

O Level

English Language

Session: 1984 June
Type: Report
Code: 1100

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

ORDINARY LEVEL

Subject 1100

Paper 1100/1: Comments on Papers

Examiners found a pleasant selection of topics to mark and many candidates seemed to enjoy writing their answers.

1. *"I told you so"*. This topic was popular, especially with the better and the weaker candidates. Answers were mainly in narrative form and almost always using the title as a concluding line. Many were able to personalise their accounts by writing from within their own experience.

2. *"Homesickness"*. Writing on this subject was generally dull and undistinguished, even if honest, with long descriptions of journeys and arrivals. Only the better candidates were able to explore the feelings accompanying the homesickness; a number of weaker candidates interpreted the title as "being ill at home". The question was quite popular.

3. *"Can violence ever settle arguments?"* This topic, although quite popular, proved to be difficult for the candidates who, on the whole, were unable to marshal ideas and present a cogently argued case. Frequently answers were offered in abstract terms, unsupported by examples. There were some good personal accounts of feelings and actions experienced by themselves and a few excellent, well-informed ones on international situations.

4. *"It wasn't really Mr. Robinson's fault"* This was a popular question which produced a wide range of answers. Some of the best were well-planned, amusing, witty and avoided "gilding the lily"; others were dreary catalogues of ill-conceived and unlikely misadventure. A significant number of pupils obviously derive pleasure from the discomfiture of their teachers. Mr. Robinson must exist in some guise in almost every school, and the question was well within the experience of pupils who are always at their weakest when approaching the unknown.

5. *"A person with a great sense of humour"*. There were relatively few answers on this topic but those seen displayed a wide range of competence. Some candidates showed sensitivity, an ability to plan and a sound command of language. At the other end of the scale, a number of candidates seemed incapable of distinguishing between "a person with a good sense of humour" and "a funny person".

6. *"Imagine that you were present at an important event"* This was a reasonably popular question with many answers set in the days of the '39-'45 war. One frequently encountered here the sort of solecisms and anachronisms which arise from inadequate knowledge. Answers also covered such areas as the World Cup 1966, the Queen's coronation, the execution of Charles I and, nearer to home, accounts of Mother's wedding day.

7. *"Has life been improved by the widespread use of television?"* The arguments on this topic were predictable: generally T.V. does, according to the candidates, improve life. One perceptive writer pointed out that T.V. and video could make teachers lazy. The question was a popular one, was answered with enthusiasm and the material was fairly well rehearsed.

8. *"A holiday resort in bad weather"*. This was a popular topic, frequently well done with evocative writing about the sea, storms and distress. A few candidates concentrated on how people react to bad weather and gave first-hand accounts of their own experiences. Caravan sites were often used as equivalent to holiday resorts and were accepted as relevant.

Paper 1100/3

Examiners felt that there was a sufficient variety of questions to enable candidates to select the style of writing at which they were most proficient.

1. *"The shop on the corner"*. This was perhaps the most productive title on either paper. Essays were nostalgic, descriptive, atmospheric, mysterious and occasionally humorous. The shop was even used as a front for sinister activities. Most answers were pleasant to read and were easily followed even when poorly expressed.

2. *"The return"*. This was a popular topic with would-be short story writers who produced a great quantity of rambling narrative. Often the balance was poor, with two parts describing the going and one describing the return. Stories were derived from many sources including living abroad, outer space, fighting in the army, shipwreck, imprisonment, holidays and even re-incarnation.

3. *"How do you relax when you are tired, nervous or anxious?"*. This was not a popular question and was tackled by few candidates of ability. Perhaps young people were unprepared to admit to the need for relaxation. Those who attempted to cover exhaustively the three epithets in the title often became muddled and repetitive. Remedies varied from listening to pop music to smoking or drinking, from taking baths to fishing. One student relaxed by reading with cucumber slices on her eyelids. To use this essay as a vehicle for a favourite hobby distorts the nature of the topic.

4. *"Write about someone you admire who does a difficult job."* This topic produced genuine enthusiasm from the very few who wrote about it. Mrs. Thatcher and the police were popular choices, as were the candidates' own parents. Often the accounts were workmanlike and informative, well-structured and sympathetic. One amusing account was written by a boy who had most admiration for himself.

