

CARIBBEAN EXAMINATIONS COUNCIL

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

MAY/JUNE 2010

**ENGLISH A
GENERAL PROFICIENCY**

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GENERAL COMMENTS

The number of candidates writing the examination this year was approximately 100,000.

Paper 01, the multiple choice paper, accounted for most of the Understanding component of the examination overall, and Paper 02, the free response paper, accounted for all of the Expression as well as part of the Understanding component (part of Question 1 and all of Questions 2 and 3).

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

	PAPER 01 Multiple Choice	PAPER 02 Essay	TOTAL
Understanding	60* = 46 ⁺	40* = 30 ⁺	76 ⁺ = 40%
Expression	–	90* = 114 ⁺	114 ⁺ = 60%
TOTAL	46⁺	144⁺	190⁺ = 100%
* raw score			
+ weighted score			

The percentage of candidates attaining Grade III and above in the two papers this year, and the three previous years is as follows:

2007	2008	2009	2010
49.01	(RoR*) 41.86	56.44	66.45
	(T&T*) 49.56		

* Rest of Region

* Trinidad and Tobago

The performance mean for the examination (out of a total of 190⁺) for 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010 is as follows:

2007	2008	2009	2010
77.94	(RoR) 74.74	81.82	85.33
	(T&T) 78.58		

Average performance (2007-2010) on the multiple choice paper (Paper 01) out of a total of 60 marks is as follows:

2007	2008	2009	2010
23.44	(RoR) 26.24	27.92	26.25
	(T&T) 26.98		

Average performance (2007–2010) in the component sections of Paper 02 is given below.

	2007	2008	2009	2010
Section A	10.04 (30)	10.42 (30) (RoR)	10.69 (30)	14.57 (30)
Summary Skills		8.78 (30) (T&T)		
Section B	15.45 (29)	8.84 (30) (RoR)	11.13 (30)	9.07 (30)
Comprehension		12.98 (30) (T&T)		
Section C				
Story Writing	13.62 (35)	13.29 (35) (RoR)	13.27 (35)	13.67 (35)
Description		14.25 (35) (T&T)		
	10.63 (35)	11.23 (35) (RoR)	13.30 (35)	11.42 (35)
		13.82 (35) (T&T)		
Section D	13.74 (35)	12.78 (35) (RoR)	14.44 (35)	13.28 (35)
Argument		13.13 (35) (T&T)		

DETAILED COMMENTS

Paper 01 – Multiple Choice

Performance on Paper 01 was satisfactory, with approximately 72 per cent of candidates achieving acceptable grades. Paper 01 assessed understanding of meaning conveyed through word choice, grammar and punctuation as well as meaning constructed from reading literature and opinions expressed in various forms. Candidates performed best on items requiring understanding of literary discourse, but were weakest on understanding informative discourse, grammar and mechanics.

Paper 02 – Free Response

Section A: Summary

The summary expected from candidates writing the CSEC English A examination is one demanding the skills used in every-day situations where what is said or what is written may need to be put into a concise form. The summary should reflect the general depth and intention of the original while giving all of the necessary information in candidates' own words. There are various approaches to writing summary and teachers need to expose students to these. One may simply follow the organization of the original, moving chronologically through the points. Summary may also begin with the conclusion and then show the line of reasoning and facts. The important requirement is that the correct relationships between the points must be maintained, so that the meaning is unchanged and clear. Additionally, while it is not necessary to capture every detail, it is important that vital information is not ignored. A good vocabulary is an asset that should be cultivated, since a summary must be rendered in one's own words.

The responses to the summary question continue to suggest that many candidates are not being taught the skills of summary writing. There is persistent wholesale or partial lifting. In a large number of instances where the main points are grasped, the summaries fail because not enough attention is given to organization and meaning. Large numbers of candidates continue to have problems comprehending the passages set. This is directly related to the lack of comprehension skills generally. Poor vocabulary, poor understanding

of grammar and punctuation, weak grasp of connotative language, and weak reasoning are among the elements contributing to misinterpretation. Section A tests two elements: understanding and expression, hence the importance of comprehension skills. Candidates must not see ‘comprehension’ as a textbook activity, but as an essential part of daily life.

Often the skill of paraphrasing is confused with summarizing — paraphrasing will generally increase, rather than reduce the length, so that in such cases many of the main points come outside of the word limit.

Question 1

The summary passage on cassava proved to be generally manageable, based on a topic of which most candidates have some knowledge. There was a general improvement in candidates’ performance in writing the summary, with more candidates demonstrating those skills needed to show competence. However, the general weaknesses continued, with such responses reflecting the same problems that have been identified in the past: lack of understanding of the passage, the use of extraneous information, use of the language of the text, and overall weakness in the use of language. This year, like other years, there were many instances where candidates wrote letters and stories about cassava preparation and use in their own homes. Not only did they misunderstand or ignore the instructions, but they indicated a serious inability to address what was asked, without permitting what was known to interfere. In instances where it was obvious that candidates were attempting to write in their own words, vocabulary deficiency was a problem.

Section B: Comprehension

In Section B, there are two kinds of texts, representing the literary and the expository genres. The questions require precise answers rather than the general or vague. Candidates should pay close attention to every word that is used in the textual piece (prose, poetry, drama) and recognize the various levels of meaning. Of importance too, is the fact that questions are asked in various ways. Teachers need to ensure that in preparing students, they use the taxonomy to help them to become familiar with types of question words and meaning. In response to each question, candidates are expected to answer precisely what they are asked. These questions **never** require paragraph-long answers. Responding to a question which requires a specific 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 candidate.

