

CARIBBEAN EXAMINATIONS COUNCIL

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

JANUARY 2012

**ENGLISH A
GENERAL PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION**

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GENERAL COMMENTS

Performance in the January examination was moderate. Most candidates produced competent scripts. Very few superior scripts were in evidence, and, at the other end, there was no startling number of incompetent scripts. What the examination results suggest, particularly through the questions which call for reading and understanding, is that most candidates' reading is superficial. As a result, candidates miss what is being asked when they need to study and respond to questions. Research has established that poor reading and comprehension skills lead to poor writing skills. There is much need for teaching to focus more on improving the quality of students' general understanding and writing skills.

This target can be achieved through encouraging discussion, interactive reading where students are taught how to question what they read and to let themselves feel free to interpret or reinterpret the texts, more exposure to a wide range of topics and styles of writing, that allows the garnering of ideas and information for further use — in short, seek to widen the students' experiences with good models. Equal focus must be placed on what is written and how it is written. All of this is even more crucial since in our technologically advanced environment and instant solutions, our students are encouraged to be very visual. There is no need, or time, to imagine; they are accustomed to being given the interpretations.

DETAILED COMMENTS

Paper 01 – Multiple Choice

Performance on Paper 01 was fairly good. Seventy-six per cent of candidates achieved scores at the level of Grades I-III. The mean score for the paper was 26 out of a weighted total of 46. Candidates performed fairly well on Questions 1–20 which assessed understanding of meaning conveyed through grammar and mechanics. Questions 21–28 assessed understanding of literary text, sampled by a poem and candidates showed good understanding of the details of the poem, as well as the tone of the poet. Performance on the narrative passage was also good while on the expository passage, performance was fair. Candidates were generally able to recognize cause and effect, identify main ideas and draw conclusions. The weakest performance was noted on Questions 43–60 which assessed understanding of persuasive text. Candidates were unable in instances to distinguish fact from opinion and to identify language devices used by the writer.

Paper 02 – Free Response

Section A: Summary

Question 1

This question requires candidates to understand a piece of writing and reproduce its meaning concisely and clearly. Competent performance demonstrates both these abilities. Weak scripts usually indicate major problems with understanding of the passage, and with ability to express meaning in the candidate's own words (synthesis). The summary question is awarded total marks of 30, evenly distributed under three headings: *Understanding* (Content), *Organization*, and *Expression*. Generally, candidates did not show any great difficulty in responding to this question, particularly in understanding the content. However, weak responses indicated a lack of the basic skills of summary writing — *using one's own words without changing the meaning of the passage*. 'Lifting', as the examiners term the partial or wholesale use of words of the passage, is therefore common. This is a major difficulty, and one which causes candidates to lose considerable marks under *Expression*. Some candidates attempt to use their own words, but are seriously handicapped by poor vocabulary.

Particular effort needs to be taken to teach strategies for organization. Most candidates choose to follow the order of the original text, and this often prevents them from achieving a shorter piece of writing. It is most important that students be taught to recognize the relationship and the links between the main ideas in the passage, so that they are not tied to copying the movement of the passage.

Candidates continue to ignore word limits, provide irrelevant details, unnecessary examples, and present information that was not provided in the passage. A major tendency is to write in short paragraphs. It is necessary to remind candidates that the summary has no single topic sentence, and should really be a paragraph which pulls together the essence of several paragraphs. There is a rich section on the kind of activities that can foster the necessary summary skills included in the English A syllabus.

The passage set for January 2012 dealt with our dependence on fossil fuel, oil. The summary expected should have included:

- The disadvantages of dependency on oil
- The advantages offered by renewable energy
- The challenges to be faced if renewable energy sources are to be successfully used.

Below are examples of summaries that could illustrate what was expected of candidates.

Sample Summary No. 1

The high price of oil has caused us to look for alternative sources of energy, which can be produced at a lower cost and are now environmentally friendly. Using renewable energy sources, which are resources that never run out, offers many advantages. They are usually indigenous to a country and so reduce the need for foreign exchange, do not pollute the environment, have a multitude of applications and can be accessed anywhere. However, the cost of implementing the use of renewable energy is very high. To successfully develop its production and use, large investments are needed. There must be policies that provide incentives, such as reducing import duties and selling excess electricity.

Sample Summary No. 2

The world is dependent on oil which is a non-renewable resource. We suffer because oil producing countries often raise the price, and our fuel costs also rise. In addition, oil production is not environmentally friendly. Developing renewable energy offers advantages. Since it comes in several forms, a variety of ways of producing it is possible, even in remote places. It costs less than oil, is more environmentally friendly and saves foreign exchange as there is no need to import. Developing renewable energy, however, is difficult. It demands much capital investment. Policies that help by creating incentives to invest, produce and use renewable energy, are also needed.

Section B: Comprehension

Questions 2 and 3

There were two types of passages used in this section — the literary and the expository. What was seen was a marked difference in the performance of candidates on Question 2 and 3. The inclusion of literary questions and the interpretation of the writer's style in Question 3 proved to be difficult for many candidates.

