

C A R I B B E A N E X A M I N A T I O N S C O U N C I L

**REPORT ON CANDIDATES' WORK IN THE
SECONDARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION**

JUNE 2004

ENGLISH A

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ENGLISH A
GENERAL AND BASIC PROFICIENCY EXAMINATIONS
JUNE 2004

GENERAL COMMENTS

The examinations in 2004 followed the format used in previous years. Paper 01, the multiple choice paper, tested most of the Understanding component of the syllabus and Paper 02, the free response paper, tested the Expression component of the syllabus as well as part of the Understanding of literary and persuasive writing.

In 2004, 49.5 per cent of the candidates at **General Proficiency** achieved Grade III and above, while 19.1 per cent of the Basic Proficiency candidates achieved similar grades. The number of candidates taking the General Proficiency examination was 81 120, while 3 068 sat for the Basic Proficiency examination.

The decline in the number of candidates taking **Basic Proficiency** continued in 2004, the numbers over the past four years have been 4 502 (2001); 3 792 (2002); 3 777 (2003); 3 068 (2004).

DETAILED COMMENTS

Paper 01 - Multiple Choice

Basic Proficiency

Candidates' performance in Paper 01 in 2004 showed only a very marginal upward change over 2003. The mean score in 2003, out of a possible 60, was 25.08 and this moved to 25.58 in 2004.

General Proficiency

Candidates' performance in Paper 01 in 2004 showed a slight decline when compared with 2003. The mean score in Paper 01 moved downward from 34.63 in 2003 to 33.03 in 2004, out of a possible 60.

PAPER 02 - FREE RESPONSE

Basic Proficiency

Candidates' performance in Paper 02 in 2004 was better than in 2003. The mean score increased from 22.10 in 2003 to 25.72 in 2004, out of a possible 80. Average performance in the component sections of Paper 02 in 2004 was as follows:

Section 1 – Summary Skills	(out of 20 marks)	5.06
Section 2 – Comprehension	(out of 24 marks)	9.87
Section 3 – Story Writing	(out of 16 marks)	5.17
Section 4 – Argument	(out of 20 marks)	5.62

General Proficiency

In Paper 02 performance, as indicated by a comparison of the section means in 2003 and 2004, is summarised as follows:

Section 1 (Summary skills): there was an improvement in performance compared with 2003: 8.20 (2003) and 9.23 (2004)

Section 2 (Understanding): there was an improvement in performance compared with 2003: 8.22 (2003) and 9.30 (2004)

Section 3 (Story telling): there was no substantial difference in performance between 2003 and 2004: 8.84 (2003) and 8.79 (2004)

Section 4 (Argument): there was a slight decline in performance compared with 2003: 9.29 (2003) and 8.66 (2004)

Candidates' performance in expression tasks on Paper 02 (that is, Sections 1, 3 and 4) was very similar in 2004 to what it was in 2003, with means of 26.68 and 26.33 in 2004 and 2003 respectively, out of a possible 75.

A comparison of the average mark in the four sections shows that there is little difference in performance across the sections. It could suggest that teachers are covering all four areas evenly.

General Advice

Teachers need to emphasise that CXC English A (both Basic and General) is an English language examination and that candidates must, above all, demonstrate competence in and control of the English language. The fundamental preparation for the examination is that candidates should develop high-level skills, both passive (comprehension) and productive (expression) in the English language. These skills must be demonstrated in all areas: the proper use of punctuation marks (not only full stops and commas, but also the not so frequently used ones such as colons and semi-colons), as well as other conventions in writing, such as inverted commas, upper case/lower case, abbreviations, the writing of numbers, whether in figures or in words, correct spelling, proper sentence structure and paragraphing. The kind of writing that has become popular in e-mail messages and in advertisements is not acceptable in this examination.

In Section 1, when a straightforward summary is required, main points must be identified and organised logically within the word limit specified. In cases where the original is reproduced wholesale, the CXC markers are instructed to interpret this as incompetence. In other words, some attempt must be made by candidates to use their own words. Summarising is a real-life skill and should be treated as such by teachers and candidates; it should not be treated as a deletion exercise or a copying exercise.

