



Assessing the Assessment: Writing at GCSE

In the third of his series, **Peter Thomas** takes a detailed look at the new GCSE writing exemplars, suggesting that they provide valuable material for department training and exemplify good writing by any new or former standards.

This series of articles has set out to look in detail at the implications of new exams, mark schemes and exemplar materials for secondary English. As teachers throughout the key stages use mark-schemes, exemplars and levels descriptors to set teaching and learning priorities, their impact on curriculum and classroom practice is enormous.

The first article in this series (*Teaching English*, Winter 2016) considered the similarities and differences in GCSE mark-schemes, and the likely impact of the priorities embedded in their skills hierarchies and levels terminology. The second article (*Teaching English*, Spring 2017) considered the relationship between external assessment regimes and classroom teaching and learning in KS1/2 English and its possible impact on KS3/4. In particular, it scrutinised exemplars of students' responses to the KS1/2 grammar, reading and writing tests illustrating attainment at, below, and above 'expected level'. This article focuses on the various GCSE writing exemplars.

First, a reminder of some of the conclusions drawn from the previous scrutiny:

- Prioritising high-status tokens of performance in level descriptors leads to formulaic writing in KS1/2
- The very specific prescription of grammatical knowledge required to meet 'expected' level in the KS2 Grammar test is given greater weight by being a major part of the assessment of children's reading and writing – a triple whammy effect.
- Emphasis on high-status content features tends to result in reward for use of learned devices even when that use is less than appropriate or effective.
- The very specific prescription of assessed grammatical knowledge and usage at KS1/2 is at odds with a much more flexible curriculum and assessment at KS3/4.
- Secondary teachers need to be aware of what incoming Year 7 students have been taught as valued ingredients of success in English, e.g., fronted adverbials, exclamatory sentences and recognition of the subjunctive.
- Secondary teachers need to know how to sustain, develop or depart from the curricular and assessment priorities of KS1/2 English.

Writing and the reformed GCSE English

Traditionally, English has adopted an approach to writing that values individuality and a wide repertoire. This approach has helped to make English a subject offering appeal, scope and reward to students of all abilities. It is an approach affirming that communicating ideas, feelings and attitudes has a personal, social and linguistic dimension that makes 'SPaG' only one part of the business of teaching and learning how to communicate effectively.

As secondary schools run up to the crucial first awards of the new GCSEs this year, teachers need reassurance that the new 'rigour' of the reformed specifications does not mean a devaluing of that tradition by narrowing the writing repertoire or narrowing the assessment framework. In the uncertain conditions of a new specification, a new grading system and a new political culture of raised standards for a 'world class' examination, there is some scope for anxiety. Teachers will, conscientiously and anxiously, do anything they can to serve their students well in this new culture. This may mean relying on expensive outside agencies like PiXL, or the latest quick-fix saleable scheme for 'raising performance'.

Sadly, trust and confidence in English teachers' scholarship and professional expertise are struggling to survive in the current context. What would help teachers and students is a sense that some things in English assessment have not changed. The role of the Awarding Bodies at this time is crucial in reassurance and practicality. Teachers will be grateful for guidance towards examination success that preserves the variety and creativity that have traditionally been a strength of GCSE writing.

Grading and standards in the reformed GCSE English

All four Awarding Bodies in England (AQA, OCR, Edexcel and Eduqas) provide the same 9–1 attainment range governed by the same Assessment Objectives but have developed their own mark-schemes as graduated assessment criteria. They all publish exemplars of

students' work to illustrate the application of their mark-schemes, except for grade 9. This is not because no work has been discovered at that level. It will not be a judgemental grade based on criteria, but a statistical grade, awarded to *around* 20% of all grades at 7 and 8. (A previous announcement was that grade 9 would be the top 20% of grades at 7 or above.) To carry forward the current standard, the number of grades 7, 8 and 9 awarded will match the proportion of the cohort who would have been awarded an A or A*, had the qualification not been reformed.

