

# FIRST LANGUAGE ENGLISH (9–1)

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Paper 0990/12  
Reading 12

## Key messages

Candidates did well when they:

- followed instructions and references carefully to base their answers on the correct text/section of text for each task
- avoided copying the language of the text where explanations were required in their own words
- worked through the three texts and questions in the order set
- answered all parts of all questions
- planned their responses for higher tariff tasks in advance of writing – keeping the focus of the question in mind
- considered the marks and space allocated to each question, targeting their response time accordingly
- paid attention to the specific guidance offered in tasks – for example, by indicating clearly the one example from the text extract they were using in **2(c)**, choosing examples from the correct paragraphs in **2(d)** and identifying just the correct word/phrase in each part of **2(a)**
- developed relevant ideas, opinions and details from the text in the response to reading task rather than inventing untethered material
- avoided repetition
- checked and edited their responses to correct any incomplete ideas or unclear points.

## General comments

Candidates' responses indicated familiarity with the format of the Reading paper and general understanding of the demands of the three tasks. There were, however, some candidates who did not pay attention to the guidance in the task instructions and missed opportunities to evidence skills and understanding. Instances where whole tasks had not been attempted were rare, though there were occasions where part or all an answer was based on the wrong text and/or the focus/perspective of the task had been over-looked, limiting opportunities to target higher marks. Where candidates had written far too much for some questions, it was not unusual for answers to other part questions to be incomplete or missing.

Responses to the tasks indicated that candidates found the three texts equally accessible and engaging. Occasionally, a loss of focus on the rubric and/or details of a question as set limited the evidence of understanding and skills offered in the answer. For example, a few candidates attempted to choose and explain more than one example in **2(c)** and/or identified one choice but talked in general terms about the extract. A few still tried to offer explanations in their own words for **2(a)** rather than select from the text as required. Similarly, there were some less well-focused responses to higher tariff tasks from candidates who had scored well in smaller sub questions. For example, some candidates introduced excess, writing far more than the maximum of 120 words advised, for the selective summary **Question 1(f)**; other candidates did not address all three bullets in **Question 3**, or discussed choices from outside of the identified paragraphs in **Question 2(d)**.

In **Question 1**, candidates scoring highly had worked through the tasks in the order presented and usually made efficient use of their time. The best answers paid attention in **Questions 1 (a)–(e)** to the marks and space available as a helpful indicator of the length and detail they needed to offer in each answer, providing clear, unambiguous responses. They did not add further unnecessary material and focused on answering each question as set. Most candidates followed the line or paragraph references in the questions carefully to help them to move down **Text A** in order and to direct their attention. Almost all remembered that in a test of comprehension their responses to these initial short answer questions needed to be derived from the text to evidence their Reading skills, not drawn from personal opinion or experience.

Less successful responses sometimes offered circular answers to lower tariff questions which repeated the language of the question and /or text where own words had been specified as being required. Where questions asked for key ideas, information or detail from the text, some included extra details which were not required or relevant to the answer, sometimes copying incorrectly, and diluted evidence of understanding as a result. In **Question 1(f)** a significant number of candidates relied heavily on copying whole sections of text and/or repeating the language of the text, limiting the available evidence of their own skills and understanding. A small number of candidates attempted unwisely to answer this summary task by offering and explaining quotations from the passage. A few candidates failed to address the task, basing their answer to **Question 1(f)** on Text A and/or Text C.

In **Question 2** candidates needed first to identify **(2(a))** and explain **(2(b))** words and phrases from **Text C, The lost cave**, moving towards an explanation of how language was being used by the writer via one example from the extract in **Question 2(c)** and on to the language task, **Question 2(d)**. More effective answers were careful to refer to the text to locate specific relevant choices and consider meaning in context. Opportunities for marks were missed by those candidates in **Question 2(c)** who did not clearly identify one example from the text extract to explain and in **Question 2(a)** by some who copied out whole sentences from the text rather than identifying the exact word/phrase that matched the precise sense of just the underlined word/phrase in the question. To aim for higher levels in **Question 2(d)**, candidates should ensure that they explore and explain the meaning of each of the words they have chosen in some detail before moving on to consider associations and connotations or suggest effects. Most were able to suggest six potentially useful examples for analysis - three in each half - for the **2(d)** task and offer basic effect or meaning in context, though several candidates were not sufficiently clear, careful or detailed in the examination of their choices. In less successful responses, repetition of the language of the text, misreading of detail or simple labelling of devices (without explanation of how these were working) meant opportunities to target higher levels were missed. A small number of candidates offered few or no choices in **Question 2(d)**.

In **Question 3** most candidates' responses attempted to include ideas relevant to all three bullets of the task, though a few lost sight of the text or task – for example, writing creatively about their own ideas for making money or speculating wildly about treasures to be found concealed in the cavern. Most candidates had remembered to write from Shaima's perspective, with the best focused on interpreting Rohaan's account in the text as Shaima looked back one year later. Some candidates lost sight of the response type required (interview) and wrote a speech or narrative instead. Responses across the cohort covered a wide range of levels of achievement, with mid-range responses often missing opportunities as a consequence of uneven focus, some lifting and/or presenting a narrow range of ideas from the text. Less successful responses either offered only brief reference to the passage, included evidence of misreading and/or repeated sections from the text with very little modification. Along with unselective copying, reliance on the language of the text to communicate ideas is an indicator of less secure understanding and to be avoided.

