DIGITAL MEDIA & DESIGN

> **Paper 9481/01**
> **Portfolio**

Key messages

- Stronger candidates successfully distinguished their original work from sourced materials and provided relevant references.
- Please do not submit duplicate video and image files.
- Ideas should be expressed or generated through visual means
- Stronger responses documented a clear conceptual direction and a logical development process.

General comments

Most portfolios submitted were well-organised. Several submissions demonstrated clear planning and a well-documented creative process. Stronger candidates successfully distinguished their original work from sourced materials and provided relevant references. Some scripts were submitted where the area of study was not clearly defined. Candidates should structure their course around a single area of study, or a combination of two or three areas of study. There are two elements to this component, supporting studies and a proposal but many submissions still referred to a final outcome. There was often an over reliance on text to demonstrate competence in each of the assessment objectives. Where learners are researching and recording ideas, exploring media, developing ideas and understanding constraints, and producing a personal digital response, the work should be largely visual. The syllabus requires that in each of the areas of study, ideas should be expressed or generated through visual means.

Some candidate's portfolios did not appear to follow the themes provided in the syllabus. Such scripts were given more general titles in the style of 'referring to nature', for example. Where candidates had given the project a working title, this was seen to give a stimulus to the initial research and more focus to explorations. However, some scripts did not clearly state the chosen theme. This often resulted in limiting achievement, as candidates are required to demonstrate relevance, intentions, and critical understanding.

Some submissions were compiled entirely from analogue activity, in the form of collage, pencil drawings and printmaking. This work was also seen to include published images or printed personal photography. These scripts had been worked on paper and then scanned before submission.

Videos of varying lengths were submitted. Most would have been improved by editing in order to improve the communication of ideas and the engagement of the viewer. Candidates are reminded that marks are not awarded solely based on making a video. Candidates should refer to the assessment criteria to be reminded where marks are awarded for recording, exploring and developing ideas. Among stronger scripts, source material was usually appropriately attributed. However, all candidates are reminded that the work of others should be clearly referenced and clearly distinguished from the candidate's own work.

Where candidates submitted moving image work, some of this material was longer in duration than the guidance provided in the syllabus. This approach does not always benefit candidate work. Centres are required to submit concise video content. This is mentioned in the previous report and centres are reminded to monitor the duration of moving image work. Please do not submit duplicate video and image files as this may create potential confusion. Learners are strongly encouraged to perform a thorough check of all work before the final submission. Please remember, it is not necessary to submit duplicates of either the Supporting Studies, or Proposal in different file formats. Some centres provided a video narration of learner work instead of a PowerPoint or PDF file. This is not required, and learners are discouraged from this practice. It can be consuming for the centre and learner and provides an unnecessary level of complexity.

Learners are encouraged to focus on the clarity and communicative properties of the visual content of their portfolios.

Comments on the themes

Boundaries

Candidates who chose this theme explored themes such as, environmental and economic factors, marginalisation and sport. Submissions often included personal responses to these complex topics through photography, moving image or mobile and multimedia applications. Some very personal topics such as mental health or relationships were seen. This theme also attracted more abstract interpretations, where candidates considered cultural, social, political, or emotional boundaries. Photography was often used to explore relationships and hardships faced, as well as physical locations. Candidates often referenced the work of Ansel Adams in relation to landscapes. Illustration projects used digitally drawn imagery to explore emotions, sometimes relating to song lyrics or works by writers, or creating short films and animations.

Stronger responses documented a clear conceptual direction and a logical development process. Higher marks were attracted where media exploration and artist research informed the digital outcome. Some scripts used contained photographic projects that used lighting and post-processing to visualise themes such as isolation or protection. Some candidates created speculative app designs or visual installations, with a convincing use of relevant tools and techniques. Higher level candidates often conducted detailed research into the theme and complimented this with research into artists and designers who worked with similar ideas. Some strong animation work resulted from a clear commitment to thorough and focused exploration of media and ideas. This theme was also interpreted through physical structures such as fences, buildings, or defined spaces. Higher-scoring scripts linked their artist and designer research effectively to the development of their work.

Lower scoring submissions would have benefited from more focused exploration of materials and ideas, as well as clearer connections between the development of ideas and the final outcomes. Such scripts would also have benefited from demonstrating critical understanding and some of the potential of visual language to communicate ideas.