In a departure from the notion that some students' relatively modest achievements are worthily represented by the lower grades of 'pass', it was originally proposed that the term 'a good pass' be used for grade 5 and above, grade 5 equating to the *top* of a previous grade C. This terminology presumably meant that we were to see grade 4 and below as 'bad' passes. The current occupant of the Education office has rather belatedly – March 28th – seen the iniquity of this and has re-named them as 'standard pass' and 'strong pass'. Still, the whole GCSE population will now be classified by a system of only 3 'standard pass' grades for the old 4 grades of D–G, and 6 'strong pass' grades for the 4 old grades of A*–C.

The importance of exemplar materials

The importance of the exemplar materials cannot be understated. This is because, as has been the case since 1988, the official QCA/Ofqual definitions of attainment are inadequate for practical purposes of assessment. For example, the Ofqual definition of writing performance at the crucial grade 8 is:

To achieve grade 8, candidates will be able to:

- communicate with impact and influence
- produce ambitious, accomplished and effectively-structured texts
- use a wide range of well-selected sentence types and structures and precise vocabulary to enhance impact
- spell, punctuate and use grammar accurately so that writing is virtually error-free

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The problem is quickly apparent: ‘impact’ and ‘influence’ are not terms precise enough to distinguish between levels of impact and influence. There’s not enough there to justify a mark or even a mark band. Ambition is another fraught notion. It is wholly admirable and sometimes rewardable, but how rewardable depends upon how high the ambition, and how far it is successfully fulfilled. ‘Ambitious’ here seems to be modified by a success criterion in ‘accomplished’, but ‘accomplished’ is, as the comma suggests, a separate quality. ‘Effectively-structured’ is a term applicable to a vast range of writing across the attainment range, and in relation to audience and purpose.

Similar observations could be made of the descriptors for the all-important ‘good pass’ grade 5:

To achieve grade 5, candidates will be able to:

- communicate effectively, sustaining the reader’s interest
- produce coherent, well-structured and purposeful texts
- vary sentence types and structures and use vocabulary appropriate to purpose and effect
- spell, punctuate and use grammar accurately with occasional errors

The terms ‘effectively’, ‘purposeful’ and ‘appropriate to purpose and effect’ are not precisely useful where purpose and effect may themselves be very limited.

These descriptions are of little help to examiners, teachers or students. Hence the importance of the mark schemes developed by Awarding Bodies for the real business of making accurate, fair and consistent judgments of what students can do. And, of course, the importance of the material illustrating how those criteria may be applied. Annotated exemplars are a prime source of reassurance or anxiety for teachers preparing students for the new exams, and for making realistic assessments of their English profile and progress.

“This article considers ways in which GCSE English exemplar material from all the Awarding Bodies may inform curriculum and classroom priorities in Secondary English.”

GCSE exemplification of performance

The fundamental change in GCSE English to all-exam assessment has removed the need for Awarding Bodies to support school-based assessment of coursework by standardising meetings and standardising exemplars – a sad loss of valuable subject-specialist CPD and networking. However, all Awarding Bodies produce print and online materials to illustrate the use of assessment criteria, as well as free INSET on Preparing to Teach. This AB-specific support is particularly important as each AB has adopted a different way of representing attainment in bands: AQA assesses AO5 (Content and Organisation) in 4 bands, Edexcel and Eduqas in 5 bands and OCR in 6 bands.

This article considers ways in which GCSE English exemplar material from all the ABs may inform curriculum and classroom priorities in Secondary English. The KS1/2 exemplars and commentaries were clearly designed to police teachers’ coverage of a very explicit curriculum content. The extension of this kind of assessment would be the biggest change to what is taught and how it is taught and assessed since GCSE began in 1988. Fortunately, these KS4/GCSE exemplars are very different from the KS1/2 exemplars.

For a start, they identify 9 levels of attainment rather than ‘expected standard’ and failed or surpassed expected standard. *More importantly, they are not intended to be definitive models of what any level of attainment looks like. ABs are emphatic that marks and bands do not correspond to eventual grades.* Rather, they are intended to show how the mark-scheme assessment criteria can be applied to students’ work. The mark-schemes themselves retain previous practice in being skills-based rather than, as with KS1/2, skills- and content-based, with a consequent flexibility of interpretation that will affect assessment and student preparation for assessment. This less prescriptive approach than at KS1/2 provides more scope for teacher/examiner judgment than a tick-box sheet based on the necessary ingredients for meeting the expected standard. Primary teachers would find the GCSE descriptors very loose, just as secondary teachers (at least, those who made it their business to understand the previous learning of year 7s) would find the KS1/2 descriptors very rigid.



