

CARIBBEAN EXAMINATIONS COUNCIL

**REPORT ON CANDIDATES' WORK I THE
SECONDARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATE EXAMINATIONS**

MAY/JUNE 2008

ENGLISH A

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Average performance (for 2008) in the component section of Paper 02 is given below.

	2008
Section 1 Summary skills	10.42 (30) (ROR) 8.78 (30) (T&T)
Section 2 Comprehension	8.84 (30) (ROR) 12.98 (30) (ROR)
Section 3 Story Writing Description	13.29 (35) (ROR) 14.25 (35) (T&T) 11.23 (35) (ROR) 13.82 (35) (T&T)
Section 4 Argument	12.78 (35) (ROR) 13.13 (35) (T&T)

General advice

Teachers need to emphasise that CXC English A (both Basic and General) is an English language examination and that candidates are required, above all, to demonstrate competence in and control of the English language. Preparation for the examination is a gradual process of acquiring and developing skills, both passive (comprehension) and production (expression), in the English language. In the examination, 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. Teachers should try to build on young people's love of text messaging and have them convert this kind of writing into kind that is acceptable in this examination.

Students should come to the examination with a well rehearsed procedure for tackling each question. In accordance with the concept of writing as a process (abbreviated under examination conditions), candidates should have deeply ingrained in them the procedure of identifying the topic, jotting down points, doing a rough copy and producing a fair copy. This is especially important in writing a summary, in doing a description, in writing a story and in producing a cogent argument. Teachers should advise each individual student, based on the student's ability and speed, about the best way to move from a rough copy to a fair copy under CXC examination conditions.

Teachers should give students specific instructions about deleting and editing so that the appearance of their work is not off-putting to examiners. Even though examiners have to make a great effort to decipher every word that some candidates have written, candidates should never forget that it is their own responsibility to write legibly.

The tasks in the examination are directly related, in most cases, to real-life skills. Employers and indeed that public at large generally regard performance in English language examinations as a measure of one's ability to perform in the world of work. Consequently, it is not advantageous to treat English language as merely an academic subject or as a subject for 'dorks/nerds'.

Specific advice on the section of Papers 02

In **Section 1**, when a summary is required, main points must be identified and organized logically within the word limit specified. In cases where the original is reproduced wholesale by the candidate, 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 (used, for example, by news reporters and policemen) and should be treated as such by teachers and candidates. In the case of business students who

may be told that an executive summary preserves the words of the full document, this is not the case here – candidates must be able to show that they can use words that condense the ideas of the original and words that can link sentences together smoothly so that the summary reads like a document in itself and not like a chopped-up version of another one.

Some candidates, in attempting to put the summary in their own words, sometimes changes meanings or insert extraneous material. This is penalized. In real life such distortion would be seen either as an attempt to mislead or deceived or, in the case of a policeman presenting evidence to a court, it could lead to wrong, unfair and disastrous decisions. So, those candidates seeking to achieve full marks or high marks should make sure that they preserve the meaning of the original.

In assessing Question 1, the examiners pay specific attention to the specified word limit, the candidates ability to use his/her own language, the accuracy and coverage of the major points and the ability to organize and connect the main points to make the answer read smoothly. There is evidence to suggest that some candidates from Belize did not have a clear idea of what was required to achieve a satisfactory mark in Section 1.

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. In response to each question candidates are expected to give precisely what they are asked to give. 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. It is the candidates' responsibility to indicate clearly what the answer is; it is not the examiner's responsibility to select it out of a number of possibilities given by the candidates.

This section requires students to respond to levels of meaning and to express their answers clearly. It is expected that students have learnt to use their judgment in answering questions. For example, some questions require paraphrases and some ask for evidence. So, students should know how to select word or phrases (as required) and use quotation marks to so indicate. Also students need to do as the question asks: if it requires 'a word' or 'a phrase', then providing a sentence, for example, is often wrong – it is an indication that the student does not know exactly what the answer is.

In the preparation for **Section 3** every candidates should have read the best story form preceding years in order to get a sense of what is required. (These 'Best Stories' are available from CXC). These stories should not be memorized and reproduced with slight alterations. More generally, candidates should not memorise published stories and hope that this kind of cheating escapes the attention of the examiners.

