons and so not provide good templates of behaviour and attitude. It seemed clear that there had been debate and discussion around Andrew Tate, for example. One examiner noted that 'more perceptive responses often mentioned that celebrities are not people that we know or who know us so how can they possibly be role models to us?' These candidates often went on to suggest that the best role models could be found closer to home offering personal examples of family members, teachers, coaches etc.

Stronger responses explored the nature of 'celebrity' and how this could be achieved through a range of ways, not always praiseworthy. They also considered how fame can bring drawbacks such as 'living in a goldfish bowl', the risk of being 'a victim of cancel-culture' as well as the more desirable elements such as wealth and popularity. Many candidates also looked at the concept of 'fakery', citing photoshopping, plastic surgery and photographic filters as being causes for young people developing body dysmorphia or anxiety and depression as they feel that they feel they fall short of the 'ideal' images presented by celebrities.

At the lower levels, responses tended to be either brief or rambling with no real sense of organisation, and contained errors in sentence structure and syntax that sometimes led to a lack of clarity and coherence. The best responses were ambitious in their selection of vocabulary and use of varied sentence structures, explored a wide and balanced range of ideas and made thoughtful and astute points. As one candidate wrote: 'Celebrities don't actually owe us anything; there is nothing they have to sign when they surpass a million followers or walk their first red carpet that says they have to inspire and care and understand. But some do nonetheless, and some markedly do not.'

Final feedback on the writing questions:

To achieve the highest level in AO4, writing needs to be 'perceptive', 'subtle' and 'sophisticated' and there should be a clear focus on the appropriate form. For AO5, candidates should consider the ordering of their ideas, write in clear paragraphs and aim to link them effectively. There needs to be accuracy but also a 'strategic' use of an 'extensive vocabulary' and an assured and controlled use of a range of sentence structures 'to achieve particular effects'. Candidates should not avoid using an ambitious vocabulary because they fear making spelling errors. Those who did achieve higher-level marks frequently opened their piece with an intriguing question, a powerful statement or a short sentence and proceeded to explore and develop their ideas with fluency, clarity and enthusiasm. Candidates are advised that colloquialisms such as 'gonna' and 'wanna' should only be employed in direct speech. They should also avoid writing solely in upper case as this does not allow them to demonstrate an awareness of the correct use of capital letters.

Candidates must ensure that they do not rush the writing task, allowing time both to plan and to proof-read as unforced errors in grammar and spelling can lead to lower marks. Examiners commented that where there was evidence of planning, this often led to a clear and effective structure and greater textual cohesion and accuracy.

Handwriting was raised as a cause for concern in some instances by examiners; it is essential that candidates try their best to ensure legibility and are supported by their centres to do so.

Concluding advice

Candidates should:

- be provided with plenty of opportunities to practise reading and responding to unseen passages under timed conditions
- be aware of the different assessment objectives to ensure that they focus their answers specifically on the different question requirements
- highlight the relevant lines for Questions 1-3 in the Extracts Booklet
- use the number of marks available for Questions 2 and 3 to suggest how many clear and discrete points they should make
- not spend time analysing language in answers to Questions 1, 2 or 3
- answer Question 2, as far as possible, in their own words and aim to offer some interpretation
- provide interpretation of the text in Question 3 by not simply relying on quotations to make the points without comment
- underline or highlight the key words of Question 4 so that answers are appropriately focused
- consider the effects of language and structure features within the context of the given extract in Question 4 rather than offering generic explanations
- select appropriate references from the whole extract that fully support points made in answer to Question 4

- make a range of comparative points in Question 5 and link elements such as content, theme, tone, purpose, narrative voice, language; points should be balanced across both texts
- points in Question 5 should be supported with relevant quotations or close textual references; these should be selected carefully and some exploration of them should be attempted
- take time to make a brief plan for the higher tariff questions (5 and 6 or 7)
- give careful consideration to the given form and audience for the writing task and use these to inform register and tone
- try to use a wide vocabulary and varied sentence structures
- think carefully about how to engage the reader right at the start and consider how to end effectively
- aim for a structured, cohesive and complete piece of writing
- allow time to proof-read their writing response in order to achieve the highest possible degree of accuracy
- read all instructions carefully
- attempt every question
- take great care with handwriting.

