

Teacher Notes

AQA GCSE

English Language Unit 3

Understanding Spoken and Written Texts and
Writing Creatively

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Introduction

This workbook is designed to help students to acquire experience of the kind of tasks that they will face when completing the Unit 3 controlled assessment from AQA English Language. The workbook contains both source material and exercises aimed at improving the students' level of skills.

The workbook can be used as a 'stand-alone' resource for exam preparation or as part of a teaching programme dealing with different aspects of English. The source material and questions are intended to reflect the structure of the controlled assessment and to give students opportunities to sharpen the skills that the assessment will test.

These notes are designed to be helpful but not in any way prescriptive. For any written task in English Language, there is a wide range of possible responses. The answers given are suggestions of likely good responses but teachers will realise that students can come up with quite different ideas that may be equally valid.

Some of the questions require only short answers. This is usually because they have been designed to prepare students for a more complex task that is to follow.

The ladder of skills

This concept is central to the workbook. It is hoped that students will be able to use the ladder of skills idea to work out the progression from grade to grade. One of the most awkward questions an English teacher can be asked is, 'How much more do I have to write to get more marks?' Students often find the concept of a hierarchy of skills a difficult one to deal with. If this notion is introduced early in the GCSE course, then students can become familiar with it. That is not to say that every student will progress up the rungs of the ladder to the magical A* grade, but it might help those who are hovering around the borderline between a pair of grades to focus on the requirements of the higher of the two. AQA publishes a guide for teachers which contains a much more detailed version of this.

Part a Understanding written texts (extended reading)

Writing essays on prose texts

Question 1 (page 5)

This question will help students to consolidate their knowledge of their set text. Make sure they have written the events in the order in which they happen.

Question 2 (page 6)

This is a vital element of any answer that is heading for grade C or above. Students must grasp the idea that the piece of literature being studied has an original context. More sophisticated students will be able to relate this to a modern-day reading of the piece and say how it has current relevance.

Question 3 (page 7)

This task asks students to outline the writer's intentions. A sure sign of a candidate at grade D or below is that the novel or poem is taken at face value and is treated as something real. Candidates at grade C and above should be able to display a grasp of the notion that the text is a construct and that the author had a purpose in writing it.

Question 4 (page 7)

Try to encourage students to come up with words and phrases such as ‘The writer makes us feel sympathy for A, whereas B is made to appear highly unappealing.’ You can always turn this into a thesaurus task.

Themes and ideas

Questions 1–5 (pages 8–9)

As these questions are generic, some students may need help adapting them to fit their set text. The purpose of these questions is to enable students to practise writing about the themes and ideas in their set text and the effects that they may have on the reader.

Characterisation and voice

Questions 1–7 (pages 10–12)

As these questions are generic, some students may need help adapting them to fit their set text. The purpose of these questions is to enable students to practise writing about the ways in which the characters in their set text are portrayed and the effects that they have on each other and on the development of the plot.

Aspects of genre and form

Questions 1–5 (pages 13–15)

Again these questions are generic. The emphasis here is on the ways that different parts of the text or texts are connected. Simple listing of narrative events is a sign of a weak candidate; such basic plot summary is worth very few marks in the exam. What candidates need to be able to do is to establish clear connections within their set text(s). These questions are intended to help candidates to make such connections.

Sample extracts

Item 1 *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens

Questions 1–2 (page 17)

This passage requires some detective work. If students are asked to list the colours used and the position of Fagin in front of the fire, then they should eventually be able to see that the imagery is that associated with the devil in Christian theology.

Question 3 (page 17)

Students should already have dealt with Fagin’s appearance and the devil imagery. They should be encouraged to explore Fagin’s apparent welcoming nature which is, in fact, all a sham. If Fagin is happy to see Oliver, it is merely because he recognises the worth of such an innocent boy. Perhaps students could consider just how many of Fagin’s lads might have started off the same way.

