UNIVERSITY OF MALTA
THE MATRICULATION CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION
ADVANCED LEVEL

ENGLISH

MAY 2010

EXAMINERS’ REPORT

MATRICULATION AND SECONDARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATE
EXAMINATIONS BOARD
This year 547 candidates sat for Advanced Level English. The grade distribution, together with the percentages, is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade:</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
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<tr>
<td>Amount:</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>167</td>
<td>138</td>
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<td>5.7%</td>
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<td>25.2%</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
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A – E 397 72.6%
A – C 210 38.4%
Fail 100 18.3%

Paper One: Drama, Poetry, Poetry Criticism

William Shakespeare: King Lear or Julius Caesar

John Keats: The Odes; Isabella; Lamia; The Eve of St. Agnes; La Belle Dame Sans Merci;
Bright Star! Would I Were Steadfast As Thou Art; When I Have Fears That I May Cease
To Be; On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer.

Wilfred Owen: Anthem for Doomed Youth; Apologia pro Poemate Meo; Asleep; At a
Calvary near the Ancre; A Terre; The Chances; Conscious; The Dead-Beat; Disabled;
Dulce et Decorum Est; Exposure; Futility; Greater Love; Insensibility; Inspection; The
Last Laugh; Le Christianisme; Mental Cases; Miners; The Next War; The Parable of the
Old Man and the Young; The Send-Off; The Sentry; The Show; S.I.W; Smile, Smile,
Smile; Spring Offensive; Strange Meeting.

Elizabeth Jennings: Selected Poems

Shakespeare

An overwhelming majority of students opted to answer questions on King Lear, with only 47 candidates choosing questions on Julius Caesar. There are number of positive points that need to be spelt out below.

Those who wrote answers on King Lear generally opted for Question 1A. On the whole, students manifested a sound knowledge on the notion of Justice, with a good number of them dwelling in some depth on issues of ‘human’ and ‘divine’ justice as evidenced both in the main and in the sub-plot of the play. However, when it came to sound argumentation and articulation of ideas, a large number of students were contradictory in their statements, completely ignoring Lear’s suffering and Cordelia’s ‘unnecessary’ death. Only a handful placed their arguments within the context of Edgar’s taking over of the kingdom in the very last few lines of the play.

Very few students attempted to answer Question IB and those who did, did not fare too well. While there were those who showed confidence with regard to the different types of imagery used by Shakespeare, unfortunately these candidates did not use any illustration. There were others who just focused on one type of imagery, for instance, animal imagery, and ignored the rest. Most of the few students who answered this question devoted large parts of their essay to writing about the various images that are found in the play, without in any way connecting this to the question asked. There were also cases where students discussed the
themes of the play without in any way paying attention to the imagery. Such answers were inordinately tangential to the question set.

Generally speaking, those students who answered questions on *Julius Caesar* did quite well. Students chose almost equally between Questions 2A and 2B. With regard to Question 2A, students wrote a good analysis, not only describing the facts that led up to the conspiracy but also going into some depth into the psychological build-up that led to Brutus being persuaded to join the conspiracy. However, overall, students generally fell short of clinching the matter, as it were, completely sidestepping the issue of Brutus’s attitude towards the conspirators and the conspiracy as well as the overriding consequences of private and public revenge. There were two or three cases where candidates dwelt at some length on the nature of the conspiracy yet said next to nothing on revenge.

Those candidates who answered Question 2B manifested a firm grasp on and understanding of the characters they chose to write about. The very few who lost some marks on this question did so because they simply wrote everything they knew about the characters without relating this substantial knowledge to the question set. They left out important points that truly demonstrate Shakespeare’s profound knowledge of the human character, in all its complex and sometimes complicated psychological ramifications.

With regard to a few negative aspects related to students’ writing and presentation of their answers, the following points are relevant.

An overriding recurrent preoccupation is that of poor planning. This is largely reflected in the haphazard, sometimes random, way in which candidates jump from one theme or plot (in the case of *King Lear*) to the other in the course of their essays without any connecting idea. Generally, students then came back to the original idea at some point later on in their essay. Consequently, the essay as a whole came across as a kind of patchwork that either disconnected or else connected very uneasily.

