

CARIBBEAN EXAMINATIONS COUNCIL

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

JANUARY 2013

**ENGLISH A
GENERAL PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION**

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GENERAL COMMENTS

Overall, performance was moderate. There was a marked absence of superior scripts at one end, and also only a few incompetent scripts at the other. There was noticeable improvement in the Comprehension profile, but the Expression profile remained only fair, with only two per cent of candidates scoring Grade I on this profile. Candidates are encouraged to do more critical reading and discussion. As suggested last year, opportunities for more in-class reading and discussion should be created and geared to studying *how* writers say things and *why*. Such activities, through the use of a good model, provide candidates with an opportunity to widen their experiences.

DETAILED COMMENTS

Paper 01 – Multiple-Choice

Performance on Paper 01 was fairly good. Approximately 80 per cent of the candidates received Grades I–III. Good performance was evidenced on Questions 1–20 which assessed grammar and mechanics of writing. Performance on the questions set on the literary passages was markedly better than on those set on the expository and persuasive texts.

Paper 02 – Free Response

Section A: Writing Reports and Summaries

This section requires candidates to understand a piece of writing and to 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). Too many candidates try to get by with lifting chunks of text, 'cutting and pasting' them together, and adding an occasional word or phrase. The latter is a poor attempt to hide the fact that they are reproducing the words of the passage. We advise that teaching should concentrate on helping students to grasp and reproduce meaning. Learning activities should include:

- exercises in equivalent sentences — this can be extended beyond one sentence to a paragraph.
- practice in comprehension that involves interpretation of meaning (not just rewording) executed both orally and in writing.

The following is extracted from the January 2012 report and repeated here because it is crucial:

*Summary teaching involves two major processes: information gathering (reading, identifying, choosing and interpreting what is relevant) and information giving (synthesizing, organizing and writing). Teaching must move beyond 'identifying points' to include in summary to understanding how the text is written. Focusing on text organizational patterns such as cause and effect, problem and solution, before and after and similar developmental strategies, can lead students to greater comprehension and synthesis of information **before** they begin to write.*

Question 1

This summary question is awarded total marks of 30, evenly distributed under three headings:

- Understanding (Content)
- Organization
- Expression

Answers suggested that the text was well understood. The contents dealt with the appearance or reality of physical fitness. It noted that one could be deceived into seeing muscular structure as fitness, when in reality, many muscular persons were using anabolic steroids. These persons had the benefit of looks, but the passage told of the dangers of steroid use, and challenged persons to be sensible in their choices.

In the area of *Understanding*, students continue to score well, but there are persistent problems with *Expression* and *Organization*. The language of the text (apart from the permitted use of technical expressions) is, most often, lifted, so that candidates score low marks. It seems to be the norm to ignore the instruction *use your own words as far as possible*. Candidates still continue to ignore the prescribed length for the summary, despite repeated warnings that marks will be lost, although answers showed some improvement. The need to go over the limit suggests that candidates are not as capable as they might be, in organizing their thoughts, so they can expect a lower mark under *Organization*. Most candidates appear to have been encouraged to use the order of ideas given in the text. Only a few, usually those in the superior range, show enough understanding to group statements according to relationship, and so produce succinct and accurate summaries.

Satisfactory answers to this question

- recognized the deception of appearing fit
- recognized the willingness to take shortcuts to appear fit
- pointed out the dangers: physical, psychological and social
- cautioned those who would like to be fit to make intelligent choices.

If candidates are to better develop their skills, they need:

- extensive practice in organizing their answers, using transition words to help themselves and the reader with understanding
- to practise vocabulary exercises which help them to use simple, correct language
- reminders that reusing the words of the passage entirely (whether in its entirety, selected chunks or by joining phrases from all over) attracts no marks — as they would not have presented any language of their own for assessment
- engagement in more close-reading exercises, paying attention to recognizing tone/attitude and the writer's intention
- to engage in exercises in which analysing the internal structure of passages is emphasized
- instruction in how paragraph cohesion is achieved, and in the use of appropriate transitional and connective expressions.

Section B: Understanding

Question 2

This question, which is worth 15 marks, was a poem. Candidates responded fairly well to the questions set on the poem. This is a departure from what is generally experienced when a poem is presented. The individual parts of the question that proved challenging or problematic for Question 2 were (d), (e) and (f).

Part (d) required an understanding of language use – purpose and style. Part (e) asked for reaction, and candidates failed to distinguish between feeling and action/reaction.

