

ENGLISH A1

Overall grade boundaries

Grade:	E	D	C	B	A
Mark range:	0 - 7	8 - 15	16 - 22	23 - 28	29 - 36

General Comments

Examiners often receive the impression that supervisors have not read the *Extended Essay Guide* carefully enough, especially the section on Treatment of the Topic, and are failing to make candidates aware of the criteria and what they mean.

The range and suitability of the work submitted

There were fewer really outstanding essays this year but at the same time there was some improvement at the lower end of the scale. The range of topics was as wide as ever, though with fewer essays on Shakespeare but the usual cluster on dystopian fiction and the novels of Jane Austen. Contemporary novels are becoming increasingly popular and to one examiner it seemed as though this was the year of Harry Potter. Enthusiastic interest, such as J. K. Rowling often inspires, is of course not a sufficient condition for a successful essay since the nature of the research question is crucial: thus 'The significance of mythological allusions in the Harry Potter series' provided an appropriate literary focus, whereas the question of whether Rowling was inspired by Hitler in writing the Harry Potter novels simply steered the candidate off into biography and speculation instead of analysis of the texts. In general the best work is usually based on classics like Shakespeare, Dickens and Austen or on contemporary texts of some weight and significance such as works by Morrison, Ishiguro, Plath or Heaney. This year there was a fine essay on Sylvia Plath which ranged across the *Collected Poems* and took its evidence from poems less well-known than 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus', which normally figure centrally in student essays. There were also fine essays on the nature of the imagery in Ishiguro's *A Pale View of the Hills* and *Never Let Me Go* and on the significance of the stage-directions in *Death of a Salesman* and *A Streetcar named Desire*.

The following are examples of research questions / titles that produced successful essays:

- 'Examine, compare and contrast Lorca's concept of Duende with the English Romantic Sublime expressed in the poetry of William Blake.'
- 'The significance and the impact of parental figures on the heroines of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*.'

- 'Re-reading rape: an analysis of the function and presentation of rape in Thomas Middleton's *Women Beware Women* and Rowley and Middleton's *The Changeling*.'
- 'In Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* what are the underlying causes and the extents of the crimes committed by Briony and Amir, and does either of them ever achieve atonement?'
- 'Shakespeare's and Beckett's influence on Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.'
- 'John Donne's combination of the discourses of love and religion.'
- 'The importance of origin, isolation and death in characterizing the Creature in *Frankenstein* and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*.'
- 'How does the narrator's perspective influence the reader's understanding of *The Great Gatsby*?'

Some of these topics involved a comparison of two texts and succeeded in making them mutually illuminating, as did a comparative examination of Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* and Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, which focused on the figure of the *Doppelgänger*. But too often in comparative essays the selection of texts seemed to be arbitrary and based on no more than a perfunctory and superficial similarity of subject: thus one candidate attempted to discuss texts as different as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and Nathaniel West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* on the basis of a vague notion of the absurd, while another tried to link *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *The Count of Monte Cristo* by the hopelessly loose and general term 'conflict'. In neither case was any substantial nor revealing connection made between the two works.

Weaker essays often involved research questions that were too broad to be treated effectively in the space available, such as 'Is Romantic Love portrayed similarly in nineteenth- and twentieth-century French and English poetry?' This was far too ambitious and the candidate only managed to bring the subject under some kind of control by selecting a handful of short poems by a few poets and then fell into the trap of generalizing widely on the basis of the flimsiest of evidence. Another impossibly broad question which promoted only flaccid generalization rather than close analysis of the poetry was: 'How are the works of African-American poets affected by their time periods?' Even where essays concentrated on a single text, an unfocused topic such as 'Symbolism and themes in *The Fountainhead*' made for a routinely descriptive and mediocre piece of work. Examiners repeatedly remarked on the number of badly framed and inadequately focused research questions.

Another common source of weakness was the choice of a text or texts that had been studied in class. Although it is, of course, possible for able students to produce fresh and interesting essays on such standard works as *Lord of the Flies*, *Brave New World*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it does not often happen and candidates would usually be better advised to range beyond these familiar bounds, for instance by reading and exploring other texts by the authors concerned.

Candidate performance against each criterion

Criterion A: research question

This is where the supervisor's advice is crucial, and the formulation of a clearly focused research question is a prerequisite of a successful essay. Apart from the kinds of weaknesses outlined above, there were still many badly worded and even ungrammatical research questions, and still some essays which fell foul of the rule that at least one of the texts must have been originally written in English (for example, essays on Greek mythology).

Criterion B: introduction

Although most essays made some attempt at putting the topic in context, only a minority made out a case for its significance. Candidates need to ask themselves why they have chosen a particular research question and indicate why it is worth discussing.