Another important issue is that of weak expression. A good number of students showed a weak command of the English Language and this came to light in the course of their essays where sentence construction was clumsy, at times becoming even incomprehensible as a result. Strong emphasis needs to be made on syntactic and grammatical structures. Poor expression results in a weak essay even if ideas are brilliant.

A minority of students betrayed the fact that they did not know the text well, confusing the chronology and sequence of events, particularly in *King Lear*. Also, candidates proved to be generally better at narrating events in the play than at discussing them critically, again with particular reference to *King Lear*. These students relied too heavily on notes and/or sources. It was evident that a good number of the students had regurgitated material learnt off by heart, either from notes or standard critical works on the plays. There were cases when students did not even bother to try and fit all the knowledge they had memorised with the questions set.

Many candidates did not refer closely enough to the text in their essays. Students preparing for this examination need to be aware that arguments must be substantiated, supported and sustained by evidence from the text. Direct quotation is also necessary; it enhances the argument and shows that the student can think freely and intelligently under examination conditions. The best essays were those that were cogent, well-articulated and well-argued, with textual reference supporting their arguments.

The weakest essays lacked detail of any sort. They were sketchy, haphazard and badly-written. They generally relied on irrelevant material and, consequently, these essays just flew off at an impossible tangent. Again, a heavy reliance on notes and sources, and sometimes an un-reflected reproduction of them, did not do much to help the flow of the language.

One other point that needs to be stressed is that there was a tendency amongst students to use the Past Tense persistently in their essays, while others used both the Past and Present Tense indiscriminately. Spelling mistakes were also rife in quite a few cases and this is an
issue that needs to be addressed very seriously. At Advanced Level, students are expected to be able to spell correctly and to get the names of the characters right. It is not acceptable that sixth-form students are allowed to get away with incorrect spelling. Grammatical inaccuracy and weak punctuation are also problems that need to be properly tackled. Lack of agreement between subject and verb, using ‘which’ for people, wrong prepositions, total misuse and abuse of the comma, indiscriminate use of the colon and semi-colon: all these issues are serious ones that leave a marked impression on the overall structure and presentation of the essay in question.

Poetry

With regard to the Poetry questions, the large majority of the candidates sitting for the exam answered questions on Owen.

Just over 10% chose to answer Question 4A and those who did tended to resort to elaborate narrative strategies and story-telling. As a result, essays were generally out of point insofar as adherence to the question set is concerned. Question 4B was generally better dealt with, with students showing comprehensive knowledge not only of the text but also of background, structure and style. This Question was generally attempted more adeptly and sensible discussions of the relevant issues were forthcoming. Some of the essays in this regard were impressive, with full textual reference and well-pitched arguments. Having said that, students did tend to narrate stories rather than discuss the topic critically and because of this the rigour of the argument weakened considerably.

Owen’s poetry is the favourite with students and because of its subject matter students relate to it with enthusiasm and, in some cases, even panache. The downside to this is the fact that writing very passionately about it, students tended to overlook the finer aspects of poetry such as rhythm, symbolism, style and more.

Keats was chosen by approximately 16% of the students. Four or five of the essays were of outstanding quality, both in terms of language used and also with regard to concept. Critical appraisal of the ‘Negative Capability’ theory and reference to Keats’s letters enhanced these essays impressively. These students showed a maturity well beyond their years and their essays really set a benchmark for all the other essays to aspire towards. Most of these students managed to pitch their arguments in a highly critical context, sustaining their points by relevant quotation. They were also able to discuss the ‘Odes’ and the narrative poems with equal ease and confidence within the same essay. These essays were definitely the best across the three papers.

On the negative side, other essays on Keats did not manifest any firm argument and the majority of these were well-rehearsed and well-prepared reproductions that did not even relate to the question asked. It was all waffle and artificial argumentation, if it could be called that. It was clearly manifested that Keats proved to be a hard nut to crack and these students were certainly not up to the job.

Two students attempted to answer questions on Elizabeth Jennings. These essays were generally mediocre and weak, both in language and style.

Criticism: Poetry

With regard to Literary Criticism (Poetry), this year’s choice of poem for criticism was ‘Men of Terry Street’ by Douglas Dunn. This poem came across as very direct, both structurally and thematically and most students were able to deal with it intelligently, some of them even using the appropriate critical register. The students who did well in this section of the examination showed a natural aptitude for critical thinking and they could deal with confidence and honesty on aspects of structure, versification, first-person narrative, and more. They also showed that they could relate all this to theme, imagery, diction and style in their essays.
The weak essays in this section were very weak. Quite a few students allowed their imagination to roam and wander aimlessly, literally inventing stories about criminals and subterfuge and straying well beyond the text, with the consequence that their essays were disjointed, out of context and very poor. Generally speaking, these students showed a dearth of critical knowledge and a weak analytical response to poetry.

