

**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**

**MAY/JUNE 2011**

**ENGLISH A  
GENERAL PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION**

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## GENERAL COMMENTS

Performance this year was fair and compares favourably with the previous two years. The percentage of candidates who achieved Grades I–III was 67 compared with 66 in 2010 and 56 in 2009. The overall mean was 88 compared with 85 in 2010 and 82 in 2009. Generally, the incidence of students being wholly unprepared for the examination was small, so that answers suggesting or demonstrating incompetence were fewer. When the examination is taken as a whole, there is some improvement, but individual questions reveal fluctuations in the quality of performance.

While candidates seem to be taught the aspects of the syllabus which are examined, some candidates do not demonstrate the quality of skills that produce excellent responses. Most responses fall into the category of being adequate. There is strong evidence that questions/stimuli are not read carefully and not fully thought through. This results in many misinterpretations and inadequate responses.

The following examples are indicative of this. Section D this year included a stimulus that required students to *express their views* on the issue of banning the *import* of fruits and vegetables, in order to support local agriculture. Attention was drawn to a response which replaced the word *import* with *export*, used the word repeatedly and with confidence throughout the essay, and so missed the issue entirely. Equally concerning was the inclination of some candidates, in responding to Question 5 in Section C, to choose one of the indeterminate objects in the background of the picture and to make the story revolve around that, rather than around anything that was foregrounded.

There are still instances of candidates answering more than one question. Not only is this a poor examination strategy, since it takes time away from other questions, but it suggests that candidates do not take care to read or study the instructions.

## DETAILED COMMENTS

### Paper 01 — Multiple Choice

Performance on Paper 01 was fairly good. The mean mark on this paper was 30 out of 46 compared with 26 in 2010 and 28 in 2009. Candidates generally performed well on items of word choice, grammar and mechanics and on comprehension passages based on informative, literary and persuasive discourse. Items presenting difficulty were those requiring evaluation of the effectiveness of language devices such as irony, innuendo and symbolism as well as evaluating appropriate use of code and style in relation to the author's intention.

### Paper 02 — Free Response

#### Section A: Summary

##### Question 1

This question required candidates to demonstrate both understanding and expression skills. The material is usually drawn from informative discourse or exposition (essays, reports, scientific discussions, analyses). The skills of selection and concise expression are targeted. Included in the

syllabus is the following advice: *Summaries require economy of language, the careful selection of the relevant main ideas, and the preservation of the intention of the original.*

While most candidates managed to select the appropriate information for their answers, of that group, only a small minority showed mastery of the skill of writing clearly and concisely, *in their own words*. Fewer candidates still, were able to maintain the correct relationships while reorganizing their points for brevity. They clung steadfastly to both the pattern and the language of the original, a strategy that often worked against conciseness. Most candidates continued to lift the points entirely. Often, connectives were not used so cohesion was lost. There were extreme cases where candidates' concept of summary was to simply copy the first 120 words of the passage.

The mean for the summary this year was 14 out of 30 compared with 15 in 2010 and 11 in 2009. The passage this year appears to have been well within candidates' reach, and they scored reasonably well in the content area. Following the original organization slavishly, led to answers that exceeded the limit and so candidates lost marks. Failure to use their own language also earned low marks. Those candidates who performed in the range 9 –18 selected relevant details but generally did not maintain the original focus.

A close look at the syllabus section *Notes and Suggested Activities* (specifically pages 6 –12) will help both teacher and student to identify and hone summary skills.

## **Section B: Comprehension**

Section B is designed to test understanding, using two short passages, one literary and one expository. The skills tested are outlined in the syllabus under Understanding (a), (b) and (c) (pages 2–3). Weaker candidates responded well mainly to the first three of the ten objectives under (b) – recognizing facts stated explicitly, extracting specific and implied information.

### Question 2

The literary passage dealt with a children's activity, hide-and-seek. The mean mark on this question was 7 out of 15. Part (a) asked simply for the name of the game. Examiners recognized that the game was called differently in the various countries, and these names were accepted. Part (c), which required deducing meaning, was frequently incorrectly answered as candidates were unable to go beyond the literal and repeated the answer for the previous question. The parts most answered incorrectly or omitted were (e), (f), (g) and (i). In (g), it was not recognized that a conflict must involve at least two elements. Similarly candidates failed to capture two sides of the oxymoron in (i). Questions relating to appropriateness of tone, connotative meaning and writer's craft were not well answered.

