

CARIBBEAN EXAMINATIONS COUNCIL

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

JANUARY 2010

**ENGLISH A
GENERAL PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION**

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GENERAL COMMENTS

Paper 01, the multiple-choice paper, accounts for most of the Understanding component of the examination overall and Paper 02, the free response paper, accounts for all of the Expression component as well as part of the Understanding Component (all of Section 2 and part of Section 1).

The distribution of marks for the two profiles (Expression and Understanding) across the two papers is as follows:

| | PAPER 01 | PAPER 02 | TOTAL |
|------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Understanding | 60* = 46 ⁺ | 40* = 30 ⁺ | 76 ⁺ = 40% |
| Expression | – | 90* = 114 ⁺ | 114 ⁺ = 60% |
| TOTAL | 46⁺ | 114⁺ | 190⁺ = 100% |
| * raw score | | | |
| + weighted score | | | |

The percentage of candidates attaining Grade III and above in January 2010 and in the two previous years is as follows:

| 2008 | 2009 | 2010 |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 47.8 | 59.3 | 54.9 |

The overall means for the examination (out of a total of 190) for the years 2008, 2009, 2010 are as follows:

| 2008 | 2009 | 2010 |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 82.23 | 88.19 | 86.04 |

Average performance over the last three years on the multiple-choice paper (Paper 01) out of a total of 60 marks is as follows:

| 2008 | 2009 | 2010 |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 26.41 | 27.31 | 24.44 |

Average performance (2008–2010) in the component sections of Paper 02 is given below:

| Section | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 |
|------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| <i>Section A</i> Summary Skills | 11.51 | 14.15 | 11.13 (30) |
| <i>Section B</i> Comprehension | 6.82 | 8.60 | 10.11 (30) |
| <i>Section C</i> Story Writing | 14.25 | 13.29 | 14.52 (35) |
| Description | 12.21 | 10.24 | 13.70 (35) |
| <i>Section D</i> Argument | 13.52 | 13.55 | 13.77 (35) |

While candidates are encouraged to communicate in order to develop the facility to process and articulate ideas, there is a need for them to differentiate between the spoken language and that which is written, and to appreciate that Standard English has an international currency. CXC English A is an English Language examination and candidates are required, above all, to demonstrate competence in, and control of the English Language.

Preparation for the examination must be a gradual process of developing skills, both receptive (comprehension) and productive (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 colons and semi-colons, as well as other conventions of writing, such as inverted commas, capitalization, abbreviations, the writing of numbers, whether in figures or in words, correct spelling, proper sentence structure, and paragraphing. Critical reading and thinking skills need also to be integral parts of the regular class sessions, because without these skills the tasks of summary writing, comprehension, argument or discussion are not easily managed.

Teachers should capitalize on the current interests of the candidates and use topical regional and international issues to help them appreciate the value of effective language use, and to help them to build personal banks of ideas. It is important to remember that very few candidates are natural speakers of Standard English and therefore every learning opportunity should be used.

Managing the examination is an area for which candidates need to be prepared. Candidates should be given strategies for interpreting and responding to tasks; for preparing simple outlines to guide their construction of responses; and for effectively editing their work. They need well rehearsed procedures for tackling each question. 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. It is only through repeated practice that each individual student will come to some understanding of the best way to move from a rough copy to a fair copy under examination conditions. The perception that the English Language examination is not an activity for which the candidate needs to prepare should be seriously rejected.

There are also some basic examination presentation strategies that candidates need to be reminded of: it is important to write so the work may be read; care should be taken in deleting and adding information. The use of liquid paper should be discouraged in favour of neat crossing out, since candidates frequently forget to insert new material in places where the liquid paper was used. Correct question numbering and page numbering help ensure that efforts are not misunderstood.

The tasks in the examination are directly related, in most cases, to real-life skills. Employers and the general public regard performance in English Language examinations as a measure of one's ability to perform in the world of work. It should also be remembered that the sort of English required in an examination is different from what is normally spoken in every-day life. Preparation for the English examination is just as important as it is for any other subject

DETAILED COMMENTS

Section A - Understanding and Expression

Question 1

Most candidates showed some evidence of overall understanding of the passage to be summarized, grasped the concept that 'infertile soil' was responsible for the food crisis and in most cases demonstrated the ability to pull out two points from it. Several good scripts exhibited good language use. Too many candidates, however, still do not know what is required in summary writing. A large number of candidates experienced expression problems; hence, communication of their ideas was ambiguous or even contradictory. In addition, there was often a lack of cohesion.