Judging Paper 1 holistically, overall, students produced slightly above-average essays. From the grammatical/syntactic point of view, there was a strong tendency for candidates to confuse tenses and spelling is also a very serious problem that needs to be addressed uncompromisingly. Also, punctuation can make or break a sentence. On a general note, students need to be constantly reminded that at this level, they are expected to perform with a certain degree of excellence in their chosen subject.

Paper 2: The Novel, Prose Criticism

The Novel

John Fowles: *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*
John Steinbeck: *Of Mice and Men*
Margaret Atwood: *The Handmaid’s Tale*
Anthony Trollope: *The Last Chronicle of Barset*

When dealing with the Novel, generally, the range of textual competence was high, demonstrating much solid work. Arguments were often backed up by extensive quotations and on a number of occasions also by references to other works and/or critics, although these references were not always sufficiently worked into the argument. In fact, in a couple of instances extra-textual references were so extensive that not enough attention was given to the discussion of the novel itself. As a result, such essays lacked cogency and structural/thematic coherence. However, all too often, candidates did not focus their knowledge on the demands of the question. There were a number of well-written, fluent essays, demonstrating broader reading, which fell into this category.

With regard to organisation, structure and grammatical competence, essays on the whole left much to be desired. Random presentation of ideas, broken syntax, confusion of tenses, poor use of possessives and punctuation, atrocious spelling especially of characters’ names: these were some of the main weaknesses in the essays, at times leading the examiners to wonder how such a candidate could have been allowed to progress in the language. Few candidates perceived the merits of a good introduction. Most wrote pithy, two-line introductions and then went headlong into the novel regardless.

The *Handmaid’s Tale*

Candidates’ response to *The Handmaid’s Tale* showed that they enjoyed the novel and most essays manifested a sound knowledge of the text. Many students also brought to bear extra-textual reading on their interpretation of the novel. While this was commendable and could raise the standard of the answer, candidates should be cautioned against using prepared notes wholesale. At times, sentences and often whole paragraphs lifted from texts such as *York Notes Advanced* found their way into the answers, very rarely to the candidates’ advantage.

There was much slipshod writing in the answers, notably in candidates’ use of names, possessives, inelegant phrasing, and vagueness over the date of the Historical Notes.

A minority chose to answer Question 1A. This question was presented in two parts; however most candidates launched into a discussion about the importance of the historical notes and conveniently forgot the more demanding second part of the question. There were several solid answers to the first part, bringing out Atwood’s main purpose in highlighting the extent to
which prejudice is still firmly entrenched in mankind’s future, despite the cosmetic improvements. Those few who considered the second part of the question did not really take into account the ironies implicit in Pleixoto’s lecture, such as his reconstruction and undermining of Offred’s narration and its consequent effect on the reader. Here, Atwood’s subtle use of irony in her language was generally overlooked and the consequent undermining and bathetic thrust was, in some cases, only superficially commented upon.

On the other hand, an overwhelming majority of students opted for Question 1B. In this case, the better candidates integrated the different strategies of power into the general thematic concerns of the novel, thus producing well-structured essays. Most, however, took the ‘list’ approach, with the consequence that the essay read like an array of strategies of power rather than a well-structured, cohesive one. This meant that, although the points could have been valid, as indeed they were in some cases, the essays lacked proper cohesion. On the whole, essays tended to be descriptive; while students showed an impressive range of reference in their writing, only a few pitched their arguments on a critical register. Almost all candidates mentioned the crucial ideas about the patriarchal society, religious hypocrisy, a lack of identity and control of language, this final point often linked with Orwell’s Newspeak. Several candidates limited the strategies of power to the regime, not perceiving that Offred herself constructs her own power to keep herself sane. While many touched upon the underlying subtext of Offred’s subversion of language, very few extended this to the way the act of narration itself becomes an act of resistance, crucially enabling her to almost manipulate her listener/reader subtly through the actual telling of the tale and thus standing up to the isolation imposed by the regime.

