

# FIRST LANGUAGE ENGLISH (9-1)

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Paper 0990/12  
Reading

## Key messages

Candidates did well when they:

- worked through the three texts and questions in the order set, attempting all parts of all questions
- had planned their responses for higher tariff tasks in advance of writing – keeping the focus of the question in mind when selecting ideas and deciding on a logical route through their answer
- after reading questions, returned to the text to check their understanding of key details and ideas
- followed task instructions and references carefully to base their answers on the correct text and/or section of text
- focused on the evidence of skills and understanding they needed to demonstrate for each of the three extended response questions
- considered the marks and space allocated to each question, targeting their response time accordingly
- paid attention to the specific guidance offered in tasks – for example, indicating clearly the one example from the text extract they were using in **2(c)** and identifying just the correct word/phrase in each part of **2(a)**
- developed relevant ideas, opinions and details from the text in the response to reading task rather than inventing untethered material
- used their own words where instructed to do so, avoiding unselective copying and/or lifting from the text
- avoided repetition
- checked and edited their responses to correct any incomplete ideas or unclear points.

## General comments

Candidates' responses indicated familiarity with the format of the Reading paper and general understanding of the demands of the three tasks, though there were still some candidates who did not pay attention to the guidance in the task instructions and missed opportunities to evidence skills and understanding as a consequence. Instances where whole tasks had not been attempted were very rare, though there were occasions where responses to part questions were incomplete or missing, limiting opportunities to target higher marks.

Responses to the tasks indicated that candidates found the three texts equally accessible and engaging. Occasionally, a loss of focus on the rubric and/or details of a question as set limited the evidence of understanding and skills offered in the answer. For example, a few candidates attempted to choose and explain more than one example in **2(c)** and/or tried to offer explanations in their own words for **2(a)** rather than select from the text. Similarly, on occasion there were some less well-focused responses to higher tariff tasks from candidates who had scored well in smaller sub questions. For example, some candidates introduced excess, writing far more than the maximum of 120 words advised, for the selective summary **Question 1(f)** and/or framed their answer as advice, others did not address all three bullets in **Question 3**, or discussed choices from one paragraph only in **Question 2(d)**.

In **Question 1**, candidates scoring highly had worked through the tasks in the order presented and usually made efficient use of their time. The best answers paid attention in **Questions 1 (a)–(e)** to the marks and space available as a helpful indicator of the length and detail they needed to offer in each response, providing clear, unambiguous responses. They did not add further unnecessary material and focused on answering each question as set. Most candidates followed the line or paragraph references in the questions carefully to help them to move down **Text A** in order and to direct their attention. Almost all remembered that in a test of comprehension their responses to these initial short answer questions needed to be derived from the text to evidence their Reading skills, not drawn from personal opinion or experience.

Less successful responses sometimes offered circular answers, repeating the language of the question where own words had been specified as being required; such responses provided insufficient evidence of understanding as a consequence – for example, in **1(b)(i)** suggesting that ‘this means happiness that has no complications’. In **Question 1(f)** a few candidates relied heavily on copying whole sections of text and/or repeating the language of the text, limiting the available evidence of their own skills and understanding as a result. A small number of candidates attempted unwisely to answer this summary task by offering and explaining quotations from the passage.

In **Question 2** candidates needed first to identify **(2(a))** and explain **(2(b))** words and phrases from **Text C, The dancer**, moving towards an explanation of how language was being used by the writer via one example from the extract in **Question 2(c)** and on to the language task, **Question 2(d)**. More successful answers were careful to refer to the text to locate specific relevant choices and consider meaning in context. Opportunities for marks were missed by those candidates in **Question 2(c)** who did not clearly identify one example from the text extract to explain and in **Question 2(a)** by some who copied out whole sentences from the text rather than identifying the exact word/phrase that matched the precise sense of just the underlined word/phrase in the question. To aim for higher levels in **Question 2(d)**, candidates should ensure that they explore and explain the meaning of each of the words they have chosen in some detail before moving on to consider associations and connotations or suggest effects. Most were able to suggest six potentially useful examples for analysis - three in each half - for the **2(d)** task and offer basic effect or meaning in context, though several candidates were not sufficiently clear, careful or detailed in the examination of their choices. In less successful responses, repetition of the language of the text, misreading of detail or simple labelling of devices (without explanation of how these were working) meant opportunities to target higher levels were missed. A small number of candidates offered few or no choices in **Question 2(d)**.

In **Question 3** most candidates’ responses attempted to include ideas relevant to all three bullets of the task, though a few lost sight of the text or task – for example, writing creatively about their own experience of dance/school and/or their own parents’ expectations (ideas which were not relevant in this response to Reading task). Most candidates had remembered to write from Veda’s perspective, with the best focused on interpreting the evidence in the text throughout, though not all remembered that Veda was writing to both of her parents. Responses across the cohort covered a wide range of levels of achievement, with mid-range responses often missing opportunities because of uneven focus and /or presenting a narrow range of ideas from the text. Less successful responses either offered only brief reference to the passage, included evidence of misreading and/or repeated sections from the text with very little modification. Along with unselective copying, reliance on the language of the text to communicate ideas is an indicator of less secure understanding and to be avoided.

Paper 1 is primarily a test of Reading, though 15 of the 80 marks available are for Writing – divided between **Question 1(f)** and **Question 3**. In these questions, it is important that candidates consider the clarity and register of their writing. It is advisable to plan and review responses to avoid inconsistencies of style, serious errors that impede communication of ideas and awkward expression. Candidates should be aware that unclear writing is likely to limit their achievement, as will over-reliance on the language of the passages. Leaving sufficient time to edit and correct responses is advisable.

### Comments on specific questions

#### **Question 1 Comprehension and summary task**

##### **Questions 1 (a) – (e)**

Short answer **Questions 1(a)–(e)** required candidates to read and respond to **Text A, Why dance?**. More successful responses had paid careful attention to the command words and paragraph references in the task instructions to demonstrate effectively and efficiently the evidence of understanding required. Some mid-range responses missed opportunities to target higher marks, for example by offering overlong, unclear or ambiguous explanations, striving to offer own word answers where these were not needed and/or repeating language of the text where own words were required. Candidates should note that where use of own words is necessary to evidence understanding task guidance specifies that. Less well focused answers on occasion negated evidence of understanding by including additional incorrect material and/or extra guesses and irrelevant material – an inefficient use of examination time.

The most successful responses provided evidence that candidates had understood the need to interpret and use details in the text carefully to answer each of the comprehension questions to show what they could do

and understand. They followed the order of the sub questions to work through the text from the beginning and were careful not to introduce ideas outside or in contradiction to those suggested by the text.

**(a) Give two pieces of evidence that humans possess an urge to dance, according to the text.**

In **Question 1(a)**, the majority of candidates had taken their cue from the question and successfully identified paragraph 1 of the text as containing the evidence of humans 'urge to dance'. A small number of candidates offered only one piece of evidence and/or overlooked key elements of the evidence as offered – for example, citing pictures in general rather than specifically pictures of dancers on cave walls. Some candidates made use of the question stem to help focus their answer, whilst others simply wrote the key words of their answer alongside each bullet in the response area – either approach was acceptable.

**(b) Using your own words, explain what the text means by:**

**(i) 'uncomplicated happiness' (line 6):**

**(ii) 'pent-up emotions' (line 7):**

In **Question 1(b)** task guidance made it clear that use of own words was required to evidence understanding. Where answers failed to score both marks it was sometimes the result of having explained just one aspect of the phrase, for example in **Question 1(b)(i)** attempting to explain 'pent-up' only and repeating the word 'emotions'. More effective answers were able to indicate that they had securely understood the meaning of both aspects of the question in the context of the text – for example, in **1b(i)** that 'uncomplicated happiness' meant the pure or simple joy experienced by many people when dancing. A small number of candidates offered no evidence of understanding by simply repeating the words of the question and/or did not pay careful attention to the words in context – for example proposing in **1b(i)** that it meant dance was not complicated and would make you happy.

**(c) Re-read paragraph ('Experiments have proved ... went up.').  
Give two reasons why dancing is better for you than sitting quietly or cycling on an exercise bike.**

In **Question 1(c)** most candidates were able to identify two distinct reasons why dancing is better for you than sitting quietly or cycling on an exercise bike according to paragraph 3 of the text – that it improves problem-solving skills and mood levels. A few candidates had not read closely and based their answer incorrectly on paragraph 4 and/or 5.

**(d) Re-read paragraphs 5 and 6 ('Another big draw ... those who don't.').**

**(i) Identify two reasons why people are drawn to dancing.**

**(ii) Explain why even an untrained dancer might be persuaded to dance.**

When deciding on their answers for **parts 1(d)(i)** and **1(d)(ii)** a number of candidates identified attractions of dance that might both draw people in general to it and persuade even those who were untrained and could be credited for that. For example, many saw the fact that dance was fun as being relevant both generally and specifically. Others were equally successfully in offering just the ideas they considered most relevant to untrained dancers in **part (ii)** and the more general points in **part (i)**. Candidates who were less focused on the details of the task sometimes missed opportunities to target full marks – for example, by attempting to base their answer all/in part on paragraph 3 or by miscopying to suggest incorrectly that dance was 'not for those of a certain age or ability'..

**(e) Re-read paragraph 7 ('These factors compensate ... unnecessarily early.').  
Using your own words, explain why some people might not want to take up dancing as a career.**

In **Question 1(e)** the most successful explanations showed that candidates were able to derive three distinct reasons of the four available in the specified paragraph. Candidates who recast the relevant information using their own words as instructed were best able to demonstrate that they had teased out and understood the implied reasons why some people might not want to take up dance as a career, with many offering all four ideas succinctly.

**(f) According to Text B, what prevents students from wanting to attend dance classes?**

**You must use continuous writing (not note form) and use your own words as far as possible.  
Your summary should not be more than 120 words.**

In their responses to **Question 1(f)** most candidates were able to demonstrate at least a general understanding of some relevant ideas from **Text B** and some understanding of the requirements of the task. However, there were examples of copying and lifting which diluted evidence of skills and understanding in answers. All points on the mark scheme were covered over the range of answers seen, though repetition of the same idea, inclusion of advice to teachers of how to address students' concerns and/or misreading of details meant opportunities were missed by many candidates to target higher marks.

Where responses were most effective, candidates had made a consistent attempt to use their own words and to keep their explanations concise. Many had recognised the opportunity to demonstrate their writing skills by adapting the more informal and persuasive style of the original text to a more formal style suitable for a written summary when presenting an objective overview of the factors preventing students from wanting to attend. Less assured responses had often missed this chance – for example echoing the text with reference to other students 'hanging around' and 'this "we" business'. Some mid-range answers did not immediately direct their response towards the focus of the task, offering redundant advice to teachers of how to prevent these problems.

Overview was evidenced in some of the most successful answers where relevant ideas had been carefully selected from different parts of the text and then re-organised efficiently for their reader. Less well-focused responses copied from the text, with minimal or no rewording or reorganisation of the original, often resulting in significant excess through redundancy and repetition. Whilst candidates are not expected to change all key words or terms in their prose response, they should not rely on lifting whole phrases and/or sentences from the text. Indiscriminate copying of the passage, repetition and adding comment or example should all be avoided as these do not allow candidates to successfully address the selective summary task.

The strongest responses to the selective summary task showed evidence of candidates having planned a route through the content of their answer before writing their response. There were some extremely effective and well-crafted responses that focused specifically and exclusively on reasons for not wanting to take part in dance classes as presented by Text B, demonstrating both concision and precise understanding of a wide range of relevant ideas. Some answers at the top end charted potential problems chronologically from a potential dancer's perspective – starting with the first impressions gained from website through to the experience in class and the audience of students appearing at the end of the lesson just when they were feeling hot, tired and sweaty.