Item 2 Reports from the *New Statesman* and the *Guardian*

Question (page 20)

Weaker students will tend to recount factual information and to deal with the texts in isolation. A typical grade E response will be largely narrative though much of the text might be misread due to the nature of the vocabulary in the passages. More able pupils will begin to establish links between texts. At grade C these links will probably still be at the level of comparing facts. Grade A and B pupils will begin to demonstrate an understanding of the way that language has been manipulated by the writers in order to have an effect on the reader. They will be aware of the impact of language such as 'High noon. The clock ticking. Good versus evil.' (Pilger) and 'The disclosures have paved the way for a showdown' (Borger, Wintour and Oliver). The very strongest responses should contain references to the writer's intent and motivation.

Item 3 *Kidnapped* by Robert Louis Stevenson

Question (page 22)

The atmosphere comes partly from the stormy night. Why has Stevenson chosen this setting? In addition, the reader is given hints that all is not well for David as he climbs the staircase. The danger of his climb is reflected in the weather and the passage builds to a climax with the revelation in a lightning flash that the young man is standing at the top of an unfinished staircase, one step away from almost certain death.

Item 4 Poems by Emily Dickinson

Question 1 (page 24)

Answers should contain references to Dickinson's use of imagery, e.g. religious symbolism in both poems. There is also the use of Nature as a representation of all that is good in the world and a sense that the good will carry on even though individual people will die. The economic use of language is something that makes Emily Dickinson difficult to grasp at first glance, but a clear focus on lines such as 'Soundless as dots on a disk of snow' would allow students to find a way in to the text. You could ask them to write their own line about 'a silence so complete that you can hear it' — this might bring out the skill of Dickinson as a writer of memorable phrases which are nevertheless hard to pin down.

Question 2 (page 24)

Death is presented as being 'safe' and the dead are 'untouched' by the cares of the world. The poem is full of imagery connected with peace and Dickinson seems to link death with a release from troubles. In the second poem, there is an image of flowers growing on the grave even though the people in the poem 'with daisies lie'. The idea of being dead is again presented without a sense of fear, and the phrasing of 'And time should gurgle on' reflects the ideas in the first poem about being released from care. In neither poem, however, does Dickinson actually wish for death; she merely suggests that there will be a peace once this life is over.

Question 3 (page 24)

This question requires a close focus on language use. Students should be familiar with linking metaphors in order to create a poetic landscape and Dickinson's bold use of metaphor should be addressed by better students. Weaker answers will probably consist of simple commentary on some selected metaphors. Responses to this question will typically separate A-grade candidates from B- and C-grade candidates. At grade C, simply identifying a metaphor and making a basic comment about it would be typical. At grade A, a candidate will be able to link individual metaphors to develop a sense of the meaning of the whole poem.

Item 5 'Sonnet 18' by William Shakespeare**Question 1** (page 25)

Answers should focus on the cultural and historical background to the sonnet as a form of love poetry. The sonnet is typical of Shakespeare in that it asks a question, puts forward a proposition and then leaves the reader with a puzzle in the final couplet.

Question 2 (page 25)

The sonnet deals with the complex and frightening idea that human beings are not around for very long. The writer of the sonnet realises that he will be dead but that the sonnet itself will still be read by people. This idea 'gives life' to the person who is the subject of the sonnet as the reader wonders what this person's beauty must have been like in order to inspire the writer.

Quotations**Question 1** (pages 26–27)