Although the question paper states word limits as mainly approximations, the experience has been that the better students tend to write stories that fall within or not to far outside the word limits. Stories that stretch into four, five, six and more pages tend to be rambling, out of control and weak.

Good stories demonstrate interesting storylines, characterization, good and effective use of details to create atmosphere and mood, good and refreshing language use. Weak stories tend to be linear, mostly behaving like reports, with weak language. Students should try to improve their own techniques of story writing, including the effective use of dialogue and the contrast between characters, by studying good stories written by Caribbean authors.

Candidates should use language that they can control. At times candidates use words and structures with which they are not really familiar. The result is that what they write is often verbose, sometimes unintelligible in parts and unimpressive. Teachers are encouraged to help students feel comfortable with the simplicity of language and the use of language that sounds and feels natural. Oral spontaneous story-telling based, for instance, on photographs, sketches and proverbial statements could stimulate some interesting class productions – for listening, writing and peer interaction.

Description must be clearly constructed and developed (for example, the different components must be linked appropriately). Details must be logically and effectively sequenced. The different focuses and facets

must be linked appropriately (for example, background vs. foreground; main focus vs. peripheral detail). The interpretive interventions (reflections) of the writer must be relevant to the purely descriptive elements. Choice of features to be described must be clearly motivated and must effectively contribute to the whole picture. Description, even if imaginative, must be consistent within itself. Any change in perspective (for example, visual, mood, tone, etc.) must be clearly established. There should be varied and lively use of language to create picture elements as well as appropriate choice of words to create moods, tones, atmosphere and setting. Although responses to this question have improved over the last three years, there are still too many candidates who are writing a story and not paying attention to the instruction given.

In the case of **section 4**, note that argument skills require both mastery of persuasive language and presentation of sound points, backed up by suitable examples. Providing information without using good argumentative techniques is a weakness; so is the reverse. Students should pay attention to ‘tone’ and ‘audience’ and not indiscriminately use the language of debating in every argument they present. Students can learn different styles of argument by studying letters to the editor and editorials in newspaper as well as short, interesting articles in popular magazines or in the magazine section of newspapers.

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 unfounded 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 do better than if they merely agree with what they think is the examiner’s view.

DETAILED COMMENTS

General Proficiency

Rest of the Region excluding Trinidad and Tobago

SECTION ONE (Profiles – Understanding and Expression)

Question 1

In this question candidates were asked to read and then summarise a passage taken from an article in a magazine dealing with the sea turtles, their habits, threats to them and attempts to conserve them. Candidates were expected to organize the information and present it in continuous prose in no more than 120 words.

The examiners identified the major points in the passage to be the following:-

- Turtles have been around for a very long time
- Turtles are capable of living very long lives
- Their number has been drastically reduced recently
- They are endangered now because of :
 - man-made treats
 - natural features
 - beach erosion causing loss of eggs
 - loss of eggs and hatchlings to predators
 - their own low rate of reproduction
- Conservation is difficult because of the turtles’ migratory habits
- There is now a more hopeful future since conservation attempts are being made
- Visiting sanctuaries to observe turtles can be a rich experience.

Following are two excellent summaries of the passage which give some idea of how candidates may differ but still give the critical information needed:

- (1) *There are seven species of turtles, ancient creatures capable of living very long lives. Yet, these animals are now endangered. The threats to them are both man-made and natural. Man-made threats include pollution, bad fishing practices and coastal development. Natural threats include predators, the fact that the animal lays its eggs on beaches and therefore the eggs are vulnerable, beach erosion and the turtle's own low rate of reproduction. In addition, since the turtles migrate vast distances and spend most of their time at sea, conservationists have difficulty in helping with their situation. Some attempts are being made, however, including having sanctuaries here in the Caribbean. These regional organisations provide the additional service of educating and entertaining visitors. (118 words)*
- (2) *Sea turtles, which have been around for a very long time, are now under threat of extinction. Their number has decreased drastically over the last ten years because of several threats, man-made and natural. Man-made threats include pollution, fishing and coastal development. Natural threats include predators and beach erosion. Not only do eggs take a long time to hatch, but they have only a slim chance of coming to maturity. There are current attempts being made to conserve turtles, but conservation is difficult because turtles migrate long distances, do not reproduce often and nest at night. Organisations in the Caribbean have been working in various ways towards increasing their survival. Their efforts provide visitors with enriching experiences. (117 words)*