Most candidates appeared to be aware of the need to try to use their own vocabulary where feasible without changing or blurring the original idea and to organise points helpfully for their reader. On occasion, candidates overlooked the need for concision in a selective summary task and significant excess arose because of lengthy explanation. Some candidates continued to write far more than the maximum of 120 words advised in the task guidance. Others adhered to the advised length of the response but took far too long to explain only a handful of ideas. Candidates producing effective answers were able to demonstrate that they had understood a wider range of relevant ideas, communicating these accurately and concisely in their own words.

Most candidates showed at least some awareness of the need to avoid excess, though not all were able to select ideas efficiently to navigate around more obviously redundant material – for example, the additional detail around the scheduling of dance classes and experience of feeling watched by other students. A significant proportion of students gave lengthy descriptions of the timetable order and its effects before eventually moving on to mention other more relevant points, not having recognised that much of the information around the timetable and the lesson crossover was repeated.

Less effective responses sometimes relied on trying to offer a précis of the whole text in the order it was presented. Many of these answers simply tracked through and replayed the text, substituting occasional own words – an approach that diluted evidence that the text and/or task had been understood. Many of these least effective responses also tended to have misread key details in the text – for example, some suggested that large rooms (classes) were a problem, or that students would be tired at 8pm in the evening as it was very late for a lesson.

Length was sometimes an indicator of the relative success of a response. Some responses were far too short with only a small number of relevant ideas identified, and others very long and wordy due to the inclusion of unnecessary information, comments or quotations. The least effective responses were overly reliant on the language of the original. Candidates are reminded that lifting sections of text and splicing them together is unlikely to evidence understanding of either the ideas in the passage or requirements of the task.

**Advice to candidates on Question 1(f):**

- after reading the task instructions, re-read the text to identify only those potentially relevant ideas you can use in your answer
- identify and discard any ideas or extra details which are not relevant to the focus of the question – for example, where a question asks you to focus only on ‘what prevents’, you should not include advice on how to counter or deal with these issues
- reflect on the ideas you have highlighted in your plan, checking that they are distinct and complete – for example, whether there are repeated ideas which could be combined or ideas which might need further explanation
- return to the text to ‘sense check’ any ideas you are unsure of before you try to use them
- plan the ideas you are going to include ahead of writing your response – draw a neat line through your planning afterwards
- organise and sequence your ideas to make them clear to your reader – do not rely on repeating ideas in the order of the original text
- explain ideas in a way that someone who had not read the text themselves would understand
- write informatively and accurately in your own words, avoiding errors which affect meaning
- do not add details, examples or comment to the content of the passage
- check back to ensure that you have included all the ideas you planned to
- though it is not necessary to count every word, you should keep in mind the guidance to write ‘no more than 120 words’ and aim for concision.

**Question 2**

**(a) Identify a word or phrase from the text which suggests the same idea as the words underlined:**

- Grandma thinks that she shouldn’t cause trouble between her son and daughter-in-law.**
- Veda’s mother starts to talk seriously.**
- Veda’s plans for a future career are not ones that her mother considers worthy.**
- At school Veda used to try very hard but found it difficult.**

Focused responses to **Question 2(a)** clearly identified in each part the correct word or phrase from Text C to correspond with the meaning of the underlined example – simply and efficiently just giving the word or phrase as their answer. Other responses added unnecessary time pressure by copying out the entire sentence in each case, substituting the word or phrase and then bracketing or underlining their answer. Marks were sometimes missed where answers were incomplete (for example, giving ‘lecture’ without ‘launches into a’ and so not covering the full sense of the underlined phrase). Others lacked focus (for example, copying out whole sentences or including extra words or longer sections of text that went beyond the sense of the underlined word(s)) – for example, including ‘her place’ in their answer to **part (i)**.

**(b) Using your own words, explain what the writer means by the words underlined:**

- dreamt**
- compulsion**
- excel**

In **Question 2(b)**, successful answers had carefully considered the precise meaning in context of each of the words underlined. Less successful responses simply repeated/reflected the word in their explanation – for example, ‘excel means she was excellent’ – or did not offer sufficiently precise explanation for understanding of the individual word specified to be credited – for example, ‘good at’ on its own suggested none of the extraordinary level talent/skill indicated by the word ‘excel’.

- (c) **Use one example from the text below to explain how the writer suggests the dance teacher's happiness at Veda's performance.**

**My dance teacher's stick clatters heavily to the floor. He claps spontaneously. 'Perform like that and you're sure to win.' I can see tears brimming like dew-drops in his eyes.**

In **Question 2(c)**, where candidates had focused clearly on using just one carefully selected example taken from the text extract they were best placed to demonstrate their understanding – usually beginning with an explanation of meaning in context, ahead of going on to explain what that suggested in relation to the writer's feelings. Those making efficient use of time often identified their example, by underlining it in the text of the question or used it as a subheading for their answer. Successful responses often centred around the image of 'tear drops brimming like dew-drops in [the teacher's] eyes' suggesting something of the beauty/natural reaction in his overwhelming pride. Other strong responses focused on how the teacher clapped 'spontaneously' explaining the effect of the instinctive and impulsive show of appreciation as indicating an honest and heart-felt reaction. Several candidates however appeared to have selected 'claps spontaneously' without understanding the meaning of spontaneously – offering incorrect suggestions for meaning such as 'loudly' or 'went on for a long time.'

Most successful responses had carefully noted the number of marks available and focused their response to make three distinct points in relation to their one chosen example. Less successful responses often attempted to discuss more than one example – time that might have been more profitably spent in **Question 2(d)** where there were up to 15 marks available and more opportunities for relevant development of explanations. Some less successful responses did not pay careful attention to the instruction to select from the given extract and attempted unwisely to paraphrase the whole extract and/or discuss it in very general terms. On occasion, opportunities were missed due to a lack of focus on the task or text – for example, a few candidates assumed incorrectly that it was Veda who was crying and/or simply repeated the wording of the question asserting that their chosen example 'showed happiness' without suggesting how.

- (d) **Re-read paragraphs 9 and 12.**

- **Paragraph 9 begins 'I think back ...' and is about Veda's memories of what her grandmother**
- **said about the early evidence of her dancing ability.**
- **Paragraph 12 begins 'I leap and land ...' and is about Veda practising for her dance**
- **competition while her teacher taps the beat.**

**Explain how the writer uses language to convey meaning and to create effect in these paragraphs. Choose three examples of words or phrases from each paragraph to support your answer. Your choices should include the use of imagery.**

Successful responses to **Question 2(d)** offered clear analysis of six relevant selections – three from each paragraph – often starting by explaining literal meaning in context and then moving on to consider effect (for example, discussing connotations and suggesting the impacts created by the writer's language choices). Such responses demonstrated understanding of how the writer was using language in each case through detailed discussion of focused choices. Where candidates considered all the key words in slightly longer choices they were able to avoid those more generalised comments of less effective responses. Candidates relying on repeating the language of the text within their explanation were less well placed to demonstrate understanding fully and often offered only partially effective or very thin explanation as a result. The strongest responses considered all the key words within their choices individually, as well as suggesting how they worked within the longer phrase and / or in the context of the description as a whole. Rather than selecting the most 'obvious' literary devices, successful responses often set out to identify those relevant selections that they felt best able to explain. Some of the strongest responses explored how their judiciously selected choices worked both individually and together to influence the reader's impression, building to an overview. Responses at level 5 frequently showed imagination and precision when discussing images, for example in relation to Veda 'chasing down soaring music' and 'catching and pinning rhythms'. A small number of candidates selected only three choices in total over the whole question and limited their achievement as a consequence.

When dealing with paragraph 9, many answers had identified either ‘restricting bars’ and/or ‘prison-line cot’ as potentially interesting examples to discuss, with most able to offer at least a basic explanation of the younger Veda’s frustration at being constrained, though not all took the opportunity to target higher marks by finding their own words to explain ‘her desire for freedom’, often relying instead on recycling the words of the passage to describe how she ‘urgently craved release’. Some mid-range answers offered more careful selection and explanation in one half of the answer than the other – failing to target higher levels by repeating words such as ‘fast’ and ‘challenging’ when discussing paragraph 12 rather than finding synonyms to evidence understanding of meaning. Some candidates who wrote more general comments around the feelings of happiness Veda experienced when dancing missed opportunities to consider the distinct meanings of each word in ‘fills me with elation’ and ‘excitement mounting’ which might have resulted in higher marks. Many candidates offered basic effects – for example, suggesting that ‘lotus buds blossoming’ suggested the beauty of Veda’s movements, whilst those offering evidence of understanding at higher levels were often able to go on to consider how the image of a bud opening to a flower might add to the sense of her natural talent.

Some candidates had misread details of the text or were unsure of the basic meaning of the words they had selected and their explanations were limited as a result – for example, some had not understood that ‘heave’ described an action by Veda and implied a degree of effort or difficulty, suggesting incorrectly instead that it meant Veda used to ‘lean against’, ‘hang on’ or ‘have’ bars on her cot. The least successful answers to **Question 2(d)** offered inappropriate, generic comments such as ‘The writer uses images that help us imagine what it was like for Veda.’ – such comments are unlikely to be a useful starting point for discussion of how language is working in the extract and can often create a false sense of security, meaning candidates move on without saying anything more concrete to evidence their understanding. Satisfactory responses offered a clear explanation of the literal meaning of each word within the example they had chosen, whilst more successful answers reached for more precise vocabulary and in doing so touched on effect. Candidates working at higher levels were often able to visualise images, using explanation of what you could ‘see/hear happening’ in context as the starting point for their explanation of effect.

In **Question 2(d)**, answers which simply list literary devices used and / or copy from each paragraph without careful consideration of the examples to be discussed are not likely to evidence the skills and understanding necessary to target higher marks. It is the quality of the analysis which attracts marks in a language question. Selections in **Question 2(d)** need to be clear and deliberate, helping to focus the analysis which follows. Long quotations with only the first and last words identified are less likely to be useful and often result in very thin general comments at best. On occasion, opportunities were missed in answers where choices had been selected from one paragraph only. Some of the least successful answers to **Question 2(d)** appeared to have been answered last and were very brief, generalised and/or incomplete. The most successful answers were often able to explore and discuss their understanding of words within relevant choices, considering different possibilities of meaning, associations and connotations, ahead of arriving at an understanding of how and why these particular words might have been used by the writer in this context.

### Advice to candidates on Question 2:

- make sure that the quotations you select from the text are precise and accurate – do not copy out lines or chunks of text, miss out key words or include only part of the choice
- in each part of 2(a) make sure that your selection from the text is clearly identified – remember you are looking for a word or phrase, not a whole sentence
- in 2(b) be careful not to include extra incorrect guesses that might detract from the evidence that you understand the meaning of the word you are explaining
- in 2(c) clearly identify the one example from the text excerpt you are going to explain
- in 2(d), choose 3 examples from each of the two specified paragraphs (6 choices in total)
- where you are trying to explain meaning check that your explanation makes sense
- when explaining how language is working avoid empty comments such as saying that ‘the writer helps us to imagine the scene’ – you need to say how your chosen example does this to show understanding
- make sure your explanations deal with each of the key words within an identified choice separately as well as how they work together
- when you are trying to suggest effect and are unsure, start by explaining the precise meaning in context of the word(s) in the choice
- when you are trying to explore and explain images, consider the connotations and associations of the words within choices to help you to suggest the effect the writer might have wanted to create

- allow time to edit your answers – for example, to add in further detail and/or correct errors to help show you have read carefully and understood.