Paper 1 is primarily a test of Reading, though 15 of the 80 marks available are for Writing – divided between **Question 1(f)** and **Question 3**. In these questions, it is important that candidates consider the clarity and register of their writing. It is advisable to plan and review responses to avoid inconsistencies of style, serious errors that impede communication of ideas and awkward expression. Candidates should be aware that unclear writing is likely to limit their achievement, as will over-reliance on the language of the passages. Leaving sufficient time to edit and correct responses is advisable.

### Comments on specific questions

#### **Question 1 Comprehension and summary task**

##### **Questions 1(a)–(e)**

Short answer **Questions 1(a)–(e)** required candidates to read and respond to **Text A, Mountain River Cave**. More effective responses had paid careful attention to the command words and paragraph references in the task instructions to demonstrate effectively and efficiently the evidence of understanding required. Some mid-range responses missed opportunities to target higher marks, for example by offering overlong, unclear or ambiguous explanations, striving to offer own word answers where these were not needed and/or repeating language of the text where own words were required. Candidates should note that where use of own words is necessary to evidence understanding task guidance specifies that. Less well focused answers on occasion negated evidence of understanding by including additional incorrect material and / or extra guesses and irrelevant material – an inefficient use of examination time. Occasionally candidates copied out entire sections of text for **1(e)** rather than using key details from the text in their explanation and could not be credited.

The most successful responses provided evidence that candidates had understood the need to interpret and use details in the text carefully to answer each of the comprehension questions to show what they could do and understand. They followed the order of the sub questions to work through the text from the beginning and were careful not to introduce ideas outside or in contradiction to those suggested by the text.

**(a) Re-read paragraph 1 ('Vietnam is home ... 200 metres.'). Give two examples of spectacular landscapes (apart from the Mountain River Cave) in Vietnam:**

In **Question 1(a)**, the vast majority of candidates were able to successfully identify both examples, from sentence two of the text:

'From "cascading rice terraces" to "mazes of rivers with rice paddies" ...'.

A small number of candidates offered only one example and/or inaccurate suggestions such as 'rice paddles'. Some candidates made use of the question stem to help focus their answer, whilst others simply wrote the key words of their answer alongside each bullet in the response area – either approach was acceptable.

**(b) Using your own words, explain what the text means by:**

- (i) 'located in the heart' (line 3)**
- (ii) 'formed between' (line 4)**

In **Question 1(b)** task guidance made it clear that use of own words was required to evidence understanding. Where answers failed to score both marks, it was sometimes the result of having explained just one aspect of the phrase, for example in **Question 1(b)(ii)** attempting to explain 'formed' only and repeating the word 'between'. More effective answers were able to indicate that they had securely understood the meaning of both aspects of the question in the context of the text – for example, in **1(b)(i)** that 'located in the heart' meant the cave could be found in the centre of the park.

A small number of candidates offered no evidence of understanding by simply repeating the words of the question and/or did not pay careful attention to the words in context – for example proposing in **1(b)(i)** that 'the heart is an organ used to pump blood'. Others failed to demonstrate secure understanding by introducing incorrect details such as suggesting that the cave was formed 450 years ago.

**(c) Re-read paragraph 2 ('Mountain River Cave ... he'd found the cave entrance.'). Give two reasons why Ho Khanh might have felt wary about investigating Mountain River Cave further.**

In **Question 1(c)** most candidates were able to identify two of the three distinct reasons why Ho Khanh might have felt wary about investigating Mountain River Cave further according to paragraph 2 of the text. A few candidates had not read closely and tried to base their answer on paragraph 3.

**(d) Re-read paragraphs 3 and 4 ('The cave was ... millions of years.').**  
**(i) Identify two reasons why a member of the public might be unable to visit the cave.**  
**(ii) Give the evidence that Mountain River Cave has existed for a very long time.**

For **part 1(d)(i)** most candidates offered a lack of fitness/being unfit and arriving in the rainy season as two reasons why a member of the public might be unable to visit the cave, though a number cited the two year waiting list as one of the limiting factors and could be credited for that. Candidates who were less focused on the details of the task sometimes missed opportunities to target full marks – for example, by attempting to base their answer to **1(d)(i)** all / in part on Ho Khanh's experience paragraph 2 or by simply asserting that cave experts needed to be physically fit, without making the implications of that clear to answer the question. In **1(d)(ii)**, opportunities to score full marks were sometimes missed by misinterpretation of details from the text – such as the suggestion that fossil fuels were found in the cave, the stalagmites were 80 centimetres tall, or that the cave grew more than 10 centimetres per thousand years.