Performance on Question 1 this year was about the same as last year, revealing the same strengths and weaknesses in candidates' answers. There were still too many candidates who did not observe the word limit given. Among these, some seemed to operate with the casual assumption that excess would be overlooked in all answers, while a few attempted to deceive the examiners by putting an incorrect number of words at the end of their answer.

As usual, many candidates lifted portions of the passage, of varying lengths, verbatim. Candidates who approached summary writing as a deletion exercise often ended up having sentences or pieces of sentences which were improperly connected to what preceded, were inaccurate or incoherent. In most cases, such candidates reached the word limit when they were about two thirds in the passage and then they added a sentence from the last paragraph or simply disregarded the rest. As in this passage, important points may occur at the end and if you do not recognise them, you will lose the writer's main intention.

Superior scripts clearly demonstrated satisfactory comprehension and writing skills, without any injection of extraneous material. They were able to cover all the main points, omitting unnecessary details and repetitions and using language which demonstrated appropriate word choice.

Suggestions for teachers and students

In preparing students for this section of the paper, teachers should:

- i) remind students to observe the stated length.
- ii) drill students in the skill of reading questions for theme and specific tasks to be done; insist that students read the instruction given and not assume that every year it is identical.
- iii) help students to recognize the fact that summary writing comprises reading and writing skills (comprehension and composition skills).
- iv) help students to appreciate some of the basic features of summary writing:-
 - a) using one's own words as far as possible
 - b) using straightforward English with clarity and conciseness
 - c) responding to the rubric of the question with its implications for audience, purpose and situation/context

- d) using connectives to achieve fluency of writing/reading
- e) observing correct mechanics of the language.

SECTION TWO (Profile – Understanding)

Performance in this section was significantly below last year's and this was principally because of candidates' response to the poem.

Question 2

This question sought in part to test candidates' understanding of part of the poem "The way we were" by Maureen Roberts. The following were deemed to be the correct answers to the questions set:

- (a) *West Indians*
- (b) *dollars and cents*
- (c) *It is reaction of surprise/amusement/disbelief/ sarcasm*
- (d) *She is confident; she thinks highly of herself; she has a sense of humour*
- (e) *line 23*
- (f) *'fingers stiff with fear'; 'vocal cords contracted with the curse of shyness'*
- (g) *Her attitude is (positive) appreciative, thankful.*

In the case of (a), any reasonable and appropriate alternative was accepted. Most candidates answered (b) incorrectly, giving *shillings* and *pence* as the answer. Since 2(c) and (d) especially required candidates to go beyond quoting from the passage and to make an assessment of the narrator, this question was generally not well done. In the case of 2(e), candidates were expected to see the difference between the harsher first part of the poem and the more pleasant second part and to identify where the change occurred. Only a small number were able to identify the point of change accurately. On the whole, therefore, Question 2 was not well done. This may partly be attributable to the fact that the passage was in verse.

Question 3

This question sought in part to test candidates' understanding of a letter to the editor of *The Saturday Voice* newspaper about Carnival. The following were deemed to be the correct answers to the questions asked:

- (a) *She does not like it.*
- (b) *You/We cannot; none (because it is a rhetorical question).*
- (c) *Move/barely/swaying to.*
- (d) *To create the impression that beads are overused.*
- (e) *Carnival/the participants in Carnival/the costumes of Carnival*
- (f) *Sand/Sandy colour/ the desert*
- (g) *She uses alliteration, that is , a number of words beginning with 's'.*
- (h) *July*

Performance on Question 3 was better than on Question 2. However, a significant percentage of candidates lost marks because their answers were not precise enough, as in the case of (g) which required ‘alliteration’ or some accurate paraphrase. Even though most candidates answered 3(h) correctly, there were some who could not get beyond the time of Carnival in their own country.