Criterion C: investigation

Most candidates consulted a range of secondary sources but there was a general tendency to treat them uncritically. Arguing against a critical opinion can enliven an essay, and it should also be borne in mind that good essays can be written without relying on published criticism. Reliance on Wikipedia, Spark Notes and other basic guides usually resulted in a mediocre essay. An important aspect of using sources is learning to evaluate them.

Criterion D: knowledge and understanding of the topic studied

Most essays showed a decent knowledge of the primary texts, ranging from adequate to good, but often that knowledge was conveyed in general terms without the detailed examples that are the mark of a good candidate's close critical engagement with the text.

Criterion E: reasoned argument

A common weakness was to dwell on descriptive accounts of texts or plot summaries rather than developing an argument. The use of sub-headings, which may help students organize their thoughts at the draft stage, tended to be unhelpful in the final version, breaking up the flow of the argument and leading to fragmentation and difficulties of transition. The use of quotations as evidence was often perfunctory, and candidates should be made aware of the need to introduce illustrative quotations properly and set them in context.

Criterion F: application of analytical and evaluative skills

This was often the weakest aspect of the essay since many candidates describe rather than analyse. It was only the better students who presented personal and illuminating insight into the primary texts. Weaker essays failed to move on from descriptive comment to analysis, or relied on citing secondary sources for their analysis rather than engaging personally with the texts.

Criterion G: use of language

There was a wide range of achievement here, from fluent and eloquent at one end of the scale to stumbling and garbled at the other. However, most essays were decently written and scores of 2 and 3 predominated.

Criterion H: conclusion

The most common form of conclusion was one which repeated points already made in the introduction or the body of the essay and it was not often that students produced a synthesis of their findings. The worst conclusions tended to indulge in banal generalization.

Criterion I: formal presentation

There has been a general improvement in the standard of presentation and most essays were well-presented, particularly those from those schools where the use of a standard format seems to be well-established. Some essays still presented strings of footnotes with page references to the primary text, cited in full each time, rather than using parenthetical references after the first full citation.

Criterion J: abstract

Performance was patchy here with too many candidates failing to state 'how the investigation was conducted'. Some poor abstracts were very short, and supervisors should note that nothing is to be gained from using a lot fewer than the 300 words allowed. Students also need to be told that an abstract should not be written in the future tense as a form of introduction.

Criterion K: holistic judgment

This was where routine essays on texts studied in class scored badly and more adventurous essays, which sometimes bit off more than they could chew, could be rewarded for their initiative.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

Helping define a clearly focused, fruitful and manageable research question is the main challenge for supervisors, and some of the problems outlined above need not have occurred if the supervisor had followed the instructions in the *Extended Essay Guide*, the careful reading of which is an essential first step in the teaching of future candidates. Supervisors are advised to steer candidates away from biographical topics (e.g. examining a writer's works as reflections of his or her life), as these almost inevitably result in essays that are merely speculative, unanalytical and second-hand. It may help to choose literary texts that are less well-known but of clear literary value. With classic texts it is advisable to find a topic and an approach that will prevent the candidate from having to go over too much well-trodden ground. With such texts judicious use of secondary sources may enable the argument to begin at a higher level, and it is important for supervisors to guide candidates towards finding a balance between offering their own reading in ignorance of all secondary sources and relying so much on them that that all personal response is smothered.

Supervisors also need to strike a balance between encouraging students to follow their passionate interests and pointing out that some texts are likely to be more productive subjects for analysis than others (teenage vampire novels come to mind). Where a candidate is interested in a comparative topic, supervisors should ensure that there is a substantial basis for the comparison and that an attempt is made to make the texts shed light on each other. Close textual reference should be at the centre of the essay and candidates need to be encouraged to seek evidence in the primary text to support their interpretation and to integrate their illustrative quotations smoothly into their argument. Where they are interested in the historical, psychological, sociological, or philosophical aspects of a literary text, they should be urged to avoid treating that text simply as a source of documentary evidence for a theory in another discipline, but rather encouraged to examine how it works as literature (ie as a novel, play or poem) to throw light on history etc.

Students should be encouraged to look, and think, beyond basic study guides and to treat Wikipedia and internet sites with caution. Supervisors should bear in mind that it is the student's own research into the text that is most important.

Finally, it is important to note that many supervisors are fully aware of all this and are to be congratulated on the quality of the essays submitted. This year, as in earlier years, the best essays were intelligent, incisive, illuminating, well-written and a pleasure to read – a credit both to the candidates and to their teachers.