- (e) **Re-read paragraph 5 ('To reach Mountain River Cave ... Mountain River Cave entrance.'). Using your own words, explain why the journey to Mountain River Cave might be seen as difficult.**

In **Question 1(e)** the most successful explanations showed that candidates were able to derive three distinct reasons of the four available in the specified paragraph. Candidates who recast the relevant information using their own words as instructed were best able to demonstrate that they had teased out and understood the implied reasons why the journey to Mountain River Cave might be seen as difficult, with many offering all four ideas succinctly. Some candidates wrote far too much for this question, expending time that could have been more profitably focused on other questions and/or checking responses for accuracy.

- (f) **According to Text B, what could make visiting a cave dangerous?**

**You must use continuous writing (not note form) and use your own words as far as possible.**

**Your summary should not be more than 120 words.**

In their responses to **Question 1(f)** most candidates were able to demonstrate at least a general understanding of some relevant ideas from **Text B** and some understanding of the requirements of the task. However, there were examples of significant copying/ lifting and/or a reliance on note form in some answers which diluted evidence of skills and understanding. All points on the mark scheme were covered over the range of answers seen, though repetition of the same idea, inclusion of unsolicited advice to anyone thinking of visiting caves and/or the addition of ideas from Text A/B meant opportunities were missed by many candidates to target higher marks.

Where responses were most effective, candidates had made a consistent attempt to focus on making the dangers of visiting caves explicit through careful use of their own words and to keep their explanations concise. Many had recognised the opportunity to demonstrate their writing skills by adapting the more informal and expansive style of the original text to a more formal, efficient style suitable for a written summary when presenting an objective overview of the dangers of visiting a cave. Less assured responses had often missed this chance – for example, echoing the text with exclamations such as 'Please do not enter' and 'Now comes a fun part'.

Some mid-range answers did not immediately direct their response towards the focus of the task, offering redundant advice of how to avoid dangers. Overview was evidenced in some of the most successful answers where relevant ideas had been carefully selected from different parts of the text and then re-organised efficiently for their reader to avoid repetition of references to creatures which might be a danger if disturbed. Less well-focused responses copied from the text, with minimal or no rewording or re-organisation of the original, often resulting in significant excess through redundancy and repetition. Some unwisely introduced information and/or language from Text A or Text C – adding to the materials rather than slimming it down as required by a selective summary task. A few based their response entirely on the wrong text and/or copied their whole answer from the text. Whilst candidates are not expected to change all key words or terms in their prose response, they should not rely on lifting whole phrases and/or sentences from the text. Indiscriminate copying of the passage, repetition and adding comment or example should all be avoided as these do not allow candidates to successfully address the selective summary task.

The most effective responses to the selective summary task showed evidence of candidates having planned a route through the content of their answer before writing their response. There were some extremely effective and well-crafted responses that focused specifically and exclusively on reasons why visiting caves might be dangerous as presented by Text B, demonstrating both concision and precise understanding of a wide range of relevant ideas. Some answers at the top end offered all twelve distinct ideas and were not distracted to include reference to the narrator's credentials/experience or repeat questions directed at the reader in the original text as some other less skilful responses were.

Most candidates appeared to be aware of the need to try to use their own vocabulary where feasible without changing or blurring the original idea and to organise points helpfully for their reader. On occasion, candidates overlooked the need for concision in a selective summary task and significant excess arose as a result of lengthy explanation. Some candidates continued to write far more than the maximum of 120 words advised in the task guidance. Others adhered to the

advised length of the response but took far too long to explain only a handful of ideas. Candidates producing effective answers were able to demonstrate that they had understood a wider range of relevant ideas, communicating these accurately and concisely in their own words.

Most candidates showed at least some awareness of the need to avoid excess, though not all were able to select ideas efficiently to navigate around more obviously redundant material – for example, the lists of the different species of animals that might be found in caves and the tempting features/aspects of ‘magical grottos’. A significant proportion of students added lengthy descriptions of the ways in which the different animals might be dangerous having already included other more relevant points, not having recognised that by doing so they were adding excess.

Less effective responses sometimes tried to replay the whole text in the order it was presented, often diluting evidence that the text and/or task had been understood as a consequence of significant excess through repetition and/or reliance on the language of the original. Many of these least effective responses also tended to have misread key details in the text and/or introduced their own opinions – for example, some suggested that being scared by dangerous creatures was a problem. Occasionally, some candidates indicated a loss of focus by including ideas from Text A and/or Text C that were irrelevant to this task, such as suggestions that collapsed ceilings or intrusive ivy were dangerous for anyone visiting a cave.

Length was sometimes an indicator of the relative success of a response. Some responses were far too short with only a small number of relevant ideas identified, and others very long and wordy due to the inclusion of unnecessary information, comments or quotations. The least effective responses were overly reliant on the language of the original, with a small number of responses offering no creditable content as they were entirely copied from the text. Candidates are reminded that lifting sections of text and splicing them together is unlikely to evidence understanding of either the ideas in the passage or requirements of the task.