Suggestions for teachers and students

Teachers still have to do more work in order to get students to grasp implied meanings and not just obvious ones, to make summary assessments of characters and to express these accurately.

Teachers should dissuade students from giving long-winded answers which really conceal ignorance – any answer which provides two or more alternatives in the hope that the examiner will select the correct one will automatically be awarded zero marks.

The incidence of particular question types will vary according to the selections the examiners make to ensure that the full syllabus is covered. Teachers should therefore familiarize themselves with all sections of the syllabus or peruse papers over the years to make sure that they provide practice for students in all the question types specified in the syllabus, including prose and verse.

SECTION THREE (Profile – Expression)

Question 4, 5 and 6

Question 4 required that candidates write a story based on a picture in which a woman appeared to be screaming. Question 5 asked candidates to write a story which included the sentences *The amusing thing is that I didn't plan it this way. It was just a series of unexpected turns.* Question 6 (the descriptive easy) required candidates to describe the scene before a match between two high school teams.

Question 6 was the least popular of the questions in this section (attempted by 26% of the candidates) and also the one least well done on average. Question 4 was the most popular (attempted by 39% with Question 5 in between in terms of the number of candidates who attempted it (35%), but the best done on average. Question 4 produced the best story for 2008. The overall performance on this section was about the same as last year.

Question 4 produced a variety of responses. Most candidates were able to integrate the picture quite well into the story and many candidates were able to produce interesting stories.

Question 5 proved to be challenging for many candidates who seemed unable to illustrate *a series of unexpected turns* in their story. As usual, many responses to this question had the stimulus quotation inserted without satisfactory integration into the plot.

In the cases of Question 6, there was marked improvement over last year, indicating that candidates were better prepared to write a descriptive essay. However, too many candidates seemed unable to resist the temptation to write about the match itself instead of limiting themselves to *the scene just before the match*.

Suggestions for teachers and students

Teachers should treat Section Three as having two sections – two question requiring short stories and one question requiring a descriptive essay.

Teachers should continue to use pictures from varied sources, especially those dealing with current topics and themes in newspapers, to help stimulate and guide writing. This helps to make classroom writing interesting and should help students to focus on the use of details to create character, emotion and atmosphere. The creation of humour in writing is something that students might enjoy doing in their writing classes – how to tell a joke, how to write a joke, how to hold back the punch line are part of the story-writing that might interest even reluctant writers.

Over the years, candidates have used the story lines in films they have seen as the basis for their short stories. However, even though originality in story line is not an absolute requirement, candidates should not get into the habit of slavishly copying other people's material. It is not only illegal but it will also result in the copied parts of stories being discredited.

In relation to integrating the given quotation into the story, teachers are advised to work more on logical development of plot, integration of story elements, along with the other story writing elements. Candidates whose stories are impressive are those who use relevant details to create atmosphere, mood and feelings. Training in short writing must always stress the process – thinking, drafting, editing and proof reading.

Students should be explicitly made familiar with the difference between narrative and descriptive. Students should imagine themselves using a camera and describing what they see through the lens as they move the camera gradually from left to right to take in the whole scene. While it is necessary for teachers to get students accustomed to description by practising descriptive phrases and sentences with striking adjectives and adverbs, students should be wary about memorizing flowery phrases and sticking them willy-nilly into descriptive essays. In order to prepare students for this question, teachers have to focus specifically on vocabulary enrichment by providing students with a list of adjectives, one of nouns and another of adverbs and get students to combine them in a relevant way as they describe specific scenes. Teachers need to make these lists cover all the senses – sight, smell, touch, hearing and taste.

SECTION FOUR (Profile – Expression)

Question 7 and 8

Question 7 asked candidates to present an argument for or against the idea that Caribbean countries would be better served if they had women as prime ministers. Question 8 asked candidates to express their views on the topic *Planning for the future is a waste of time. Too much of our future is beyond our control.* Candidates did not demonstrate any significant difference in performance for the one or the other question. Performance in this section this year was slightly lower than last year. On average, Question 8 produced better answers than Question 7. Most of the good responses to Question 8 outlined the benefits to be derived from planning and give illustrative examples. Responses to Question 7 overwhelmingly concentrated on traditional concepts of women arguing that such characteristics would make them either good or bad prime ministers respectively. Added to this, there was a fairly general assumption (except in the case of Guyanese candidates) that prime ministers were all-powerful.

