

CARIBBEAN EXAMINATIONS COUNCIL

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

JANUARY 2011

**ENGLISH A
GENERAL PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION**

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GENERAL COMMENTS

The examination in January 2011 followed the same format as in previous years. Paper 01 — the multiple-choice paper — tested the Understanding profile, and Paper 02 — the free response paper — tested both the Understanding and Expression profiles.

Performance remained stable in January 2011. Fifty-four per cent of candidates achieved Grades I–III. This was consistent with overall performance in January 2010 when the percentage of candidates who achieved this level stood at 55 per cent. The percentage of candidates at the Grade I level increased to 9.13 in 2011 from 7.08 in 2010, and 7.7 in 2009. There was significant improvement in the performance on Profile I — Understanding, and a more modest improvement on Profile II — Expression.

Most students produced scripts that fell within the levels of suggesting or demonstrating competence. There were only a few superior scripts at one end, and also a few incompetent scripts at the other. This seems to indicate a need for teaching to focus more on improving the quality of students' general understanding and writing skills.

This target can be achieved through careful reading and critical thinking that leads to the synthesis of ideas, and more exposure to a wide range of topics that allows for garnering ideas and information for further use. The goal should be to widen the students' experiences with good models.

Equal focus must be placed on both *what* is written and *how* it is written. The latter goes beyond the mechanics of writing in terms of correct use of grammar to also include greater focus on choice of words, tone and perspective or writer's stance.

DETAILED COMMENTS

Paper 01 – Multiple Choice

Performance on Paper 01 was good, with approximately 79 per cent of candidates achieving Grades I and II. The mean on this paper was 30.57 out of a weighted total of 46. Paper 01 assessed understanding of meaning conveyed through word choice, grammar and punctuation as well as meaning constructed from reading literature, informational text and opinions expressed in various forms. Candidates performed best on items requiring understanding of literary discourse. Retrieving explicitly stated information and ideas, and making straight forward inferences were well done.

Paper 02 – Free Response

Section A: Summary

Question 1

This question requires candidates to understand a piece of writing and reproduce its meaning concisely and clearly. Competent performance demonstrates both these abilities. Weak responses indicate usually major problems with understanding the passage, and with the ability to express meaning in the candidate's own words (synthesis). Many candidates try to succeed by lifting chunks or 'cutting and pasting' them together in ways that indicate attempts to hide the fact that they are reproducing the words of the passage. Teaching should concentrate on helping students to grasp and reproduce meaning. Exercises in equivalent sentences are useful, and can be extended beyond one sentence to a paragraph, and further. Practice in comprehension that involves interpretation (not just re-wording) — executed both orally and in writing, is likely to be also very useful.

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

The summary question is awarded a total of 30 marks, evenly distributed among three areas:

- Understanding (Content)
- Organization
- Expression

The text in January consisted of information with which most candidates would be familiar, and their answers generally indicated that they understood the contents. It is in this area — understanding — that candidates continue to score well. Generally the instruction to write in continuous prose is observed. However, two problems persist. One of these is the practice of lifting the language of the text, apart from the permitted use of technical expressions. It now seems to be the norm to ignore the instruction to express the meaning *as far as possible in your own words*. The second is the continued ignoring of the prescribed length by a high percentage of candidates, despite repeated warnings that marks will be lost. Any points coming after the

word limit of 120 words are not rewarded. In fact, 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 also expect a lower mark under *Organization*. Satisfactory answers to this question

- identified the theme/subject, and the thesis or general thrust of the discussion
- located the specific issue and the reasons for focusing on this issue
- identified the causes of the problem (general and specific)
- examined specific areas by definition, recognition of causes and effects
- described the outlook for the future and the reasons for those views.

Recommendations for Teachers

- While students **MUST** use their own words, “in your own words” does not require avoidance of key words of the passage. The *technical jargon* (scientific terms, specialized vocabulary) of some passages cannot be avoided when students are writing summaries.
- Students need to undertake extensive practice in organizing their answers, using transition words to help the reader with understanding and readability and using simple, correct language.
- Students should be reminded that to reuse the words of the passage entirely (whether as a whole chunk or by joining phrases from all over) attracts no marks — as the student has not presented any of his/her own words for assessment. Staying within the word limit is another area for practice.
- Engage students in more close-reading exercises — paying closer attention to writer's intention.
- The internal structure of the passage should be emphasized and organizational patterns reinforced so that students understand the importance of cohesion and coherence.
- Emphasize the teaching of paragraph cohesion and the use of appropriate transitions and connectives.
- Build vocabulary and spelling skills to help with comprehension.

- Students should be taught the critical elements for superior organization and language: transitional phrases and the value to achieving economy; using appropriate transitions; avoiding arbitrary use.