- a** Dickens makes Fagin appear evil by describing him as 'a very old shrivelled Jew' and showing him 'making a low obeisance to Oliver'.
- b** Oliver seems very innocent. When he thinks the other boys are helping him, they are in fact showing him 'civilities' and pretending to be 'affectionate' in order to trick him into feeling at home with them.
- c** The reader can detect Pilger's anger from his use of counterpoint, such as in the second paragraph — an account is given of the nuclear threat and then dismissed very strongly as 'It was all false.' Throughout the article, he takes the view that much of the perceived threat has been manufactured by America and he sets out to destroy America's credibility.
- d** Words and phrases such as 'condemn the Iranian regime' and 'accused Iran yesterday' point to the support of the article writers for the views put forward by European and American leaders. The *Guardian* articles take the opposite stance to that of John Pilger.
- e** In the passage from *Kidnapped*, the uncle is cruel to his nephew. He sends him up the unfinished staircase 'certainly to run great risks, perhaps to die'.
- f** Stevenson stresses the darkness of the staircase by saying it was so dark that 'it seemed a body could scarce breathe'.
- g** In 'Sonnet 18', Shakespeare pretends to ask a question; he does this in order to tease the reader and so 'gives life to thee', the subject of the poem.

h Shakespeare reflects on the fleeting nature of human existence when he says ‘every fair from fair sometime declines’.

Question 2 (page 27)

These questions require students to select suitable quotations from their chosen set text(s). This exercise could be extended by asking students to select three major quotations per chapter of their set text, for example. Knowing where the relevant quotations are in the prose text is essential. This is especially important as only non-annotated copies will be allowed for use in the controlled assessment.

Part b Producing creative texts (creative writing)

Re-creations/Moving images/Commissions

The approach to marking students’ answers in this section of the workbook/exam paper is the same for each style of writing. The answers should be marked using the appropriate mark scheme from the Specimen Paper and Mark Scheme booklet.

As each of the pieces is a work of creative writing, teachers will have to use wide-ranging generic criteria to award marks. It will not be practically possible to compare two very different pieces, and a ‘holistic’ mark out of 40 will be arrived at by looking at the various skills and strengths displayed by the candidate.

The ability to show restraint when writing about personal topics should probably be rewarded. Many weaker students will simply list events from their lives and will often be alarmingly honest. The more skilled writers will see that the controlled assessment is a chance for them to display their writing skills, irrespective of the subject matter.

It is perhaps worth telling students that writing to describe can be the most difficult task as it does lead easily into writing extended narrative. Those students who cannot properly control the use of description in their writing would be well advised to stay away from writing to describe in the examination. In addition, the controlled assessment is not the place for a student to try out his or her descriptive writing. Good candidates will have prepared to write descriptively. While this does not mean that they will arrive at the controlled assessment with a learned piece of writing that they trot out irrespective of the question, it does mean that students who choose to write to describe are familiar with the peculiar limitations of this kind of writing.

Re-creations

Success in this task relies upon the student’s ability to adapt existing material. The choice of the original material is often the key — there is no point in a student trying to adapt a difficult poem that is only partly understood. The final genre is also very important. If a

student has already had success in writing short stories, then it seems sensible that such a genre is chosen for the re-creation task.

Moving images

Reviews of moving image productions are notoriously difficult to do well. The standard response is the film review — but this is fraught with problems. Responses which do nothing other than retell the story will not reach above grade D. For a grade C and above, there must be some understanding of two things:

- the intentions of the film maker (or TV company etc.)
- the likely impact on the audience

Pupils who take lively and unusual approaches to moving image genres which they know well will almost certainly do better than those who write in unfamiliar formats about unfamiliar genres.

Commissions

As these responses are relatively short pieces of writing, the most successful students are likely to be those who have been able to focus on one very specific thing. The wide-ranging action adventure yarn cannot be pulled off in a very short space and is unlikely to be successful (though you might well see many Hollywood blockbuster synopses in this area). Clear, crisp description or a very definite journalistic stance are likely to lead to higher grades but will probably be self-selecting for the more able students anyway.

Part c Spoken language study

This is a technically complex area and will probably be very difficult for all but the more able students. Indicators of responses above grade C include:

- the ability to analyse language by stepping back and recognising the way that the speaker can influence others
- an understanding of the way that spoken language changes according to context
- recognition of the importance of turn-taking in discourse and of the social conventions associated with it
- overuse of certain forms of language which end up becoming clichéd — e.g. soap opera speak 'My friend was always there for me.'

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