Advice to candidates on **Question 1(f)**:

- check you are sure on the particular focus of the summary question, then re-read Text B to identify and discard any material which is not relevant
- identify the potentially relevant ideas you can use in your answer – you might find it helpful to list them in a plan and/or number them on the text in the insert
- reflect on the ideas you have highlighted in your plan, checking that they are distinct and complete – for example, try to spot repeated ideas which could be combined
- return to the text to ‘sense check’ any ideas you are unsure of before you try to use them
- organise and sequence your ideas to make them clear to your reader – do not rely on repeating ideas in the order of the original text
- explain ideas in a way that someone who had not read the text themselves would understand them
- write informatively and accurately in your own words, avoiding errors which affect meaning
- do not add details, examples or comment to the content of the passage
- check back to ensure that you have included all of the ideas you planned to
- though it is not necessary to count every word, you should keep in mind the guidance to write ‘no more than 120 words’ and aim for concision.

## Question 2

- (a) **Identify a word or phrase from the text which suggests the same idea as the words underlined:**
- (i) The ivy completely covered the rock face.
  - (ii) Shaima thought about a time in the future when she might be able to attend a live excavation.
  - (iii) Shaima did not know what was happening in the garden.
  - (iv) Rohaan looked closely into the cave mouth.

Focused responses to **Question 2(a)** clearly identified in each part the correct word or phrase from Text C to correspond with the meaning of the underlined example – simply and efficiently just giving the word or phrase as their answer. Other responses added unnecessary time pressure by copying out the entire sentence in each case, substituting the word or phrase and then bracketing or underlining their answer. Marks were sometimes missed where answers lacked focus (for example, copying out whole sentences or including extra words or longer sections of text that went beyond the sense of the underlined word(s)) – for example, including ‘events outside’ in their answer to part (iii).

- (b) **Using your own words, explain what the writer means by the words underlined:**
- (i) lifted
  - (ii) freed
  - (iii) remaining

In **Question 2(b)**, successful answers had carefully considered the precise meaning in context of each of the words underlined. Less successful responses simply repeated/reflected the word in their explanation – for example, ‘freed means he set himself free’ – or did not offer an accurate explanation for understanding of the word specified in context to be credited – for example, neither ‘stood up’ nor ‘carried’ covered the meaning of the word ‘lifted’ in the sentence, ‘Rohaan lifted himself to his elbows.’

- (c) **Use one example from the text below to explain how the writer suggests Rohaan’s feelings when he first sees the cave entrance.**

**He looked at what was left of the rock face. A gaping hole stared defiantly back at him, as if inviting a stand-off. Rohaan dropped his eyes to break the gaze and received an immense surprise. Half a metre from the base was the floor of a cave entrance. It was surely inviting him to look inside.**

In **Question 2(c)**, where candidates had focused clearly on using just one carefully selected example taken from the text extract, they were best placed to demonstrate their understanding – usually beginning with an explanation of meaning in context, ahead of going on to explain what that suggested in relation to the writer’s feelings. Those making efficient use of time often identified their example, by underlining it in the text of the question or used it as a subheading for their answer. Successful responses often centred around the choice of the hole ‘inviting him to look inside’ or ‘received an immense surprise. Several candidates however appeared to have selected ‘dropped his eyes to break the gaze’ without understanding the meaning of dropped – offering incorrect suggestions for meaning such as ‘Rohan was intrigued and was really trying to see what was in there’ or suggesting vaguely that it ‘showed Rohan’s surprise’.

Most successful responses had carefully noted the number of marks available and focused their response to make three distinct points in relation to their one chosen example. Less successful responses often attempted to discuss more than one example – time that might have been more profitably spent in **Question 2(d)** where there were up to 15 marks available and more opportunities for relevant development of explanations. Some less effective responses did not pay careful attention to the instruction to select from the given extract and attempted unwisely to paraphrase the whole extract and/or discuss it in very general terms. On occasion, opportunities were missed due to a lack of focus on the task – for example, a few candidates simply repeated the wording of the question and text asserting that their chosen example ‘showed Rohan’s feelings of surprise’ without suggesting where or how.

(d) **Re-read paragraphs 5 and 10.**

- **Paragraph 5 begins ‘In the garden ...’ and is about how Rohaan becomes momentarily covered by ivy when it suddenly comes loose from the rock.**
- **Paragraph 10 begins ‘Armed now with a torch ...’ and is about Rohaan’s first experiences as he enters the cave.**

**Explain how the writer uses language to convey meaning and to create effect in these paragraphs. Choose three examples of words or phrases from each paragraph to support your answer. Your choices should include the use of imagery.**

Successful responses to **Question 2(d)** offered clear analysis of **six** relevant selections – three from each of the two specified paragraphs – often starting by explaining literal meaning in context and then moving on to consider effect (for example, discussing connotations and suggesting the impacts created by the writer’s language choices). Such responses demonstrated understanding of how the writer was using language in each case through detailed discussion of focused choices. Where candidates considered all the key words in slightly longer choices, they were able to avoid those more generalised comments of less effective responses.

