

CARIBBEAN EXAMINATIONS COUNCIL

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

MAY/JUNE 2009

ENGLISH A

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**GENERAL PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION
MAY/JUNE 2009**

GENERAL COMMENTS

General Proficiency

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 COMPONENT as well as part of the Understanding (all of Section 2 and part of Question 1).

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:

<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>	<u>2008</u>	<u>2009</u>
48.54	49.01	(RoR*) 41.86 (T&T*) 49.56	56.44

*Rest of Region
*Trinidad and Tobago

The performance mean for the examination (out of a total of 190*) for 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009 is as follows:

<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>	<u>2008</u>	<u>2009</u>
79.14	77.94	(RoR*) 74.74 (T&T*) 78.58	81.82

Average performance over the last three years on the multiple choice paper (Paper 01) out of a total of 60 marks is as follows:

<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>	<u>2008</u>	<u>2009</u>
32.36	23.44	(RoR*) 26.24 (T&T*) 26.98	27.92

Average performance (2007-2009) in the component sections of Paper 02 is given below.

	2007	2008	2009
Section 1	10.04 (30)	10.42 (30) (RoR)	10.69 (30)
Summary skills		8.78 (30) (T&T)	
Section 2 Comprehension	15.45 (29)	8.84 (30) (RoR) 12.98 (30) (T&T)	11.13 (30)
Section 3		13.29 (35) (RoR)	13.27 (35)
Story Writing	13.62 (35)	14.25 (35) (T&T)	
Description	10.63 (35)	11.23 (35) (RoR) 13.82 (35) (T&T)	13.30 (35)
Section 4	13.74 (35)	12.78 (35) (RoR)	14.44 (35)
Argument		13.13 (35) (T&T)	

General advice

Teachers need to emphasise that candidates are required to demonstrate competence in and control of the English language. Preparation for the examination is a gradual process of acquiring and developing skills, both passive (comprehension) and productive (expression). In the examination, these skills must be demonstrated in all areas: the proper use of punctuation marks (full stops, commas, colons and semi-colons), as well as other conventions in writing, such as inverted commas, upper case/lower case, abbreviations, the writing of numbers whether in figures or in words, correct spelling, proper sentence structure and paragraphing.

Teachers should try to build on young people's love of text messaging and other interactive types of communication on the computer (e.g. e-mail, Facebook) to enhance their understanding of skills that are required in non-face-to-face communication, and have them adapt these skills to fit the kind of writing that is acceptable in this examination.

No matter how frustrating it may be, teachers must continue to use all their resources to encourage students to read because it is only by reading consistently that students will become comfortable with the written word. Furthermore, it is only by writing consistently that students will learn to write well. Reading (on its own) will not make a child acquire the skills of writing – passive skills (e.g. reading) cannot automatically transform themselves into active skills (e.g. writing).

Candidates should come to the examination with a well practised procedure for tackling each question. Candidates should have deeply ingrained in them the procedure of identifying the topic, jotting down points, doing a rough copy and producing a fair copy. This is especially important in writing a summary, in doing a description, in writing a story and in producing a cogent argument. It is only through repeated practice beforehand that each student will come to some understanding of the best way to process a rough copy into a fair copy under examination conditions.

Teachers should give students specific instructions about deleting, making insertions and making additions to their work so that what they write is intelligible to the examiners. Candidates must also acquire the habit of numbering answers correctly and setting out their answers on the page in a way that the examiners can recognise them. Even though examiners are required to make a great effort to decipher every word that some candidates have written and to find all the pieces of an answer, candidates should never forget that it is their own responsibility to write their answers legibly and clearly. Unlike the situation in school where in most cases one teacher corrects a whole test paper, in the CXC examination each answer is corrected by a different examiner.

The tasks in the examination are directly related, in most cases, to real-life skills. Employers and indeed the public at large generally regard performance in English language examinations as a measure of one's ability to perform in the world of work. It is almost a sure way to fail the English 'A' examination by starting off believing that you already know English and all that you need is a little practice on one or two questions. This becomes even more critical for those who have to repeat the examination after failing to perform satisfactorily in it.

Specific advice on the sections of Paper 02

In **Section 1**, when a summary is required, main points must be identified and organised logically within the word limit specified. In cases where the original is reproduced wholesale by the candidate, CXC examiners are instructed to interpret this as incompetence. In other words, some attempt must be made by candidates to use their own words. Summarising is a real-life skill (used, for example, by news reporters and policemen) and should be treated as such by teachers and students. In the case of business students who may be told that an executive summary preserves the words of the full document, this is not the case here – candidates must be able to show that they can use words that condense the ideas of the original and words that can link sentences together smoothly so that the summary reads like a document in itself and not like a chopped-up version of another one.