Questions 2 and 3

Most candidates performed fairly well on this section, with Question 2 being the one with which candidates were more comfortable. Question 3 appeared to be more demanding.

Questions that candidates found most challenging were 2(d), 3(c), 3(f), 3(g), and 3(h). All these questions required making judgements rather than lifting answers from the passage. Question 2(d) required the candidates not to simply list the occupations, or choose one, but to decide on the main occupation; Question 3(c) required them to decide on not why ‘gut’ feeling has to be developed, but why it has to be *‘deliberately developed’*; 3(f) presented problems to candidates who simply lifted from the passage; 3(g) was a test of ability to derive the meaning of an unfamiliar word from its context; 3(h) required the ability to arrive at overall meaning and the writer’s intention in a passage.

Section C: Story Writing

It is recognized that candidates seem to read less than before, with each year-group reading less than the one before it. One reality is that the adult world supplies the student world with film, visual stories which reduce the need to read for pleasure or entertainment, and sometimes even for knowledge — there is no need to imagine, since the visual preempts this activity. However, the movie concretizes a story: there is character, setting, theme, conflict, climax; there are details, moods and tones. The movie gives opportunity for critique: what worked, why it did, where the situation was unrealistic, where and how could things have been improved? What would a sequel contain: what other perspectives are possible? What would you write

if you wanted to convey the beauty, emotion or some other abstract aspect to someone who did not see the movie? Are the spoken words alone enough to help someone experience the power of the movie? This suggests that while we continue to persuade our candidates into reading, we need to accept their differences and make more use of their world to stimulate their minds and efforts. Different types of stimuli are provided in the examination for story writing — the more visual student is helped by a picture stimulus, but this kind of stimulus is not designed to exclude anyone.

Candidates need to be encouraged to evaluate their own stories using a given set of criteria. The categories used in marking the examination are public. They are ‘incompetent’ including ranges 1 and 2, ‘competent’ including ranges 3 and 4, and ‘superior’, ranges 5 and 6. Teachers should help students to apply these categories in assessing their own efforts in the attempt to improve their skills.

A negative practice clearly evidenced by candidates’ stories is that they prepare a story and are determined to write this story regardless of the stimuli given, or they tack the stimulus on to the final paragraph in the hope that it may be absorbed. In both instances, their responses are clearly incompetent, and assessed in this range.

Questions 4 and 5

By far the more popular and better done was Question 5, but Question 4 was also attempted by many candidates. Overall, candidates continue to be poor to moderate in this section. The vast majority fell into the ‘competent’ group, mainly at the lower end of the mark scheme. There were only occasional exceptionally good scripts. The responses generally indicate weaknesses in story-writing techniques, as well as significant weaknesses in fundamental language competencies.

Section C – Descriptive Writing

Comments made on Question 6 in previous years bear repeating here: description must be clearly constructed and developed, having the different components linked appropriately. Details must be logically and effectively sequenced. The different areas of focus must be linked appropriately (e.g. background vs. foreground; main focus vs. peripheral detail). The interpretive interventions (reflections) of the writer must be related to the purely descriptive elements. The 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 (time, perspective, mood, tone) must be clearly established. There should be varied and lively use of language to create picture elements as well as appropriate choice of words (nouns, verbs, concrete adjectives, adverbs) to create setting and atmosphere. In short, the object should be to enable the audience to see and to vicariously experience what is being described.

Question 6

Question 6 continues to be the least popular in Section C. Where it was attempted, too much narrative was included in the response. Among the weak responses, the descriptions were merely a listing of details, with little sense of the spatial or the other elements that would make the description meaningful.

It is clear that the question is not yet achieving, to a significant degree, the purpose for which it was introduced — to provide an option to the story-writing questions. Only the exceptional candidates appear to perform well on this question, which suggests that the writing of description is not being given enough attention in classrooms.

Section D – Argument

This section tests candidates’ expression skills: how they organize thoughts for maximum effect, moving smoothly from one idea to another; how to express those views clearly and succinctly; how to use supporting elements; the techniques of audience appeal; the skill of reasoning and the ability to recognize and separate opinion from fact are among the skills assessed. Topics will be related to current social issues and elements

which appeal to or fall within the experience of the student, but the skills of reasoning, whether in arguing for, against, or in giving one's reasoned views should be acquired by using as wide a range of stimuli as possible. Teachers need to continue to give repeated 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.

Question 7

This question presented challenges with interpretation. 'Obedience' was sometimes defined culturally as '[having] manners', and a variety of other positives such as 'trustworthiness' and 'submissiveness'. The examination is a test of candidates' ability to use Standard English as an international currency. While the foregoing kind of answer is not completely 'wrong', is it at best only a partial satisfaction of the appropriate task.

Question 8

The topic, 'Sexual and violent songs' produced scripts that never lacked content; candidates who attempted this question had much to write, so they did well in Area 1, but many experienced problems with Area 2.

The topic 'Caribbean doctors' produced fairly good responses and some of the arguments were very good. Candidates made many interesting points and showed good language control.

Recommendations for Teachers

Teachers should:

- Help candidates to see the relevance of the various areas of study to the immediate and future quality of their lives.
- Teach for and encourage transfer of knowledge and skills.
- Encourage candidates to see and respect the differences in the language varieties they speak and hear.
- Help candidates to understand the need, on the one hand, for Standard English mastery as their international currency, and on the other, the value of their own dialect in identifying with the local and regional space.
- Facilitate and encourage reading by using various strategies: teach English Language through English Literature or other study texts.
- Not teach for the examination but teach strategies for tackling the examination — the skill of outlining to improve organization and succinctness; the allocation of time; how to make corrections; the importance of correct numbering and how to interpret questions are some examples.