Candidates relying on repeating the language of the text within their explanation were less well placed to demonstrate understanding fully and often offered only partially effective or very thin explanation as a result. The most effective responses considered all the key words within their choices individually, as well as suggesting how they worked within the longer phrase and/or in the context of the description. Rather than selecting the most ‘obvious’ literary devices, successful responses often set out to identify those relevant selections that they felt best able to explain. Some of the most effective responses explored how their judiciously selected choices worked both individually and together to influence the reader’s impression, building to an overview. Responses at level 5 frequently showed imagination and precision when discussing images, for example in relation to ‘armed with a torch’ and ‘advanced’. A small number of candidates selected only three choices in total over the whole question, or answered one part of the task only, limiting their achievement as a consequence. A few candidates misinterpreted instructions to offer 3 choices from some/all of the paragraphs between 5 and 10.

When dealing with paragraph 5, many answers had identified ‘surrendering to one last mighty heave’ as a potentially interesting example to discuss, with most able to offer at least a basic explanation of the suggestions that this was a battle between Rohaan and the plant, though some misread the text and suggested it was Rohaan giving in. A number were tempted by the image of a breaking chrysalis shell but had misread ‘chrysalis’ as ‘crystal’ and offered inappropriate explanations that could not be credited.

Some mid-range answers offered more careful selection and explanation in one half of the answer than the other – failing to target higher levels by repeating words such as ‘collapsed’, ‘sprang’ and ‘suddenly’ when discussing paragraph 5 rather than finding synonyms to evidence understanding of meaning. Many candidates were able to offer effects – for example, proposing that ‘sprang’ suggested a surprise attack and/or powerful jump of a predatory animal, or that ‘one last mighty heave’ suggested a heroic (and/or comedic) effort on Rohaan’s part. Answers at the top end had often noticed and explored the presentation of events as a war/ battle when events being described involved nothing more serious than pulling out a plant, citing the writer’s decision to pair mischievous with assailants as hinting at the comedic value of the scene. Similarly, those answers demonstrating secure or better evidence of understanding in relation to the language used in paragraph 5 has often focused carefully on the specific and different movements being described – for example, exploring words such as ‘toppled’ and ‘writhed’.

Some candidates had misread details of the text or were unsure of the basic meaning of the words they had selected, and their explanations were limited as a result – for example, some had not understood that ‘toppled’ described an involuntary action by Rohaan and implied a loss of balance, suggesting incorrectly instead that it meant Rohaan stepped or moved backwards deliberately as he was scared of the ivy.

Many of the choices offered from paragraph 10 related to the uncomfortable experience of exploring the cave – with choices including contorted and confined, but often missing how

increasingly added to the sense of the walls closing in and how contortion suggested unnatural, even painful movements. Some of the most convincing explored in detail the images of the ‘walls swallowing the light’ and the ‘treacherously loose stones’.

The least successful answers to **Question 2(d)** offered inappropriate, generic comments such as ‘The writer uses images that help us imagine what it looked like’ or repeated the description of the paragraph in the question as an ‘overview’. Such comments are unlikely to be a useful starting point for discussion of how language is working in the extract and can often create a false sense of security, meaning candidates move on without saying anything more concrete to evidence their understanding. Satisfactory responses offered a clear explanation of the literal meaning of each word within the example they had chosen, whilst more effective answers reached for more precise vocabulary and in doing so touched on effect. Candidates working at higher levels were often able to visualise images, using explanation of what you could ‘see/hear happening’ in context as the starting point for their explanation of effect.

In **Question 2(d)**, answers which simply list literary devices used and/or copy from each paragraph without careful consideration of the examples to be discussed are not likely to evidence the skills and understanding necessary to target higher marks. It is the quality of the analysis which attracts marks in a language question. Selections in **Question 2(d)** need to be clear and deliberate, helping to focus the analysis which follows. Long quotations with only the first and last words identified are less likely to be useful and often result in very thin general comments at best. On occasion, opportunities were missed in answers where choices had been selected from one paragraph only. Some of the least successful answers to **Question 2(d)** appeared to have been answered last and were very brief, generalised and/or incomplete. The most successful answers were often able to explore and discuss their understanding of words within relevant choices, considering different possibilities of meaning, associations and connotations, ahead of arriving at an understanding of how and why these particular words might have been used by the writer in this context.

#### **Advice to candidates on Question 2:**

- make sure that the quotations you select from the text are precise and accurate – do not copy out lines or chunks of text, miss out key words or include only part of the choice
- in each part of **2(a)** make sure that your selection from the text is clearly identified – remember you are looking for a word or phrase, not a whole sentence
- in **2(b)** be careful not to include extra incorrect guesses that might detract from the evidence that you understand the meaning of the word you are explaining
- in **2(c)** clearly identify the one example from the text excerpt you are going to explain
- in **2(d)**, choose three examples from each of the two specified paragraphs (six choices in total)
- where you are trying to explain meaning check that your explanation makes sense
- when explaining how language is working avoid empty comments such as saying that ‘the writer uses lots of adjectives, verbs and nouns’
- make sure your explanations deal with each of the key words within an identified choice separately as well as how they work together
- when you are trying to suggest effect and are unsure, start by explaining the precise meaning in context of the word(s) in the choice
- when you are trying to explore and explain images, consider the connotations and associations of the words within choices to help you to suggest the effect the writer might have wanted to create
- allow time to edit your answers – for example, to add in further detail and/or correct errors to help show you have read carefully and understood.