The Digital Classroom

There were not enough responses to this theme to discern a pattern.

Digital Poetry

Submissions in this theme varied widely in quality. The strongest candidates created compelling visual interpretations of original poetry, making considered use of typography, composition, and colour. There was evidence of planning, and experimentation with visual metaphors. Some scripts worked with designs for digital installations, murals, or photography. These works often communicated emotional themes effectively, resulting in some engaging and original outcomes. Some submissions explored the interplay between text and image. The strongest responses included both original poetry and visualisations. Some other well-developed scripts combined digital manipulations, photography, or short video to communicate ideas. Lower scoring scripts typically demonstrated a familiarity with image manipulation software. However, theses scripts would have benefited from original research and a focus on the refinement of ideas.

Emotions

Some learners choose to depict emotions through icons, pictograms, or an aspect of a user interface. Some learners described emotions as determinants of behaviour. This idea would then be used to structure a project. Among lower scoring scripts, limited amounts of research tended to undermine any claims for insights gained. Such scripts would have been improved by providing more evidence which could be rewarded in AO1. Where learners choose to develop a proposal for digital elements of an app or website, these scripts were often supported by research into artists or designers who work in the digital or moving image environment. Higher scoring scripts were seen to gain insight from these artists, and to have been inspired by them to undertake further visual experiments.

Some scripts used equivalents from the natural or urban environments to represent one emotion or another. The artists or photographers studied frequently provided context and appropriate content for learners to consider. Among stronger scripts, candidates made work in response to the work of others which avoided pastiche and focused on ways by which to communicate the theme. Other higher scoring scripts used original photography as a starting point for analogue and digital visual experiments. Some learners undertook research into medical or scientifically defined emotions. This kind of research was often appropriately limited to specific information to provide context. However, such scripts would have benefited from research which provided creative insight rather than information.

Higher scoring scripts were seen to record visual experiments which reflected the emotion selected by the learner for study. Learners who worked with photography experimented with motion blur, double exposure, or negative lighting techniques. Other higher scoring scripts developed their critical understanding using collage, experimental wall displays, or suspended images. Some scripts made creative use of material produced earlier in the process, to revisit and develop discarded ideas. However, where lower scoring scripts sought to develop hand drawn material into animations, this work would have been improved by a clearer record of refining ideas. More successful scripts took inspiration from referencing artists, photographers, or designers, to develop an aspect of their work. These ideas included reflections on water, or atmospheric conditions, early morning or evening light used to imply emotions or mood.

Travel

Some scripts featured photography. However, some of these scripts would have been improved by using scale, composition, and formal elements to construct images. Among lower scoring scripts, the work would have benefited from a more sustained focus on selecting and editing images. Some learners used social media sites which broadly reflected their chosen aspect of the theme. In researching relevant insights, learners would be better advised to reflect on the work of established historical and contemporary practitioners. Among higher scoring scripts, the work of contemporary photographers was considered. However, most marks were achieved where learners avoided expressing personal taste but rather, investigated the photographer's use of visual language.

Lower scoring scripts were often seen to record research using historic information or tourist information. Such scripts would have benefited from recording insights which were more relevant to the candidate's intentions. Contextual studies of this sort have the potential to be effective in raising awareness and developing ideas. However, candidates are encouraged to handle research sensitively and exercise a discerning approach. Some scripts sought to deconstruct the work of established designers. These investigations included the formal elements of design, movement, and composition. Candidates supported app designing with original studio photography, and the development of original brand logos.

Some candidates drew on local cuisine sampled during travels for their subject matter. However, typically this work would have been improved by developments beyond basic digital modifications to saturation and brightness levels. More marks could have been attracted by developing the theme, by designing motifs or logos, considering the visual impact of the local built or natural environment, or employing instant research methods such as street photography or snatches of conversations. Travel was sometimes represented by the collection of mementos and photography of regional plants and places. Some candidates gathered a great deal of material and undertook detailed analysis of some selected images. These images were then seen to be reconstructed outdoors as part of the development of an innovative creative strategy. Higher-scoring candidates made effective use of artist research to inform their outcomes and demonstrated strong editing and design skills. A clear journey from concept to final piece was evident in stronger work. Higher scoring candidates also researched filmmakers who had worked with the theme. Successful moving image responses were seen to combine documentary footage with poetic narration.