This flexibility is clearly stated:

Eduqas: *Marking should be positive, rewarding achievement rather than penalizing failure or omissions. Candidates themselves set the level of difficulty in terms of the choice of content, form and structure, as well as the use of language. Successful execution must be considered in relation to ambition. ... It is important that candidates do not adopt a formulaic approach to the writing task in the exam. Such an approach is likely to limit achievement rather than enhance it.*

OCR: *This Mark Scheme is a working document; it is not exhaustive; it does not provide 'correct' answers. The Mark Scheme can only provide 'best guesses' about how the question will work out, and it is subject to revision after we have looked at a wide range of scripts. ... Make every effort to look positively for achievement throughout the ability range.*

AQA: *It must be stressed that a mark scheme is a working document, in many cases further developed and expanded on the basis of candidates' reactions to a particular paper. The information provided for each question is intended to be a guide to the kind of answers anticipated and is neither exhaustive nor prescriptive. All appropriate responses should be given credit.*

Edexcel: *It is the examiner's responsibility to apply their professional judgement to the candidate's response in determining if the answer fulfils the requirements of the question.*

Assessment flexibility has a positive side in its prompting of professional judgment of a writing repertoire wider than writing for assessment. It has a potentially negative side, too, in the hands of vastly increased examiner recruitment, much of it inexperienced in assessment, and some of it inexperienced in teaching GCSE in the mainstream.

If writing in English is to be more than a Lego-assembly of approved grammatical features and stylistic devices, the annotated exemplar scripts can be a helpful resource, and, indeed, they are. They provide reassurance and support by reinforcing that:

- the application of assessment criteria is skill-focused and flexible
- individuals' writing meets descriptors in different and uneven ways

These two aspects are important because they underpin effective assessment for learning in the development of a wider writing repertoire. The healthy message is that the assessment of writing does not have to bestow supremacy on a particular genre of writing called *writing for assessment*.

Assessment of writing or writing for assessment?

Over the years in which GCSE English has established a criterion-referenced form of assessment, teachers have become adept at using mark-schemes to identify skills priorities and performance targets. For example, a descriptor mentioning a 'wider range of punctuation' as a higher level attainment feature will result in semi-colons and ellipses liberally (and usually inappropriately) inserted into writing, and reference to a 'range of sentence structures' as a higher performance indicator will result in a plethora of very short – or one-word –

sentences and rhetorical questions. Examiners and moderators have become familiar with descriptor-driven writing, and writing heavily scaffolded by acronyms such as PEE and AFOREST. Whilst these may be helpful to students who, otherwise, would lack focus, structure and control, such formulaic approaches inhibit more individual, ambitious and sophisticated exploration and expression in the upper ranges where knowledge applied and developed counts more than knowledge reproduced.

For several years, GCSE Principal Examiners and Principal Moderators for all ABs have tried in reports to signal more subtle, varied and creative ways of interpreting assessment criteria and to prompt more authentic and individual ways to demonstrate 'conscious crafting' of language in GCSE writing. The descriptor 'conscious crafting of language' is a useful one, but it is often used to approve usage rather than discriminating and appropriate usage. It would be more useful if qualified by modifiers such as 'attempted' and 'successful'.

All ABs issue cautions against mass teaching of common approaches that result in similar responses. For example:

AQA: *Weaker writing was based on formulaic writing, often accompanied with a mnemonic in the margin listing essential devices to be included.*

Edexcel: *It was pleasing to see the time and effort taken by some candidates in their planning, increasingly in the form of mind maps, though occasionally a less useful generic acronym such as 'AFOREST' constituted planning.*

OCR: *There were happily fewer instances this session of the contrived use of statistics, metaphors and triplets. A variety of rhetorical devices was employed, the most popular being the direct question to the audience. It is worth urging a little restraint here. Responses that do little more than constantly batter the audience are not demonstrating a variety of skills.*

Eduqas: *It is important that candidates do not adopt a formulaic approach to the writing task in the exam. Such an approach is likely to limit achievement rather than enhance it.*

The exemplar materials follow a long tradition of examiners' cautions against mechanical insertions of expressive and structural devices. They reinforce the principle that successful writing rafted for audience and purpose depends on application, development and relevance of stylistic features.