The French Lieutenant’s Woman

Fowles’s novel is also one which appears to be generally appreciated by candidates taking this examination, as demonstrated by many who wrote in response to Question 2A. However, the complexity of Fowles’s themes and technique can daunt candidates somewhat and this was evident in the tendency towards superficiality and narration in some of the answers. A few candidates had been exposed to the critical terminology clustering around a text such as The French Lieutenant’s Woman and used this to their advantage. Several answers also demonstrated evidence of wider reading.

There were just twenty-six candidates who answered Question 2A. Although on paper the question on Fowles’s inventiveness and originality presented itself as a ‘gift’ question, in that it allowed candidates leeway in matters of both content and approach, many had no idea what the terms ‘inventive’ and ‘original’ imply, when applied to a contemporary novel. For instance, surely using imagery and detailed description cannot be called original? Is there anything original about the love plot, choice of names to reflect character, character development itself? Yet these ideas are precisely the ones students used for their arguments on ‘inventiveness’ and ‘originality’. At times, the impression given was that candidates had no clue that plot, character, setting and conflict are the basic ingredients of any novel. Neither could the nineteenth-century setting per se be termed original and inventive. On the whole, students failed to discuss the notion of the double perspective, the interplay between the two centuries and the self-consciousness culminating in the endings that ultimately accounts for much of the originality of the work. Those candidates who showed an awareness of this and perceived which chapters to focus on, namely, Chapters 13, 14, 55, 60 and 61, instead of telling the story, wrote the better essays.

Forty-eight students answered Question 2B. The theme of evolution was extremely straightforward and should not have proved to be very troublesome to candidates. Most focused their answer entirely on Charles, presenting a blow-by-blow account of how he changes throughout the novel, with the weaker candidates falling into the narrative trap, especially in discussing the endings where there was little consideration of what the choice of endings implied about Fowles’s own philosophy. The better essays placed Charles within the wider context of existentialism and the social changes of the time. Very few candidates extended their discussion beyond characterisation and perceived that the evolution of Charles is paralleled by the narrative technique itself; indeed, the struggle to evolve within the novel also takes place on the level of the narrative, in the juxtaposition of its traditional and meta-
fictional elements. The more insightful candidates also commented on the demands such a novel makes on the reader.

Of Mice and Men

Although Of Mice and Men attracted the largest number of answers, as it indeed has done over the past few years, these were the weakest among the whole lot. The questions set required candidates to think their points through but most merely trotted out the usual stock answers on the fall and consequent disillusionment of the American Dream and went through a list of weak characters, often lapsing into mere narration. Many also referred to Steinbeck’s “non-teleological” philosophy, sometimes giving a definition of its meaning, but failing to tie this up with their answer. The cyclical pattern of the novel’s structure, reflected in the repetition of settings, imagery and dialogue, was mentioned by several candidates; however very few commented on its importance and significance within the structural and thematic paradigm set up by the novel itself.

More than half the student population taking the examination answered Question 3A. The key words in this question were “humanity” and “inhuman odds” but most candidates latched on to the word “struggle” in the question, and wrote essays on victimisation and dreams, while cataloguing the struggle each character goes through in order to survive, ideas which are tangentially relevant, but not sufficiently focused. The words “humanity” and “inhuman odds” were bandied about in the answers, but very few candidates considered their implications. The question clearly was not about inhuman actions, such as bullying or killing, which is what most took “humanity” – or “inhumanity” – to refer to. Evidence that candidates’ interpretation was limited were ridiculous assertions such as Curl ey’s wife showing her humanity by flirting and victimising Crooks; Crooks by bullying Lennie; Lennie by crushing Curley’s hand and of course, George by killing Lennie. Very few candidates bothered to reflect on what the term “humanity” could imply. For instance, most mentioned the killing of Lennie but almost no-one considered why such a clearly inhuman action reveals the ‘compassion’ of George for Lennie, emphasised by the different reactions of Curley, Carlson and Slim. The dream was obviously mentioned by practically all candidates, but few went beyond the obvious that the dream gives hope, which is crushed by the killing of Lennie. The bonds of friendship cemented by the dream would have been more relevant. Instead, many candidates gave lists of the differences between George and Lennie, as described by Steinbeck at the start of the novel, and the comparisons of Lennie to animals without making this relevant to the question (for instance, the implications this has for destiny). Candidates would have been better off considering how somebody like George allowed himself to be saddled with someone like Lennie, thereby highlighting the “humanity” idea implied by the question. Characters like Carlson, Curley and their opposite, Slim, were also relevant, although they rarely featured in the discussion.