Suggestions for teachers and students

While this section of the paper often gives topics which are immediate to teenagers, students also need to keep abreast of topics of regional as well as wider or international interest. It is not always that topics close to the immediate and current experience of teenagers will be given in this section.

Students need constant practise in logical development of argument, especially in the proper use of conjunctions and adverbs which express logical relations, as in cause and effect, contrast and concession. Words and phrases such as 'however', 'although', 'consequently', 'by contrast', 'accordingly' should be mastered and used in full sentences rather than meaninglessly or in fragments, as they often are.

DETAILED COMMENTS

General Proficiency

Trinidad and Tobago

SECTION ONE (Profile – Understanding and Expression)

Question 1

In this question candidates were asked to read and then summarise a passage taken from an article in a magazine dealing with ethanol production in America. The topic was chosen because it was seen to be topical, even if not local. Candidates were expected to organize the information and present it in continuous prose in no more than 120 words.

The examiners identified the major points in the passage to be the following:-

- Ethanol production has increased tremendously and is still increasing
- Ethanol seems to offer the USA a chance to become less dependent on imported oil
- That would free the USA from concerns about oil prices and uncertainty of supply
- However, a sufficient increase in ethanol production is unlikely because:
 - the land space to produce the corn is unavailable
 - Americans are addicted to cheaper oil
 - ethanol is less cost effective
 - ethanol production and distribution depend on oil
 - expensive basic elements need to be put in place to facilitate ethanol distribution

Following are two excellent summaries of the passage which give some idea of how candidates may differ but still give the critical information needed:

- (1) *Ethanol production in the USA has increased tremendously and is still increasing. There are significant benefits should the USA manage to reduce dependence on foreign oil through the production of ethanol. The price of oil would fall significantly; oil producing countries would have less power; and the USA would be less worried about fluctuating oil prices and supply. However, reduction of dependence on oil is unlikely. One reason is that there is insufficient land to grow the volume of corn needed. In addition, America has become addicted to oil which is more cost effective than ethanol. Also, ethanol brings problems as its production and distribution depend on the use of oil and require infrastructural change. (115 words)*
- (2) *Ethanol production in the USA has increased dramatically to the point where it exceeds the farmers' ability to produce the necessary amount of corn. Ethanol could reduce the dependence on foreign oil so that the USA would not be subject to fluctuating prices or the threat of interrupted oil supply. The price of oil would fall and the power of OPEC reduced. The biggest hindrance is that the USA does not have enough land to produce the required amount of corn. Furthermore, production costs are high and ethanol itself requires the use of oil in all stages of its production and distribution. In addition, since the traditional forms of distribution are unsuitable for ethanol, costly modifications need to be made. (120 words)*

Performance on Question 1 was below standard, probably because the subject matter was not within the immediate interest of many candidates. Since candidates had to read the passage carefully instead of depending on their general knowledge of the subject, the exercise proved difficult for many of them. Many candidates, probably more so than usual, lifted portions of the passage, of varying lengths, verbatim, without understanding them and without properly connecting them. There were still too many candidates who did not observe the word limit given.

Suggestion for teachers and students

In preparing students for this section of the paper, teachers should:

- i) remind students to observe the stated length
- ii) drill students in the skill of reading paragraphs and identifying the topic
- iii) help students to recognize the fact that summary writing comprises both comprehension and composition skills
- iv) help students to appreciate some of the basic features of summary writing:-
 - a) using their own words as far as possible
 - b) using straightforward English with clarity and conciseness
 - c) using connectives to achieve fluency
 - d) observing correct mechanics of the language.

SECTION TWO (Profile – Understanding)

Performance in this section was below last year's but about the same as that of 2006. On average Question 3 was done better than Question 2.