Annotated exemplars of students' assessed writing

Most of the exemplar material is presented as guidance to teachers on how to mark their mock exams. For this purpose, Edexcel and AQA produce two versions of scripts – one un-annotated for colleagues to discuss, and one annotated by senior examiners to show what the discussion should have covered. The analysis of exemplars in this article is limited to the materials produced to support assessment of narrative and descriptive writing. It is also limited to two full writing scripts, one of them in the middle range of attainment (potentially grade 4/5) and one of them matched to higher level criteria.

If writing in English is to be more than a Lego-assembly of approved grammatical features and stylistic devices, the annotated exemplar scripts can be a helpful resource, and, indeed, they are. The healthy message is that the assessment of writing does not have to bestow supremacy on a particular genre of writing called 'writing for assessment'.

1 OCR English Language Writing exemplars: (AO5: 6 bands, AO6: 4 bands)**Narrative and Descriptive Writing: writing prompt is ‘Use this title for a piece of descriptive writing’**

The OCR commentary approach is a brief summative statement placing the writing in a band.

Script A: ‘The day the storm came’**Assessed at AO5 band 6 and AO6 band 4:**

Summative statement: *This moves from being very competent to excellent work. The detail, control, structure and overall ambition are impressive.*

The initial *competence* and the *impressive detail* seem largely a matter of **adjectival embellishment**: ‘beat-up alarm clock’, ‘clustered night-table’, ‘dark red curtains’, ‘perfectly blue clear sky’, ‘countryside village’, ‘stained denim overalls’, ‘demonising grey clouds’, ‘sturdy farmhouse’, ‘long walk’, ‘muddy puddle’, ‘big fat raindrops’ and ‘musty basement’. Whilst these do show competent control and impressive detail, they are not particularly impressive as a main strength of the piece.

There is *control of structure* and there is *ambition* in the use of **short sentences** – ‘The door had shut’. ‘Hard’. ‘Typical’. ‘Hopeless’. There is some use of simile: ‘rain drops prickling me like a needle all over’, though the use is more laboured than sophisticated. This script is relatively unsophisticated in **sentence structure**: of the 54 sentences in the whole piece (4 of them comma spliced), 23 are compound sentences, 18 of them linked with ‘and’ and 5 with ‘but’. 15 of the 54 sentences begin with ‘I’. **Vocabulary** is occasionally more than appropriately selected, as in ‘demonising’ and verbs such as ‘sighed’, ‘sobbed’, ‘squelshed and sloshed’.

Whilst this is not what most teachers would describe as impressive writing, they will find this script encouraging as an example of top-band performance. It indicates that writing showing purposeful commitment to some obvious features of expression and structure can be highly rewarded.

Script B ‘The Day the storm came’**Assessed at AO5 band 6 and AO6 band 4**

Summative statement: *This is an original and well-crafted take on the task with sophisticated control of purpose and effect. The accumulative structure builds tension and there are skillful uses of metaphor and personification. High level work here.*

This commentary seems a more emphatic statement of merit than that on Script A. The achievement of *control of purpose and effect* is evident in **vocabulary and sentence structure**. There is less dependency on the communicative resources evident in Script A. There is some **adjectival embellishment** (‘gloomy tunnel’, ‘murky lane’, ‘untouched, pristine snow’). There are fewer short sentences: ‘The car was dead’, ‘Are you impressed?’ There are some **similes**: ‘icy snow sloshed around the tyres like a washing machine dumped in a swamp’, ‘mist...blocked out any chance of being seen, as though a bottle of Tippex had been spilled onto the earth’ and ‘like a swarm of angry hornets’. The originality and sophisticated control of purpose and effect are evident in other aspects of the writing, such as the skilful use of **metaphor and personification** in the car’s demise presented as a loss of breath, whimpering and panting, and its resuscitation expressed as application of a defibrillator in the form of a battery booster. There is further originality, crafting and sophistication in the **structural device** of the repeated voice-mail recording and the mingling of dialogue with narrative.