### Question 3

**You are Veda. It is a few months later and you have started studying at your new dance school. You write a letter home to your parents, reflecting on your past experiences.**

**In your letter you should explain:**

- **why dancing has always been so important in your life**
- **how the adults in your life felt about your dancing and how this made you feel**
- **your thoughts now about the conversation you had with your parents after you won the competition.**

Having worked through **Question 2** and already familiarised themselves with **Text C**, candidates following the order of tasks as set were best placed to think their way into Veda's perspective once she has started her new dance school and is looking back on the events details and/or suggested in the text. A few candidates who appeared unwisely to have left **Question 2** until last indicated some initial misreading of timescales and details in their answer to **Question 3** – for example referencing the teacher described in the passage as Veda's current dance teacher and/or confusing the conversation with her parents before the competition (outlined in the text) with the conversation they were invited to imagine using cues in the narrative once she knew she had won.

Almost all candidates chose to address the bullets in the order set, though some wrote convincingly starting with Veda's thoughts now about the conversation, reflecting on the attitude of her family members and her teacher, before explaining the importance of dance in her life and coming back round to the present. Most kept in mind the advice to 'reflect on her past experiences' not simply repeat them and avoided introducing untethered ideas in relation to what might be happening in her new dance school.

The first bullet of the question invited candidates to revisit details in the text related to the importance of dance in Veda's life and most candidates were able to offer several relevant ideas, with answers aiming at higher marks taking up the invitation in the question to reflect and as a consequence extend and develop ideas from the text. Almost all mentioned more straightforward explicit ideas – for example, referencing Grandma's stories about Veda learning to move before she learned to talk and Veda's evident enjoyment / sense of fulfilment when performing. Many identified Veda's ambition to be a professional dancer / dance as her career – often also touching on her mother's preference for her to take another, more 'respectable' career route with the best answers often using this as a natural link into the reactions of other adults in Veda's life (bullet 2) and generally it was bullet one which was answered most securely at all levels. There was some copying that resulted in less successful responses forgetting they were meant to be addressing Veda's parents, not just writing about them. There was also some unhelpful lifting from the earlier texts – for example, 'Dance was important to Veda because it improved her problem-solving skills' or 'enabled her to jig at weddings'.

Many answers to bullet two missed opportunities by only commenting on Veda's mother's view as if it were the view of both parents – the text offered details to suggest that Pa's opinion might differ. More successful answers offered evidence that they had read more closely, for example by commenting on the father's sense of being caught in the middle and were often then well placed to develop these ideas for bullet three in relation to Pa's role in the imagined conversation following the news of Veda's competition success. Other answers missed opportunities by overlooking Grandma's attitude as distinct from that of Veda's parents, whereas those offering more successful responses recognised that Grandma's support and understanding not only played a role in encouraging Veda but also pre-empted the imagined conversation for bullet three since she 'had been talking to Pa'. Some comprehensive answers also included reference to the judges and to Veda's dance teacher – often developing the contrast in their enthusiastic and positive reactions to Veda's talent to that of her mother/parents.

When developing the conversation referred to at the end of the text for bullet three, most versions of Veda were understanding of her mother's ambitions and attitude – recognising the inference in the text that however unfair the reaction might seem on the surface, Ma was not a monster. Some developed the idea of gratitude / recognition that her mother would relent since she wanted the best for Veda – for example citing that Veda had not been prevented from attending dance lessons and Grandma saw hope she would be persuaded once it was clear Veda could expect success. Those who had taken time to reflect on Pa's perspective separately in bullet two, were often now able to extend the idea that he might now (finally) decide



to intervene, having been petitioned by Grandma on Veda's behalf. Many picked up on the suggestion that Veda would have 'answer(ed) questions sensibly and explain(ed) herself', persuading her parents that this was the right thing to do. Where candidates decided that Ma's anger as described earlier would never let her agree, they could still be credited though those who suggested Ma still refused to let Veda go and prevented her from doing so showed signs of misreading since the question was clear that Veda was now attending the dance school.

The third bullet was often the least well covered in mid-range and lower answers with many missing Grandma's excitement and the fact that Veda was making an effort to answer sensibly – both of which ideas were clear in the text. In the weakest responses, ideas relevant to bullet three were often not included and replaced by more general signings off or speculation of the fame and extreme fortunes Veda might gain as a dancer – at odds with the suggestions in the text – limiting the evidence of skills and understanding as a consequence. A few attempted to address bullet three by referencing the earlier conversation ahead of the competition, others speculated at length about life in the new dance school, inventing new characters, facilities and events not suggested by **Text C** and/or referring to how to improve a dance school (based on advice in **Text B**) or the benefits of dancing socially/cognitively (attempting to use material from **Text A**).

On occasion, having returned to the text to find useful details in Text C, some candidates then undermined their own efforts by reading less carefully than they needed to – for example, suggesting that Veda's teacher worked at her new dance school or that her parents kept her prisoner in her cot as a child, refusing to allow her to attend dance lessons. Meanwhile other candidates provided far more secure evidence of their skills and understanding, often showing evidence that during planning they had apparently made effective use of strategies such as simple diagrams to clearly establish the relationships between events and/or personas, and the evidence/details they could use to predict the 'conversation' for bullet three.

For the most part, candidates seemed familiar with the requirements of a letter to parents, and many were able to use an appropriate register and draw on a range of suitable vocabulary to express their ideas. Where candidates relied too heavily on the structure and/or language of the original text to communicate, expression often became awkward and/or lost clarity. Many answers would have benefitted from a read back through/some basic editing to ensure that meaning was clear throughout in order to offer more secure evidence of their Writing and Reading skills. The best answers were often polite and measured – echoing the reflective perspective suggested by the question – and maintained the role and voice of Veda addressing her parents until the end. The least successful responses to **Question 3** copied sections of text with minimal modification and rarely addressed bullets two and/or three adequately, often signing off in their own name rather than Veda's.

#### **Advice to candidates on Question 3:**

- remember to base your answer on the ideas and details you find in Text C only
- keep the audience and purpose for your response in mind throughout your answer
- decide on the voice and style you want to create and maintain that in your answer
- look for the clues and evidence in the text to help you make judgements about characters and situations
- give equal attention to each of the three bullet points
- do not copy directly from the text: use your own words as far as you can to express ideas
- try to do more than just repeat details of what happened: developing ideas allows you to better show your understanding, for example by explaining feelings or commenting from the point of view of the character you are writing as
- leave sufficient time to edit and correct your response.

# FIRST LANGUAGE ENGLISH (9-1)

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Paper 0990/22  
Directed Writing and Composition

## Key messages

This paper was mainly assessed for writing, although there were fifteen marks available for reading in **Question 1**.

To achieve high marks, candidates were required to:

- use an appropriate form, style and register in both questions
- structure ideas and organise responses effectively to persuade and engage the reader
- produce detailed and evocative descriptions and engaging, credible narratives
- adapt their style and structure for different audiences, purposes and genres
- construct varied sentences accurately, with a clear attempt to influence and interest the reader
- use precise and wide-ranging vocabulary, appropriate for the task and style required.

## General comments

Examiners found that almost all candidates understood what was required in both questions, Directed Writing and Composition. Nearly all candidates understood the instructions for the examination and attempted Question 1 and either a descriptive or narrative writing task, although a few candidates only responded to one question on the paper, usually the Composition. In **Question 1**, responses were written mostly in candidates' own words, but some were mostly or wholly copied from the texts in the Reading Booklet Insert. These responses inevitably limited very severely the marks available for Examiners to award in both elements of assessment for this question.

Nearly all responses showed a clear understanding of and some engagement with the topic of the reading texts in **Question 1**. Most responses were written in an appropriate style and format for a speech given by a student to a gathering of interested parties in a school or college setting. There was in many a sound grasp of the main ideas about the advantages or disadvantages of handwriting lessons for younger students which were given in the reading texts.

Most candidates approached the topic using their own words rather than lifting or copying the words in the passages, although many included short phrases from the texts, such as handwriting being 'a better workout or the brain'. More effective answers here also tended to structure responses independently, selecting and commenting on the details in the texts in a coherent response which argued consistently throughout. Effective responses showed some ability to probe and challenge the views given in the texts, often suggesting that prevailing conditions in modern life meant that both handwriting and the use of technology for producing written texts were necessary skills for children to be taught.

In the middle of the mark range, responses tended to reproduce the points made in the texts, sometimes with a little personal opinion or a less specific exhortation to teach handwriting in schools, with some beginning to evaluate. A substantial number of responses at this range made some reference to the ideas in the texts with a little opinion on the topic in given at the end. These views tended to address the topic in general rather than the more specific arguments given in the reading texts, giving less evidence of close reading and understanding.

Less effective responses tended to repeat the ideas in the texts, rather than selecting points and commenting on them. In some responses at this level, this resulted in a lack of cohesion with conflicting viewpoints given side by side. The evidence for handwriting being beneficial for children, given in the texts, tended to be reproduced at this level with limited comment on them to show more than an ability to

understand surface meanings. Others produced summaries of what each text said, offering the writers' views but with very few comments of their own.

For the Writing mark, there was often a clear attempt made to adapt the style and register to reflect the task and the purpose of the speech. In most cases, some understanding was shown of how speeches are structured and presented and how rhetorical devices such as questions and exclamations can be used to engage and persuade the audience. The most effective responses paid specific attention to the audience and style required for the task. These were lively but evaluative in style, using ideas from the texts to create and structure arguments and often employing rhetorical devices sparingly but effectively to persuade. Most in the middle range of marks wrote in a more straightforward style and there was less focus on scrutinising the ideas in the texts. Less effective responses relied more on the sequence of the points made in the texts with less selection and reordering of ideas from the originals. This sometimes resulted in contradictory statements, weak paragraphing and less cohesion overall.

In Section B, descriptive writing at the highest level was evocative and subtle and most responses gave a range of descriptive detail without resorting to narrative. Many responses to the descriptive writing questions were very engaging and sustained, employing widely different interpretations of the questions. The idea of a 'flying creature or object' was interpreted in a wide variety of ways. Many successful responses described a setting in nature with birds of many types featuring as the main focus for description, both in appearance and movement. Airplanes and spaceships were also described and both kinds of interpretations were valid and often effective. In the second task, a 'moment of stillness' was interpreted in various ways and contexts. The reason for the 'stillness' was often an instance of quiet pleasure in the natural world but sometimes the moment was created by terrible shock or sudden realisation. Effective description of these scenes often focused on the thoughts and feelings of the narrator as well as details of the surroundings. Some less successful responses to both questions were clearly intended as narratives rather than descriptions and Examiners found only limited descriptive content to reward. These tended to become dominated by events or lengthy narrative preambles, leaving less scope for descriptive detail. In the middle range, responses to the first question focused sometimes on a rather factual description of, for example, a military aircraft, in which the technical specification of engines or the colour of the livery was described. While there was some detail, these responses lacked engagement and interest for the reader. In both questions, descriptions were more effective when there was specific detail and where the description created an atmosphere which evoked the scene credibly and engagingly. Less effective responses to both descriptive writing questions were characterised by a lack of descriptive detail, a tendency to become narrative or a factual, rather concrete description which did not draw the reader in.