Wellbeing

This theme was often approached in a socially conscious and personal way. The theme prompted creative exploration into topics such as healthy eating, body image, and sport. Many candidates chose to work with photography and film to communicate messages around physical and emotional health. Higher scoring submissions were particularly effective in their use of digital design tools, clearly developed ideas, relevant research, and a persuasive sense of the constraints of the project. This was then used to influence and inform the candidate's progress. Where candidates chose to develop app designs, they often appropriately

researched other wellbeing apps and used original photography of the human figure as a starting point for the visual styling. Elsewhere, designs for menu icons and short videos were seen.

Where learners chose to develop an advertisement proposal, they often sited poster design as exemplar material. This strand of research would have been improved by identifying the insights gained from study of these advertisements. Some scripts included work on colours pallets. This presented an opportunity for learners to review and refine their work as it developed. However, such activity would been improved by a more convincing narrative about colour choices and their relation to the theme. Many scripts focused issues concerned with mental health. Others drew a link between the mood of an advertisement and its message. Higher scoring scripts considered typography and text layout as an essential part of a set of visual elements in an advertisement. Mock-ups of computer games were seen where the protagonist's goal was to make healthier choices. Some candidates used personal insights, such as interviews with friends, family and staff members to provide them with firsthand research on which to base their ideas.

Lower scoring scripts tended to be brief. These scripts would have benefited from more attention to relevant research, exploration of and development of techniques, and clearer direction in emerging ideas. Where logo design was covered, many lower scoring scripts would have been improved by a critical reflection on the designs. This could be supported by peer feedback or another stakeholder. This could then afford a candidate an opportunity to process and refine their ideas. Among other lower scoring scripts the final outcomes such as website, app, or leaflet designs would have been improved by better layout design, more refined sense of aesthetic balance, and a clearer understanding of visual hierarchy.

Some higher scoring submissions used visual experimentation to research public awareness campaigns or advertising design strategies. Candidates typically used text and image combinations to raise awareness. Several explored character design or app layouts to promote wellness activities. Higher scoring scripts also demonstrated a clear sense of planning, a consideration of real-world constraints, and a convincing realisation of intentions. Lower scoring submissions sometimes showed promise but would have benefited from evidence of testing, feedback, and exploration of media or materials. Candidates are encouraged to develop a more iterative approach to the development of their work.

DIGITAL MEDIA & DESIGN

Paper 9481/02
Externally Set Assignment

Key messages

- Candidates that adhered to the detail of their chosen assignment and their selected concept better achieved across the assessment criteria.
- Using testing and feedback to develop creative work throughout the assignment will aid the fine-tuning process towards the final outcome and result in higher attainment.
- Candidates should not submit work that is hosted on external sites.

General comments

A variety of well presented outcomes, that had been explored with a wide range of research and recording techniques, were submitted for this component. Some delightful and creative work was seen. There was evidence of the good use of exploration with relevant media, materials and technology; where this was relevant to the candidates' intentions, they tended to achieve well. Candidates appear to be increasingly confident in their use of 3D modelling and animation techniques.

Some submissions contained large amounts of work. However, candidates are advised to be selective and focused in the work they submit. This will better demonstrate attainment in each of the four assessment objectives. Some scripts used the word 'Proposal' in their evidence for the Final Outcome. Please note that a Proposal is a requirement of Component 1. Component 2 requires a Final Outcome. Some candidates evidenced reflections and evaluations after the completion of the final outcome and placed it at the end of the supporting studies submission. Whilst this is useful activity for future work, it is not a requirement for this component.

Candidates who had fully considered their chosen assignment and embraced the requirements of the concept creatively, gave themselves a better opportunity to review the work as it developed. This involved the testing and seeking of feedback on the art and design aspects of their work. Candidates should be guided to research and explore their assignment through the creative aspect of their chosen concept. Too often research and exploration was focussed on the underlying story of the theme. Whilst it is important for candidates to gain an understanding of the issue, it is the researching, exploration and development of creative work that is awarded. The creative work of artists, photographers and designers should be researched and explored for inspiration in preference to the referencing of the life of the artist.