Sentence structure shows greater sophistication of control and effect than Script A.

Of the 56 sentences in the whole piece, only 7 are **compound sentences**, 5 of them linked with ‘but’ and 2 linked with ‘and’. There is some dependency on sentence starts with ‘I’ (13/56) but the whole piece demonstrates a range of more ambitious and successful complex sentence structures, particularly those using in-sentence **punctuation** (11 grammatical commas and 5 parenthetical commas) to separate clauses, and two semi-colons. This more advanced punctuation and sentence structuring may make some teachers think it odd that Script A is assessed two marks higher for AO5 and 2 marks higher for AO6 than Script B.

Teachers will find this script also encouraging in its rewarding of a more ambitious expression and structure. The positive message for teachers is that both of these scripts exemplify top-band writing. Both of them are placed at the lower end of the top band, indicating that neither has complete fulfilment of all the criteria. This is an interesting message, because it suggests that there are two different ways of writing to match top band criteria – one more creatively bold than the other, though, in this case, teachers might think it significant that the more conventional writing is valued slightly higher.

“The reassuring impression of all the higher level scripts is that they show variety, individuality and unevenness in writing. They exemplify what teachers will recognise as good writing by any new or former standards, and the sort of scripts that are useful as a classroom teaching and learning resource.”

2 AQA English Language Writing exemplars (AO5: 5 Bands, AO6: 4 bands)

Narrative and Descriptive writing: Writing prompts are 'Write a description/story...'

The AQA commentary approach is immediately visually appealing, with precisely-situated colour-coded highlighted sections of students' writing – red for AO5 features and blue for AO6 features. Marginal comments in the same colour relate the highlighted parts to relevant mark-scheme descriptors. This makes a very distinctive display of criteria in precisely-situated context. These marginal comments are supplemented with brief summaries of why the piece matches published levels for AO5 and for AO6. This appealing visual impact makes the exemplar material very well suited to on-screen display, allowing a class to read all the un-annotated script, make their own annotations, then match them to those flashed up from the annotated version. This works similarly to AQA's very good *Examprom online* support.

Script A: Write a description of a stormy sea as suggested by this picture.

Assessed at AO5 lower band 3 and AO6 band 3

Summative statement: *Clear communication; generally matched to descriptive purpose; clearly chosen vocabulary and appropriate use of linguistic devices; coherent paragraphs with one particularly effective use of a structural feature. Variety of sentence forms for effect; sentence demarcation mostly secure and mostly accurate.*

Clear use of vocabulary for effect is evident in the sustained **adjectival embellishment** ('stormy sky', 'defenceless trees', 'huge gushes', 'thick, murky clouds', 'furious waves', 'rugged black rocks', 'deep grey dints') and the choice of verbs and adverbs – 'roars', 'attacked', 'echoed loudly', 'punish the land'. The *effective use of a structural feature* is the fifth verb-less sentence in a paragraph including an **ellipsis**: 'Each rock protecting one thing... the lighthouse.' Apart from one complex sentence appropriately punctuated to separate clauses, and one compound sentence using 'and', the other 20 **sentences** are grammatically simple, but all securely boundary-marked.

The conscious crafting identified as *clear details to match descriptive purpose* and *appropriate use of linguistic devices* in this script emerges from the vocabulary choices above. There is a pattern of **personification** in the **figurative language**: 'The sea ... trying to swallow the land' and 'The lighthouse stood firmly and bravely'. This is supported by some attempts at simile: 'Then white was as bright as the light from above' and 'the red was as deep as our blood'. The piece has some **variety of sentence forms** in the shape of single word sentence ('Roar!') and a rhetorical question at the end: 'Or could it change?'.