The best narrative writing engaged the reader with well-drawn and interesting characters and scenarios which were well-prepared. Both narrative questions elicited a very wide range of approaches and Examiners awarded marks in all Levels here. Effective and engaging responses to the first question presented widely varied scenarios in which characters were faced with decisions about sporting, academic, criminal or other kinds of opportunities which proved pivotal in some way. Less effective responses often included quite similar scenarios to those more effective narratives but were less well controlled and the needs of the reader for a varied pace and shaping of the plot were less well understood.

The second narrative question elicited response with many interpretations of a 'Lost' from an internalised sense of the narrator having become hopeless or friendless to more literal interpretations of becoming separated from a group during a walk or hike. Less effective narratives tended to become a series of events which while relevant to the task were not developed, engaging narratives. Many involved camping trips with characters who were simply named rather than brought to life and narrators who inevitably got lost in dark forests. These kinds of responses were usually resolved in less satisfying ways such as simply being discovered by friends or finding their way back. A number of less successful responses to both narrative questions wrote more discursively on the kinds of opportunities one should not miss or, for the second question, a few responses described a state of mind but there was very limited narrative content and progression overall. While these were often organised and paragraphed, they were not narrative in intent or development.

## **Comments on specific questions**

### **Section A**

**Imagine that schools in your area are considering either introducing or abandoning handwriting lessons for all younger students. You have been invited to speak at a meeting of teachers and parents to discuss the idea.**

**Write the words of your speech.**

**In your speech you should:**

- **evaluate the ideas, attitudes and opinions given in both texts about handwriting and keyboard skills**
- **give your own views, based on what you have read, about whether or not handwriting lessons in school are a good idea.**

**Base your speech on what you have read in both texts, but be careful to use your own words. Address both of the bullet points.**

**Write about 250 to 350 words.**

**Up to 15 marks are available for the content of your answer, and up to 25 marks for the quality of your writing.**

### **Marks for reading**

The task required candidates to consider and evaluate the ideas in both texts and to advise an audience of teachers and parents about whether handwriting lessons should be timetabled for younger students. Examiners awarded high marks for Reading where there was some probing and evaluation of the ideas in the reading material, rather than a straightforward listing and reproduction of the points in the texts. Not all candidates addressed the implication in the question that the school in question could either introduce or abandon handwriting lessons and as a result some may have missed the opportunity to argue coherently that handwriting was no longer a skill which was relevant for young people in the modern world. Most responses attempted to reflect the ideas in the explicit ideas texts which were largely in favour of teaching handwriting, thereby not really using the more implicit ideas which required a deeper understanding.

More effective responses here focused carefully on the arguments in the texts, with the highest marks awarded for those which addressed and evaluated a range of ideas and implications in them. The extent to which the implicit ideas and opinions contained in the texts were probed and scrutinised determined the Level and mark awarded for Reading. These implicit ideas often involved, for example, an understanding that older generations may not be included in a society which relied entirely on keyboard communication or, conversely, that just as methods of communication had changed over time, the prevalence of keyboards over handwriting was inevitable. Indeed, some argued that to require students to adopt a difficult and cumbersome method of writing for the sake of tradition was a betrayal of the younger generation. In responses given marks in Level 5 and 6 for Reading, Examiners often rewarded some thoughtful consideration of the other benefits of learning to write by hand beyond simple communication.

In Text A, for example, the suggestion that handwriting was a good 'workout for the brain' was developed in some responses to suggest that younger children's progress in all areas of learning would improve as a result of this stimulation at an early age. In Text B, there was some critique in better responses of the stated benefits of schemes such as the 'pen licence' in so far as having neat handwriting was not so useful a skill in its own right.

Having ideas worth communicating to others was sometimes considered more important than being able to produce neat handwriting and the licence could also foster an unhelpful competitiveness among students who might never be able to write neatly. Others focused on the exclusion of children whose schools and families could not afford the expensive technology required for keyboard learning, suggesting that simple pen and paper would always be needed for many children in the world.

The implications of some of the ideas in both texts concerning the importance of handwriting for a child's identity, individuality and sense of community were often discussed at the higher Levels. The sense of

cultural identity fostered by learning to handwrite in time-honoured ways, as referred to in Text A, was sometimes combined productively with Text B's briefly stated point that the uniqueness of each person's handwriting was preferable to the bland, pre-determined font of a keyboard-generated message. For some, the effort required to handwrite a personal message to a family member was intrinsically more valuable than an email or e-card which could be generated at speed with little effort. The implication that the speed and convenience of keyboards meant that children would be exposed to screens much longer was seen as a danger to their health and may also contribute to a lazy attitude to communication when errors could be corrected automatically without the understanding or intervention of the writer. Many candidates argued that it was unrealistic to expect students to handwrite everything when technology could save time and effort. Some development of this idea was offered in some thoughtful responses where the time saved by taking notes or writing extended texts on keyboards could be better spent on learning more knowledge or more skills.

In Text B, successful responses made better use of the example of innovative methods for teaching handwriting to younger children. Rather than reporting these methods as examples of how handwriting could be taught, these responses focused more closely on the task by considering the wider skills acquired in learning to write by hand, addressing why it should be taught. The early boost of self-confidence afforded children who gained their 'pen licence' as well as the fine motor skills practised were considered benefits in themselves, as was the sense of community fostered by writing personal letters to older people who may not have had access to keyboards.

These kinds of explanations and extensions of the ideas in the texts were more evaluative than a simple opinion or summary and warranted marks in Level 5 or above. However, responses in which a range of such evaluations were made, or ideas in the texts were assimilated to create a highly evaluative critique, were less common and there were relatively few Level 6 responses for Reading.

Responses given marks in the middle range – in Level 4 and lower Level 5 – tended to be more straightforward, with some reflection and comment on the redundancy of handwriting in the workplace or the neurological benefits of teaching children to write by hand in Text A, alongside some of the ideas presented in Text B. Marks in Level 5 were given where some comments amounted to 'some successful evaluation', usually one or two developments or judgements made about the importance of handwriting for wider educational progress or sometimes the concerns about the costs of technology which made handwriting more practical. In some responses, these kinds of comments were enough for Examiners to award a mark in Level 5, providing there was some specificity rather than a vague reflection that handwriting was generally better for a child to learn.

Responses given marks in Level 4 often showed an understanding of the main ideas in the texts and offered a straightforward summary of the ideas in the texts while not examining those ideas more closely. Examiners also noted that the focus of the comments was more general and less focused on specific ideas, often with some valid but not fully justified opinion that both keyboard and handwritten communication skills would be necessary for children to acquire in school. In some responses at this Level, comments tended to follow closely the organisation and structure of the original texts, sometimes leading to some contradiction. For example, in Text A, evidence was given that there was little need for handwriting in the workplace but in Text B the assertion was made that handwriting skills would be needed for success in students' future lives.

Less effective responses showed some understanding of the ideas in the passage but there was reference to a narrow range of points or there was some misunderstanding of the details. Responses at the lower Levels were also poorly adapted for a speech with awkward references such as 'Text A says that...' which showed some lack of awareness of how speeches are constructed and how the audience addressed should be accommodated. Ideas were sometimes summarised with very limited conclusions or comments on them which made it difficult for Examiners to award marks above Level 4.

A small number of less successful responses, given marks below Level 4, were almost totally reliant on lifting or copying from the texts, where there was little of the candidate's own words in the response which inevitably limited the marks Examiners could award for both Reading and Writing.

## Marks for writing

25 marks were available for style and register, the structure of the answer and the technical accuracy of spelling, punctuation and grammar.

## Style and audience

The task allowed for a range of appropriate styles and registers for candidates' speeches and different ways to show an understanding of the audience. Across the ability range, an apt, usually quite formal style of standard English allowed for Examiners to consider marks for Level 4 and above where a 'sometimes effective style' was required. Although not always sustained, many speeches began with a lively introduction which engaged the audience. Quite often at this Level and above, these opening sections included some rhetoric intended to encourage the audience to reflect on their own experience of learning to write: 'Did you endure the constant repetition of single letters on endless papers? Do you realise that children nowadays often know which button on a keyboard to press long before they can write that letter on paper?' Some reflected on their own classroom experience as older students: 'My opinion on this topic is influenced by the need to produce two or three essays every week. How long do you think that would take if I had to write them by hand?'

These openings showed an appropriate understanding of how a younger person could engage the attention of adults interested in education. In other, often effective, responses, the writer adopted the role of a teacher or parent. This sometimes gave a slightly different perspective on some ideas in the texts, such as the sense of achievement and pleasure to be derived from communicating in handwritten form or the dangers of over-reliance on technology in the classroom: 'As teachers we can limit the distractions students have in the classroom but using keyboards to take notes in class gives them access to a whole world of distraction.'

In the middle range of marks, Examiners could sometimes award marks in Level 4 even where more technical writing skills were lacking and suggested a Level 3 mark, as long as the style and register adopted were appropriate for the task and the audience. A clear, consistent attempt to engage the specific audience rather than summarise the content of the texts in a straightforward way could sometimes compensate for other elements of style such as weak spelling or insecure grammar. Conversely, there were many responses which were accurate in the main but showed little adaptation of style from the original texts to suit the style, context and register of a speech, limiting the effectiveness of the response as a whole. In some at this Level, the speech was opened appropriately but the audience seemed quickly forgotten in responses which reported the ideas in the texts with limited acknowledgement of the listeners.

Level 3 marks were usually awarded where the reading material was largely reproduced so that the organisation and sequence of sentences and paragraphs reflected the original and were not adapted to create a coherent speech. While most responses, to varying degrees, worked their way through the ideas in the texts, less effective responses tended to refer to the texts as Text A and B with limited grasp of what the intended audience knew or understood and the style showed less awareness of how speeches are delivered.

## Structure

As mentioned above, responses awarded high marks for Writing handled the material confidently and presented their arguments cogently. At the highest Level, the ideas in the two texts were addressed but in a cohesive speech with a persuasive purpose rather than a disjointed summary of two quite different texts. The different points for and against the teaching of handwriting, including the more implicit ideas, were organised as arguments and counterarguments in a coherent speech. The argument being pursued determined the sequence of ideas in these responses rather than a simple tracking of what each text said.

Responses given Level 5 marks for Writing tended to reflect a range of points made in each text but were reordered in a response which was sensibly structured and paragraphed. This often avoided the clashing of contradictory points from each text. Many used the bullet points in the question to help structure their responses, offering some comment on the ideas in each text before closing with some opinion and occasionally some exhortation. Some responses aimed for a rhetorical ending which sometimes worked well: 'Do you really want to bring up a generation that never experienced the creative, fulfilling process of learning to write by hand?' An overall coherence and structure were required for this Level which was usually less evident in responses below Level 5.

Less effective responses sometimes struggled to provide a coherent argument and were more tied to the sequencing of the texts. In most cases the information given in the texts was offered with some rewording and paraphrase but several phrases were also lifted from the texts.

### Accuracy

Accomplished writing which was accurate and controlled as well as appropriate in tone and register was given a mark in Level 6 for Writing. These responses were often engaging and showed a strong awareness of audience but were also fluent and virtually free of error. There was a range of precisely selected and complex vocabulary and sentence structures varied and were consciously used, often rhetorically, to engage the reader. Some complex sentences structures were chosen which conveyed with some subtlety the contending views in the texts and complex clauses were controlled by careful punctuation: 'On the one hand, the cultural identity of young children is bound up in the way handwriting skills are passed down from one generation to another, moulding their experience of tradition and history, but at what cost?'

Level 5 responses were usually purposeful and clear, though perhaps not as ambitious and wide ranging in vocabulary or as precise in register or style as those given higher marks. Level 4 responses, as described in the marking guidelines, were 'sometimes effective' but not consistently so. Although the style was usually plain, the language used was apt and generally accurate. A range of quite basic errors was made at this level which limited the effectiveness of the style but did not affect clarity of meaning. Very common misspellings included 'handwritting' and capital letters for countries and languages were often omitted.