Question 2

This question sought in part to test candidates' understanding of a passage taken from Mark McWatt's *Suspended Sentences: Fictions of Atonement*. The following were deemed to be the correct answers to the questions set:

- (a) *rain/mud*
- (b) *He laughed because the idea of reaching Annandale was ridiculous/He laughed because the writer did not realize that it was impossible to get to Annandale in the rainy season*
- (c) *unpleasant/dreary/gloomy*
- (d) *because he could not get down the river/because he could not get to where he wanted to go*
- (e) *because it was isolated/because it 'seemed to lie ... between reality and dream'*
- (f) *meandered*
- (g) *the almost opaque curtain of rain*
- (h) *disgust/frustration*

Since 2(c) and (d) especially required candidates to go beyond quoting from the passage and to make an assessment of the narrator, this question was generally not well done. In the case of 2(e), candidates were expected to see the difference between the negative first part of the poem and the more pleasant second part and to identify where the change occurred. Only a small number were able to identify the point of change.

Question 3

This question sought in part to test candidates' understanding of an article in the *Sunday Sun* newspaper about 'boys on the block'. The following were deemed to be the correct answers to the question asked:

- (a) *It gives you the topic of the passage/It tells you what the passage is about*
- (b) *Intelligent*
- (c) *by using a quotation from a magazine/by citing an authority/by giving evidence that it is widespread throughout the Caribbean*
- (d) *underachievers/ the unqualified/slower children*
- (e) *the failure of education to provide adequate, serious compensatory schooling*
- (f) *It will become a social cost to all of us/There boys will become liabilities*
- (g) *The problems must be tackled root and branch systematically and in a sustained manner*
- (h) *education*

As is usually the case, candidates found those questions which required identification of words from the passage easier than those which required a judgement or assessment. In the case of 3(a), instead of stating the relevance of the quotation, many candidates simply explained what it meant. A significant number of candidates gave the answer 'Yes' to 3(h) and/or repeated the three alternatives in the question, showing clearly that they did not understand a straightforward question structure.

Suggestions for teachers and students

Teachers still have to do more work in order to get students to move beyond the literal, to make logical judgements and to express these accurately. Teachers should ensure that students understand the structure and wording of questions and not assume that they do. Teachers should dissuade students from giving answers with several alternatives. Such answers are generally awarded zero marks.

Teachers should bear in mind that questions which require judgements and assessments will always occur on the examination paper, in Question 2 and Question 3, the balance across the two questions differing from year to year. The incidence of particular question types varies to make sure that the full syllabus is covered.

SECTION THREE (Profile – Expression)

Question 4, 5 and 6

Question 4 required that candidates write a story based on a picture in which a woman appeared to be dancing or performing a ritual or reaching for something. Question 5 asked candidates to write a story which included the words *As my parents sat there discussing me, I could not believe what they were saying. This was my life, not theirs.* Question 6 (the descriptive essay) required candidates to describe the scene from a building as people *stared out at the city*. Performance on this section was generally better than last year and candidates are coming to terms with the requirements of Question 6.

Question 5 was by far the most popular of the questions in this section (attempted by 75%) and the best done on average. Question 6 was the least popular (attempted by 6% of the candidates) and Question 4 did not fare much better in terms of the number of candidates who attempted it (14%). The performance on Question 4 and 6 was about the same and it was not significantly lower than that on Question 5.

Question 4 produced a variety of interpretations. Most candidates were able to integrate the picture into the story and many candidates were able to produce interesting stories.

Question 5 proved to be attractive to many candidates who seemed to be familiar with the situation. As a results, the stories were generally interesting and satisfactorily written.

In the case of Question 6, there was variety in the responses with many candidates choosing a science-fiction type of story.

Suggestions for teachers and students

Teachers should continue to use pictures from varied sources, especially those dealing with current topics and themes in newspapers, to help stimulate and guide writing. This helps to make classroom writing interesting and should help students to focus on the use of details to create character, emotion and atmosphere. Candidates whose stories are impressive are those who use relevant details to create atmosphere, mood and feelings. Training in short story writing must always stress the process – thinking, drafting, editing and proof reading.