### Question 3

The mean mark for this question was also 7 out of 15.

The problem parts were (f) where there was an inability to draw the inference, and (h) where again there was an inability to grasp and explain the oxymoron. It was noted that fewer candidates attempted to lift segments of the passage and tried to answer every question; there were fewer instances of no response.

Candidates continue to ignore the use of the term phrase, and give instead full sentences or even paragraphs, and so lose marks. This prompts the reiteration of the need to teach students to study the requirements of individual questions.

### **Section C: Story Writing**

This year, Question 4 was the most popular. Question 6 was the least popular in this section. The stories demonstrated generally that competence in writing standard English is weak.

#### Question 4

This question used a picture of an elderly man playing a guitar as a stimulus. Candidates seemed generally comfortable with the picture stimulus. It prompted stories with good characterization and emotional involvement. Story lines tended to be similar, but those scoring the higher marks managed to create conflict or relationships with grandchildren, and tended to use symbolism. Reflection and flash back techniques were also attempted. The mean mark was 13 out of 35.

#### Question 5

This question was better handled. It was based on the stimulus *A cold hand grasped his wrist as he slumped to the ground*. Many candidates made unconvincing use of the stimulus often tacking it on to the end or barely including it in the story. The mean mark was 15 out of 35.

#### Question 6

This question was a challenge largely because candidates seemed unfamiliar with the word *pedestrian*. The question was based on the stimulus *The streets were filled with pedestrians in anticipation of their new leader*. Another challenge was also the need to describe mood and atmosphere, so that a significant number of answers scored between 10 and 13 marks. This year saw some resurgence of the tendency towards narration rather than description. At the same time, those candidates who understood the requirements wrote very good pieces. The mean mark for this question was 12 out of 35.

### **Section D: Argument**

#### Questions 7 and 8

Both of these questions should have been quite suitable given the demands of the syllabus. The content required to respond to them should have been sufficiently within candidates' experience. Question 7 required candidates to write an essay giving their views on the topic *The government should ban the importation of all fruits and vegetables in support of local production*. Question 8 required an argument supporting or opposing the view that *Hungry students cannot learn. Free lunch should be provided for all secondary school students*.

Each question was structured in such a way that there were two parts to be linked to produce an acceptable response. This presented a major difficulty for large numbers of candidates who failed to create necessary links between the two parts; for example, candidates might argue *hungry students cannot learn* OR *free lunch should be provided*.

Some of the responses were quite long – in several cases two or three pages, well over the word limit. In addition, many candidates had ideas but did not have the language skills necessary to

articulate those ideas well. The mean mark for Questions 7 and 8 were 16 and 14 out of 35, respectively.

### **Recommendations for Teachers**

- It is clear that hundreds of students across the Caribbean have not mastered the use of Standard English. There continues to be interference from dialects and patois used throughout the region; to these have been added the slangs originating from dancehall music and the North American ghettos and the abbreviations familiar to users of the messaging media of modern technology. For students who almost abhor reading, some methods must be found to encourage correct use of the language.
- Teachers need to continue to pay attention to having students use their own words when summarizing and to employ transitional words and phrases in order to develop their responses into a coherent whole. Oral and written exercises should be used to introduce these words into the active vocabulary of students. Practice in construction shifts and equivalent sentences would be useful.
- The teaching of comprehension can be combined with the teaching of summary as both require thoughtful reading and understanding of meaning.
- Students should be helped to focus on interpretation; much practice in listening, reading and reproducing meaning and in attention to accuracy is necessary. Sensitivity to how words and sentences work in the language is important.
- Students need to develop a firm grasp of language structure through regular reading of good literature. This includes attention to paragraphing, grammar, spelling, diction and other conventions of writing.
- Students should be given ample practice in recognizing and using the elements of story-writing and descriptive writing.
- Greater use should be made of literature to teach writing—immersion into how stories work.
- Strategies should be engaged to provide individual help to students so that personal needs can be addressed.