Faulty sentence structures, fluctuating tense use or too much lifted or copied material often kept writing marks for **Question 1** below Level 4. Another limited feature was a simplicity of style, vocabulary and sentence structures. These responses often showed some clarity in conveying meaning but there was a wide range of quite basic punctuation and grammar errors which meant that Examiners could not award marks in Level 4. Grammar and agreement errors such as 'this children' or 'childs, tense errors such as 'children had learned to write by hand in some countries' were quite common at this Level. In rare cases, material from the texts was so extensively copied that responses could not be given marks in Band 4 for Writing or for Reading because neither the content or the style of the response was the candidate's own. Less rare were responses in which more complex ideas and sentence structures were copied from the texts while the writer's own style was more simple or faulty.

### Ways in which this type of answer could be improved:

- **Be prepared to challenge the ideas in the reading texts.**
- **Always justify and explain the reasons why you agree or disagree.**
- **Make sure the ideas you use are derived from the passage.**
- **Aim for breadth of coverage of the ideas in the passage as well some depth in evaluating them.**
- **Think carefully about the kind of style which suits your task and the audience.**
- **Check your writing for basic punctuation errors, such as missing definite or indefinite articles, weaknesses in grammar or misspellings of key words which are in the passage.**

### Section B

#### Descriptive writing

**Describe a flying object or creature as it takes off, moves through the air and then lands again.**

**Write a description with the title, 'A moment of stillness' .**

Both descriptive writing questions were popular choices for candidates and were interpreted in a wide variety of ways. In the first task, many kinds of flying objects or creatures were included. Birds of many varieties featured but there were also some mythical dragons, fairies, bees and flying insects. Flying objects included planes of many types from small aircraft to military jets taking off from aircraft carriers and helicopters on various different kinds of journeys.

All these interpretations were acceptable and valid, as long as there was a clear link with the question. Most responses followed the task quite closely and this usually helped candidates avoid slipping into too much narrative. Some included more preamble and explanation than description, explaining the purpose and preparation for a flight in a somewhat factual sequence rather than focusing on evoking the sensations and

atmosphere of the experience. However, where the time scale was short and the focus on detail secure, Examiners could award high marks.

While this tendency to narrative was also seen in responses to the second question, the focus on a 'moment' in the task helped many candidates to incorporate the sense impressions of a limited snapshot of time without over-explanation or preamble. The cause or reason for this 'moment of stillness' often became clear through the details selected and the way they were organised but there were many sustained, detailed and effective descriptions in response to this question.

Some effective responses to the first question created an engaging atmosphere from the start as the narrator observed their surroundings. Natural settings were commonly used here, featuring mountains and lakes in which birds or other creatures were observed in their natural habitat. The choice of details and closely observed images in effective descriptions created clear, readily pictured scenes for the reader: 'From the vantage point of a tall tree, the eagle surveyed his domain, the broad sweep of mountains and the wide, cloudless sky, untroubled by the insignificant intrusion of my presence in his kingdom.' In another tranquil setting, the jarring sound of a military aircraft is heard before the aircraft is seen: 'Into this peaceful, serene landscape the phut-phut of a distant helicopter could be heard becoming louder and scattering the hidden creatures of the forest in all directions.' In other descriptions, the focus on the effect of the flying creature or object on the narrator gave the piece its impact: 'The ease with which it rode the thermals, its huge wings barely moving as it swept across the valley, its eyes fixed on the ground far below, made me gasp. The creature had literally stopped my breathing.'

Occasionally, more clichéd details made the description a little less effective or sometimes the images were not quite successful. Adjectives such as 'beautiful', 'peaceful' or birds described being 'as fast as a cheetah chasing its prey' were less effective than those responses which brought the creature or object alive by closely observed detail and striking, unusual images. The most effective descriptions avoided these more general, stereotypical ideas and focused more closely on details and specific moments.

The second question was more often selected than the first and elicited a wide range of scenarios in some highly effective descriptions. Again, there were many natural landscapes in which narrators derived moments of calm and restorative tranquillity. In some, the turmoil in the narrator's mind was hinted at, so that as the description unfolded this sense of restoration became more credible. In some effective responses, however, the 'moment' described was caused by extreme shock or fear. One response was set in a hospital waiting room in the moment bad news about a loved one was given to a shocked and traumatised narrator. The focus on detail here had more impact than a more straightforward attempt to describe strong feelings: 'The nurse was speaking but I couldn't hear her voice. The dripping tap in the basin behind her and the ticking of the clock on the wall filled my senses. There was a little crack on the lens of her glasses. I wondered how she could see properly. Her starched uniform was so clean, her words like knives reaching into my guts.' In another unusual interpretation of the task, the sense of bewilderment and fear after a murder was depicted: 'There was a spreading red stain on the pale carpet. Somewhere from down a long tunnel my mother's disembodied voice screamed over and over. The room began to spin until I slumped to the floor, my eyes falling absent-mindedly on the knife in my hand.'

Level 5 responses to both questions used a wide range of details and were well-constructed, although were less consistently effective and cohesive overall. At the bottom of Level 5 and in Level 4, responses were sustained and competently organised but were usually a little more predictable or drifted into narrative.

For Content and Structure, responses given marks in Level 4 tended to become narrative quite quickly, especially in the second question where there was some over-explanation of what had happened before the 'moment of stillness'. In some responses to both questions, overlong preambles often gave way to more specific description though the description sometimes became a more straightforward list of what was seen and heard. The descriptive content tended to be a little more stereotypical or general than responses given higher marks.

Less effective responses given marks in Level 3 or below often included less well organised lists of details briefly given rather than developed or were simple narratives about trips into forests or flights to holiday destinations. Occasionally at this Level, the difference between narrative and descriptive writing was not well understood. Where responses were largely descriptive at this Level, details were listed and paragraphing was insecure or not used.

High marks for Style and Accuracy reflected a precise and varied vocabulary, used carefully to achieve specific effects, as well as the technical accuracy of the writing. In both descriptive tasks, highly rewarded responses had a much wider range of vocabulary, precisely deployed to evoke atmosphere and engage the



reader. Highly effective responses showed an ability to use both simple and complex language and sentence structures to create subtle, complex atmospheres of, for example, tranquillity or chaos. In less effective responses, vocabulary was sometimes wide-ranging and complex but used with less precision. In a few cases, this insecure use of language resulted in a style which was difficult to follow and the credit which could be given for a wide-ranging vocabulary was lost by imprecise and inappropriate use. More plain, clichéd or repetitive vocabulary was often characteristic of Level 4 marks.

As is often the case in less secure descriptive writing, tenses switched between past and present, sometimes within sentences. Incomplete or verbless sentences also affected marks given in the middle range. In a few responses there were no complete sentences at all. Lapses in grammar, perhaps minor in isolation but more damaging when persistent, also kept responses out of Level 4 for Style and Accuracy. These included disagreement, especially between pronouns and verbs, and fluctuations in tenses which created an awkward style lacking in fluency, even where other elements were accurate, such as spelling or sentence construction.

### **Ways in which the writing of descriptions can be improved**

- **Try to avoid clichéd scenarios and consider a more individual and original selection of content. Choose a scenario which gives you a range of details on which to focus.**
- **Keep your focus on details which will help you evoke a particular atmosphere.**
- **Write sentences with proper verbs and do not switch tenses.**
- **Use vocabulary precisely: complex words used wrongly do not help your style.**

### **Narrative writing**

**Write a story that includes the words, ‘... this opportunity was too good to miss ...’.**

**Write a story with the title, ‘Lost’ .**

Both narrative writing questions were popular choices for candidates across the mark range and there was a very wide range of plotlines, characters and scenarios in these responses, based on valid, relevant interpretations of the questions. Similar plotlines were used in many narrative responses such as the opportunity to be selected for a sports team in the first and being lost on a trip of some kind in unfamiliar, often dangerous terrain in the second. The construction and execution of these plots, however, varied considerably in quality. More effective narratives showed a clear understanding of the other aspects of developed story-writing apart from a credible plot, such as well drawn characters, a vivid evocation of setting and a shaping of the narrative to interest and engage the reader, varying the pace to provide moments of drama and tension. Where stories were mostly a series of events told in a simple, chronological sequence, the lack of these elements of a more developed structure tended to limit the marks Examiners could award for Content and Structure.

Effective responses were well organised and often original interpretations of the title. In the first question, responses given higher marks for Content and Structure often revolved around the protagonist’s realisation that, despite the risks, the opportunity which presented itself was irresistible. This sense of jeopardy sometimes involved a chance to win some coveted prize in an underhand or illegal way, such as cheating in an examination, betraying a friend to make some kind of gain or becoming embroiled in some illegal enterprise to make money. One response effectively garnered the reader’s sympathy for a poorly paid, hard-working son whose mother was gravely ill and needed funds for her treatment. The opportunity which could not be missed was the chance to organise a robbery at the home of his employer, involving some advanced computer hacking skills. On being confronted by the employer’s family and unable to go through with plan because of his conscience and the innocence of the employer’s small child, his skills were at last recognised by the employer and properly rewarded, allowing him to relieve his mother’s suffering.

There was some careful characterisation of both protagonist and employer and one or two moments of controlled drama and tension which maintained the emotional investment of the reader in the fate of the characters involved. Other storylines which allowed for some skilful construction included a student about to take a crucial examination, beset by anxiety and fear of an oppressive parent, who accidentally faced being able to have sight of the papers beforehand. The story was constructed interestingly, starting as a memory just as the now-grown protagonist was about to receive an accolade in his profession, with the bullying parent now frail and incapable. The characterisation of these two characters was spare but highly effective. At the beginning, for example, the parent was described as ‘cold, irritated by his son’s nervous prattle at the

breakfast table, anxious to be gone to the shiny palace of his workplace where his employees feared him and were silent.'

There were also some very effective narratives to address the alternative narrative question. The idea of 'Lost' was interpreted in a wide variety of ways, most of which were valid and gave candidates a range of approaches to adopt. There were many literal interpretations where characters got lost on hiking trips in desolate, frightening landscapes, on car journeys, during visits to unfamiliar cities, airports or other busy areas. One scenario which often worked well was for a younger sibling to become detached from a usually bored or irritated older brother or sister and to get lost in a potentially dangerous environment such as a fairground, theme park or shopping centre.

There was often some moral lesson learned by the older sibling in realising how important their family was and while most stories ended with the safe return of the lost child, some bleak outcomes had consequences which were far-reaching for the protagonist. One such tale was told from the vantage point of old age with the narrator looking back, many years later, on a life blighted by losing a younger sibling who never returned. Again, it was often the varied pace and careful use of language to build tension which made these narratives effective and drew the reader in, as well as the care taken over characterisation and setting. The bleak narrative mentioned above, for example, depended on a carefully observed description of the lost little girl for its impact at the end: 'She's still there somewhere, still six years old, spinning around in her new pink dress, licking the chocolate off her little fingers without a care in the world.'

Narratives given marks in Level 5 were usually more straightforward in structure and approach but cohesive and with some engaging features. Examiners could award marks in Level 5 for Content and Structure where the narrative was organised and there was a clear attempt to create a developed story, relevant to the task. Responses in this range were usually chronological accounts but were cohesive and balanced and contained a suitable ending depicting some resolution. There were many which involved mobile phones that didn't work or cars that broke down and where credible characters and settings were created, Examiners could award marks in Level 5. Effective characterisation of the protagonist or narrator was often a factor in Examiners selecting a mark in Level 5 rather than Level 4, especially in responses to the second question where the response was paragraphed and organised but had more of a discursive rather than narrative shape and purpose. While some Level 5 narratives were a little predictable, stories needed to be well-managed with some conscious shaping beyond a simple retelling of events.