This script illustrates attainment in the area of the likely 'good pass' standard. It indicates that some unobtrusive application of obvious expressive and organising devices can be rewarded as evidence of crafting language for purpose and audience. The 'variety of sentence structure' in a paragraph consisting of five verb-less sentences may seem to some teachers a matter of insecure control rather than successful crafting for effect, but the unevenness of success in the written appears to be consistent with the placing of the piece in band 3, and will be some reassurance to most teachers. The script's most significant merit as descriptive writing appears to be its sustained personification in descriptive writing.

Script B: Write a story that begins with the sentence: 'This was going to be a terrible day, one of those days when it's best to stay in bed because everything is going to turn out bad'.

Assessed as AO5 lower band 4 and AO6 band 4

Summative statement: *Convincing communication; conscious crafting; range of developed, complex ideas to convincingly match descriptive purpose. Sentence demarcation consistently secure; extensive vocabulary with highly accurate spelling.*

Sophisticated vocabulary and successful linguistic devices are identified in the opening sentences: 'The darkness encapsulated the light, blanketing my sense of hope, as the grey mass crept across the sky. From above, everything was silent save the slapping water beneath the sky.' 'Conscious crafting' is identified in the **personifying simile** of 'the white structure seemed to look down at the wild sea in disgust and embarrassment, like a parent and a delinquent child'. Throughout, *conscious crafting* is identified in the adjectival and **adverbial embellishment** ('ferociously slammed', 'glistening sample', 'gloomy sky', 'discarded tissue'). The piece shows rather more than *consistently secure sentence demarcation*: its 10 **sentences** are all complex, some with several subordinate clauses, all separated by appropriate parenthetical commas.

The last paragraph sustains the **personification** and its display of sentence control: 'The strips of white now wrestled with the dreary abundance of clouds, yearning for the chance to glide across the sky, yet the constant dark sheet remained merciless and cold, denying any light through the barriers of gloom.' The merit of the writing is largely in its sustained **personification** of the violent malevolence of the elements. Apart from being rewarded for conscious crafting, this last paragraph is rewarded as *range of developed, complex ideas to engage*.

Teachers will find some useful guidance in this exemplar. The script would be readily recognized as potential for top band assessment, though not at the top of the band. It illustrates the reward for employing a range of devices that teachers will find easy to promote, though less easy to promote to subtle and sophisticated effect. Apart from demonstrating what seems a commonly approved personification in descriptive writing, it offers a model of forceful brevity. Its 10 complex sentences do rather more than many longer pieces with two or three times as many less sophisticated sentences.

“There is a common pattern of rewarding varied and especially complex sentence structures, purposeful paragraphing and the use of extended figurative language, but the exemplars do not show the mechanical assembly of acronymic devices.”

“The message is that individualised, inventive, authentic communications such as this are as emphatically rewarded in the new GCSEs as they would have been before.”

3 Edexcel English Language Writing exemplars (AO5: 5 bands, AO6: 5 bands)

Narrative and Descriptive Writing: writing prompts are ‘Write about...’

The Edexcel commentary approach is less visually appealing than the AQA colour-highlighted annotated version but it is much more detailed in its following commentary on AO5 and AO6. Of all the AB exemplar material, the Edexcel is the fullest and most detailed. The commentaries give very specific examples of the writing features meriting level descriptors and – a really important point – best-fitting is very well served by a third section on what a piece of writing would need to do to meet criteria for a higher grade.

Script A: Write about a time when you, or someone you know, had to work hard on something (assessed as AO5 band 3 and AO6 band 3).

The AO5 commentary indicates strengths of **paragraphing** for scene setting but weakness creating connection, shape or reader interest. **Language** resources are commended for establishing an authentic tone for the persona. This authenticity is done largely by purposeful **adjectival embellishment**: ‘pre-match training drills’, ‘sportsman-like duty’, ‘famed tactical team talk’, ‘high-pressure style’. There is no attempt to use **similes** or **personifying imagery**. The AO6 commentary notes varied **vocabulary** and **sentence** variety, with general control of subordination and co-ordination. The ‘improvement’ commentary indicates a need to work on clarity and effect in terms of character, a gradual building of atmosphere and a need for relevance in choice of detail. There is effective management of a **range of sentence structures**, but there is a predominance of compound sentences – of 49 sentences (5 of them comma spliced) 14 are compound sentences using ‘and’.