5. *"Grandparents"*. This was the most successful stimulus on the two papers. It was popular with all ability levels. Never dull, often loving, mature, occasionally cruel, these essays generally discussed character and daily routine, but an encouraging number of candidates chose a more ambitious exploration of the relationship between grandparent and child. They wrote with detachment, amused tolerance and sometimes disconcerting perception. There was the opportunity to write at a personal level; few stereotypes emerged.

6. *"The day Dad decided to do it himself"*. Most of these numerous efforts concerned, as expected, home decorating and maintenance, usually described in a narrative, would-be humorous fashion, where Dad, hoping for an unlikely economy, found himself paying for more than had been saved. Candidates were striving for humour and more often than elsewhere they succeeded in producing the desired effect.

7. *"Are experiments on live animals ever justified?"* This was a very popular question since it is a subject on which many teenagers feel strongly. Essays were

often tedious to read not so much because of the dearth of accurate information as because of an inability to organise the material they had.

8. *The postcard.* The danger appears to be that with so much detail in the picture almost any story can be relevant. We read about a girl pursued by an ardent admirer into a lake; coalmines in the hills in the background; an intrepid explorer up the Amazon thinking nostalgically of home (why not 'The return?'); A. J. Sisley writing his autobiography. One of the best essays written in this year's examination was on this question.

Comments on Language.

A report for schools must seem to teachers an ungracious list of the failings of their weaker candidates with no tribute to the achievements of their more successful ones. Let it be said at the beginning, therefore, that there were many excellent answers to most of the topics, showing a mature grasp of language, a felicitous vocabulary, an ability to create atmosphere and character and a capacity for cogent argument. One school was singled out for comment by the examiner as exemplifying the best standards in English. The imaginative and lively writing explored the use of appropriate, colourful imagery and yet maintained fluent, easy communication entirely free from mechanical errors. Unfortunately it is not the able candidate who needs a report of this nature, which is designed to help teachers by pointing out the main weaknesses throughout the country.

All too often essays had very limited structures, indifferent spelling, weak vocabulary and a lack of control over images. On the other hand, beneath the technical weaknesses one can detect that pupils are willing to write easily and freely about themselves and things they have experienced.

Paragraphing

Many candidates wrote in short, even single sentence, paragraphs, while others managed a brief introductory paragraph followed by an unbroken two page 'gallop'. Even where paragraphs visually appeared to be of reasonable length, they were lacking in cohesion. Links, except in good scripts, were not strong and often tended to rely on simple devices like 'then' or 'next'. Schools may profitably consider paragraphing more than it appears some do.

Structures

Only better candidates produced a rich or even moderately affluent variety and mix of simple, compound and complex sentences. The general run of essays displayed an excess of compounds with but an occasional foray into complexity. All too often, simple subject-verb-object patterns persisted and openings were repetitive. Regrettably verbless sentences appeared when no particular effect was being sought. Even more regrettably many candidates were unable to differentiate a sentence from a sequence of sentences by using full stops rather than commas. 'This' for 'which' still bedevils the style of too many candidates.

Punctuation

The use of commas for full stops has been noted above. The apostrophe is often entirely omitted, but is beginning to appear more startlingly anywhere, e.g. 'could'nt', 'would'nt', 'the boy's ran away', 'again'st'. Colons were rare; semi-colons were more in use and more accurately placed than in previous years.

Direct speech was not well-handled either in paragraphing or in punctuation.

There was frequent failure to use hyphens even when they were obligatory.

Spelling

Simple words are still misspelt. Homophones cause difficulties as with words

such as, 'horde', 'lightning', 'there'; 'where' and 'were' confusion appears to have increased. Fusions are multiplying. One essay within eight lines gave 'intime', 'alotof', 'infact', 'allright', 'anymore', and 'afterall'. Some phonetic spelling delayed the reader, e.g. 'dorn', 'enfrawling', 'byust', 'cayosse', 'miragolosly', 'His accomplish pointed a sworn-off shotgun', 'You made your bed and must line it'.