Level 4 marks for Content and Structure were awarded for stories which were relevant to the task but were less developed and used fewer elements of developed narrative writing. At this Level, stories were often more dependent on a series of events, without the preparation of setting and character to engage the reader. A simplicity of content or a lack of development rather than weaknesses in organisation were typical at this level. Similar plots and scenarios were often used as those in more effective narratives but these were less effective in engaging the reader. For the 'Lost' question, accidents or breakdowns were just as common but more time and focus were given to relating events than developing credible, rounded characters. In the first question, simple sports stories or academic successes were common, often cohesive overall but with limited development. While most less effective narratives had some simple but clear sequence of events, there were fewer features of a developed narrative and the reader was less engaged as a result.

Responses given marks in Level 4 and lower were usually simple accounts of events and showed limited awareness of the reader or the features of narrative writing which elevate an account into a developed story. While there was usually some relevance to the task selected, the plot was either very simple or confusing and characters lacked substance, often appearing only as names, and their motivations and relationships were not outlined. Dialogue was either used very little or, occasionally, too much, with limited storytelling to help the reader make sense of events.

High marks for Style and Accuracy were given for responses where the writing was engaging and varied in vocabulary and where different sentence structures were controlled and used to create particular effects. The characteristics of Level 6 writing included a fluent and varied use of language which was subtle enough to create a range of effects and helped to engage the reader. Punctuation within sentences, especially in the use of dialogue, was secure in responses in Level 6, though very rarely below this Level. A sophisticated and precise range of vocabulary allowed Examiners to consider the highest marks for Style and Accuracy. Responses awarded marks in Level 5 tended to be less ambitious and complex but still mostly accurate and largely fluent whereas Level 4 responses were plain in style and lacked some range and precision in vocabulary. At this level, the writing had few serious errors which affected the clarity of meaning, such as weak sentence control, sentence separation and grammar errors. Quite common errors of grammar and expression appeared increasingly in responses given low Level 5 and Level 4 responses, such as misagreements and some awkward use of prepositions. Occasionally, imprecise and somewhat over-

ambitious vocabulary led to a style which was not lucid or easily understood. Errors in sentence control and separation, as well as lapses in tenses, limited otherwise competently told stories to Level 4, as did frequent errors in basic punctuation or grammar. The incorrect use of participles or errors in grammatical agreement contributed to a lack of fluency and accuracy which kept many responses out of Level 5. Similarly, basic punctuation errors and the misspelling of simple words and wrongly selected homophones sometimes appeared in otherwise competent writing, limiting the mark for Style and Accuracy. Weak demarcation of sentences, most commonly the use of commas where full stops were needed, was very common in Level 4/low Level 5 writing.

**Ways in which the writing of narratives can be improved:**

- **Think about how to interest and intrigue the reader in shaping your narrative.**
- **Consider imaginative ways to tell your story, apart from a chronological account.**
- **Characters' thoughts and feelings help to engage your reader. Do not rely on events.**
- **Check your writing for errors which will badly affect your mark, such as basic spelling and punctuation mistakes.**
- **Choose your vocabulary with precision and consider the power of simple words and sentences to create particular effects.**

# FIRST LANGUAGE ENGLISH

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<p><b>Paper 0990/03</b> <b>Coursework Portfolio</b></p>
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## **Key messages**

Candidates did well when they:

- adapted their writing style to demonstrate an understanding of the needs of different audiences and context for each of the three assignments
- read critically and thoroughly evaluated the implicit and explicit ideas, opinions, and attitudes they identified in a text in Assignment 1
- assimilated ideas from a text to provide developed, thoughtful and sophisticated responses in Assignment 1
- supported their analysis, evaluation and comments with a detailed and specific selection of relevant ideas from a text in Assignment 1
- wrote original and interesting responses which reflected their personal ideas, feelings and interpretations of events and situations
- wrote with confidence using a wide range of vocabulary with precision and for specific effect in all assignments
- sequenced sentences within paragraphs in a way which maintained clarity of arguments, description, or narrative
- demonstrated a high level of accuracy in their writing
- engaged in a process of careful editing and proofreading to identify and correct errors in their writing.

The best practice for the production and presentation of coursework portfolios was when:

- centres followed the guidelines and instructions set out in the Course syllabus and the Coursework Handbook
- a wide range of appropriate texts were used for Assignment 1, which contained ideas and opinions to which candidates could respond, and were relevant to their interests
- centres set a range of appropriately challenging tasks which allowed candidates to respond individually and originally to topics and subjects they were interested in, or of which they had personal knowledge or experience
- teachers gave general advice for improvement at the end of the first drafts
- following feedback, candidates revised and edited their first drafts to improve their writing
- candidates checked, revised, and edited their final drafts to identify and correct errors
- teachers provided marks and summative comments at the end of the final draft of each assignment which clearly related to the appropriate mark level descriptors
- teachers indicated all errors in the final drafts of each completed assignment
- centres engaged in a process of internal moderation and clearly indicated any mark adjustments in the coursework portfolios, on the Individual Record Cards, and on the Candidate Assessment Summary Forms.

## **General comments**

A significant number of candidates produced interesting coursework portfolios which contained varied work across a range of contexts. There was evidence to show that many centres set tasks which allowed candidates flexibility to respond to subjects related to their personal interests or experiences. The majority of coursework portfolios contained writing of three different genres. There were very few incomplete folders seen by moderators.

Moderators reported an improvement in the number of centres following the instructions in the coursework handbook and in this session most centres provided the correct paperwork and completed all relevant forms

accurately. The Moderation Team reported that many centres provided summative comments closely related to the mark schemes at the end of each completed assignment. These were extremely helpful in helping moderators to understand how and why marks had been awarded and centres are thanked for following the process as instructed in the Coursework Handbook.

The major concern for all moderators was that some markers of the coursework portfolios did not indicate errors in the final draft of each assignment and/or provide a summative comment which referred to the marking level descriptors to justify the marks awarded. Some folders had no teacher annotation or marks on the assignments at all. Failure to follow this process often resulted in inaccurate or inconsistent marking and was one of the main reasons for adjustment of marks by moderators.

## Administration

Successful administration was when centres:

- indicated all errors in the final draft of each assignment
- carried out a thorough process of internal moderation which was clearly signposted on the assignments themselves as well as on all relevant documentation
- supplied marks and specific comments relating to the mark schemes at the end of the final draft of each assignment
- accurately completed the Coursework Assessment Summary Form (CASF) and ICRC, including any amendments made during internal moderation
- ensured that each coursework folder was stapled or tagged and securely attached to the Individual Candidate Record Card (ICRC)
- submitted their sample of coursework folders without using plastic or cardboard wallets.

## Internal Moderation

Centres who followed the instructions for carrying out internal moderation as directed in the Coursework Handbook are thanked for engaging in this important process. There was a general trend of greater accuracy of marking by centres where there was clear evidence of internal moderation than centres where no internal moderation process was evident on the coursework folders and documentation.

Some centres did not record changes made at internal moderation on the candidates' Individual Candidate Record Cards (ICRCs) which caused some confusion about the final mark awarded to candidates. Centres are requested to ensure that any changes made at internal moderation are signposted clearly on the work itself then also recorded on the ICRC as well as on the Coursework Assessment Summary Form (CASF). This is essential to ensure that the correct marks are recorded for all candidates.

## Using the coursework handbook

A cause of concern for all moderators was that some issues persist even though there are clear instructions in the Coursework Handbook, and the same concerns have been raised in previous Principal Moderator Reports. To ensure effective and accurate marking is achieved, and that all paperwork arrives safely for moderation, it is essential that all the instructions given in the Coursework Handbook, and on the relevant forms, are carefully followed. In future sessions centres will be required to complete a checklist and include it with the sample.

Below highlights the three most significant issues related to the administration and annotation of candidates' work which led to mark adjustments by moderators:

### 1 Indicating all errors in the final version of each assignment

- Some of the assignments showed little or no evidence of complying with the instruction in the Coursework Handbook that markers should indicate all errors in the final draft of each assignment. This process helps markers to effectively and accurately evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a piece of work and to apply the most appropriate 'best fit' mark from the mark scheme. If this process does not take place, it is difficult for markers to make a balanced judgement. In several centres there was evidence across all three assignments that markers had awarded marks from the higher levels of the assessment criteria to work containing frequent, and often serious, errors that had not been annotated by the marker. This inevitably led to a downward adjustment of marks by the moderator. It is important for all who mark the coursework portfolios to fully understand the importance of indicating and taking

into account all errors in the final draft of each assignment. To avoid adjustment of marks for accuracy, it is essential that centres engage in this process and clearly indicate errors in their candidates' work.

## 2 Individual Candidate Record Cards (ICRC)

- Some centres did not attach the portfolios of work to the ICRC in accordance with the instructions in the Coursework Handbook and point 4 on the electronic version of the ICRC (although this was a smaller number than in previous sessions).
- Some confusion was caused when a small number of centres included ICRCs for the whole cohort as well as the ICRCs for the sample sent; centres only need to send the ICRCs (securely attached to the coursework portfolio) for the candidates in the sample submitted for moderation.
- On some folders there were errors in the transcription of internally moderated mark changes, or it was unclear which mark was the final one. Where internal moderation has taken place, any mark changes should be transferred from the assignment to the ICRC to ensure that the moderator has a clear understanding of all mark changes.

## 3 Coursework portfolios

- A significant number of centres did not collate the individual assignments into complete coursework portfolios but instead placed loose pages of work into the grey plastic envelopes and despatched them to Cambridge; this caused moderators some difficulties when assembling the coursework folders and delayed the moderation process. Centres should secure each individual coursework folder using tags or staples with the ICRC securely fastened as a cover sheet.
- Moderators reported that several centres used plastic or cardboard wallets to present candidates' work as an alternative to securely attaching the individual assignments to the ICRC; this caused extra work for moderators and increased the risk of work being mislaid. Centres are requested not to place coursework folders into plastic or cardboard wallets.
- Some centres included more than one rough draft; this is unnecessary and can lead to confusion. Please ensure that the rough draft included is clearly labelled as a draft.
- Occasionally rough drafts contained annotations and specific feedback; centres are reminded that when markers offer feedback on rough draft, it should be general advice. No errors should be indicated, and the marker should not offer corrections or improvements. Overmarking of rough drafts can be raised as malpractice by moderators.
- Some centres included documentation not required for the moderation process; the only paperwork that should be included in the sample is clearly indicated in the Coursework Handbook. There will also be a checklist for future submissions which centres should complete and include with their coursework sample.

### Comments on specific assignments:

#### Assignment 1

Candidates were successful when:

- they responded to interesting texts which contained engaging content
- they demonstrated analysis and evaluation of the individual ideas and opinions identified within a text
- the form, purpose and intended audience of their writing was clear to the reader
- they wrote in a fluent, accurate and appropriate style.

