
GCSE

ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMMENTARY

For first teaching in 2015

Aims of the commentary

At AQA, we recognise that change to assessment strategies can be a cause of anxiety and uncertainty. To this end, we are keen to make a commitment to support change, both at launch, and in the lead-up to first teaching in 2015. A key part of this is this commentary which seeks to make the new assessment strategy transparent for teachers and students. For each question, it sets out:

- the Assessment Objective that is being assessed
- how the question has been designed to assess the Objective
- clarification from the senior examiners about what is required
- how a student has responded to the question and feedback from the examiners.

This commentary document will be developed over the life cycle of the new specification. We will make a collection of student responses available, initially from the pilot phase of development, and then from further assessment opportunities in the lead in to first teaching.

The assessment objectives

GCSE English Language Assessment Focus	What this means
AO1 Identify and interpret explicit and implicit information and ideas. Select and synthesise evidence from different texts.	Identify suggests retrieving data or facts; interpret includes working with more complex material – reading for inference and comprehension. Select and synthesise include bringing material together to create new material and summarising with understanding.
AO2 Explain, comment on and analyse how writers use language and structure to achieve effects and influence readers, using relevant subject terminology to support their views.	A notional hierarchy – simple descriptive statements, descriptions elaborated with reference to how they work, and linkages between writing and its results.
AO3 Compare writers' ideas and perspectives, as well as how these are conveyed, across two or more texts.	Comparison: of content and form. From identification of main similarities and differences through to sustained, detailed, evaluative and interwoven responses.
AO4 Evaluate texts critically and support this with appropriate textual references.	Requirement for a personal judgement which is informed and evidenced through references to the text. Involves a degree of summation and detachment. Taking an overview from a critical distance.
AO5 Communicate clearly, effectively and imaginatively, selecting and adapting tone, style and register for different forms, purposes and audiences. Organise information and ideas, using structural and grammatical features to support coherence and cohesion of texts.	Write in different forms and for a range of purposes and audiences. Organise information and ideas using structural and grammatical features.
AO6 Candidates must use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.	Write accurately without compromising creativity and risk taking.

Question	Question wording	AO	Design rationale
3	<p>You now need to think about the whole of the source.</p> <p>This text is from the opening of a novel.</p> <p>How has the writer structured the text to interest you as a reader?</p> <p>You could write about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what the writer focuses your attention on at the beginning • how and why the writer changes this focus as the extract develops • any other structural features that interest you. <p>[8 marks]</p>	AO2	<p>The question requires an extended written response. This longer-form answer style will allow students to respond fully to the question. It asks the student to consider the whole source. The question provides a relevant context for the student, in this case informing them that the extract is from the opening of a novel. The bullet points provide a helpful guide and prompt the student to concentrate on how the writer leads the reader through the text. The final bullet point intentionally prompts students to go beyond the guide in the previous two, and bring in any features that they feel are relevant to the task. In this sense, we have looked to build on the analysis in Q2 that rewards references to structure at punctuation and sentence level, in order to now look at structure as a sequence of paragraphs and the writer's influence on the reader as part of a reading experience.</p> <p>Possible areas for students to develop understanding in could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sequence through a passage • movement from big to small – ideas or perspectives • taking an outside to inward perspective, or vice versa • introductions and developments • reiterations • repetitions, threads, patterns or motifs • summaries and conclusions • shifts of focus • narrative perspective • connections and links across paragraphs • internal cohesion and topic sentences.

Student response:

The writer focuses the reader's attention on the weather as the very start of the novel. This will set the scene for the reader before introducing any characters. The writer constantly reminds the reader how bad the weather is, at the start with the descriptive words emphasising the surroundings. And then in the middle where the writer starts writing about the people in the coach, when the woman says "she remarked for at least the twentieth time that it was the dirtiest night she ever remembered".

The writer develops from talking about the weather to talking about the coach driver and the coach traveling. She still references to the weather throughout the description of the coach driver. For example "in a faint attempt to gain shelter from his shoulders", the word shelter references to rain which she talks about in the first paragraph. Also "between the numb fingers of the driver" references to the "cold grey day in late November" in the first paragraph. From talking about the driver, the writer moves on to talk about the passengers in the coach.

Examiner's comments:

The passage for consideration is the whole text. The command word 'How' signals comment/explanation/analysis; the word 'structured' focuses the AO and the word 'interest' offers further guidance to what the question requires. This is achieved with simple, concise wording. In this way we will make the question accessible to students of all abilities.

The student is aware of development from weather, to the coach driver, and then the coach itself. There is some awareness of how the weather relates to the driver with the reference to him "in a faint attempt to gain shelter from his shoulders".

This response shows some understanding of structure, with some relevant examples and attempt to comment on effect. It merits a mark in Level 2.

