



Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority

GCSE English literature

Review of standards 1980–2000 (includes GCE O level)

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Archived Content

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Introduction

Changes in English literature examinations between 1980 and 2000 were influenced by a number of key events. These included the introduction of:

- GCSE national criteria in 1985 leading to the first GCSE examinations in 1988
- the key stage 4 programme of study in the 1991 national curriculum order for English leading to revised GCSE criteria for first examination in 1994, including the introduction of tiered examinations in English literature
- a revised national curriculum in 1995 leading to revised GCSE criteria for first examination in 1998.

Between them, the syllabuses in this study attracted almost 90 per cent of the more than half a million candidates who took GCSE English literature in 2000.

Examination demand

Materials available

Reviewers used syllabuses, question papers and mark schemes from English literature examinations from 1980, 1990, 1995 and 2000. In some cases, examiners' reports allowed reviewers further insight into expectations of the examination. Appendix A shows in detail the materials available.

Presentation of syllabuses and question papers

An obvious and significant change between 1980 and 2000 was the increased specificity of the syllabuses. This was particularly noticeable in the content, assessment objectives, coursework requirements and grade descriptions. Candidates in 2000 were tested, through clearly targeted questions in examination papers and coursework, on a specified range of skills and knowledge. Much of the greater specificity in 2000 resulted from changes in the GCSE national criteria for English and English literature.

Over the period of the review, examination papers became accessible to a wider ability range in terms of layout, rubrics and the wording of questions. Reviewers did not consider that such improvements in the accessibility of question papers had altered the demands that they made.

Scheme of assessment

There have been significant structural changes in the examining of English literature at this level. One of the most obvious changes between 1990 and 2000 was to the tiering structure. In 1990, awarding bodies offered untiered examinations. Both the 1991 and 1995 criteria required the use of tiers but the usual tiering structure changed. For almost all awarding bodies in 1995, the usual grades targeted at foundation tier had been F–G, while higher tier had targeted grades A*–E. The 1995 criteria meant that in 2000 the target grades for higher tier were A*–D, and for foundation tier C–G for all awarding bodies. The natural, if counter-intuitive, effect of this change was to make papers for both tiers more demanding in 2000 than in 1995.

The balance of coursework and terminal examinations has varied considerably over the period. For the first GCSE English literature examinations in 1988, while externally assessed syllabuses were available, most entries were for syllabuses with 100% coursework assessment. In 1995 and 2000, the amount of coursework was restricted to a maximum of 30%. This study focuses on the comparison of syllabuses with terminal examinations.

Content

Between 1980 and 2000, the number of texts studied for examination increased, and their range widened. Almost all 1980 syllabuses required candidates to study a minimum of three texts, one in each of the three major literary genres: prose, poetry and drama. In 2000, all syllabuses required study of a minimum of six texts, two in each genre. In 1980, the study of a Shakespeare play was compulsory, but otherwise candidates were free to choose texts from any period. In 2000, all candidates had to study prose, poetry and drama texts from both before and after 1900.

The changes occurred in stages. By 1990, all awarding bodies had increased the minimum number of texts for study to five or six. All awarding bodies required candidates to study all three genres. However, Shakespeare had ceased to be compulsory. All syllabuses required candidates to respond to unseen texts in either the written paper or coursework and all syllabuses included a 'wider reading' element. This requirement was met by study of one additional text as a minimum. Texts could be chosen exclusively from before or after 1900, but the range of prescribed texts was broader than in 1980.

The 1995 syllabuses were greatly influenced by the requirement to assess the key stage 4 programmes of study of the 1991 national curriculum order for English in GCSE examinations. All syllabuses included a requirement for candidates to compare and/or contrast texts, often within areas of study, and to show an understanding of the social and historical contexts in which texts were written. The study of a Shakespeare play was a compulsory element and a requirement to study an additional pre-1900 text had been added. The number of texts to be studied ranged from four to six.

The 2000 syllabuses reflected the increased demands of the national criteria for English and English literature in the 1995 national curriculum. Some awarding bodies had developed anthologies to meet the reading requirements of the programmes of study for English, and there was an understanding that a number of tasks in coursework would be common to the award of both GCSE English and English literature. The study of a Shakespeare play was a requirement of GCSE English and no longer a compulsory element of English literature. One awarding body differentiated between the tiers in its prescribed list of texts. Only one awarding body retained the use of unseen texts in its written examination.

A significant change in demand related to the kind of knowledge of texts required of candidates, reflecting the extended range of texts to be studied. In 1980, most candidates needed to learn three texts thoroughly: this meant memorising quotations and being able to recognise or explain details, for example in context questions. The emphasis was on a detailed knowledge of an individual text, its characters, themes and plot.