The passage to be summarised is usually taken from a newspaper or magazine which caters to the general public. In order to understand the passage, candidates must be familiar with English words and structures that educated people use in their general writing. In some cases a few words may not be familiar to a reader, but in those cases the reader will very likely be able to work out the meaning from the context. Candidates should therefore get into the habit of reading at least the editorial page in their local newspaper as well as letters to the editor. In addition, candidates should read one or two articles from magazines that cater to their age group: Caribbean magazines and even international magazines for the general public. In this way they will become better able to work out, among other things, unfamiliar words in context.

The examiners look first of all to see whether the word limit has been exceeded. They stop their reading at that point, disregarding all else. The examiners then look to see whether the candidate has understood and can clearly identify the main points in the passage and award marks accordingly. The examiners then assess whether the candidate has put those points together in an intelligible and logical manner using his/her own words and award marks accordingly.

- When candidates exceed the word limit, the marks may be reduced by as much as 20%.
- When candidates use only the words in the original passage, the marks are automatically reduced by 33%.

Some candidates, in attempting to put the summary in their own words, sometimes change meanings or insert extraneous material. This is penalised. In real life such distortion would be seen either as an attempt to mislead or deceive or, in the case of a policeman presenting evidence to a court, it could lead to wrong, unfair and disastrous decisions. Those candidates seeking to achieve full marks or high marks should make sure that they preserve the meaning of the original.

The questions in **Section 2** are set in such a way that precise answers are required. Candidates should be trained to pay close attention to every word that is used and to the different ways in which questions are asked. In response to each question, candidates are expected to give precisely what they are asked to give. Answers should be to the point. These questions **never** require paragraph-long answers. Responding to a question which requires a precise 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.

This section requires students to respond to levels of meaning and to express their answers clearly. It is expected that candidates have learnt to use their judgment in answering questions. For example, some questions require paraphrases and some ask for evidence. Students should know how to select words or phrases (as required) and use quotation marks to so indicate. Also students need to do as the question asks: if it requires 'a word' or 'a phrase', then providing a sentence, for example, is often wrong – it is an indication that the candidate does not know exactly what the answer is.

In the preparation for **Section 3**, every candidate should have read the best story from preceding years in order to get a sense of what is required. (These 'Best Stories' are available from CXC). These stories should not be memorised and reproduced with slight alterations. More generally, candidates should not memorise published stories and hope that this kind of cheating escapes the attention of the examiners. Cheating is punished severely and can have serious consequences.

Although the question paper states word limits as mainly approximations, the experience has been that the better students tend to write stories that fall within or not too far outside the word limit. Stories that stretch into four, five, six and more pages tend to be rambling, out of control and weak.

Good stories demonstrate interesting storylines, characterization, good and effective use of details to create atmosphere and mood, good and refreshing language use. Weak stories tend to be linear, mostly behaving like reports, with weak language. Students should try to improve their own techniques of story writing, including the effective use of dialogue and the contrast between characters, by studying good stories written by Caribbean and other authors.

Candidates should use language that they can control. At times candidates use words and structures with which they are not really familiar. The result is that what they write is often verbose, sometimes unintelligible in parts and unimpressive. Teachers are encouraged to help students feel comfortable with the simplicity of language and the use of language that sounds and feels natural. Oral, spontaneous storytelling based, for instance, on photographs, sketches and proverbial statements could stimulate interesting class productions – for listening, writing and peer interaction.

Description must be clearly constructed and developed (e.g. the different components must be linked appropriately). Details must be logically and effectively sequenced. The different focuses and facets must be linked appropriately (e.g. background vs. foreground; main focus vs. peripheral detail). The interpretive interventions (reflections) of the writer must be relevant to the purely descriptive elements. 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 (e.g. visual, mood, tone, etc.) must be clearly established. There should be varied and lively use of language to create picture elements as well as appropriate choice of words to create moods, tones, atmosphere and setting. Although responses to this question have improved over the last three years, there are still too many candidates who are writing a story and not paying attention to the instructions given.

In the case of **Section 4**, note that argument skills require both mastery of persuasive language and presentation of sound points, backed up by suitable examples. Providing information without using good argumentative techniques is a weakness; so is the reverse. Students should pay attention to ‘tone’ and ‘audience’ and not indiscriminately use the language of debating in every argument they present. Students can learn different styles of argument by studying letters to the editor and editorials in newspapers as well as short, interesting articles in popular magazines or in the magazine section of newspapers.