- There were very few superior scripts, and candidates evidently experienced several problems getting beyond initial understanding of the passage: though they understood the general drift of the passage, they clearly had difficulty with the details, and the way those details developed and interacted with the main point and thrust of the writing.
- The habit of lifting and regurgitating chunks from the passage, without analysing the content, continues to be a problem. Teachers need to focus more on the need for interpretation and re-expression of the *meaning* of what is read — not just changing of words (interpreting rather than translation).
- Exceeding the word limit is still a problem. More practice is needed in the strategies of achieving economy in writing, in selection of points, and in achieving focus.
- Organization is another major problem since many candidates show a lack of ability to link points and ideas logically. Many candidates are limited to the chronology in the original.

Following are three summaries of the passage which give some idea of different approaches to presenting the critical information.

Sample Summary #1

Various factors contribute to the world's food crisis. These include pests and diseases, flood and drought, poor farming practices, the decreasing amount of cultivable cropland, and, most importantly, the increasingly poor quality of soil. Successful attempts have been made to improve seed quality but this has limited effect where the soil is poor. Producing better types of plants increased food for a

short while but failed because of soil. The world food crisis is usually seen as a result of bad marketing practices, but other things like water, diseases and soil must not be taken for granted, as is usually the case. Attention has been given to improving agricultural practices, but very little is done to improve the soil.

(120 words)

Sample Summary #2

Seeds are improving but food production is falling because soils are deteriorating and people are going hungry. According to scientists better varieties resulted in the 'green evolution'. Many years ago, improved plant varieties resulted in the 'green evolution'. This led to the belief that the crisis was over. The hope was short-lived as fertile soil, a critical factor, was lacking. The present food crisis, intensified by natural disasters and diseases, could have been averted with the promotion of fertilizers in places like Africa. Although they practice modern agricultural techniques, governments and charities are not interested in funding projects to improve the quality of soil.

(105 words)

Sample Summary #3

Although the quality of seeds is improving, soil is getting worse and there is currently a food crisis. Soil improvement is critical to solving this crisis.

While it is true that the crisis is viewed in economic terms, a combination of environmental conditions also contributes to creating the desperate food situation. The chief problem is that fertile soil is needed to capitalize on the high quality seeds and plants developed through modern scientific methods. Research in soil improvement has been neglected because it does not capture the interest of governments and charities. They fail to realize that even the best quality seeds cannot flourish without good soil. Soil health is needed to avert a worse food crisis.

(117 words)

Suggestions for Teachers and Candidates

Competence in the techniques of summary is required: a grasp of the thesis; identification of the main points; logical organization in which the correct relationships are grasped and expressed, the ability to express the material in one's own words, with an appropriate vocabulary; and completion within the word limit specified. In cases where the original is reproduced wholesale by the candidate, this is interpreted as incompetence.

Summarizing 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 candidates who may be told that an executive summary preserves the words of the full document, this is not the case in English — 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.

The examiners first determine whether the word limit has been exceeded. Words beyond the word limit are not considered. Consideration is next given to whether the candidate has understood and can clearly identify the main points in the passage and award marks accordingly. The examiners then assess whether the candidate has put those points together in an intelligible and logical manner using his/her own words and award marks accordingly. When candidates exceed the word limit, the marks may be reduced by as many as twenty per cent; when candidates use only the words in the original passage, the marks are automatically reduced by 33 per cent.

Care must be taken to preserve the meaning of the original, and to avoid the inclusion of extraneous material, personal opinion and commentary. In real life, such distortion would be seen as being unethical, and it could lead to wrong, unfair and disastrous decisions.

Section B - Understanding

Questions 2 and 3

Generally, candidates found the questions in this section within their reach, but there were many instances of candidates aiming to succeed by including everything in the section of the passage to which the question directs them, when in fact they are required to be specific. There were varied weaknesses in answers, most exhibiting vagueness, and problems with expression.