### Question 3

You are Shaima. A year after Rohaan discovered the cave in your garden, you have written a book about the experience and what has happened since then. You are interviewed for a television show to promote your book.

The interviewer asks the following three questions only:

- Can you outline what Rohaan was doing at first in the garden and how he discovered the cave?
- What made him realise that his discovery was significant?
- How did the discovery affect your plans for the garden and have your lives changed since then?

**Write the words of the interview.**

**Base your interview on what you have read in Text C, but be careful to use your own words. Address each of the three bullet points.**

**Begin your interview with the first question.**

Having worked through **Question 2** and already familiarised themselves with **Text C**, candidates following the order of tasks as set were best placed to think their way into Shaima's perspective as she looks back on the events detailed and/or suggested in the text. Some made effective use of details given in the introduction to the text and the task – for example, developing the hint that the RS in the name of Rohaan's planned business might stand for Rohaan and Shaima, and/or recognising that the timescale of one year on allowed plenty of opportunity for Shaima to have heard all of the details of Rohaan's experience. A few candidates insisted that viewers would need to read Shaima's book to find out what happened and missed key elements of Rohaan's experience from their answers.

Almost all candidates chose to address the bullets in the order set and followed the instruction to begin with the first question and limit the interviewer's questions to the three provided, though some answers built the interviewer's part considerably. Where candidates had focused on offering full answers to each of the specified , they were often able in addition to include smaller prompts and requests for more detail from their interviewer that both allowed for development of ideas and contributed helpfully to the creation of a convincing voice. However, less well focused response often spent far too long introducing this week's star guest, exchanging pleasantries and advertising next week's programme at the expense of providing evidence of close reading by answering the questions set. Several responses to question 3 appeared to be incomplete and/or did not deal with one or more of the bulleted questions.

The first bulleted question invited candidates to revisit details in the text related to what Rohaan was doing at first in the garden and how he discovered the cave. Most candidates were able to offer several relevant ideas, with answers aiming at higher marks taking up the opportunity to reflect and as a consequence extend and develop ideas from the text. Almost all mentioned more straightforward explicit ideas – for example, referencing Rohaan's intention to create an office in their garden and the decision to clear the ivy plant to create more space. Many had identified that the discovery of the cave was accidental, with the best answers often recognising and using this as a natural link into the answer to question/bullet two. Generally it was bullet one which was answered most securely at all levels, though there was some copying in less effective answers that tended to carry on into bullet two and dilute evidence of understanding.

Many answers to bullet two missed opportunities by only reporting on the discovery of animal remains. More effective answers offered evidence that they had read more closely, for example by commenting on the potential historical and scientific significance of the find. A number mentioned the torch, though fewer recognised the clue in 'now' to deduce that Rohaan must have gone to get it in the interim and/or that the darkness encouraged Rohaan's curiosity to explore. A few developed the suggestion in 'path' that this may have been a well-worn route at some point and/or constructed by someone and some developed the idea that the cave had apparently laid undiscovered for a very long time. Misreading by some candidates led to unlikely suggestions that Rohaan had found a tavern or a caravan underground.

When developing the implications of their find – how the discovery affected their plans for the garden and how their lives had changed since the events of a year ago ( bullet three) – most responses cited their improved financial situation and the public interest in their story, along with the opportunity it presented for Shaima to take part in a real archaeological dig of her own. Where candidates had relied heavily on reproducing the text in response to bullets one and two, they often wrote very little and/or struggled to offer ideas rooted in the text for this third section.

For the most part, candidates seemed familiar with the requirements of an interview though some tried to present it using reported speech rather than simply writing the words of the response to each question. A few wrote long descriptive or narrative sections about arriving at the studio for the interview and/or the audience's reactions – offering little / no evidence of their reading skills. Some candidates copied language / sections of text from Text A, Text B and/or question 2a. Where candidates relied too heavily on the structure and/or language of any text/question to communicate their ideas, expression often became awkward and/or lost clarity. Where responses were entirely in the words of the original text, there was often no creditable content for either reading or writing .

**Advice to candidates on Question 3:**

- remember to base your answer on the ideas and details you find in Text C only
- keep the audience and purpose for your response in mind throughout your answer
- decide on the voice and style you want to create and maintain that in your answer
- look for the clues and evidence in the text to help you make judgements about characters and situations
- give equal attention to each of the three bullet points
- do not copy directly from the text: use your own words as far as you can to express ideas
- try to do more than just repeat details of what happened: developing ideas allows you to better show your understanding, for example by explaining feelings or commenting from the point of view of the character you are writing as
- leave sufficient time to edit and correct your response.

# FIRST LANGUAGE ENGLISH (9–1)

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Paper 0990/22  
Directed Writing and Composition 22

## Key messages

This paper was mainly assessed for writing, although there were fifteen marks available for reading in **Question 1**.