Candidates need to read the questions carefully, make sure they understand key words, then select their points, choose examples that support their points and be consistent and clear in their presentation. For some unfounded reason, some candidates operate on the assumption (consciously or unconsciously) that they must agree with the opinion given and that if they do not, they will not receive high marks. The fact is, however, that the questions are deliberately set to allow for differences of opinion and most likely if candidates state their real views, they will do better than if they merely agree with what they think is the examiners’ view or what they ought to say.

General Proficiency

SECTION ONE (Understanding & Expression)

Question 1

In this question candidates were asked to read and then summarise a passage taken from a magazine article dealing with difficulties faced by the sugar industry in the English-speaking Caribbean and solutions proposed. Candidates were expected to organise the information and present it in continuous prose in no more than 120 words.

The examiners identified the major points in the passage to be the following:–

- Sugar remained the English-speaking Caribbean’s premier export crop because of high prices and preferential treatment.
- Sugar has now become unviable since prices have declined because large global producers have entered the market.
- Sugar is important, however, because of its ecological impact and because it is a part of the life of a significant part of the population.
- Caribbean economies have to change because of the WTO ruling.
- Change will not be easy because it requires money, modernization and retraining.

Following are three summaries of the passage which give some idea of how candidates may differ but still give the critical information needed:

- (1) *Although many Caribbean states have abandoned sugar, chiefly because of competition from bigger producers, it remains the most important export crop in the English-speaking countries supported as it is by high prices and preferential trading agreements with the UK and the EC.*

In Jamaica, sugar still provides the livelihood for many in almost every parish and is a major foreign exchange earner. It is also environmentally friendly. However, elsewhere price cuts ruled by the WTO have led to changes in the importance and nature of the sugar industry, including the end of production in some cases. The success of this transition will depend on several factors, including European support, investments for modernization and retraining some workers. (116 words)

- (2) *Although cane production was abandoned in some Caribbean countries, the industry has flourished in others because of high prices and preferential trading arrangements with Europe. In Jamaica, sugar plays a vital part in contributing foreign exchange, in preserving the natural environment by preventing soil erosion and in providing a haven for animals. Recently, however, some Caribbean sugar industries became less profitable as larger countries started to export sugar. In response to this, some Caribbean countries have diversified. Europe’s decision to cut its preferred price, as directed by the WTO, has led to new industries being established, but this kind of change is difficult since European support is required as well as re-training of personnel to do other jobs. (117 words)*

- (3) *Caribbean economies have to reorganize in response to changes in the market economy for sugar. This means modernizing the industry as well as re-training and re-deploying human resources into other areas. The situation is partly a result of a WTO ruling against preferential conditions offered to the Caribbean by Europe, and partly because of the advent to the market of large producers like Brazil and Australia. These factors have made sugar production in the region less viable.*

Though some countries chose to stop producing sugar, the Caribbean cannot afford to abandon the industry entirely not only because significant parts of the population rely on it for a livelihood, but also because it is an essential part of the ecological landscape. (120 words)

Performance on Question 1 this year was marginally better than last year's, though revealing the same strengths and weaknesses in candidates' answers. However, there were still too many candidates who did not understand what is required in a summary.

As usual, many candidates lifted portions of the passage verbatim, often because they were not quite sure of the meaning of a key word. Because the passage used Jamaica to show the continuing importance of the sugar industry in some places, some candidates concentrated almost their entire summary on Jamaica. Those candidates who tried to summarise by simply following the sequence of the passage (without reading the whole passage first and identifying the main points) reached the word limit when they were about two thirds in the passage and then simply disregarded the rest. This meant that they automatically lost marks for not identifying some of the main points and they lost marks for poor organisation of their summary.

Superior scripts clearly demonstrated excellent comprehension and writing skills, without any injection of extraneous material. They were able to identify all the main points, omitting unnecessary details and repetitions, and they were able to put together the points in a coherent way, using their own language as far as possible .