Few candidates understood the term “inhuman odds”. Time and again, Crooks, Candy and Lennie were all regarded as “inhuman odds”, with absurd sentences like “Lennie is George’s inhuman odd” and “Curley’s wife is Lennie’s inhuman odd”. Relevant points could have been the social conditions the men were up against (generally mentioned only in passing) and crucially, the overpowering force of destiny emphasized by the cyclic narrative framework, the technique (not theme, as some called it) of foreshadowing and the imagery. All too few candidates considered the ways Steinbeck pits the characters against a relentless destiny, the true import of “inhuman odds”. Another pertinent reference was to Burns’ poem; however, once again, most candidates merely made the connection without considering the wider implications of this intertextual reference and significance.

Students who answered Question 3B generally failed to understand the notions of ‘time and place’. As implied by the question, there were two main interpretations to “time and place”: the wider context of America during the Great Depression and the actual locations/three-day structure of the novel. Candidates usually focused on either one or the other, with a few writing about both. Both interpretations of the terms as set by the question were accepted by the examiners. However, as with question 3A, very few delved into the implications suggested by time and place. Candidates regaled examiners with chunks of historical detail about the American Depression, not always making firm links to the novel. Consequently,
such answers went off at a tangent without any visible or less visible connections to the question set.

Although the examiners accepted different approaches to the idea of “time and place”, some candidates took a very narrow view and wrote mostly narrative essays on the ways characters seem to find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. Others mentioned the way the setting is enhanced by the imagery, which in itself is relevant, but then failed to carry this through and merely listed different examples of, for instance, references to light and darkness when they should have emphasised their symbolic, metaphorical importance.

Disappointingly, although several referred to the play-like, dramatic, structure of the novel — indeed at times it was referred to as a play, not novel — no one went further to discuss its tragic elements, ideas which could have been triggered by the words “time and place”, for instance, the ways the tight time-frame, limited settings and single-minded plot, almost Aristotelian in concept, all contribute to the relentless movement towards the climax and enhance its inevitability.

In conclusion, the percentage of answers that satisfied the examiners was rather low. Although it was amply evident that most candidates had studied their texts well, many did not think beyond the obvious and tended to be descriptive in their answers instead of displaying the critical insight, which is crucial at this level.

Four students attempted the questions on Anthony Trollope’s *The Last Chronicle of Barset*. One of them answered Question 4A and the response to this was perceptive, insightful and critical, betraying a maturity beyond the age of a sixth-form student. The other three essays were weak on both the linguistic and the structural front.

**Criticism: Prose**

The passage selected was accessible and had minimal challenges at vocabulary level. It was rich in imagery and provided candidates with the opportunity to exploit their knowledge of literary terms. Generally, candidates understood the passage at comprehension level and mis-readings were minimal. Candidates caught on to the layers of abundant imagery which dominated the text.

Multiple levels of understanding were evident in the essays and these varied from the focus on the overall function of the text to a focus on words lifted out of context. For instance, some candidates perceived the colour ‘white’ as a symbol of purity and others qualified it as a non-heat absorbent colour, thus ignoring ‘staring’ which modified the meaning of ‘white’ in the phrase ‘staring white houses’. In both cases, candidates grouped words and lifted them out of context assuming they could make inferences not directly related to the text.

Disappointingly, one fundamental shortcoming in the candidates’ reading of the text was that they were frequently confused by the temporal and spatial deixis adopted in this passage (for instance, ‘before or since’, ‘within’ and ‘without’). The initial reference to location and time, ‘Thirty years ago, Marsellies lay burning in the sun, one day’, created some confusion as candidates were unable to conceive that the ‘one day’ was any day in the past which occurred thirty years ago. Quite a number of inferences were made to solve what seemed to be puzzling, and this was made more confusing by the two sentences that followed: ‘A blazing sun…become universal there’.

Rightly so, candidates paid attention to contrasts and repetition, however their observations did not always move beyond these literary deviations and failed to engage in critical commentary. They often became trapped in the repetition of the intense heat, which dominated the text. Unfortunately, such a shortcoming led to either extended summarising or paraphrasing. This was especially apparent when candidates followed the text linearly.