Some candidates used a standardised index or guide at the beginning of their supporting studies. While this can offer helpful structure, it often restricted higher achievement, as candidates appeared to follow the template too rigidly. In contrast, higher-scoring submissions typically reflected a more individualised enquiry, with candidates shaping the direction of their projects independently, such as making their title page with their own imagery and graphics.

Supporting studies were occasionally submitted as lengthy video files. While video can be useful e.g. showing interview clips, PowerPoint presentations, additional video files and PDF documents are more accessible and effective formats for showcasing creative work. Centres are encouraged not to submit duplicate video and image files of either the Supporting Studies, or the Final Outcome in different file formats. Some centres provided a video narration of learner work in addition to a PowerPoint or PDF file. This is not required.

In a number of cases, AI tools were used, such as AI-generated voiceovers in video work. It is essential that candidates clearly credit the use of AI, including the prompts or tools used, to ensure transparency and fairness in assessment.

Approaches to the assignments

1. Activation

Most candidates chose physical activities that they participated in as the basis for this assignment. Some scripts also referred to the emotional and mental benefits of activity and others demonstrated this by referring to quality of sleep, improved concentration, and social engagement.

In the main, one of the four concepts was explicitly selected to develop this assignment. Popular reference artists who capture movement included Eadweard Muybridge and Harold Edgerton. In response, candidates employed creative use of slow shutter speeds to capture the appearance of movement in photography.

Animations that evidenced detailed exploration and development, including storyboards attained in the higher mark bands

Producing a documentary attracted many candidates who responded in a personal way either using themselves or family members. Mobile phone footage was evident and phones held in landscape mode were more cinematic. Voice-overs, captions, titles, inter-titles and non-diegetic sound layered with diegetic sound did help candidates achieve more marks, especially when editing decisions and the narrative development were documented. A large number of scripts with a documentary final piece often scored lower in research and exploration than in development and final outcome. This was often due to limited or satisfactory research into relevant practitioners and experimentation with their specific techniques. Often research was limited to a narrow range of documentary styles. Further investigation and exploration into associated techniques would enable candidates to access the higher mark bands. The documentary concept produced some self-portraits which included reflective blogs intercut with supporting footage. In many submissions the candidate's focus was on personal physical improvement rather than digital art and design solutions. Candidates who made storyboards tended to apply themselves more to the formal elements of design and conventions of filmmaking.

Higher scoring candidates often developed their own graphics that incorporated their own photographs – this was seen particularly in the app design concept. Lower scoring scripts relied heavily on templates which limited originality and the realisation of intentions. Many candidates included evidence of research by analysing how other apps had been designed which then informed their own creative design. Experimentation where an app was the final outcome was often limited to experimentation of typography which limited the marks available. Some candidates made use of tools such as Figma to experiment with journey maps which allowed them to access higher marks. Other evidence of experimentation such as wireframes, sketches and/or side by side mock ups would enable the candidates to access higher marks. Most candidates produced a competent concept with a personalised brand for the app.

Candidates who produced an App/game design for a mobile phone mostly used app design templates effectively. However, it was sometimes difficult to conclude the design work undertaken by the candidates. Stock imagery, whether in UX/UI or in photography, should be acknowledged. Further evidence of design work is necessary for higher achieving submissions.

2. Cloud

Most submissions evidenced a backdrop for an exhibition about climate. Many candidates showed their concern for the climate crisis by developing thorough personal investigations. Many submissions were particularly strong in visual storytelling and animation techniques. There was a noticeable strength in how candidates translated abstract concepts into cohesive visual narratives.

Low scoring candidates took a limited number of photographs of the sky, and presented them in a grid, or templated gallery. Sometimes the taken images had little evidence of clouds and the photographs' narratives were more about what was on the ground than in the sky. Higher attaining submissions used software to produce life simulation videos, designing a gallery which incorporated the candidates' photographs. Successful candidates creatively transformed dry technical data on climate into exciting visuals, by developing characters cand narratives for their animations and films. The motifs of angels, and wings were popular. Some candidates explored the materiality of clouds using kapok, plastic bags, plastic sheeting, reflective surfaces and space blankets to create cloud effects. The adding or capturing of lens flares and God rays helped to develop a personal and, in some cases, a profound and poetic visual language.