In Part (f) both expressions that represented contrast were needed to demonstrate that contrast, and many candidates were not able to indicate both.

Question 3

This question was an expository piece discussing treatment of and reaction to global warming. Given that the passage dealt with an issue which should be familiar to candidates, the responses were disappointing. The average mark out of 15 was 5. Many candidates could not respond appropriately to the expressions: *political football* and *fiddled with*. The strong suggestion is that although they can recognize metaphorical language from the diction (mechanically) they are not able to penetrate the meaning of the expression and its value in the text. Responses also suggested that candidates are unable to read questions correctly — they ignore some words, misinterpret others, or simply do not understand what the question is asking. This indicates that apart from reading and discussing various texts, candidates need to be given practice in interpretation, and in recognizing key words that would reduce the chance of irrelevancies.

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 first stage. It is suggested that students be helped to be more focused on interpretation, more concerned with answering what is *actually* asked, rather than what is usually asked. As with Section A, much practice is advised in reading, listening, and reproducing meaning; in interpreting meaning at different levels; and in paying attention to accuracy. Developing sensitivity to how words and sentences work in the language is important, so that candidates rise above the level of seeing comprehension as guesswork. It is strongly recommended that teachers return to and apply Bloom's (revised) Taxonomy, (for example), in developing questions.

Section C: Writing Stories and Descriptive Essays

Following the now familiar pattern, there were three stimuli: Question 4, the picture; Question 5, the narrative prompt; Question 6, a descriptive essay responding to a specific setting. Question 5 was the most popular question, with twice as many candidates as those responding to Question 4, and three times as many as those choosing Question 6.

Questions 4–5

These questions are marked out of 35. The majority of the stories fell into range 3, with averages ranging between 14 and 15 marks.

In Question 4, most candidates were able to use the stimulus satisfactorily, although the stories were not particularly strong. The stimulus to the narrative, Question 5, was also reasonably incorporated, although some candidates did little in constructing character, or meaningfully using the strategies of storytelling.

Question 6

In general, this question was not well done as candidates had a poor grasp of the requirements, and failed to interpret the stimulus appropriately. Answers continue to be highly narrative. The majority of candidates do not grasp the need for descriptive details to create focus and are very weak in organizing movement of description. They demonstrate a lack of use of descriptive words and ability to create images, so visualization and interest are missing, and candidates resort to narrative.

Section D: Argumentative Writing

Question 7

This question invited candidates to support or oppose the view that *As long as government is paying for my education, it can tell me what to study*. There were far-ranging interpretations, including: that the government could tell the candidate what specifically to study for the examination; the pros and cons of government-sponsored education; the right to freedom of choice. The question was the more popular choice, but the answers were generally poorly handled.

Question 8

This question asked candidates to express their views on the statement that *A single Caribbean team should represent the region in all international sporting competitions*. This statement lent itself to fewer interpretations. Examiners felt that candidates were unsure of the meaning of the term *region*.

Recommendations

- **Planning:** The rubrics which introduce each section of the examination paper invite candidates to plan their longer responses. This was often interpreted as ‘write the essay, then copy it’. This double-writing affects time negatively, and many answers showed the hurry to complete. Some candidates also failed to cross out the unwanted answer. The preparation for the examination should include the skill of outlining, so the candidate can make maximum use of the time.
- **Language Use:** The quality of language generally, but particularly in the questions which demand longer continuous answers (Questions 1, 4/5/6; 7/8) raises some concern: shifting tenses, lack of discrimination in past tenses, lack of subject and verb agreement, basic punctuation and spelling errors are all persistent problems. Very often, rereading reduces the number and type of errors, and students should be taught *how*, and encouraged to reread critically.
- Examiners advise that much more effort should be put into helping candidates to improve their stock of adjectives and adverbs, and to provide opportunities for studying and emulating good descriptive pieces.
- Most candidates are exposed to the visual through television. This can be used constructively to help develop the skill of descriptive writing. Candidates may be invited to role-play, to be the camera or camera person. They should become familiar with the concepts of foreground, middle distance and background; with the techniques of panning and focusing; and helped to distinguish between concrete and abstract words and phrases.

- It was observed that some candidates seemed to have been prepared to write their argumentative essays along specific lines with particular techniques. Experienced examiners caution that while some students do benefit from such a strategy, teachers should use it with caution, as there is the risk that competent and even superior students will be forced into a mould which affects their expression and development negatively. It is highly preferable to teach them how to reason, and provide them with a variety of ways to open, develop, and close their arguments.