In 2000, the kind of learning required was different. Candidates were allowed to take texts with them into the examination room. Questions on character, themes and plot remained similar to those in previous years; but questions based on passages from texts focused more on interpretation and critical response.

Syllabuses suggested that the expected range of knowledge and understanding had increased: candidates were expected to make comparisons between texts, to be aware of the cultural and historical contexts in which the texts were written and to consider alternative interpretations of texts. In reality, except for the comparing of two poems, these expectations were met, if at all, in coursework.

Assessment

Time pressures in examination conditions decreased after 1980. The 1980 GCE O level papers usually comprised a single paper lasting 2.5 hours. The number of tasks on the papers was four or five. The

GCSE examinations in 1990, 1995 and 2000 had papers lasting two hours, with two or three tasks to be completed. Conversely the introduction of coursework meant that the amount of assessment and the range of tasks increased. In 2000 a total of six tasks was typically required for assessment in the examination as a whole.

An exception to this general increase in the amount of assessment was evident in CCEA's syllabus. In 1995, candidates were required to sit two examination papers, four hours in total, and submit three assignments in coursework. The first paper included two compulsory unseen passages, prose and poetry. The second paper set three tasks to cover all three genres, and all three genres were to be covered also in coursework. In 2000, the one written paper of 2.5 hours had become open book; the three tasks required did not include poetry; and the coursework was limited to two poetry tasks and one prose.

In broad terms, examinations comprised two types of questions between 1980 and 2000: passage- or context-based and essay-based. In the 1980 passage-based questions, candidates were often assessed on their detailed knowledge and understanding of the passage and its place in the text as a whole. Essay questions often directed candidates to write about plot, character and/or theme but rarely provided prompts or bullet points to help candidates structure their responses. In the 1990 examination papers there was a greater emphasis on personal response and candidates' engagement with the texts than was apparent in previous or subsequent years. Questions often contained phrases such as "What do you think about...", "Say how you react to..." or "What most interests you in...". Empathy questions of the kind beginning "Imagine you are character X and..." were common. The overall effect was to give the 1990 papers a different emphasis from those of other years.

In 2000, the need for papers designed to assess the foundation tier led to an increase in the use of prompts or bullet points to direct candidates to important elements in the text or to help them structure their responses. For almost all papers, candidates were allowed to take their annotated texts with them into the examination.

The nature of the texts studied in examinations has a considerable impact on demand. Some texts are considered more demanding by teachers because of their surface features, themes or cultural background. *Northanger Abbey* and *Lord of the flies* appeared on the same syllabus in 1980; few would deny that the latter is more accessible to candidates. Such a range can be found in any syllabus in any year. Given that candidates and teachers have a choice of which text to study it is impossible to quantify changes in demand in this respect. In contrast, there was a clear increase in demand in terms of the range of texts to be studied. In 1980, the common pattern was a Shakespeare play, a novel and some poetry, with no restrictions of choice within the latter two genres. In 1990 and 1995, demands for texts pre-1900 and post-1900 increased and in 2000 the minimum requirement was for two texts from each genre, one pre-1900 and one post-1900.

Summary

The main change that occurred over the period 1980–2000 was the move from GCE O level to GCSE. This affected most aspects of assessment, including the number and range of texts covered, the skills being tested and the nature of the assessment, in terms of both the use of coursework and the availability of texts in the examination.

Most of the changes that occurred between 1990 and 2000 reflected the introduction of the national curriculum and subsequent revisions to it. These included whether the study of Shakespeare was compulsory or not, the proportion of coursework permitted and the assessment objectives.

Changes to tiering arrangements made both tiers of examination more demanding between 1995 and 2000.

The time allowed per task rose over the period 1980–2000, but the overall number of tasks required increased.

Throughout the period, there was variation in the demand of set texts within a syllabus.

Standards of performance at grades A, C and F

Materials available

Reviewers considered candidates' work at all the grade boundaries from all the awarding bodies for 2000. For 1995, most awarding bodies provided a more limited range of candidates' work across tiers at grade C, with more gaps in coursework. Only two awarding bodies were able to provide a small number of examples of candidates' work at grades A and C for 1990 and 1980. The details of what materials were used are given at Appendix B.

The descriptions of expected performance used in this exercise were developed from published grade descriptions, adjusted to take into account the fact that the work was from borderline candidates. The performance descriptions used are given at Appendix C.