Suggestions for teachers and students

In preparing students for this section of the paper, teachers should:

- (i) remind students to observe the stated length
- (ii) drill students in the skill of reading questions for theme and specific tasks to be done
- (iii) insist that students read the instruction given and not assume that every year it is identical.
- (iv) help students to recognize the fact that summary writing comprises reading and writing skills (comprehension and composition skills)
- (v) help students to appreciate some of the basic features of summary writing:-
 - a) using one's own words as far as possible
 - b) using straightforward English with clarity and conciseness
 - c) responding to the rubric of the question with its implications for audience, purpose and situation/context
 - d) using connectives to achieve fluency of writing/reading
 - e) observing correct mechanics of the language

SECTION TWO (Understanding)

Performance in this section was similar to last year's overall performance.

Question 2

This question sought in part to test candidates' understanding of a passage from George Lamming's "Of thorns and thistles". The following were deemed to be the correct answers to the questions set:

- (a) *She entered on tiptoe; she whispered*
- (b) *that there is tension; that there is conflict; a dramatic effect; an effect of give and take*
- (c) *Her normal attitude was pleasant and agreeable.*
- (d) *A tense or unpleasant atmosphere existed.*
- (e) *She disapproved of it; she disliked it; it was outrageous and offensive*
- (f) *She prepared herself to receive Rose; she was trying to calm herself; she shut herself off determined to ignore Rose; she wanted to appear to be asleep; she assumed a position of protest*
- (g) *She was old and weak*
- (h) *She had difficulty seeing.*

Most candidates found no difficulty answering (a), (e) and (g). In the case of (b), as is usually the case, whenever a question asks *What effect does ...*, there is a sharp separation of weaker students from stronger students. In the case of (c), a high percentage of candidates seemed not to be able to contrast the incident in the passage from what was 'normal'. It is clear that they expected a clue or the answer to be near the beginning of the passage and paid little attention to *It was seldom that Angela displeased her*, which occurred in the last paragraph. In the case of (d), it seemed as if the word *atmosphere* in this context posed a problem for many candidates or that they found difficulty finding an appropriate word to identify an atmosphere. (f) was probably the most testing of the questions in that it required candidates to formulate a conclusion about Mother Barton's posture based on what had happened before. This kind of task seemed to be beyond the reach of the majority of the candidates. In the case of (h), too many candidates found it difficult to understand that a summary answer was required rather than individual answers to each phrase given.

Question 3

This question sought in part to test candidates' understanding of a passage taken from a newspaper article "Impact of Criminal Aliens" written by Tony Best. The following were deemed to be the correct answers to the questions asked:

- (a) *Undocumented immigrants and immigrants who commit crimes*
- (b) *It gives the idea of something happening unexpectedly or without ceremony or that it comes as a shock.*
- (c) *It means one is refusing to deal with the problem of the effects on the Caribbean of the deportation of immigrants who commit crimes.*

- (d) *It evokes or encourages one to have sympathy or empathy for the position of the United States.*
- (e) *It suggests that “friends” is not to be taken at face value, that it has another meaning; it is an example of sarcasm or irony.*
- (f) *An example is “choirboys are not being shipped to the region”.*
- (g) *Many of the deportees left the region as underage children and were sent back to the Caribbean as hardened adult criminals.*
- (h) *He is suggesting that all parties concerned should sit down and work out a reasonable policy.*

Performance on Question 3 was below that on Question 2. As is usually the case, answers, such as (a), (g) and (h), which are explicitly stated in the passage were answered satisfactorily by most candidates. As was the case in Question 2, the phrase *What is the effect of ...* in (b) posed a great problem for the vast majority of the candidates, added to the fact that the word *jolted* seemed to be unfamiliar to many of them. The same was the case in (d) where, in addition to the word *effect*, many candidates could not get beyond using the word *understand* to explain *understandably*. In the case of (c), candidates had to know the meaning of the saying and then apply it to the passage. This double task was beyond most of the weaker candidates. It was mostly the weaker candidates who had problems with (e) and ((f).

Suggestions for teachers and students

Teachers still have to do more work in order to get students to grasp implied meanings and not just explicit meaning, to make summary assessments and to express these accurately. Teachers should bear in mind that questions which require judgements and assessments will always occur on the examination paper, in Question 2 and Question 3, with the balance across the two questions differing from year to year.

The incidence of particular question types and ways of phrasing questions (e.g. *What effect does ...*) will vary according to the selections the examiners make to ensure that the full syllabus is covered. Teachers should therefore familiarise themselves with all sections of the syllabus or peruse papers over the years to make sure that they provide practice for students in all the question types specified in the syllabus as well as the various ways of phrasing questions.

Teachers should dissuade students from quoting whole sentences and even paragraphs in answer to a simple question. Unusually long answers immediately cause the examiners to think that the candidate does not really know the answer. In any case, any answer which provides two or more alternatives in the hope that the examiner will select the correct one will automatically be awarded zero marks.