Many candidates relied on a limited number of photographs with basic editing that anchored their attainment in the lower mark bands. Many chose to look at Alfred Stieglitz cloud photography 'Equivalent', as a starting point for the project. More successful submissions included contact sheets with explorations in relation to editing software, trying different editing techniques and reflecting upon the success of each. Some photo stories included text in a variety of forms including poetry written by the candidate. Explorations into layout and typography achieved more marks for A02 and A03.

Those choosing the animation concept often experimented with a variety of cartoon techniques which enabled them to access the higher marks in AO2. Lower scoring scripts tended to have photographs of clouds at different times and locations. These were often altered using basic manipulation techniques which limited the number of marks that could be awarded.

For the moving image outcomes, the evidence often showed the pre-production, production and post production stages but not research into film making techniques and/or experimental video work which would have allowed them to access higher marks. Higher attaining videos had compelling storylines, some meditative narratives and all were engaging whatever the length of the short film. A few took on board the creative possibility of the video being played on a loop, these tended to be shorter videos.

3. Games Café

Many candidates began their investigation with a photographic study of the interior of games cafes.

A few submissions pursued the food aspect of this assignment, ignoring the game part of the title. Some candidates demonstrated a limited response by restricting their research to online references, comparing competitors branding. There was some dissonance at the lower level from candidates who created posters for traditional board game cafes but used visuals suggesting digital gaming.

A few submissions evidenced the photography of player interaction, the photography of hands (e.g., playing board games) which worked especially well for card players, shuffling, hiding expressions behind fanned cards, peeking over shoulder shots etc. This enriched the candidates' responses with more confident work that explored socialisation, interaction, strategy and camaraderie. In the weaker scripts, these photographs often used a simple point and shoot technique with limited evidence of camera settings or considered composition. The more advanced pieces included evidence of F-stops used as well as justification for compositional decisions.

Many of the digital installation submissions were unique and imaginative, with the candidates taking the opportunity to explore relevant media, technology and producing highly effective outcomes. In lower scoring scripts, research was limited to existing games café interiors without linking that research to the development of their work.

Candidates often demonstrated excellent awareness of website conventions during this concept. Many were clearly influenced by the graphic design elements of a website and produced effective logos and buttons. There was often good research regarding typography and colour theory when viewing sites. Candidates using platforms such as Wix and Figma usually ensured that their homepages were well laid out and flowed. Higher scoring candidates were able to go beyond these conventions and improved their responses with effective use of photography, although candidates limited their attainment by focusing their research on either graphics or photography, and not both.

DIGITAL MEDIA & DESIGN

| Paper 9481/03 |
| Personal Investigation |

Key messages

- Learners are encouraged to consider projects which are personal and which reflects their interests.
- Some examples of highly accomplished work were seen.
- Stronger scripts contained work which communicated effectively using the potential of visual language.
- Candidates should not submit work that is hosted on external sites.

General comments

This is the A Level component and is a substantial piece of independent research. An interesting range of work was presented throughout this component which included photography, video, games, websites/blogs, magazines, 2D and 3D animated sequences. However, many centres submitted PowerPoint presentations containing a large number of slides. Centres are reminded that concise and focused investigation are preferred characteristics of this component. Learners are therefore encouraged to perform a thorough check of all work before the final submission. Video files were often slow to download. Centres are therefore encouraged to consider video compression in a way that maintains quality. Long duration video or animation work is to be avoided. Candidates are encouraged to submit succinct moving image work which reflects a period of sustained and focused study.

The Examiners noted examples of strong work, and much work which represented a clear 'step up' from components 1 and 2. Candidates were seen to take advantage of a component which affords the opportunity to fully develop a substantial piece of independent research, reflect their own interest and develop the skills most applicable to each of them. Some examples of highly accomplished work were seen by the Examiners. These scripts tended to show a distinctly mature approach to the investigation. These submissions demonstrated clear progression from conception to realisation. The themes submitted were varied and original and included some focused investigations. For example, some more abstract themes such as philosophy or specific emotions allowed learners to undertake unusual and personal strands of research that informed the creative study.

Some centres uploaded the same body of evidence for the Final Outcome and for the Written analysis. Such duplication is not required. Learners are required to submit a final practical outcome – a portfolio of practical work demonstrating a resolved creative outcome in one of the areas of study. Some candidates might choose to submit the written analysis as a supporting document, while others might use the word count as a thread throughout an entire project.