To achieve high marks, candidates were required to:

- use an appropriate form, style and register in both questions
- structure ideas and organise their writing effectively to persuade and engage the reader
- produce detailed and evocative descriptions and engaging, credible narratives
- understand how different audiences, purposes and genres should influence the style adopted
- construct varied sentences accurately, with a clear attempt to influence and interest the reader
- use precise and wide-ranging vocabulary, appropriate for the task.

## General comments

Candidates were familiar with the format of the examination paper and understood what was required for both the directed writing and composition questions. There were few very brief scripts, incomplete scripts or scripts in which the instructions regarding which questions to answer were not followed. A few scripts contained no **Question 1** but nearly all candidates understood the instructions for the examination and attempted **Question 1** and either a descriptive or narrative writing task. Most responses were written in candidates' own words although there were a few responses which were mostly or wholly copied from the texts in the Reading Booklet Insert. Some lifting of phrases or sentences was common but where this lifting of material was more extensive it was difficult to award high marks. In Section B, most candidates understood how the content of descriptive and narrative writing differs, although there were stories submitted for the descriptive writing tasks which made it difficult for Examiners to award high marks for Content and Structure. **Question 5** was sometimes addressed in a more discursive than narrative style, again making it difficult to award high marks for Content and Structure because the mark scheme directs Examiners to look for characteristically narrative writing skills.

Nearly all responses showed a clear understanding of and engagement with the topic of podcasts in the reading texts in **Question 1**. Most responses were written in an appropriate style and format for a letter to a figure of authority in the workplace. The formal register required here was generally well understood, with most responses structured clearly with appropriate valedictions. Most candidates approached the topic using their own words rather than lifting or copying the words in the passages. More effective answers here also tended to structure responses independently, selecting and commenting on the details in the texts in a coherent response. Some opinion was usually given about the potential benefits and drawbacks of using podcasts at work, based on ideas in the texts, with only a minority simply reporting the facts and ideas in the texts with no comment on them. Again, more effective responses tended to comment on specific ideas in the texts rather than offer general impressions about podcasts and their popularity and uses in modern life. Sometimes, responses reflected the ideas in the texts in a way without a specific focus on the use of podcasts in the workplace and how they might affect workers. More effective evaluation tended to probe some ideas in the texts rather than reproduce them and to suggest that raising the overall morale of workers would benefit both the individuals and the business.

Less effective responses tended to repeat the ideas in the texts, rather than selecting points and commenting on them. Some salient ideas in the texts were not quite addressed, such as the potential drawbacks of podcast use in the workplace or, occasionally, the drawbacks became so dominant in the response as to weaken the argument in favour of podcasts. There was some assertion rather than argument, often where candidates simply denied that podcasts would distract workers. Sometimes, curbs were suggested on the use of podcasts in the workplace which tended to avoid the need to consider the ideas in the texts where credit could be given. For example, some argued that podcasts should only be used at break times, an approach which meant that several ideas in the texts were redundant.

Most made good use of the bullet points in the question to help structure the response and the ideas in the texts were scrutinised thoughtfully in more effective responses. The balance between the staff's needs and those of the business were often seen as co-dependent rather than competing in more effective responses while less well considered scripts sometimes gave a summary of the ideas in the texts but without the focus on how the boss could be persuaded to allow podcasts in the workplace. The structure and organisation of ideas required in a formal, but persuasive letter, such as an appeal to the boss's need for more productive workers or some rhetorical devices such as questioning or exclamation. Less effective responses were often written in a style with less consistent awareness of the audience and purpose of the task.

In **Section B**, effective responses to the composition questions were characterised by a clear understanding of the genre selected, descriptive or narrative, and of the features of good writing in each.

Descriptive writing at the highest level was evocative and subtle and most responses gave a range of descriptive detail without resorting to narrative. There were some imaginative descriptions of old toys found in long abandoned boxes, farm machinery rusting in fields or old cars left in garages for many years. Although not all were successful, there were also descriptions of broken hearts. Less effective responses to this question were too broad in scope, describing old buildings, for example, or an object which had little meaning for the narrator. For the second question, a wide range of descriptions of buildings of different kinds was described, some iconic and some with specific significance to the narrator, with the most effective often evoking a clear impression of why the building was 'special' to the writer. Weaker responses here described quite ordinary buildings, such as shops or cafes, and questions from previous examinations were sometimes used with limited relevance to the specific task here.

Both narrative writing questions proved popular across the range of abilities. The required phrase in **Question 4** was used in a variety of ways, often to help structure a story in which the narrator realised that they had already been where they found themselves at some point in the story. Narratives which were constructed around the use of the phrase and which included credible characters and scenarios were generally more effective than those which used the phrase more co-incidentally in the story. **Question 5** elicited some highly engaging and well-constructed narratives. Narratives often featured a physical ball, often a football but sometimes a more mysterious ball with special properties but there were also many balls at the end of a school year or occasionally a ball set in more opulent surroundings in the past. Less effective responses to both narrative questions lacked a clear sense of narrative purpose. In **Question 4**, rather ordinary holiday destinations featured which the narrator realised they had already seen in the past while in **Question 5** there was more of a tendency to write discursively about the different sports which involve balls.