This is a well-balanced justification of its position in the middle of the mark range – a position close to what may at awards become a ‘good pass’. Teachers will appreciate this as a benchmark and training resource.

Script B: Write about a time when you, or someone you know, did something without thinking it through (assessed as AO5 band 5 and AO6 band 5).

The AO5 section of commentary identifies **paragraph** coherence in the continuity of the hindsight theme and textual cohesion in the patterning repetitions of tags such as ‘I know’ and ‘quite so...’. **Sentence variety** is also identified as high order, with a mixture of idiomatic and rhetorical sentences in addressing the reader, and well-controlled dialogue within the narrative. Only 8 out of 43 sentences are compounds using ‘and’. There is a variety of short sentences – ‘I laughed’ – and complex sentences, with appropriate grammatical commas separating adverbials and parenthetical commas separating clauses. The writer has no need for adjectival embellishment as verb choices are precisely expressive: ‘bunnyhopping’, ‘plastering’, ‘yelled’, ‘catapulted’, ‘hailed’, ‘launched’ and ‘muttered’. The AO6 section identifies a well-sustained **simile** of trees like ‘limbs of the dead ... concealed by the gloom’ used to describe a menacing Gothic landscape and to foreshadow further grimness in events as the ‘rotting corpse-like limbs’ caused the writer to be catapulted from his mountain-bike. This is subtly-controlled **personifying imagery**.

Teachers will have little difficulty in seeing this as top band writing, and will appreciate the script as a model of writing which has authentic feelings and attitude as well as high qualities of structure and expression. Appeal to reader is a double feature here – literally in terms of the deftly-managed switches between narrative and personal address to the reader, and appeal by virtue of humour, irony, realism and ruefulness that make it a pleasure to read.

Interestingly, given such a poignant, vivid and entertaining piece of writing, the ‘improve’ section of the commentary justifies a mark below the top of the band because of the ineffective conclusion to the hindsight theme, and a teenage register which slightly restricted opportunities to demonstrate a fully extensive vocabulary. Some teachers may quibble with both reservations, and see the whole piece as better than most able students could manage in the conditions, but the message of the script is that individualised, inventive, authentic communications such as this are as emphatically rewarded in the new GCSEs as they would have been before.



4 Eduqas English Language Writing exemplars (AO5: 5 bands AO6: 5 bands)

Narrative and Descriptive Writing: The writing prompt is 'Write a story which...'

The Eduqas commentary approach is a mixture of AQA's marginal/within-text commentary and a band-descriptor summary, but less detailed and less precisely-situated in identified attainment than AQA's. It is less detailed as an explanation of assessment in action than the Edexcel approach. Further detail and realistic guidance is available on the Eduqas on-line Exam Review facility.

Script A: 'Write a story which ends: '... and I knew everything would work out somehow.'

Assessed as AO5 band 4 and AO6 band 4

Summative statement: *mostly coherent but the ending is contrived/unconvincing, tenses uncertain, most spelling is accurate, control of sentences mostly secure.*

The script seems rather better than the summative descriptors. There is some effective **vocabulary** – 'wallow in my own misery', 'huge set of papers that dwarfed me', 'bawling my eyes out', 'beacon of hope', 'earnest eyes' and 'my saviour, truly a knight in shining armour'. There are varied **sentence structures**, more of the 29 sentences being complex than compound, and most of them appropriately punctuated with parenthetic commas for clause separation: 'After making that discovery, I realized her free hand had been extended towards me for an embarrassingly long time, the other hand grasping what appeared to be a wrapped painting. The **adjectival embellishment** is apt, sustained and varied, contributing to the piece's *coherent* quality, and the *contrived/unconvincing* conclusion seems more a matter of taste than of measured textual coherence. Some teachers may consider that the three-part sentence 'Looking at her earnest eyes, all the stress escaped me and I knew everything would work out somehow' is not only grammatically secure but an apt summary of the emotions experienced in the story as a whole.