Moderators commented that many candidates responded to texts which were of an appropriate length and challenge and which appealed to the interests of the candidates. Successful texts included articles exploring issues relevant to young people, for example, the growth of online learning during the Covid pandemic, feminism, social media, the pros and cons of having tattoos, national issues in the candidates' own countries, and environmental issues. Less successful texts were those which were old and outdated or were of limited personal interest to the candidates. Texts selected for **Assignment 1** should be an appropriate length, explore ideas and offer opinions, and use rhetorical or literary devices designed to provoke or sustain the reader's interest to ensure that the text offers scope for candidates to fully engage and respond to it in a sustained piece of writing. Centres are encouraged to use a good range of relevant and up-to-date texts for **Assignment 1**. Other less successful texts were ones where the candidate fully endorsed the writer's views and opinions because they offered few opportunities for evaluating ideas and opinions, as required by the mark scheme. It is also crucial to select texts for their quality of written communication: moderators reported

seeing a number of poorly written texts taken from a variety of websites. Many of these were too long and tended to be informative, offering very little scope for rigorous evaluation or analysis. Moderators also reported seeing texts which contained potentially offensive or disturbing material despite this being mentioned in previous reports. This may indicate that candidates were allowed to make their own text choices, but centres are reminded that it is their responsibility to ensure that all texts used for Assignment 1 are fit for purpose, and this includes avoiding offensive or unsuitable material. Disagreeing with completely unreasonable or offensive viewpoints also provides fewer opportunities for rigorous evaluation and can be far less challenging for able candidates.

Some centres set one text for a class or sometimes whole cohort. When this approach was adopted by a centre there was usually a tendency for candidates to produce responses which were very similar in content and structure due to heavy scaffolding. This made it difficult for candidates to create the original and sophisticated responses expected of the higher-level assessment criteria and was sometimes a reason for adjustments of marks. Centres are advised that teaching a text to a whole class and offering a scaffolded plan for the response may be a useful teaching strategy for initially developing the necessary skills and knowledge for Assignment 1, but this approach should not be used for the final coursework submission.

If centres are unsure about how to approach and set tasks for **Assignment 1**, they can refer to the Course Syllabus and the Coursework Handbook. Both documents provide advice and guidance about task setting and text selection and can be found on the School Support Hub via the main Cambridge website.

## Reading

Although some centres were accurate with their marking of reading, as in the previous moderation sessions, there was a significant trend for many centres to award marks from the highest-level assessment criteria to work which more appropriately met the lower-level assessment criteria. Candidates who successfully met the higher-level assessment criteria were those who demonstrated a consistently evaluative approach to most of the ideas and opinions in a text, and provided a developed, sophisticated response which made direct reference or included quotes from the text. Candidates who engaged in a general discussion about the topic or subject of a text, or those who did not thoroughly evaluate a text, tended to produce work which more appropriately met the Level 4 assessment criteria in Table B (reading). The most common reasons for adjustments to a centre's marks for reading were when moderators identified a trend of candidates engaging in a general discussion about the topic of a text/s, or when the number of points covered were 'appropriate' rather than 'thorough'.

## Writing

Many candidates responded to texts in an appropriate form and style. Letters were the most popular choice of form, and many candidates demonstrated some understanding of audience and purpose. When candidates were less successful with writing, it was often because the form, intended audience and purpose of the writing was not clear. This made it difficult for the candidates to meet the highest-level assessment criteria and was a reason for adjustments to writing marks for **Assignment 1**. Successful responses to Assignment 1 tasks were those in which the writing was highly effective, almost always accurate, and consistent throughout in the application of form and style. Work which showed insecurity with form and style, such as the omission of an appropriate ending to a letter, a limited or inconsistent use of rhetorical devices for speeches, or lack of clarity of the intended audience, tended to meet the assessment criteria for Level 5 or below, Table A (writing) or below. The moderators noted that there was a general tendency for many centres to award marks from the highest-level assessment criteria to work which more appropriately met the lower-level assessment criteria.

Another common reason for the adjustment of marks for writing was because of the accuracy of the candidates' writing. When errors impaired meaning, such as the incorrect construction of sentences or use of grammar, typing errors, or the incorrect selection of words from spellcheck, the overall quality and efficacy of the discussion was affected. Errors such as these are classed as serious and make it difficult for candidates to meet the higher-level assessment criteria; this type of writing is more characteristic of writing achieving marks from the middle to the lower levels of the assessment criteria. Moderators also noted a tendency for centres to over-reward vocabulary that had some merit in its selection but was not always used precisely or effectively in the response.

### Advice to candidates for Assignment 1:

- thoroughly explore, challenge, and discuss the ideas in the text
- avoid making general comments about the topic or subject of the text, instead, ensure that comments are specifically related to the ideas, opinions or attitudes identified in the text
- look for, and use inferences made implicitly in the text
- look for contradictions or misleading assumptions in the text and comment on them
- develop points to create a thorough, detailed, and clear line of argument or discussion
- make sure that the audience and purpose is clear and adapt the written style accordingly
- proof-read assignments to ensure punctuation, vocabulary choices and grammar are correct.

### Assignment 2 (description)

The majority of tasks set for **Assignment 2** were appropriate and encouraged candidates to write in a descriptive style. Many students wrote engaging and vivid descriptions from experience or their imaginations, which were a pleasure to read. Moderators also noticed that there were relatively fewer descriptions which slipped into narrative than in previous sessions, but this is still a regularly observed flaw in descriptive writing assignments, sometimes due to the nature of the tasks set. Moderators reported seeing some tasks which invited candidates to describe an experience or trip which tended to lead to tasks more suited to narrative writing. Centres are reminded to set descriptive tasks and remind candidates to avoid using narrative writing techniques in their responses.

The most engaging and successful descriptions were those where the candidates had carefully selected vocabulary to create a realistic and credible sense of atmosphere, place or person, and which were well sequenced and carefully managed for deliberate effect. Successful responses included descriptions of towns or cities in which candidates lived, important rituals or festivals, or significant settings or places. Less successful tasks were those which asked candidates to describe events or scenarios of which they had no personal experience, or settings and situations in which the candidate clearly had no interest or engagement. Many of these responses relied on unconvincing descriptive writing which did not engage the reader. This type of writing is characteristic of work achieving marks from the middle to lower levels of the assessment criteria, although it was noticed that many centres awarded marks from the higher-level assessment criteria. This was quite often a reason for adjustment of marks from Table C (content and structure).

Whilst many candidates showed a secure and confident understanding of language, there was still a general tendency by a number of centres to award marks from the higher-level assessment criteria to work which contained ineffective overuse of literary techniques. Some moderators commented that this seemed to be actively encouraged by some centres. To achieve marks from the higher-level assessment criteria, candidates need to demonstrate a confident and secure understanding and use of language for specific effect. This is difficult for candidates to achieve if they over-use adjectives, include inappropriate images or idioms and/or use obscure or archaic language. The overworking of language was a common reason for moderators adjusting marks.

Another common reason for adjustments to marks was when moderators identified a trend of awarding marks from the higher-level assessment criteria to writing that contained a limited range of sentence structures, incorrectly constructed sentences, or contained frequent errors with punctuation and grammar. Writing that achieves marks from Levels 5 and 6 of Table D (style and accuracy) is expected to be consistently accurate, consistent with the chosen register, and demonstrate an ability to use a range of sentences for specific effect. The moderators saw some writing which displayed these characteristics, but a significant number of the assignments receiving marks from centres from Levels 5 and 6 in Table D more frequently displayed the characteristics of writing expected from Level 4 or below. Many candidates 'told' the reader about the scene being described, rather than engaging the reader with a careful and precise use of vocabulary and images. The moderators also noticed a general trend for candidates to use repeated sentence structures and create almost list-like descriptions.

In addition, the work of a significantly large number of candidates contained frequent and serious errors which impaired the meaning and overall effect of the candidates' work. The most frequent errors were missing prepositions and articles, tense inconsistencies, typing errors, commas used instead of full stops and grammar errors. Quite often, the meaning of sentences was blurred, or meaning was lost altogether. Errors which affect the meaning and clarity of writing cannot be considered as 'minor'. As mentioned earlier in this report, the absence of the indication of all errors made it difficult for the moderators to determine whether errors had been considered when marks had been awarded; moderators noted that on some weaker assignments no errors had been annotated and the summative comment declared a high level of accuracy.



Accurate and effective application of the assessment criteria is achieved through the careful weighing up of the strengths and weaknesses of a piece of writing and the application of a mark which ‘best fits’ the assessment criteria. To achieve this, it is essential that errors are identified and indicated by the markers. Engaging in this process allows markers to effectively balance the strengths and weaknesses of a piece of writing and apply marks that are most appropriate to their candidates’ work.

Information and guidance on how to apply the mark schemes are given in Coursework Handbook. Examples of good tasks and exemplification of the standard of work expected at the different levels of the mark scheme are also provided in the Coursework Handbook.

### Advice to candidates for Assignment 2:

- use a range of vocabulary suited to the context and content of the description
- create images appropriate for the context and content of the description
- create an engaging imagined scenario using language designed to have an impact on the reader
- avoid slipping into a narrative style
- proof-read responses to identify and correct common errors such as missing articles and prepositions, switches in tenses and typing errors
- avoid repetitive sentence structures; instead use a range of sentences for create specific effect.

### Assignment 3 (narrative)

Much of the task setting for **Assignment 3** was generally appropriate and moderators saw some engaging and effective narratives which were well controlled and convincing. Moderators reported seeing some tasks which did not invite narrative responses as they were too informative. Successful narratives were those in which candidates created stories characterised by well-defined plots and strongly developed features of narrative writing such as description, strong characterisation, and a clear sense of progression. The narration of personal experiences and events, or responses where candidates were able to create convincing details and events within their chosen genre, tended to be more successful. Candidates were generally less successful when their understanding of audience and genre was insecure, and the resulting narratives lacked credibility and conviction. Moderators commented that this sort of writing was often seen when candidates were writing in the genre of detective or murder mystery stories. Stories such as these, although containing a definite beginning, middle and ending, were often unrealistic and incredible, or lacked development of character or plot. Some responses failed to conclude properly, ending with an unconvincing or unsatisfactory cliff hanger. This sort of writing is classed as ‘relevant’ or ‘straightforward’ and should expect to be awarded marks from Level 4 or below from Table C (content and structure). Moderators noticed that there was a trend with a significant majority of the work sampled for centres to award marks from Levels 5 and 6 to writing which more appropriately fitted the Level 4, or below, assessment criteria. This was quite frequently a reason for marks being adjusted.

When moderators saw very accurate work containing precise well-chosen vocabulary, and which maintained a consistent register throughout, they could agree when centres awarded marks from Levels 5 and 6 in Table D (style and accuracy). As with **Assignments 1** and **2**, moderators noticed a significant trend for centres to award marks from the highest levels of the mark scheme to work which contained frequent and persistent errors and which more accurately met the assessment criteria from Level 4 or below in Table D. This was a common reason for adjustment of marks. The comments made for **Assignment 2** with regards to accuracy and the annotation of errors are also relevant to **Assignment 3** and should be noted by all who mark coursework.

### Advice to candidates for Assignment 3:

- create stories that are realistic, credible, and convincing
- remember that characters’ thoughts and feelings help to engage the reader
- avoid clichéd scenarios and consider an individual and original selection of content
- carefully proof-read and check assignments for errors such as punctuation, use of prepositions and articles, tenses, and construction of sentences.

# FIRST LANGUAGE ENGLISH

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Paper 0990/04  
Speaking and Listening Test

## Key messages

Centre administration was of a high standard and most centres coped well with their application of Submit for Assessment (SfA).

Correct timing in the test is vital to successful performance. Generally, the candidates who observed the 3–4 minutes allowed for **Part 1** through careful preparation and practice were more successful. The timing of **Part 2** was more problematic for some centres. Examiners must ensure a minimum of 7 minutes is allowed each candidate. Other centres ignored the maximum 8 minute ceiling and allowed candidates to converse for much longer. This is unnecessary and often counter-productive.