Section B: Comprehension

Questions 2 and 3

Candidates demonstrated knowledge of the requirements of Questions (a) to (d) which largely required recalling information explicitly stated in the passages. It was evident that most respondents had a good understanding of what the extracts were about and therefore could give correct responses to the questions that did not test higher-order skills involving evaluating or synthesizing information. Evaluating content, language and textual elements proved difficult in some instances.

The individual parts that proved challenging for Question 3 were (e), (f), (g) and (h). While candidates understood the nature of the questions, they struggled to analyse and synthesize the information and to link it to the writers' overall meaning. Question (h) in particular proved most difficult for candidates. This required them to draw a conclusion from the last three sentences of the passage.

Recommendations for Teachers

- The teaching of comprehension can be usefully combined with the teaching of summary writing as both require thoughtful reading and understanding of meaning.
- Students should be helped to be more focused on interpretation, more discriminating in their answers; more concerned with answering what is asked, not 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.
- Practice in vocabulary building that involves not lists of words, but discerning meaning in context, is advised; practice in producing and responding to varied plausible responses helps students to 'see' how writing may be interpreted, but there should also be insistence on accuracy in cases where some answers are not plausible responses to a stimulus or not supported by the passage.

- Developing sensitivity to how words and sentences work in the language is important, so that students rise above the level of seeing comprehension as guesswork or ‘anything goes’.

Section C: Story Writing and Descriptive Essay

Question 4

The picture stimulus was well interpreted by candidates. It evoked various scenes and events involving the character in the picture. The facial expression was often interpreted as grief, pain, loss or some suffering that the character experienced.

Question 5

The stimulus on which candidates were to base their story was “Kenia considered the plan she had made. She looked around sadly, then nodded. It was the best decision”. Most responses were pre-occupied with rape/sex and the abuse of teenagers by family members. The tales often lost sight of the stimulus, which was not effectively used. Candidates had difficulty integrating the stimulus into their narratives, so that most often it was 'tacked on' at the end.

Question 6

Candidates were required to describe the scenes and atmosphere in a stadium based on the stimulus “The huge crowd rose to its feet as the athletes entered the stadium”. Candidates were able to relate to the activities and events in a stadium. Most were often able to (though not in great detail) describe the ‘atmosphere’ and ‘scenes’, and very often successfully appealed to the readers' senses.

Generally, the question continues to pose challenges for candidates who have not mastered the writing of a descriptive essay. Their responses fall into the realm of the narrative which is the genre of writing tested in Questions 4 and 5. There were some instances of misinterpretation of the 'time frame' of incidents/events/scenes. In some instances, there was no focus on the athletes.

Recommendations for Teachers

- While there were some highly competent and superior scripts in response to Question 6, most scripts continue to be unsatisfactory mostly because students ignore the rubric.
- Students need to be taught how to write a descriptive essay, and to recognize (not simply told or shown) differences between it and a story. One way in which this can be done is by an

immersion strategy involving reading and writing descriptive essays, and similar immersion in stories, some of which will involve description, but are not simply descriptive essays.

- A descriptive essay allows for creativity in the same way the story does. Candidates may impose their own interpretation (so long as it is valid), and create their own scenes based on valid interpretation of the subject. Within the scene they can create different elements or aspects.
- Teachers are advised to treat the writing of description as a writing experience into which they put in as much preparation as they do for story writing — and encourage every student to write a number of descriptive essays until they know how to do them. This is more advisable than the practice of preparing students for stories only, thus closing an option that they might well have found interesting and suited to their interests and abilities.
- A danger in teaching ‘story’ only is that the stimulus set in the exam may not appeal strongly to a particular student and so may only evoke a mediocre response. Full exposure and teaching give the students a fair chance to do well.

Section D: Persuasive Writing

More candidates did Question 7 which required them to give their views on the need for special institutions for bullies, than Question 8 which required an argument for or against the testing of school students for HIV, with or without their parents’ consent.

Candidates were familiar with the subject of ‘bullying’ in schools. Candidates spent most of the time dealing with bullying — the behaviour, the causes and the effects and sharing anecdotes from personal experiences. The focus should have been whether there should be an institution for those given to bullying.

Candidates responded well to Question 8 whether they were supporting or opposing the view. The words ‘with or without consent’ used in the question posed a challenge for some candidates. Many candidates did not establish a clear position in their line of argument.

Suggestions for Teachers in Addressing Weaknesses

- Strategies such as listening to and presenting arguments followed by peer critiquing of arguments are usually useful.

- The writing and presentation of papers and speeches are also useful, as are debates, advice corners, improvised situations such as talk-shows, and other means of promoting thoughtful speech and writing.