Candidates' Performance on Question 2

The passage was taken from *Harriet's Daughter*, a former English B text. It addressed the narrator's mixed feelings towards her father who, in her opinion, is disdainful of his Black heritage. Fifteen marks were allocated to a total of eight questions on the passage, one question being subdivided into two parts. The language of the passage was appropriate for this academic level.

Candidates were able to identify the occupation (a) and views (b) (i) of the narrator's father and were also able to recognize irony (c) and sarcasm (f). Questions which required candidates to identify and understand attitude (b) (ii) and feelings (g) were not well answered. Similarly, although they were able to correctly select an expression showing sarcasm, candidates were unable to use the context of the passage to arrive at the meaning of the sarcastic phrase "*he's so concerned about being coloured...*"

It was commendable that most candidates attempted even those questions (e), (g) (h) which apparently were challenging to them. Teachers should continue to encourage such efforts. With regard to developing higher level skills of comprehension, regular class and group discussions on appropriate passages will help students not only to identify, but to understand and articulate attitudes, feelings and tone.

Candidates' Performance on Question 3

Generally, candidates appeared to understand the passage, but they struggled to analyse and synthesize the responses and linked them to the writers' overall meaning. The mean on this question was 6 out of 15 marks. Weaker candidates had difficulty on Parts (c), (e), (f) (g). In Part (c), although the answer appeared clearly in the second line of paragraph two, candidates tended to use peripheral information. The term 'bedrock' in Part (f) should have been understood from the context in the passage, but proved to be a hurdle for many; and question (g) saw many candidates either misinterpreting the question, or attempting to answer by lifting the entire statement containing the words used in the statement.

Recommendations for Teachers

Here last January's comments bear reiteration, *the teaching of comprehension can be usefully combined with the teaching of summary writing as both require thoughtful reading and understanding of meaning.* Summary writing goes another step, but understanding is the primary stage. It is suggested that students be helped to be more focused on interpretation; to be more discriminating in their answers; and to recognize what is asked, not what is usually asked. Benefits can be had from practice in vocabulary building that involves not lists of words, but discerning meaning in context; practice in producing and responding to varied plausible responses helps students to "see" how writing may be interpreted. There should also be insistence on accuracy in cases where some answers are not plausible responses to a stimulus or supported by the passage. Developing sensitivity to how words and sentences work in the language is important, so that students rise above the level of seeing comprehension as guesswork or 'anything goes'.

Section C: Story Writing and Descriptive Essay

There was a noticeable increase in the number of candidates who wrote on topics that were not given on the examination paper. Although some responses demonstrated competence in English, the candidates failed to score because they did not use the stimulus. Most scripts fell within the range of *suggesting competence* to low levels of *demonstrating competence*.

Question 4

The mean on this question was 12 out of a total of 35 marks. The picture stimulus was not well interpreted. In some instances candidates did not focus their writing sufficiently on the foreground of the picture to develop their stories.

Question 5

This question required a response to the following stimulus: “Martine and Sam huddled in the scanty shelter, looked back at what was left of their house and wondered what to do next.” Write a story which includes these words. While their language was competent, many candidates failed to answer the question. The mean on the question was 14 out of 35 marks.

Question 6

Generally, this question continues to pose challenges for candidates who have not mastered the writing of a descriptive essay. As in the past, most responses continue to use narrative as the vehicle for description. However, techniques such as moving in an orderly fashion over the scene, of widening or narrowing the view, are being used more than before, which is an encouraging feature. More work needs to be done on encouraging students to let characters contemplate, internalize, and reflect on the scenes suggested, so as to include feelings and reactions in the response to the task. The mean on the question was 13 out of 35 marks.

Section D: Persuasive Writing

The topics were within candidates’ scope of knowledge. Nevertheless, both topics were not fully argued and explored from an informed position. Too few ‘tools of argument’ were employed. Weak responses indicated a lack of a clear position on the topics.

Question 7

Candidates were required to write an essay supporting the views of either of two speakers based on whether homework was a waste of time or a rewarding activity and necessary for success in life. This question was the more widely chosen of the two options. The mean was 13 out of 35 marks. In many instances, candidates merely stressed the idea that homework is good practice while largely ignoring the part of the question that asked about its relationship to success in life. There were a few candidates who disagreed, but were unable to give valid or meaningful reasons for their disagreement.

Question 8

Candidates were required to give their views on whether it should be mandatory for all secondary school students to participate in extra-curricular activities as a requirement for graduation. There were varied interpretations of ‘extra-curricular’. Some candidates did not appear to fully understand the meaning of the expression. As was the case with Question 7, the last part of the question was largely ignored. Some candidates dealt with why it is good to participate in extracurricular activities, but did not make the connection with its requirement for graduation. The mean on the question was 14 out of 35 marks.

Suggestions for Teachers in Addressing Weaknesses

Strategies such as listening to and presenting arguments followed by peer critiquing of arguments are usually useful. Writing and presentation of papers and speeches are also useful, as are debates, advice corners, improvised situations such as talk shows, and other means of promoting thoughtful speech and writing.