The questions in Section 2 are set in such a way that precise answers are required. Candidates should be trained to pay close attention to every word that is used and to the different ways in which questions are asked and to frame their answers appropriately. For example, instructions sometimes say 'give a word'; at other times they say 'give a phrase'; at other times still they say 'give a clause'. In each case candidates are expected to give precisely what they are asked to give. Candidates need to read and re-read the questions themselves as well as the passages on which the questions are set. Answers should be to the point. These questions never require paragraph-long answers. Responding to a question which requires a precise answer by simply lifting a long extract from the passage is a bad strategy, one which usually results in zero being awarded for such an answer.

In Section 3 many candidates are exceeding the suggested length for the short story and though excess is not penalized in the marking, spending too much time on one question can affect performance in others. Every candidate doing this examination should have read the best stories from preceding years in order to get a sense of what is required. (These 'Best Stories' are available from CXC.) These stories, however, should not be memorised and reproduced with slight alterations.

In the case of Section 4, candidates should note that argument skills require both mastery of persuasive language and presentation of sound points, backed up by suitable examples. Candidates need to read the questions carefully, make sure they understand key words, then select their points, choose examples that support their points and be consistent and clear in their presentation. For some inexplicable reason, some candidates operate on the assumption (consciously) or unconsciously) that they must agree with the opinion given and that if they do not, they will not receive high marks. The fact is, however, that the questions are deliberately set in such a way as to allow for differences of opinion and most likely if candidates state their real views, they will achieve higher scores than those they earn by merely agreeing with what they perceive to be the examiners' views.

General Proficiency

SECTION ONE

Question 1 (Expression)

In this question candidates were asked to read an extract from a report on migration and to write a summary of it in no more than 100 words. Candidates had to select the main information, organise it logically and present it in standard English. All three components are important, but perhaps logical organisation of the information is of the greatest importance in the teaching exercise. Candidates should be made aware that a summary is not simply a series of statements presented with no expressed links between them.

Candidates were expected to identify the classes of migrants; the direction of migration; the relationship between migration, population growth/decline and the labour market; and the consequences of migration on source country and destination.

Performance on this question was slightly better than it was last year. However, there are still too many candidates who pay absolutely no attention to the word limit given or dishonestly write an incorrect number of words at the end. This latter strategy does not work.

Teachers should:

- (i) advise students against relying heavily on the original text and making just a few minor changes; and using a deletion strategy to try to reduce the number of words in the original text
- (ii) give students more practice in distilling essential information and expressing it, as far as possible, in their own words
- (iii) advise students not to repeat points or insert too many illustrative examples of points made
- (iv) above all remind students to observe the stated length

Advice to Teachers

In the training of students in summary writing, teachers should use a variety of selections, including sources outside the textbooks, such as daily newspapers and current popular magazines. Teachers should remind students to work with what is given – real-life material has imperfections and part of the training in summary writing is to be able to determine what is important or critical and what is not in such material. Report and summary writing is as much about arranging relevant points as it is about picking out the main points in what someone else has said or written. In order to reflect the original accurately, attention should be paid to time sequence and cause and effect relationships, as they occur in the original. Practice in the effective use of words such as *because*, *although*, *as a result* and *in spite of the fact that*, which link clauses (containing relevant points), will help immensely the task of summary and report writing.

SECTION TWO

Question 2 (Understanding)

This question sought in part to test candidates' understanding of ideas expressed in a narrative passage, a selection from Eugenia O'neal's "The Parillon Sisters". For the most part, candidates responded correctly to the items (a), (b), (c), (d) and (g). Item (e) was answered correctly (= to indicate that it was not English) by only a small percentage of candidates. Item (f) did not ask for words from the passage, which meant that those candidates who interpreted it in that way restricted themselves unnecessarily. Item (h) was not answered correctly by most candidates; the answer (the attitude) required was 'pity' or some equivalent. As usual, as soon as the questions go beyond "who" and "what", a great number of candidates find it difficult to cope with inferences and implications.

Question 3 (Understanding)

This question sought in part to test candidates' understanding of a view put forward by the editor of the Weekend Nation newspaper about the relationship between freedom and the law. Item (a) was answered incorrectly by a great number of candidates because they did not pay attention to the instruction that only *a phrase* should be given, not the whole of the first sentence. Items (b) and (c) were correctly answered by most candidates. The answer to (c) hinged on the understanding of the word 'ironically', which involves an opposite relationship (that is, contrary to expectation) between one thing and another. Item (d) required candidates to link the word *latter* to a preceding idea but only a minority of candidates managed to do this successfully. Item (e), which was intended as a straightforward question requiring an understanding of punctuation (*Our supreme law, our Constitution = Our supreme law is our Constitution*), was answered correctly by only a small percentage of candidates. Item (f) required candidates to solve a simple verbal logical problem. This was not correctly done by most candidates. The two-part answer to (g) did not present any major problems.