Students should continue to stress the difference between narrative and descriptive. In the case of the descriptive, a good approach is to imagine oneself using a camera and describing what one sees through the lens as one moves the camera gradually from left to right to take in the whole scene. While it is necessary for teachers to get students accustomed to description by practising descriptive phrase and sentences with striking adjectives and adverbs, students should be wary about memorizing flowery phrases and sticking them willy-nilly into descriptive essays. In order to prepare students for this question, teachers have to focus specifically on vocabulary enrichment by providing students with a list of adjectives, one of nouns and another of adverbs and get students to combine them in a relevant way as they describe specific scenes. Teachers need to make these lists cover all the senses – sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste.

SECTION FOUR (Profile – Expression)

Question 7 and 8

Question 7 asked candidates to support one of two opinions given about who should determine employees' dress at work. Question 8 asked candidates to express their views on the topic *Governments should make it compulsory for all householders to take precautions against natural disasters*. Candidates demonstrated a decided preference for Question 7 over Question 8 but, on average, performance on Question 8 was marginally better than Question 7.

Suggestion for teachers and students

While it is necessary to keep abreast of topics of local interest, students also need to read and discuss in class wider or international topics because it is not always that topic close to their immediate and current experience will be given in this section.

Students need constant practice in logical development of argument, especially in the proper use of conjunctions and adverbs which express logical relations, as in cause and effect, contrast and concession. Words and phrases such as 'however', 'although', 'consequently', 'by contrast', 'accordingly' should be mastered and used in full sentences rather than meaninglessly or in fragments, as they often are.

Paper 02 – Free Response

Candidates’ performance in Paper 02 in 2008 was lower than in the preceding years. The mean score in 2006 was 31 per cent; this declined to 29 per cent in 2007 and further declined to 26.07 per cent in 2008. Average performance in the component sections of Paper 02 was as follows (The numbers in brackets are the maximum totals for the respective questions):

	2006	2007	2008
Section 1 Summary skills	7.17 (30)	7.35 (30)	7.23 (30)
Section 2 Comprehension	12.36 (27)	12.93 (27)	11.27 (27)
Section 3 Story Writing/Description	6.65 (20)	6.29 (20)	6.76 (20)
		5.20 (20)	7.14 (20)
Section 4 Argument	8.62 (25)	6.41 (25)	5.56 (25)

SECTION ONE (Profiles – Understanding and Expression)

The passage to be summarized was adapted from an advertisement in a newspaper for ‘The Caribbean Awards for Excellence’. It was organized in three sub-sections under the following headings: ‘Mission’, ‘the Magnitude of our appreciation’, ‘Award categories’. The layout presented a stout challenge to some candidates, many of whom began their summaries with a sentence fragment that was simply a re-statement of the Mission Statement, but with no clear linkages. The few candidates who demonstrated competence were able to identify the main ideas and write the summary comprehensively. They were able to use standard English, organize their ideas sequentially and summarise the passage in 80 words, as required, without losing either the focus or the content of the original passage.

The weaker candidates presented summaries that retained the organization and language of the original passage. In such cases it was difficult to assess whether the candidate had meaningfully selected relevant details or whether these were stumbled upon by chance. As regards economy of expression, in several of the incompetent responses, the original passage was reproduced in a telegraphic style, omitting function words and transitional words and phrases and thus producing a string of disjointed sentences. Weaker responses also showed evidence of a lack of fundamental skills in summary writing. For example, the three award categories were mentioned and subsequently elaborated: “...This includes those who...”

Apart from its layout, the language of the passage also presented difficulties to candidates, who seemed unfamiliar with such phrases as ‘increased visibility’, ‘financial component’, ‘scale and scope’, ‘give impetus to’. Some candidates interpreted the word ‘candidates’ as synonymous with ‘students’ and therefore wrote summaries not about citizens being rewarded for community work, but about students being rewarded for excellent performance on exams. A number of students also exceeded the word limit by rewriting the passage, while others took ideas from different sections and mixed them to form a summary.

Students’ responses suggested that they needed more practice in summary writing: it is quite evident that they were unable to identify main ideas and paraphrase these ideas.