SECTION THREE (Expression)

Questions 4, 5 & 6

Question 4 required that candidates write a story based on a picture in which a girl appeared to be reading a book to a boy. Question 5 asked candidates to write a story which included the sentences *The door was closed and the cobwebs in front of it suggested it had not been opened for a long time. Moor turned the key and pushed open the door.* Question 6 (the descriptive essay) required candidates to describe the places along the route of a hike and the ways in which the weather affected the hike.

Question 4 produced a variety of responses with some weaker candidates resorting to a description of the picture rather than concentrating on telling a story. However, most candidates were able to integrate the picture quite well into their story and many candidates were able to produce interesting stories.

Question 5 proved to be the most attractive question for most candidates since they could easily make a story from the scenario presented. Though some responses to this question had the stimulus quotation inserted without satisfactory integration into the plot, in most cases it was reasonably well done.

In the case of Question 6, there was continuing improvement over previous years, indicating that candidates were better prepared to write a descriptive essay. It was also the case that the way in which the question was phrased allowed for more narrative into which candidates could fit their description. This year was the first time that performance on Question 6 exactly matched performance on Questions 4 and 5.

Suggestions for teachers and students

Teachers should continue to use pictures from varied sources, especially those dealing with current topics and themes in newspapers, to help stimulate and guide writing. This helps to make classroom writing interesting and should help students to focus on the use of details to create character, emotion and atmosphere. The creation of humour in writing is something that students might enjoy doing in their writing classes – how to tell a joke, how to write a joke, how to hold back the punch line are part of story-writing that might interest even reluctant writers.

Over the years, candidates have used the story lines in films they have seen as the basis for their short stories. However, even though originality in story line is not an absolute requirement, candidates should not get into the habit of slavishly copying other people's material. It may result in the copied parts of stories being discredited.

In relation to integrating the given quotation into the story, teachers are advised to work more on logical development of plot, integration of story elements, along with the other story writing elements. Candidates whose stories are impressive are those who use relevant details to create atmosphere, mood and feelings. Training in short story writing must always stress the process – thinking, drafting, editing and proof reading. In preparing students for narrative writing, teachers should have students focus on sequence of events, verb tenses and adverbs and conjunctions of time.

For descriptive writing, students can be encouraged to imagine themselves using a camera and describing what they see through the lens as they move the camera gradually from left to right to take in the whole scene. **Students need to get accustomed to the concepts 'spatial', 'temporal', and 'sensory', and to understand how these approaches bring order and meaning to their work. Critical reflection on their own writing may also be achieved through the analysis of / comparison with a range of excellent to poor examples of description.** While it is necessary for teachers to get students accustomed to description by practising descriptive phrases and sentences with striking adjectives and adverbs, students should be wary about memorising flowery phrases and sticking them, willy-nilly, into descriptive essays. In order to prepare students for descriptive writing, teachers have to focus specifically on vocabulary enrichment. One way is by providing students with a list of adjectives, one of nouns and another of adverbs, and getting students to combine them in a relevant way as they describe specific scenes. Teachers need to make these lists cover all the senses – sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste.

SECTION FOUR (Expression)

Questions 7 & 8

Question 7 asked candidates to write an essay giving their views on the statement *Watching television, rather than reading, is the best way for children to broaden their knowledge*. Question 8 asked candidates to present an argument either supporting or opposing the view that the government is wasting too much money buying school textbooks because the children are not reading them and that more money should be spent on computer equipment, which children prefer.

Candidates did not demonstrate any significant difference in preference for the one or the other question. Performance in this section this year was significantly better than last year probably because the topics were very familiar and meaningful to most candidates. There was little difference in performance on the two questions.

The good responses to Question 8 addressed both the matter of children's preference and the matter of the government investing money in the one or the other. The good responses to Question 7 addressed the advantages and disadvantages of both television and reading.

Suggestions for teachers and students

In responding to arguments, whether in real life or in examination essays, it is necessary to address all aspects of the argument that are put forward; not answering a specific aspect suggests that you have a problem with that specific aspect. In any case, answers to arguments in examination essays have to be comprehensive since marks are assigned to the different parts of a question. In other words, if you omit part of a question, you automatically lose marks assigned to it.

While this section of the paper often gives topics which are of immediate interest to teenagers, students also need to keep abreast of topics of regional as well as wider or international interest. It is not always that topics close to the immediate and current experience of teenagers will be given in this section.

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.