Advice to Teachers

Reading of material from outside the Caribbean should help to expand the passive vocabulary and general knowledge of students. Teachers still have to do more work on the literary devices used by writers in order to get students to move beyond literal interpretations. In the explanation of literary devices and specific phrases/sentences used by writers, candidates have to be accurate and precise in their answers. Teachers should dissuade students from giving long-winded answers which really conceal ignorance.

SECTION THREE

Questions 4, 5 and 6 (Expression)

Candidates did not seem to have any difficulty understanding the topics set, but there were still too many who did not know what elements are required in short stories or who could not demonstrate those elements in their writing. There were some candidates who wrote brilliant stories and generally candidates seemed to be reasonably well prepared for this section of the examination. On the other hand, this section, as it usually does, exposed the weaknesses of candidates who had not mastered the fundamentals of writing in English.

The picture stimulus in Question 4 seemed to appeal to many candidates and encouraged a variety of stories, but this year there were more stories of a better standard. Happily, there was a smaller number of candidates this year who just described the picture. This question elicited several excellent responses, including the one deemed to be the 'best story'. On the other hand, some stories had no more than a tenuous connection with the stimulus. Teachers should remind candidates that when a story has no connection whatsoever to any of the three stimuli given, it automatically is given zero marks.

Question 5 was a fairly popular choice and it produced a number of action stories. Some of these were very good and imaginative in some cases and realistic in others. Some of these stories were awarded marks in the top ranges. On the other hand, some candidates did not convincingly link the two parts of the stimulus together in their stories or did not convincingly suggest that 'life would be different' from then on.

Question 6 was not a very popular choice. Candidates seemed to have difficulty tying the two parts of the stimulus together. This question did not produce any outstanding stories.

Advice to Teachers

Teachers should not encourage students to over-indulge in the expression of literary devices. There has to be a match between the setting and the action. Students whose stories are impressive are those who use details to create atmosphere, mood and feelings. Teachers need to give all students practice in action-oriented stories and not restrict choices to emotional stories. Boys seem to prefer the former and not the latter, and teachers, if they want all their students to succeed, should be aware of this. Students should be encouraged, as often as possible, to interpret topics in a positive and wholesome way and not to restrict themselves to situations of poverty, degradation and stress. Training in short story writing should include a lot of oral work and the telling of funny stories and anecdotes where there is a concentration on the characters and what they say. Training in short story writing must stress the process – thinking, drafting, editing and proof reading. Although there is no penalty for writing stories that are longer than is suggested in the rubric, a perusal of the scripts reveals that longer stories tend to be weaker as they often get out of control.

SECTION FOUR

Question 7 and 8 (Expression)

On the whole, responses in this section were satisfactory. Candidates seemed to find the topics interesting and manageable.

In responding to the statement in Question 7 many candidates did not address all of the points and so automatically weakened their argument. It is necessary in a question such as this for candidates to be methodical in their answers and not to contradict earlier points made.

In the case of Question 8 most candidates agreed with the topic statement, sometimes passionately, but did little to show any further insightfulness. Some good responses from among those who disagreed pointed out the problems and difficulties involved in such a proposal (for example, why 15 years of age, why only young men, who would pay for the training, where would the trainees be housed). There were many spirited and well written responses from candidates supporting the proposal as well as those opposing it.

Advice to Teachers

More attention should be paid to the organisation of arguments, that is, paragraphing of different points with the relevant supporting evidence. The language should be clear and the reader should have no doubt about the writer's position on the issues. Candidates should not contradict their stated position. Poor sentence structure, punctuation and spelling are sources of distraction and cause the reader to lose the focus of an argument. Careful re-reading should help to remove such distractions.

Basic Proficiency

SECTION ONE

Question 1 tested the candidates' ability to summarise a passage from a daily newspaper – a commissioner of police's report on offences and crimes during the year 2002. The majority of candidates showed a reasonable level of understanding of the passage, though numbers and simple statistics proved difficult for many. Most, however, in their summary, did not mention the point about the challenges faced by the police. The stronger candidates were able to identify the main ideas in the passage and present a response largely using their own words. The weaker candidates often exceeded the word limit and presented responses in the exact words of the passage. Many of these simply reproduced sections of the passage joining them together incoherently. The majority of these failed to master the mechanics of the language.