If this script seems rather severely summarised, it is probably because it fails to sustain past tense verb forms, and that failure may be the reason it is placed lower in the band than its expressive qualities may suggest. Here, perhaps, is a sign of the rigour of the reformed writing agenda. The enhanced weighting of SPSS (8 being two-thirds of the 12 Communication and Organisation marks) may be something that students and teachers need to accommodate.

Script B: 'Write a story which ends: '... and I knew everything would work out somehow.'

Assessed as AO5 band 5 and AO6 band 5

Summative statement: *coherent and controlled, developed with ambition and imagination, sophisticated narrative technique, extended vocabulary, accurate/accomplished expression*

There is some within-text marginal annotation: *'ambitious narrative technique' and 'internal monologue'.*

The script is clearly placed in the top band for fairly obvious reasons. There is nothing to make a teacher disagree with the statements in the summative comment. Whilst all of these statements are easily justified, and the script provides a very useful model of how to structure and express personal feelings in a complex situation, the applied descriptors do not do much to identify the linguistic qualities of the writing.

Vocabulary – adjectival and adverbial use in the exemplar is very sophisticated – more so than in the high-level scripts of other AB exemplars. For example, 'whispered taunts, mocking jeers and glances of pure, undisguised pity' create a cumulative sense of public attitude and private pain. **Adjectives** are used to achieve a surprising, shocking contrast in 'lovely, lukewarm shower of vomit'. At no point does the adjectival/adverbial embellishment seem forced or formulaic – the 'tentatively nudged', 'faceless voice', 'extravagant flourish' and 'cacophonous roar of chattering teenagers' provide nouns and verbs with additional nuance and nothing to distract from meaning and feeling. Particularly sophisticated is the extended water/nautical **imagery**: the reference to a 'wave of nausea' in the first paragraph is figuratively developed with 'rippling waves', 'helpless boat' and 'jagged rocks' in paragraph two and 'tide of greetings launched' and 'a convoy of ships seeking their target' in paragraph 5. **Sentences** are very varied and well-controlled, with grammatical and parenthetic commas used to control complex sentences.

The script illustrates a high degree of purposeful writing by a writer in charge of language, text form and reader. It is, clearly, a fine piece meriting its high position in the mark range. But the comments, restricted to repeated items from the descriptors, do not explain to teachers why this candidate's individual merits match that common frame of reference. The script is a fine model of creative writing rightly valued by GCSE criteria. It is rather more eloquent and helpful for training purposes than the commentary.

“Any of the exemplar scripts would be useful to teachers of all specifications, though they would need to negotiate the different mark-scheme banding. AQA's commentaries are the most classroom-user-friendly. The detail and AO focus of the Edexcel commentary, and its explicit advice on what would lift performance, make this a very good training resource for experienced as well as for new teachers.”



Conclusion

The reassuring impression of all the higher level scripts is that they show variety, individuality and unevenness in writing. They exemplify what teachers will recognise as good writing by any new or former standards, and the sort of scripts that are useful as a classroom teaching and learning resource. There is, predictably, a common pattern of rewarding varied and especially complex sentence structures, purposeful paragraphing and the use of extended figurative language, but the exemplars do not show the mechanical assembly of acronymic devices. Personification seems to be the predominant feature of meeting vocabulary, effect, crafting and purpose features of descriptive writing. The scripts do not suggest that the bar has been raised for the award of top band marks.

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This survey of one part of the support material for teachers also confirms the view that GCSE assessment operates differently from KS1/2 assessment. Some secondary teachers may see this disconnect as cause for thankful relief; others may see it as an example of the continuing mismatch between curriculum and assessment across all key stages, despite all the political noise and investment in a national all-through curriculum. Despite the sometimes forceful interventions of Ofqual, and despite the rhetoric of various Secretaries of State for Education, we are still some way short of a coherent view of what students should learn and how their learning should be assessed. It is to be hoped that the Awarding Bodies maintain their nerve in defending a position which recognises the subtleties and complexities of language and of writing, and of assessing both of them in the face of brash simplifications attractive to red-top editors and transient occupants of the Department for Education.

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Peter Thomas

is Vice-Chair of NATE and Chair of NATE's Learning and Assessment Committee