SECTION TWO (Profile – Understanding)

Question 2 and 3

The general performance on this section was below that of previous years.

Question 2 tested the candidates’ ability to respond to a passage taken from Earl Lovelace’s *Salt*, featuring the experiences of a boy. Most students performed well in contextual questions, but produced weaker responses in questions which required synthesis and evaluation. For example, in 2(d) “To what does ‘it’ refer in line 9 of paragraph 1?” Students gave erroneous responses (the sun; the cemetery) and were unable

to correctly identify 'the town'. Question 2(f) and 2(g), particularly the former "(What does the father think of the son in paragraph 3?)" also presented difficulties to students.

Question 3 tested the candidates' ability to respond to an argumentative passage from a newspaper article ('Carnival Survives') written by Caspar London. Again, questions which required assessments proved difficult. For instance, in 3(e) "What does the author imply by the words 'whatever than means' in lines 14 and 15?", many students missed the sarcasm and responses quite literally that the author did not understand the expression. In this question, as in Question 2, many of the weaker candidates quoted large portions of the passage with the hope that these would provide the examiners with the correct answer. However, this strategy does not work.

SECTION THREE (Profile – Expression)

Question 4, 5 and 6

As usual, this section posed a major challenge to the majority of candidates.

Question 4 required candidates to write a story based on a picture featuring a man apparently jumping through the air or running. Question 5 asked candidate to write a story based on the sentence *It was then that I remembered my mother's words "What you sow is what you reap"*. Question 6 provided the words *The spacecraft blasted off. Mars here we come!* and asked candidates to describe the astronaut's journey and their landing on Mars. The most popular of these questions was Question 5 and the least popular was Question 6. Question 5 was satisfactorily interpreted, as was Question 4. In Question 6, students generally did not pay attention to key words: describe; journey; landing.

Some of the weaknesses in this section that need special attention are:

Grammatical problems (tense, use of pronouns, sentence structure)

Mere recounting of events with little or no attempt to make the story come alive through development of plot, characterization, appeal to the senses, effective selection of details. Poor paragraphing and ineffective use of dialogue.

SECTION FOUR (Profile – Expression)

This section tested the candidates' ability to express their views persuasively using various techniques of argument. Question 7 required students to state their views on the topic *There is nothing wrong with children being subjected to hardships and being denied privileges in life; it will build character*. Question 8 required candidates to write an argument either supporting or opposing the statement *Victims of violent crimes should be compensated by the relatives of the criminals*.

A significant percentage of the candidates did not attempt this section. Among those who did, virtually the same number did each of the questions, but Question 7 was not as poorly done as Question 8. Candidates had problems interpreting some important words and expressions in the topics for example, 'privilege' and 'hardship' (Q7); 'compensate' and 'victims' (Q8). These misinterpretations sometimes rendered their arguments invalid. Although most students who attempted the questions clearly had views on the topics, some had difficulty in effectively developing points to support their arguments. There was, however, evidence of attempts to expand, show cause and effect and employ persuasive techniques in the presentation of the essay.

The better candidates selected relevant information and developed points clearly in support of the position taken. There were instances of logical development and appropriate reinforcement of the argument. Some candidates were able to clinch their arguments with an effective conclusion.

There was a general weakness in expression and mechanics of writing. In weaker scripts there was a mere listing of points, under-developed thoughts and limited views. There was also evidence of misuse of prepositions, awkward syntax, sentence fragment, run-on sentences and neglect of appropriate punctuation, especially question marks.

General comments

Not enough students demonstrated competence in Area II (Expression). Poor expression was most obvious in Section 3 where students wrote phrases such as:

It was graduation day and we receive medals for our achievements;

The center of my hair was balled

They need freedom to associate with people to know their upstands and their downfalls

When you are in your cells you are very board

I laided on my bed and I decided to fall asleep

One encouraging fact is that many students demonstrated competence in the use of quotation marks. Apart from this, punctuation was limited to full stops and commas. The concepts of paragraphing is ignored so often that it prompts the question as to whether this aspect of writing is overlooked by teachers.