Finally, one needs to note that possessing a wide repertoire of literary terms alone is not sufficient to present a well-developed critical commentary of a prose passage. Often, this approach hindered the opportunity to develop a cogent and coherent literary appreciation.
With regard to language use, a good number of candidates prepared an excellent critical commentary and showed they possessed not only linguistic proficiency but also well-honed critical skills. As in past reports, the examiners have always reiterated and highlighted that spelling, syntax, use of expression, coherence and cohesion at sentence and paragraph level are a priority when preparing all essays at this level.

Some of the candidates’ introductions to the essays did not offer a brief overview of the points to be discussed in the essay and these appeared as a collection of unrelated abrupt starts. Furthermore, paragraphs were often not presented as a structured sequence of arguments developed and sustained. On the other hand, surprisingly, the majority of the conclusions were dominated by a sudden compulsion to comment critically. In fact, it was in these instances that candidates engaged in critical commentary offering an overall appreciation of the literary passage.

Looking at Paper 2 holistically, generally, candidates are demonstrating a commendable attitude that shows them seeking critical sources for their essays. The amount of knowledge of text shown in these essays is generous and, in some cases, impressive. The major obstacle to writing critically is mainly threefold: (1) the difficulty of expressing knowledge in grammatically and syntactically correct English, and not substantiating this with textual reference (2) relating the knowledge of text to the question asked, and (3) using knowledge to pitch arguments at the appropriate register and helping students engage critically with the text. With regard to the Literary Criticism component of the Paper, although it is encouraging and commendable that students are showing good knowledge of literary terms and techniques, they should master a more critical approach to a prose text and should also develop a more cohesive formal approach towards their writing.

**Paper 3: Language Essay, Comprehension, Linguistics**

**Language Essay**

The most popular titles were the discursive text type. Options (a), (c), (g) and (h) provided candidates with a varied list of topics and some of the candidates performed exceptionally well in their exposition of knowledge related to the environment, technology and the more specific topic of animal testing.

Generally, candidates showed a positive disposition towards topics which feature in current debates, as was evident in their reaction to environmental issues and technology (options (a) and (h)). Some candidates prepared mature and well-focused responses to these. Regrettably, this was not the pattern across the board since linguistic proficiency persistently failed even with those who seemed familiar with the topic.

One cannot avoid mentioning the discrete items which contributed towards a poor performance: for instance, subject-verb agreement; tense and aspect; relative pronouns, spelling, etc. Additionally, there were problems also at the level of coherence and cohesion. A case in point is the erratic use of paragraphing; candidates seemed to treat paragraphs as ‘breaks’ from an otherwise lengthy paragraph. At this level, candidates are expected to master organisational skills which allow them to construct clearly-focused paragraphs which are not only connected through conjuncts but also thematically.

Thematic relevance in paragraph development is directly linked to the focus of the essay title. Consequently, if either one is weakly managed, the other suffers. This was particularly evident when candidates ignored parts of the title’s focus. For instance, in options (b) and (h), some candidates responded to the first or the latter part of the statement: in (b) consumer society and in (h) Technology, thus ignoring the second part. Furthermore, a few candidates who opted for (d) and (f) misunderstood part of the title assuming that (d) is an essay on dreams or confused one expression with another one close in meaning.
Below is a more specific illustration with regard to students’ performance in the different essays chosen:

(a) **Escapism**

A good number of candidates selected this title and their approach varied between narrative and discursive. Some of the discursive essays were either informative through their classification of the different forms of escapism or else philosophical. All of these approaches had an interesting viewpoint of the topic. On a rather negative note, a substantial number of candidates failed to address the ‘-ism’ ending of Escapism and resorted to writing stories about a physical escape, such as a prison escape. This resulted in a reductive approach to what could otherwise have been a broad-ranging topic.

(b) **The consumer society and the future of planet Earth.**

This proved to be a popular title and it presented the stronger candidates with the opportunity to excel both in the quality of the content and organisation. These could rely on an extensive repertoire of terminology relevant to the topic and they were cogent in their discussions. Unfortunately, the arguments offered by less proficient candidates were often repetitive and simplistic.