Approaches to the Personal Investigation

Final outcome

Learners presented personal investigations based on a broad range of themes, many of which demonstrated a strong sense of individuality. These included topics such as growing up, personality types, game design, space exploration, surveillance, environmental concerns, reflections, dystopian visions, expressive fashion, the power of the moving image, traditional cultures, contrasts, the status of men, the horror genre, branding and styling, perceptions of self, resilience, local food culture, and human connection. Submissions included 3D models, website designs, digital illustrations, blog post designs, game designs, app designs, moving image work, and photography. Higher scoring scripts provided evidence of the development process using software applications or analogue processes. These scripts also demonstrated the technical skills involved in the production of a digital response. Where a website or blog was submitted as a final outcome, learners would often provide a video navigating the site. However, higher scoring scripts tended to be self-explanatory.

Photography was seen in many submissions either as a development tool or as the main area of study. Where moving image work was seen some learners produced videos to display the final outcome. Animation and animation over film footage were seen in some scripts about game concepts. The more successful scripts included carefully considered and edited video content. However, some learners were seen to go straight to their final moving image outcome without scripting or storyboarding. Some reflective comments noted the importance of this developmental stage which had been under employed.

Some learners focused on memories, nostalgia for childhood, and a fascination for the lives, lifestyles and possessions of previous generations. Learners used a number of visual devices to explore the potential of lens base media. These included the framing of images, the application of tone or colour filters, and transfer printing to 35 mm film and archival images. Higher scoring scripts often carefully selected objects to act as memorabilia and contained evidence of photo shoots planned according to the time of day. Where learners worked with family portraits and photographic albums, marks were awarded for the effective and relevant use of staging, lighting, and the deployment of actors or props. Scripts attracting higher marks clearly demonstrated the creative direction of the project in the context of the intention and appropriate cultural and historic references. The Examiners also noted more casual photography from social gatherings which had received simple post processing techniques. Other learners working with photography developed their theme using a series of photographic montages, re photographing photographs, or by building three-dimensional architectural models.

Where learners explored themes such as love and relationships, this was sometimes illustrated using pets. Photographing and videoing pets gave varying results. Leaners are advised to consider carefully how they could use such a subject which can be naturally unpredictable. Some candidates portrayed an unexpected and desolate beauty through apocalyptic themes. This was done through focussing on texture, lighting, and use of models, props, and locations. The outcomes included photographic montages, the development of apps and movie trailers. This was seen to be informed by detailed observational research into the effect of colour, texture, lighting, subject matter and pace among the work of established animation studios. Submissions that were more concerned with pure graphical visual language of line, pattern, logos, typography, and layouts took inspiration from diverse sources such as Yayoi Kusama, Van Gogh, African music, and from thermal imagery. Several candidates produced pixel art games, designing a large range of isometric scenes, using cultural, and interior design references to develop sophisticated outcomes, with well-developed characters, interiors and gaming environments. The Examiners also observed some intelligent use of AI which involved the use of generative fill, as a fast way of sketching out ideas, and generating indicative content for testing and analysis.

Written element

Some written analyses were integrated into the supporting study or as a separate Word document. Learners are advised not to rely solely on text alone. The syllabus states that 'The final outcome should be supported by written and visual critical analysis which clarifies working creative processes.' Higher scoring scripts were seen to balance the quality of analysis with the quality of visual language. The highest scoring scrips demonstrated a most sophisticated resonance between visual and written content. However, there were occasions where the written analysis was seen to be uneven. Typically, such scripts would critically reflect on one area of development, while other areas would have also benefited from closer analysis. Some learners may have been initially uncertain about a theme or direction. Subsequently the written elements tended towards description and included personal reflections on the difficulty of making progress. Learners are encouraged to consider projects which are personal, which reflects their interests, and which develops the skills most applicable to each of them.

Some learners used symbolism in their written element to suggest significance. These were most successful where cultural and philosophical references were carefully explored. Some video outcomes were supported by well-structured and detailed analysis of individual sections. These included close 'reading', contextual analysis, and an insightful examination of transcripts. Higher scoring scripts contained a written element where candidates often included a detailed critical analysis of reference material. Learners often produced research and analysis that was clear, thoughtful, and purposeful, particularly where critical reflection informed and supported creative progression throughout the project. However, many lower scoring scripts were seen to rely solely on descriptive accounts or simple logs of activity.