Suggestions for Teachers and Candidates

Answers indicate a need for teachers to help students to develop accuracy and control, for example by

- engaging students in much practice in interpreting and arriving at meaning and evidence
- involving students in practice to develop the habit of focusing and discriminating
- involving students in activities that develop their vocabulary so as to produce answers that are clear and concise
- engaging students in recognizing the difference between literal and metaphorical language.

The questions in this section are set in such a way that precise answers are required. Candidates should pay close attention to every word that is used and to the different ways in which questions are asked. 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 usually results in zero being awarded for such an answer. It is the candidate's 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 candidate.

This section requires candidates to respond to different levels of meaning and to express their answers clearly. Candidates also need to do as each question asks: if it requires 'a word' or 'a phrase', then providing a sentence, for example, is often an indication that the student does not know exactly what the answer is.

Section C - Expression

Questions 4, 5 and 6

Performance in Section III was generally consistent with past years. There were a few superior scripts and also a few incompetent ones. Most of these came from Question 6 (description), as candidates

continue to ignore the requirement to describe, or to describe the scene and/or period that the question asks for.

Of the three choices given in this section, the most popular was no. 5, the word prompt, while the least popular was no. 4, the picture stimulus.

Question 4

Question 4 required candidates to write a story based on a picture of a little girl hugging a boy. Both children were smiling. Many candidates were prompted to write expository pieces in response to this stimulus.

Question 5

This stimulus was very popular with candidates. It required them to write a story beginning with the sentences 'He slammed the door behind him. He knew it would be for the last time.' Performance was generally fair.

Question 6

Many responses suggested that candidates had not studied the instructions, and, as happened in earlier examinations, they wrote mainly narrative, with some description, from the start of the assignment, rather than focus on the specific time/place elements for description.

Suggestions for Teachers and Candidates

Candidates are advised that they should read the best story from preceding years in order to get a sense of what is required, but these stories should not be memorised and reproduced. In addition candidates should not disregard the word limit set; the longer the story, the greater the chance of grammatical and other errors occurring. Although the question papers state word limits as mainly approximations, the experience has been that the better candidates tend to write stories that fall within or not too far outside the word limit. 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, and good and refreshing language use. Weak stories tend to be linear, mostly behaving like reports, with weak language. Candidates 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 and other authors.

Candidates should use language that they can control. At times they use words and structures with which they are not really familiar. The result is that what they write is often verbose, stilted, sometimes unintelligible in parts and unimpressive. Teachers are encouraged to help candidates 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.

Candidates continue to be unable to differentiate between exposition and description, or to create a piece in which the narrative overwhelms the descriptive. 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 instructions given.

- Description must be clearly constructed and developed. (The different components must be detailed, then linked appropriately to create areas of focus; the relevant details must be logically and effectively sequenced; and then the different areas of focus and facets must be linked appropriately [e.g. background vs. foreground; main focus vs. peripheral detail]).
- The interpretive interventions (reflections) of the writer must be relevant to the 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 (e.g. 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.
- Candidates should be encouraged to improve their facility with adjectives and adverbs.

Section D - Argument

Questions 7 and 8

The performance in this section was similar to that of earlier examinations but some areas of concern continue to be noted.

Question 7

This question required candidates to argue for or against the choice of local food. This was not a popular choice. While the subject was very topical candidates seemed not prepared to present arguments and comment on local foods. Arguments were often undeveloped, lacking illustrative details and comparison.

Question 8

This was by far the more popular and the better done question. It required candidates to give their views on the banning of sexual and violent songs from radio and television. It was topical and candidates were able to take a balanced approach to responding. They advanced counter arguments to show other areas of blame for behaviour beside sexual and violent songs.

Suggestions for Teachers and Candidates

Candidates need to note that skills of argument 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. Candidates should pay attention to 'tone' and 'audience' and not indiscriminately use the language of debating in every argument they present. Candidates can learn different styles of argument by studying letters to the editor and editorials in newspapers as well as short, interesting articles in popular magazines or in the magazine section of newspapers.

Candidates need to read the questions carefully and make sure they understand key words. They should then select their points, choose examples that support their points, and be consistent and clear in their presentation. 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 examiners' view or the socially acceptable view.