Moderators reported relatively few issues with the general level of accuracy of the assessment. Where moderators made recommendations of scaling it was usually because centres had not differentiated appropriately between different levels of attainment, particularly in **Part 2** and specifically between Level 4 and Level 5.

Where lenient assessment had taken place at the top end of the mark scheme for responses to **Part 1**, it was often because the candidates had chosen topics that were not sufficiently challenging which resulted in mainly narrative presentations. These were often lacking sufficient development or a defined structure.

Where lenient assessment had taken place at the top end of the mark scheme for responses to **Part 2**, it was often because the candidates were given credit for responses that were not 'consistently' developed or where the examiner was in control of the conversation and the candidate was too passive. It is for this reason that a **Part 2 – Conversation** based heavily on a question and answer model is discouraged.

Where centres had been severe in the lower levels of the mark scheme it was often because the centre did not have a range of abilities represented in the cohort. Sometimes centres were reluctant to 'bunch' marks even though performance suggested they should.

There were few reported instances of the rank order of merit being problematic within centres.

Each candidate's test requires a full formal introduction to be made prior to the beginning of **Part 1**. This introduction should include the centre name and number, the candidate's full name and candidate number, the date on which the test is being recorded and the name of the examiner. This is important information for the moderator.

## General comments

### **Administration**

For most centres, administration of the test was diligent, accurate and easy to follow. Summary forms were completed to a high degree of accuracy and samples uploaded to SfA were well-chosen and reflected the full range of marks awarded within the centre.

Where there were issues, the following guidelines may help to clarify administrative requirements:

- Uploading the recordings for all the entered cohort remains the preferred option for moderators. This allows a moderator to carefully choose recordings to moderate that accurately reflect the performance of the centre across the whole range of its marking.
- Where instructions to centres regarding uploading samples to SfA differ, it is important that the centre chooses wisely which recordings to upload. Always the top and bottom marks in the centre's range must be included. A centre should consider which candidates' recordings best reflect the marks that have been awarded so that a fair representation of the centre's performance can be made by the moderator.
- Every test should begin with a full introduction to include the date. For Component 04 it is the examiner who should complete the introduction. There were few instances of centres using generic introductions to their cohorts: these remain unacceptable.
- In a few cases the sound quality of the recordings was poor. Mostly, this was because the candidates were placed too far from the microphones being used.
- Internal moderation is actively encouraged, particularly where multiple examiners are involved within a centre. Where only one examiner is involved, it may be possible to pair with another centre to discuss standards and to share good practice.
- When internal moderation has taken place and adjustments to marks have been made, it is helpful to the moderator if changes are indicated on the summary forms uploaded to SfA, where this is possible.

### **Conduct of the test**

Once again, the standard of examining was generally very good with candidates being given plenty of opportunities to express their ideas and demonstrate their range of oratory skills productively.

Where there were concerns, the following advice is offered:

- The First Language Test is very different to the one prescribed for Second Language English. It is the centre's responsibility to apply the rubric of the test correctly. The current syllabus for First Language English is very clear on how to proceed.
- Each test should begin with the examiner's formal introduction and be followed immediately by the candidate performing **Part 1**, the **Individual Talk**. If an examiner feels that a candidate is very nervous and needs a moment of calming prior to the formal test beginning, it is recommended this is done before the recording is started.
- The examiner's role in **Part 1** is to be a passive listener who does not comment or interrupt during the presentation. Candidates should be discouraged from asking direct questions to the examiner in Part 1. Examiners should only intercede if a candidate is incapable of continuing the presentation without prompting but this should be reflected in the mark awarded as content cannot be considered more than 'adequate' in such instances.
- Given that both Speaking and Listening are assessed in **Part 2**, it is important that the conversations last long enough for candidates to demonstrate their strengths in both mediums.
- It is also important that the conversations offer sufficient challenge to allow candidates to demonstrate the range of skills they possess. Focused questioning and prompts are needed to move the conversation forward, together with an adaptability on the part of the examiner to absorb the candidate's previous comments and to extend the conversation as a result. A **Part 2** that is merely a question and answer session is not a natural conversation and is limited in terms of the marks that can be awarded.
- Examiners who rely on a pre-determined set of questions disadvantage their candidates, in particular with regard to the mark for Speaking in **Part 2**. A question from the examiner should lead to an answer from the candidate which then may lead to a comment or prompt from the examiner that is connected to the same content matter.
- Examiners who dominate conversations or who frequently interrupt candidates during the conversation do so to the disadvantage of those candidates.

### **Comments on specific sections of the test**

#### ***Part 1 – Individual Talk***

Many responses to **Part 1** were traditional presentations seeking to inform, explain and analyse. There is absolutely nothing wrong with this approach as it is the safest way to deliver a good mark for the candidate if organised, prepared and delivered successfully. Where the format varied there were some interesting monologues, often presented in character or based on the candidate's own fictional prose or poetry.

There was a wide range of varied and interesting subjects delivered with enthusiasm and good knowledge of the chosen subject matter. Most candidates prepared well, researched their chosen topics and kept within the prescribed time limit. Some candidates had 'over-prepared' to a point where they were concentrating so much on delivering a memorised response verbatim that they forgot that, in essence, **Part 1** is a performance piece that requires engagement with an imaginary audience. This led to issues with delivery and a somewhat stilted performance not commensurate with Level 5.

Very strong performances in **Part 1** successfully combined excellent knowledge and development of a topic, a tightly defined structure timed accordingly and a lively delivery style. Choosing a topic that can be explored and developed within the 3–4 minute time limit remains the first step to success. A topic chosen merely to impress a moderator with its supposed maturity or complexity but one with which the candidate has little empathy, knowledge or experience, will almost certainly lead to a lower mark than one chosen because the candidate has a real enthusiasm for it. Similarly, 'Wikipedia' style talks where there is linear content based on numerous facts but little developed opinion or analysis do not tend to be very successful because they lack sufficient depth to engage the audience fully. It should also be remembered that half the marks for the test are accrued in **Part 2** so candidates have to be prepared to discuss their chosen topic in some depth.

A strong element of presentations achieving Level 5 in **Part 1** remains the structure underpinning the talks and a clear focus on timing. A clearly defined persuasive argument or a cyclical arrangement that brings the concluding statement back to the initial point often helps candidates to fulfil 'the full and well-organised' descriptor for Level 5. Less successful structures tend to meander from point to point without such a strong sense of purpose. While structure itself does not confirm a mark in Level 5, it does provide a strong basis for candidates to exhibit their linguistic and presentational skills. Self-reflection and analysis remain strong elements in moving a talk beyond 'adequate'. Stronger candidates integrated a good range of language devices into their presentations adapting register, tone and pace to suit. Rhetorical questioning, the use of figurative language and other linguistic techniques were also used purposefully.

Some examples of **Part 1** topics from this series that worked well include:

Controlling the narrative  
My hobby – crocheting  
Coffee addict  
Colonising Mars  
Benefits of having a pet  
Redefining beauty  
Is E-sport a sport?  
A message to my childhood bully (a fictional monologue)  
Moving from Hong Kong  
My love of music  
Behind the scenes (stage crew)  
The value of travel  
Mindfulness  
Hard work

Some examples of **Part 1** topics from this series that were less successful include:

Hanging out with friends (unstructured and lacking any depth)  
Pollution (too generalised with no specific focus or point of view)  
Technology (too generalised with no specific focus or point of view)

## **Part 2 – Conversation**

Generally, the **Part 2** conversations were well conducted and examiners asked appropriate and interesting questions which enabled the candidates to extend and develop their ideas. After initial questioning to stimulate the conversation, the use of prompts, instead of a steady stream of further questioning, was often more effective in eliciting developed responses from candidates. Unlike in **Part 1**, the examiner can influence the quality of the candidate's performance in **Part 2**. The most skilful examiners asked open questions that fed directly from responses given by the candidate. Good examiners engaged fully with the topic and corresponding discussion and increased the complexity and subtlety of the questions in order to allow candidates to appropriately demonstrate their ability to deal with 'changes in the direction of the conversation'. It should be noted that this descriptor does not mean that examiners should steer the conversation away from the central topic to something completely different. 'Changes in the direction' can mean introducing a new perspective on the topic or challenging a previously stated opinion.

Generally it was the case that examiners were supportive of candidates by remaining focused on the topic matter introduced in **Part 1** and showing an appropriate level of interest. Occasionally examiners spoke in too much detail and took too long to ask their questions. On rare occasions the examiner interrupted a candidate's response when there was clearly more to be heard.

The examiner needs to engage with the candidate but needs also to ensure sufficient challenge in **Part 2** to stretch the candidate to perform at the highest level possible. In successful responses to **Part 2**, examiners managed the conversation with an awareness of providing openings for candidates to respond and develop points – they took part in the conversation but were mindful of moving on and asking questions or using prompts as a priority.

Where there were issues and improvement can be made in examining **Part 2** the following advice is offered:

- The timing of **Part 2** is controlled by the examiner. It is the examiner's responsibility to ensure **Part 2** lasts for at least 7 minutes.
- **Part 2** conversations solely conducted on a question and answer basis, where the series of questions is only loosely connected and responses from the candidate are then ignored in favour of the next question on the list, do not fulfil the descriptors in the higher levels.
- It is important that questions are open and not closed. Closed questions do not allow candidates to consistently answer in the necessary detail and depth to move beyond 'adequate'.
- Examiners must ensure the conversation is connected to the ideas presented in **Part 1** for the whole of **Part 2**. Veering into more generalised conversation does not help the candidate's performance.

### **Advice to centres**

- Adhering to the correct timings for each part of the test will allow candidates the best opportunity to be successful.
- Make sure candidates know the timings of the test. Ensure that their Individual Talk is 3–4 minutes long. You can help them in the test by interceding before 5 minutes and initiating the conversation.
- Do not interrupt candidates in **Part 1** unless they have exceeded the allowed time. Only if they really do have nothing to add should you progress the test by intervening with prompts or words of encouragement. Your intercession should be reflected in the mark awarded for **Part 1**.
- Do not ask questions in **Part 1** as this signals the end of this part of the test and the beginning of **Part 2**, the conversation.
- Ensure a full 7–8 minutes is allowed for the conversation in **Part 2**.
- Administering the conversation in **Part 2** can be quite challenging for examiners so it may be necessary to prepare some relevant back-up questions but they should not be restrictive.
- Helping a candidate choose the most appropriate topic is key to them being successful in the test.
- Try to dissuade candidates from delivering a memorised talk in **Part 1**. It is much better to prepare using a cue card so that what is said has some level of spontaneity.
- Scaffold questions strategically to encourage higher level responses from more able candidates. This will help them to access the higher mark ranges.

### **Advice to candidates**

- Choose a topic you are passionate about and one you can talk about for 3–4 minutes then discuss in even more detail for 7–8 minutes.
- Practise your presentation but do not learn it by heart.
- Have bullet point notes to help prompt you in **Part 1** but not the 'full speech'. 'Talk through' each bullet point in a lively and enthusiastic way.
- Structure your Individual Talk carefully, making sure that it develops points and stays within the 3–4 minutes allowed. Long talks do not earn more marks!
- Respond to the prompts and questions from the examiner in **Part 2** as fully as possible by developing your ideas, giving examples and discussing other aspects of the topic if you can.
- Watch good examples of speeches/presentations/talks to learn how good speakers make their speeches lively and interesting. Try to copy these techniques.
- Practise simulations of **Part 2**. There are as many marks available for **Part 2** as for **Part 1** so treat each part as equally important.