(c) **If I were President for a day…**

Moderately popular, but with the exception of a few good essays, candidates often presented a far too ambitious programme of Joycean/Odyssean proportions for a single day. In fact, they reduced their essay to a schedule of activities with minimal expansion on the significance of each one. However, the main concern was with the inaccurate use of the conditional form (especially the second conditional).

(d) ‘**All the things one has forgotten scream for help in dreams.**’ Discuss.

This title posed a slight problem as the majority of the candidates failed to grasp the concept of the expression ‘scream for help in dreams’ and the notion of repression. Many wrote an essay about dreams and gave a list of examples of the different types of dreams. Those who attempted a different approach seemed undecided about which arguments to present and tended to become repetitive. There were a few candidates who treated it as a narrative, despite the title which clearly stated ‘discuss’.

(e) **Is it true to say that today the punishment does not always fit the crime?**

This title was not as popular as the preceding ones but was still selected by a good number of candidates. Unfortunately, not many were successful and the word ‘today’ was ignored. There were candidates who attempted to argue both ways but these essays generally became incoherent. In fact, they seemed uncertain about their arguments and often ran out of ideas. With the exception of the very few, it seems that the candidates who selected this title were not well informed and only possessed a vague idea of what would be considered as morally correct or not.

(f) **Action is the real measure of intelligence.**

Apart from being the least popular choice, many candidates were focused on the idiom: ‘action speaks louder than words’. Unfortunately, even though this interpretation could have helped, very few directed their attention to the expression ‘measure of intelligence’.
(g) ‘Animal testing is always wrong.’ Discuss.

Significantly popular and astonishingly controversial, this title brought out a balance between the passionately-driven candidates and the more logical and rational ones. Whichever direction their arguments took, they were often well-presented, cogent and coherent. They adopted the appropriate style and tone. These essays ranged from the fairly good to the excellent.


This title was also very popular and the arguments were varied, often informed and pitched to the appropriate register. There were some excellent essays which revealed that candidates are capable of debating controversial issues and provide intelligent and mature arguments. However, such a statement is not applicable across the board. There were some very poor essays which revealed that an argumentative essay requires certain background knowledge about the topic in focus as well as a matching level of proficiency. In fact, out of the four most popular titles, this one revealed the poorest level of writing skills.

Comprehension

The performances in the comprehension part of this year’s language section have been, to say the least, disappointing. A comparison with the responses evidenced last year highlights elements such as lack of specificity, statements of the obvious, a general disregard for depth and a sometimes downright ludicrous misreading of the text, including the unintentionally humorous (and, it should be said, frequent) allusion to Jules Verne’s famed novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, which is mentioned in the comprehension extract, as a cinematic masterpiece, the former even sometimes being confused with an actual recent film referred to later in the passage.

The major problem encountered seems to have been the tendency to rush through the text, without earmarking the sections which needed to be perused for certain answers. Even the second question, (b), the one requiring the most straightforward answer, drew a surprising plethora of widely-varying responses, some replies even differing in terms of the actual percentages quoted in the passage regarding the areas of the earth covered by land and water.

It was one of the questions which necessitated scouting for individual particularities. Unfortunately, a good number of the answers did not deliver the detail that was expected here. The better answers tended to partly treat the passage as if it were a criticism extract, focusing on sights, sounds and the general atmosphere, accurately painting contrasting scenes between the worlds above and below the surface of the sea. More superficial replies merely concerned themselves with quoting from the passage, sometimes excessively so, or paraphrasing the actual wording used in the question!

The third question was undoubtedly the one which invited the greatest amount of basic rewording. Sadly, this was only too often evinced amongst the replies, without any reflection or evaluation of the information being offered as a response, not to mention the recurring downright ‘plagiarism’ of the actual words used in the text. Although students appeared to have performed most poorly in their attempts to answer this question, as well as the summary, as will be noted further on, a few replies were noteworthy in their efforts to isolate aspects of both ocean descent and space flight and expand the implications of the information given in the passage.

Question (d) elicited mostly adequate responses – students seemed to sufficiently grasp the gist of what was asked of them, especially in terms of the fact that Verne’s vision of the ocean was born of flights of fancy, rather than as a result of solid scientific facts. Some answers went completely awry in that they mistook figures of speech and descriptive tools employed to portray scenes vividly literally, such as, for instance, pointing out that one of Verne’s missteps in his fiction was to situate an alpine range underwater! One of the more seriously
embarrassing mishaps here, however, was the fact that some students could not distinguish between the author of the extract himself and the venerable Verne.