Performance at grades A, C and F in 2000

The majority of decisions made at all grade boundaries suggested that work was well matched to the performance descriptions. Overall, half the judgements made about work from CCEA were that it was slightly better than the performance description. In particular, at grade C on the foundation tier, work from CCEA was consistently considered slightly better than the description. For all other awarding bodies, the most frequent judgement was that work matched it.

Standards of performance between 1980 and 2000

Only work from CCEA and WJEC was available for making comparisons, and quantities were very limited. The overall view was that CCEA work at grade C and grade F from 1995 was better than the performance description – very similar to the judgements made about CCEA work from 2000. Reviewers noted that work at grade C from 1995 showed good control over expression, conveying ideas clearly. Work at grade C was also sensitive to the texts and linked techniques to their purposes and effects. Work at grade F also showed understanding and awareness of features of language in literature.

Work from WJEC in 1995 allowed limited comparisons with that from 2000 across all three grade boundaries. On the basis of the evidence available, there seemed little difference between the two sets of work. In particular, they were similar in the level of analysis of language use and of sensitivity of response. Work from 2000 did show some improvement in terms of the understanding of historical context shown.

What little work was seen from 1980 and 1990 – all from WJEC – suggested that standards of performance were, if anything, better in 1995 and 2000 than in the two earlier years.

Standards of performance at grade C across the tiers in 2000

Overall, work at grade C from the two tiers in 2000 received very similar judgements. However, this concealed some differences between the awarding bodies. For example, CCEA work from the foundation tier was judged slightly better than that from the higher tier. Work from the other awarding bodies was not distinguishable between the tiers overall, but there were some differences in particular features. In general, levels of knowledge of and engagement with texts were similar, as was the deployment of

illustration and quotation. There was evidence from both AQA and Edexcel that performances from the foundation tier were less consistent than those from the higher tier.

Summary

In general in 2000, standards at all three grades and from all awarding bodies matched the performance descriptions. There was some evidence that standards of performance from CCEA were better than those from the other awarding bodies.

Standards of performance at grade C were largely consistent between the tiers.

There was very limited evidence from earlier years; what there was suggested that standards of performance had at least been maintained over the period.

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Appendix A – Materials available for the review of examination demand

Awarding body	AQA/N	CCEA	Edexcel	OCR	WJEC
1980					
Syllabus	✓JMB	✓ NISEC		✓UCLES	✓
Question papers	✓JMB	✓NISEC		✓UCLES	✓
Mark scheme					
Examiners' report	✓JMB	✓NISEC		✓UCLES	✓
1990					
Syllabus	✓NEA	✓ NISEAC		✓MEG	✓
Question papers	✓NEA	✓NISEAC		✓MEG	✓
Mark scheme					
Examiners' report	✓NEA			✓MEG	✓
1995					
Syllabus		✓		✓MEG	✓
Question papers	✓NEAB	✓		✓MEG	✓
Mark scheme	✓NEAB				
Examiners' report	✓NEAB	✓		✓MEG	✓
2000					
Syllabus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Question papers	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mark scheme	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Examiners' report			✓	✓	✓

Appendix B – Materials available in the script review

Awarding body		AQA	CCEA	Edexcel	OCR	WJEC
1980	Grade A					✓
	Grade C					✓
1990	Grade A					✓
	Grade C					✓
1995	Higher tier grade A		✓			✓
	Higher tier grade C		✓			✓
	Foundation tier grade C					
	Foundation tier grade F		✓			✓
2000	Higher tier grade A	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Higher tier grade C	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Foundation tier grade C	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Foundation tier grade F	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Appendix C – Performance descriptors used in the script review

Standards expected at grade A

Candidates respond critically and sensitively to a range of texts, taking some notice or account of alternative approaches and interpretations. They analyse the ways in which meaning, ideas and feelings are conveyed through language, structure and form. They make some appropriate evaluation of the use of language, structure and form. They make justified and detailed connections and comparisons between texts. They recognise the social, historical and cultural contexts of texts and show an awareness of literary traditions. They select appropriate forms to convey their understanding and ideas coherently.

Standards expected at grade C

In responding to a range of texts, candidates show some understanding of how language has been used in those texts to convey meanings and ideas. They can recognise and comment on connections and comparisons between texts, referring in some detail to the texts to support their comments or views. They can identify and describe some details of the cultural and social contexts of texts. They convey their ideas in appropriate and clear ways.

Standards expected at grade F

In giving responses to texts candidates show some grasp of the key features, including themes and characters. They may recognise some straightforward features, including themes and characters. They may make some connections between texts, and may identify some of the influences affecting texts and readers. They refer to the text when recounting, explaining or giving their opinions. They convey their responses in relevant ways.