Advice to Teachers

Teachers need to ensure that their students receive more practice in summary writing since Question 1 is compulsory. Special attention should be paid to concord, tense and sentence structure.

SECTION TWO

Question 2 (Understanding)

This question tested candidates' understanding of ideas expressed in a narrative passage. The chosen extract was from Ama Ata Aidoo's 'Changes'. In general, the items were answered fairly well, though items (b) and (c) proved to be much more challenging than the others. Very few candidates answered (b) correctly. In the case of Item (d) (what kind of person), some candidates incorrectly interpreted this to mean occupation rather than personality.

Advice to Teachers

Students need more practice in answering the kinds of questions set on the paper, questions requiring precise answers. In preparing for these questions teachers should make sure that students read questions a number of times before they attempt to write their answers. After reading the whole passage, candidates should also re-read the section of the passage relevant to each specific question to make sure that what they are thinking of writing is what the passage says. Students should be advised to re-read what they have written to make sure that it makes sense to someone reading it. As is the case generally, candidates would be helped tremendously if they read more, which would make them more accustomed to written material.

Question 3 (Understanding)

This question tested candidates' ability to read and understand a persuasive passage. In the one chosen, the writer argued for a lengthening of the school year for American students. Items (a), (e) and (f) proved difficult for most candidates. In many cases the candidates' responses to Item (a) were not clear as to whether summer was getting shorter in terms of days or whether it was coming to an end. In the case of Item (e), candidates seemed to know what the word 'attitude' meant, but were confused with the word 'sobering'. For Item (f) many candidates incorrectly identified the American students as the correct response instead of students of other industrialised nations.

Advice to Teachers

In preparation for Section Two teachers should give students more practice in comprehending extracts of writing other than narrations. In fact, teachers should use various types of material from varying sources. Students should get constant practice in responding directly and concisely to questions asked, using their own words instead of lifting large pieces from the passage given. Students need to expand their vocabulary and one effective way of doing this is by reading more.

SECTION THREE

Questions 4, 5 and 6 (Expression)

This section tested candidates' ability to express themselves creatively by writing a story based on a given stimulus. Question 5 was the most popular choice and the least popular was Question 4, which was poorly interpreted. In Questions 5 and 6 many candidates simply added the statement to the end of their story without proper linkage. The majority of those who attempted Question 4 did not produce stories, but rather presented descriptions of the boy or expositions on child care and abuse. Most of those who attempted Question 5 gave depictions of a classroom scene so that the statement with 'the pen' would be relevant. However, there were a few who depicted a farm scene because for them 'the pen' was an animal pen. A few of those who attempted Question 6 based their stories on mysterious happenings, like ghosts and unidentified flying objects, but the majority wrote stories about lies, theft and rape. The better candidates were able to develop a strong and credible story line, presenting their work in acceptable standard English. The weaker candidates had difficulty presenting a good story line and this was compounded by problems in the mechanics of grammar and sentence construction. Many merely presented reports of events without conflict.

Advice to Teachers

Students should be encouraged to read more widely and practise writing more often. Students should get more practice in writing stories based on pictures. Teachers should spend more time with students on the basic elements of story writing. For example, students need more practice in incorporating dialogue into story writing. They should also be given more exposure to figurative expressions.

SECTION FOUR

Questions 7 and 8 (Expression)

This section tested candidates' ability to write persuasively in Standard English and to present sound arguments. Many more candidates did Question 8 than Question 7. In Question 7 very few candidates were able to distinguish between a reason and an excuse. Question 8 elicited many responses that vaguely addressed the various qualities needed for success (for example, determination, manners, respect, hard work) rather than focus on skills and knowledge. The stronger candidates gave evidence of persuasive techniques such as rhetorical questions, proper use of statistics and appeal to authority. Many of these used what seemed like real life experiences to support their positions. The weaker candidates were often very repetitive in presenting their argument. Errors in the mechanics of writing were prevalent and many had difficulty writing continuous prose in standard English. Often the structures used gave evidence of interference from the vernacular.

Advice to Teachers

More time needs to be spent on oral English to give the students familiarity and experience with the patterns and rhythms of standard English. Teachers need to allot some time to teaching students to write clear opinion statements which are supported by relevant examples.