Agreement and Expression

Pronoun confusion persists.

Tense shifts in narrative writing were frequent.

Expressions such as "off of", "out the window", "down the pub" were prevalent.

A colloquial register was used when more formal expression would have been less obtrusive. There was much 'mucking around' and 'moaning', 'lots of', 'bits of' and, inexcusably, "you should of".

General Presentation

Intrusive capital letters seem to be regarded by some writers as a Mark of Sophistication. More irritating, because fluent reading is impeded, is the habit of hyphenating a word at the end of a line, the word being split at an entirely unacceptable point.

Finally *Advice* – (tentatively offered)

To schools (where appropriate)

- (a) Train candidates to write sentences.
- (b) Insist on correct punctuation and paragraphing if direct speech is used.
- (c) Look for a wider range of vocabulary and structure.

To candidates

- (a) Choose a title to which you can do justice.
- (b) Plan the approach.
- (c) Learn to use a full range of punctuation.
- (d) Write clearly – fudged words *are* misspellings.

Paper 1100/2

The paper met widespread approval. It produced some imaginative writing – even over-imaginative at times – but the candidates obviously responded to the narrative vein and even the weaker amongst them showed appreciation of its human interest. There was little evidence of emotional distress at the subject matter and the paper proved a good test of comprehension, producing an excellent spread of marks and separating the good candidates from the less competent very successfully.

The work of the candidates discovered the usual wide range from excellent to abysmal. The immediate and most common cause of failure stemmed from the tendency to answer something other than was asked. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the basic requirement for success in a comprehension paper is the comprehension of the questions as well as of the passage. Careful reading is essential. Better candidates read both passage and questions carefully and showed an understanding of the sequence of events. They were attentive to the mixture of the textually-supportive question and the deductive, managing a fair precision in their answers and handling the straightforward vocabulary tests with economy, and in their reports – to answer the final question – they exhibited selective ability, searching the whole range of the passage, and controlled the flash-backs of

chronological sequence with good effect. The weaker candidates dashed in without reflection and their lack of careful relation to both text and questions led too often to unfortunate results. Some often got on to the right lines only to write themselves out of the mark. Their answers to the final question exposed the confusion consequent upon careless reading and the failure to distinguish between the two visits led to patent muddle which went unrewarded.

The standard of English varied considerably but was generally at least fair. The common errors were seen in the misuse or omission of the apostrophe (Evans' or Evan's led to a theme and variation of inaccuracy), 'pilots report', 'wives death', etc., and the ubiquitous comma for the full stop. 'Pursade' and 'aquired' defeated some of the venturesome, but on the whole spelling errors were not so obtrusive, especially among those who managed to avoid a complex style, though a candidate who can write 'just a jester to see our thick is rist are' leaves room for improvement. The main stress was felt in achieving accurate punctuation.

On the credit side, candidates seemed well-drilled in the rubrics, and few forgot to leave the appropriate spaces between different parts of the answers. They also coped effectively with the length of the paper, the small number of incomplete scripts testifying to this, and legibility showed improvement.

Finally, two 'trends' need attention. A small number of candidates listed all the questions and parts of the questions done in the grid on the first page of their script and then carefully omitted to number the questions and parts as they appeared in the body of the scripts. This practice will induce confusion in the candidates. Other students appear to have been trained in summarizing to produce notes, rough draft, and then fair copy. Those who write out what are in effect three copies of the final answer make it hard not to believe that their work in the earlier questions remains unaffected.

Even candidates occasionally enjoy the Comprehension Paper. One such candidate used an entire sheet of Syndicate writing paper to send the following with his script.

For the Attention of; The Examiner

University of Cambridge

Re: English Language Paper 2 (Nos. 1100/2, 1101/2)

Dear Sir,

Thank you for setting such an interesting passage for this Ordinary Level English Language Examination. Fortunately I have just finished reading this book in my leisure time at home.

Rhys Davies has such ability to describe a scene that you can almost imagine yourself there. Indeed I can feel the chill of the birch glade at this moment whistling down my neck, or perhaps that's the broken pane of glass above me.

I'm sorry to conclude this letter in such haste but we have just been told we have five minutes left.