

CARIBBEAN EXAMINATIONS COUNCIL

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

JANUARY 2004

ENGLISH A

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ENGLISH A

GENERAL AND BASIC PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION

JANUARY 2004

GENERAL COMMENTS

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

When performance in 2004 is compared with performance in 2003, an increase in the percentage of candidates achieving Grade III and above is evident. In 2003, 36 per cent of the candidates achieved Grade I to III, while in 2004, 54 per cent achieved Grade III or higher.

The overall mean in 2003 was 52.5 whereas in January 2004 it was 57.90. The overall improvement is attributable to improvement in Paper 01 and in all areas of Paper 02. Performance in the Comprehension section of Paper 02 showed the most dramatic change, and the overall quality of the responses in this section was impressive.

The improvement in performance this year, especially, in comprehension, is welcome. Hopefully, this level of performance can be maintained.

DETAILED COMMENTS

GENERAL PROFICIENCY

Section One

Question 1 (Expression)

This question tested candidates' ability to summarise information given in an advertisement. Generally, candidates seemed to understand what was required of them, although far too many exceeded the maximum length specified in the instructions. Candidates should be made aware that the part of their answer that goes beyond the specified maximum length will NOT be marked by the Examiners.

The text this year contained several technical terms. Candidates were required to re-use a number of words from the test, rather than their own language, as is generally required of this answer. It was, however, still necessary for candidates to take all the itemised technical information and put it into prose, that is, in the form of well constructed, grammatically and semantically logical sentences.

Generally, candidates were able to identify the main points of the advertisement. There was still, however, the need to be selective and for candidates to be aware that all the pieces of information were not of equal value and significance in capturing the basic meaning of the text.

Teachers should remember that summarising is a specialised skill which requires special attention and emphasis, and should provide their students with abundant practice, on a variety of textual stimulus material.

Section Two

There was a general improvement when compared with January 2003, although a number of candidates failed to score any marks on each question in this section.

Question 2 (Understanding)

This question tested candidates' ability to read and understand a prose passage from a work of fiction written in Standard English. Candidates were required to show an appreciation of the writer's craft, the impressions which the work creates, and relationships between characters, rather than simply an understanding of the overtly stated facts. Some candidates were unable to deduce what the setting of the text was (it was the waiting room of an Embassy), and this affected their responses to some of the parts of this question.

It was gratifying to see the improvement in performance. In response to Part (f), many students answered correctly, with a variety of lexical choices, including 'professional'. Teachers are to be congratulated and are urged to make every effort to ensure that the improvement is sustained, by making clear to candidates the particular nature of the text for this question and the type of response required.

Question 3 (Understanding)

This question tested candidates' ability to read and understand a prose passage on the importance of investing in social services. The overall performance on this question was good, and there was, no substantial difference between the performances in

Question 2 and Question 3.

Many candidates failed to answer correctly one of the interpretive questions; they were unable to distinguish between “narrative, argumentative and descriptive” in a characterisation of the passage. Part (d) also went beyond the mere factual, and required candidates to perceive and appreciate the metaphorical expression of the author. This part was quite well answered.

Teachers should make sure that candidates are able to perceive the different kinds of responses required, for example, the difference between “What, according to the passage ...?” and “What effect ...?”, “What impression ..?”. Some candidates left these latter questions unanswered, which may suggest that they did not quite understand what was required.

There still seems to be some uncertainty among some candidates as to what is a “phase” (vis-à-vis “word”, “sentence”). Part (d) asked for ‘three phrases’. Some candidates gave entire sentences. Generally speaking, candidates should be made aware that their responses should be precise, not long-winded and explanatory, and should most particularly NOT reproduce lengthy portions of the passage, perhaps in the hope that somewhere in that volume lies the correct answer.

Section Three

Question 4, 5, 6 (Expression)

This section tested candidates’ ability to express themselves creatively in continuous prose. The most popular choice was Question 5, but Question 6 had the highest mean. These were only a relatively small range of difference among the three questions.

Some candidates had difficulty fitting the statement in Question 5 into their stories. Thus these stories seemed to come to an abrupt end without the final statement being well motivated.

There was some reduction in the incidence of candidates merely describing the picture stimulus (Question 4). Teachers should continue to stress to candidates that the picture stimulus requires the imaginative creation of a story. In giving freedom to their imagination, however, candidates should not simply write their own story unrelated (or only barely so) to the stimulus.

Question 6 was the most successfully done, and some candidates achieved the highest scores (up to 24/25) on this question. It will have been observed that in Question 5 the main protagonist is male, while in Questions 4 and 6, it is female. The examiners strive to make the question paper gender-equal, but these were no real reason why males should write only about their own gender and females likewise. A good short story writer should be able to write about both male and female protagonists and candidates should be encouraged to practise writing about a variety of themes.

While some candidates have more of a flair for short story writing than others, it is clear that those who like to read, whatever their subjects may be, become more familiar with words and experiences and thus give themselves an advantage over those who do not.

Section Four

Question 7 and 8 (Expression)

This section tested candidates' ability to write persuasively and present sound arguments in Standard English. There was a marked preference for Question 8 over Question 7, and in addition the mean for Question 8 was substantially higher than the Question 7 mean. A further dramatic difference was the much larger percentage of candidates receiving zero marks for Question 7 than for Question 8.

Question 7 was the more problematic of the two questions. A large number of candidates mis-interpreted the terms "independent" and "patriotic", both in general and as they relate to newspapers in particular. These concepts should not be unfamiliar to an educated Caribbean young person and schools may wish to consider whether sufficient attention is being paid to such basic concepts as media bias/independence/partiality and loyalty to country/party/government, in Social Studies and Communication classes.

In one, particularly extreme case, "independent" was related to one's ability to cook and keep house. In other cases, there was no attempt to relate the concepts to the particular case of the Media.

Most candidates chose Question 8. It was clearly within the current experiences of the candidates and many were able to provide personal anecdotes to support their arguments.

It is very important that candidates notice and respond to all the parts of the propositions, and to the precise instructions ('write a letter', 'write an essay giving your views', and 'EITHER supporting OR opposing'). For example, in Question 7, some candidates ignored the specific allusion to 'a newspaper', and in Question 8 some candidates ignored 'punished as adults' and were content simply to argue that 16 year olds deserved to be punished for crimes committed.

The usual argumentation and writing/composition inadequacies were evident: mere assertions without any supportive arguments or examples; misuse of pronouns; incorrect subject-verb agreement especially where the noun subject is distant from the verb; punctuation including paragraphing; and spelling, especially 'there', 'their'. Students should be made aware that English spelling is not generally and consistently phonetic and the spelling of many words has to be learned individually, which is best achieved through careful reading, punctuation including paragraphing.

GENERAL ADVICE

For the third time in recent years, one candidate was found to reproduce a published story with amazing accuracy while another candidate reproduced a variant of a "CXC Best Story", retaining several chunks from the original. Teachers need to remind candidates who are preparing to write the examination that at the very best, short stories that demonstrate a lack of originality will not be awarded high scores. At worst, short stories that bear a very close similarity to previous short stories or to published work may raise suspicion of irregularity.

Teachers are again advised that, in the preparation of candidates, they should make sure that they are familiar with the syllabus. The specific tasks set will vary from year to year but they all fit the specifications set out in the syllabus. Further, it must be noted that a new revised syllabus will take effect for examination from May/June 2006. Candidates should be encouraged to write legibly, conform to the instructions (for example, maximum length of answers) and to complete the required number of questions set.