In terms of the vocabulary segment of the comprehension, some words seemed to pose greater challenges for students than others. I am thinking, here, of the word “advocates” in particular, which was repeatedly taken out of context by one student after another and defined, very predictably, either as lawyers or supporters of a theory. Most students correctly understood “recede”, “corrosive” and “alluring”, or at least gained half a mark in that they endeavoured to explain these terms accurately enough. “Impeccable” was also comprehended in the main. The other words which students seemed to find mostly difficulty with were “forays” and “levity”. “Implode” was guessed due to its closeness to its converse in outward movement.

Finally, the summarising efforts of this year’s candidates fell rather short of impressive, in that they exhibited the tendency to regurgitate the barest surface of the arguments put forward for unmanned oceanography, continually citing, for instance, the points of less discomfort and lack of sickness to be experienced as a direct result of the adoption of this form of abyssal exploration. Other aspects, such as the diminished risk of actual fatalities and the unlikelihood of humans ever setting foot on the ocean floor, were either omitted or simply glossed over. Some students even went completely out of point in that they summed up the history of methods of oceanic exploration, without so much as a mention of arguments in favour of or contra unmanned ocean mapping. On the brighter side of things, however, the more perceptive students nodded towards the anticipation of improved results yielded by amelioration in the technology used to spearhead forthcoming oceanic research.

All in all, I find that the range of responses in the Comprehension section displayed by this year’s candidates were, to a degree, unsatisfactory due to the lack of care taken to extract the specific points or details stipulated by the questions. It is, indeed, true to state that, while the text was amply accessible in terms of its diction, the subject was, in all likelihood, foreign to most students, and the questions demanding; however, at this level it is expected that students put in the effort to incorporate the specifics involved in each answer while simultaneously managing the time constraints imposed upon them in an examination of this nature.

**Linguistics**

A small number of candidates read their chosen essay question carefully and made very good attempts to relate their knowledge of linguistics to the topic at hand. Particularly successful candidates also illustrated their answers both with relevant anecdotal experience of language usage and well-sourced quotes and examples from the set texts. In many cases, this lucid and intelligent approach to answering exam questions was also supported by the candidates’ own firm grasp of English language usage and idiom.

Conversely, a rather larger number of candidates still, and despite previous reports’ advice to the contrary, provided pre-prepared essays which bore little or no relation whatsoever to the chosen examination question. In particular, with reference to question (c), less successful candidates reported on studies from the set text that were unrelated to the topic of language ranking, for example, code switching, or the domains of language use. In other cases, while the appropriate studies of language ranking were referred to, no attempt was made to interpret the results of these studies in relation to the examination question. Rather, the relevant studies were simply summarised and reported on. Candidates at this level need to be able to interpret the results of studies rather than study by rote and reproduce the figures.

Candidates were also awarded marks for their appropriate and efficient use of English. Candidates obtained marks for syntactic cohesion, correct usage of basic as well as more complex sentence structures, and for demonstrating an ability to use a range of appropriate vocabulary. Candidates were also marked for general coherence, progression of ideas and the development of an argument. A significant number of candidates struggled to demonstrate a good grasp of both basic and complex sentence structures and in some cases,
choice of vocabulary was excessively simplistic or downright inappropriate. Additionally, many examples of inappropriate language usage and problematic idiom resulted from candidates apparently attempting to make literal translations from Maltese into English.

In extreme cases, the candidates’ weak grasp of even basic sentence structures resulted in a complete breakdown of coherence and communication.

In conclusion, on the whole, a positive point that definitely emerges from this year’s examination results shows an inclination in students to deal with texts creatively and to engage with ideas creatively. There were slightly fewer students taking the examination this year and results were not as positive as last year. However, this year’s results show a marked improvement over past years’ results. Students need to be constantly and consistently encouraged to realise their potential: to focus more uncompromisingly on acquiring and consolidating language skills and to better cultivate and enhance their critical acumen when dealing with literary texts. A more rigorous approach to issues of grammar, syntax, punctuation and, particularly, spelling would enable students to write with more confidence, poise, elegance and assurance.

Students are reminded that good and correct use of the language is a very significant assessment criterion.

The Chairperson
Board of Examiners

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