Question	Question wording	AO	Design rationale
4	<p>Focus this part of your answer on the second half of the source, from line 18 to the end.</p> <p>A student, having read this section of the text said: “The writer brings the very different characters to life for the reader. It is as if you are inside the coach with them.”</p> <p>To what extent do you agree?</p> <p>In your response, you could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • write about your own impressions of the characters • evaluate how the writer has created these impressions • support your opinions with quotations from the text. <p>[20 marks]</p>	AO4	<p>The question requires students to critically evaluate the extent to which the writer has been successful in creating characters within a specified section of the text. The question requires a judgement to be made by the student as a reader and requires them to support their ideas through textual references. The statement prompts the reader to take a view about the writer’s intended impact and influence on them, and in doing so requires consideration of form and purpose – in particular, the extent to which the writer successfully draws the reader into the world of the text.</p> <p>As the final reading question on the paper, this requires the student to make an extended response. It seeks to help the student in two ways – by focusing on a specific section of text towards the end of the extract, and by providing a statement for them to consider.</p> <p>As the Assessment Objective makes clear, this is about a personal judgement which is informed and evidenced through references to the text. It needs to involve a degree of summation and detachment, as well as the student maintaining a critical distance. We feel that by providing a statement for them to make a judgement about, and to what extent they may agree, partially agree, or not agree at all, that we are more helpfully pointing them towards remaining detached, and with a sense of critical distance.</p> <p>The bullet points provide further clarity, reminding students to consider their own impression, evaluate the statement and how it relates to the effect the descriptions have on them, whilst also reminding them about the importance of making their judgement evidence based.</p> <p>We will commit to using a similar strategy to point students to make critical evaluations, but the focus for any statement will be specific to the merit of the particular text selected for assessment in the series.</p>

Question	Question wording	AO	Design rationale
			<p>It is interesting to note the challenge in evaluating a literature text in relation either to its intended effect on a reader, or purpose to entertain, or manipulation of form, structure and language – all things that the question is able to elicit from the student. Here, the emphasis in the opening statement is the phrase “very different ways” in order to provide the most perceptive readers with an opportunity to evaluate how each of the characters is developed in different ways, and to speculate on reasons why, or speculate on the different effects they may have on the reader.</p> <p>In this way we are confident that the challenge of this question, and the evaluative focus of any critical response provides a degree of synoptic assessment. The student can only achieve at the top of the mark bands if they are able to bring together all of their reading skills from inference, through analysis to evaluation.</p>

Student response:

To a large extent, I agree with the reader.

I think because the writer had described the characteristics. The weather also helps as I feel that each character's view as they saw the weather allows us to empathise with their feelings. For example, the fact that all the passengers "huddled together" for warmth, exclaiming in unison" shows that they are all cold and frightened for they "huddled together". They must all be terrified and are feeling and thinking the same. They are "exclaiming in unison". The use of the word "exclaiming" just shows us how scared they must be, and how terrified because of the weather. By them all being together and acting as one, I feel as if I am there too, with them.

As Mary Yellan sits in the "opposite corner" from the others implies that she feels secluded and alone but she sits where rain fell through a crack in the roof. I am sympathetic towards her and feels as though I want to go and comfort her in some way. Especially because her eyes were "fixed" on the window and she seemed to be hoping "with desperate interest that some ray of light would break the heavy blanket of sky". The use of the descriptive phrase "desperate interest" shows that she is hoping with all her might that something will happen and stop herself and the others on the coach, feeling discombobulated. Normally blankets make you feel protected and warm, but in this case, she was hoping that "some ray of light would break the heavy blanket". This blanket was smothering and suffocating them and she seeked a saviour, the Sun. Reading this, I think and want the same as she does. I feel as though I too am on the coach, seeking protection.

Examiner's comments:

The reading source utilises line numbers. Command words are set out in two forms – the question: To what extent do you agree? And the bullet points: consider, evaluate, support. The question clearly states which part of the text is to be considered; clearly indicates the focus on characters and clearly indicates the evaluative/judgemental requirement in relation to the AO.

This question is intended to be the most challenging reading question of this paper. The question has the capacity to elicit perceptive evaluation showing both involvement in, and objectification of, the text and, for less able students, limited, simple comments which, nevertheless offer some level of considered and supported opinions and show at least a limited ability to approach judgements. The mark scheme supports discrimination as described above.

As the final reading question on this paper, this signals the end of the assessment journey and as such requires the student to be synoptic in bringing together their learning from the two-year course and the reading skills that they have developed.

This response shows evidence that all of the criteria for Level 3 has been achieved, with some additional evaluative and perceptive comments into Level 4.

The student sets out a clear view of the statement at the start of the response. A good point is made about the weather, with a quoted example, and the way it creates empathy between the reader and characters. The focus on the word "exclaiming" shows a closer level of analysis. The final statement brings the response back to the question and helps to keep it specific to the task.

Sample