## **Comments on specific questions**

### **Section A**

#### **Question 1**

**Imagine you are an employee of a business in which listening to podcasts is not allowed.**

**Write a letter to persuade your boss that staff should be allowed to listen to podcasts in their workplace.**

**In your letter you should:**

- **evaluate the ideas, attitudes and opinions about podcasts given in both texts**
- **consider the concerns your boss might have**
- **suggest some of the benefits of staff listening to podcasts, based on what you have read, for both the staff and the business.**

**Base your letter on what you have read in both texts but be careful to use your own words. Address all of the bullet points.**

**Write about 250 to 350 words.**

**Up to 15 marks are available for the content of your answer, and up to 25 marks for the quality of your writing.**

Examiners awarded high marks for Reading where there was some probing and evaluation of the ideas in the reading material, rather than a straightforward listing and reproduction of the points in the texts. Where the letter was also accurate and ambitious in vocabulary and style, with a clear understanding of the appropriate style and register for the specific task and audience, the highest marks for Writing could be awarded. More effective responses here focused carefully on the ideas in favour of and against podcast use in the texts, with the highest marks awarded for those which handled the different, often conflicting views with confidence and perceptive evaluation. The extent to which the implicit ideas and opinions contained in the texts were probed and scrutinised tended to determine the level of candidates' achievement. These implicit ideas often involved the extent to which the benefits of podcast listening could be harnessed in the workplace to convince the boss of their efficacy.

Many responses made reference to the renewed energy and better mood which podcast listeners had reported and applied this to the effect an improvement in staff morale might have on the business's productivity. Similarly, the misgivings addressed in Text B that podcasts may prove damaging to relationships within teams were sometimes countered by reference to the wealth of topics covered in podcasts that would help to create more creative, engaged workers with ideas to contribute to the business. Inferences which could be drawn from some ideas in the texts were also used in more effective responses. One less common but valid inference was the idea that while the boss may be concerned about podcasts distracting workers, those workers were often distracted by office gossip or the sounds of machinery which would be blocked by headphones. Some sifting of ideas was also noted in more effective responses so that persuasive arguments were focused on the advantage to the boss in introducing podcasts, rather than on the benefit to individuals.

In less effective responses, assertions that workers would not be distracted by podcasts or that podcast use would not interfere with customer service were more common than reasoned arguments based on ideas in the texts. Some suggested trial periods or time limits for podcast use but did not directly address the concerns the boss might have. More evaluative responses tended to deal with concerns such as the idea that it would be rude to have staff wearing headphones in thoughtful ways, rather than advocating limits. These often-involved counterarguments rather than assertions, such as the benefit to the business of staff with improved listening skills who could better cater for customers or understand complex instructions.

In responses given marks in Level 6 for Reading, Examiners often rewarded some careful grasp of the implications of specific ideas in the texts. For example, some concluded that, while there was conflicting evidence about the effects of podcast listening on individuals, the effects on staff focus, creativity and morale made a compelling case for their use in a modern business.

### **Marks for reading**

The most effective responses adopted a consistently evaluative, critical stance and read effectively between the lines of the texts, drawing inferences and making judgements about how podcast listening might benefit the recipient of the letter, the boss.

Most responses included reference to various ways in which podcasts were believed to benefit the individual listener. The increased energy and focus outlined in Text A, alongside the range of topics covered in podcasts were commonly outlined though less use was sometimes made of Text B. The unhealthy obsession with podcast listening on the part of the writer was sometimes noticed but for the most part the second text was used to highlight the concerns the boss might have about their use in the workplace. The extent to which these ideas were countered by thoughtful arguments, usually developed from ideas in Text A, often determined whether a response could be given a Level 5 mark for Reading and in some cases a range of more evaluative comments merited a Level 6 mark.

Some subtle ideas were developed and explored. For example, allowing podcasts to be used in the workplace was considered by some to suggest a level of trust between employees and the boss which would not only engender better morale but would result in better educated, more independent workers who had more to offer an employer. Similarly, improved listening skills were sometimes thought to foster more respect between colleagues and thereby create more effective teams, rather than the worry expressed in Text B that workers engrossed in podcasts would prove to be weak team members. As one candidate put it, 'Rather than encountering bored workers completing menial tasks with no enthusiasm, surely customers would be more impressed by staff who listened to them attentively and responded creatively to meet their needs.'

A common approach in Level 5 and low Level 6 responses was that some tedious tasks in the workplace were unavoidable and often caused productivity to fall but the effects of listening to podcasts were more widespread than simply speeding up people's work rate. Improved morale was the most used argument based on the texts with which to convince the boss but where a range of thoughtful inferences were made, Examiners could award marks in level 6.

Responses awarded marks in Level 5 characteristically offered one or two more evaluative ideas but sometimes with less development or focus on the workplace and the ideas which would persuade the boss.

Where some comment or opinion was offered, mostly without specific reference to points in the texts but generally relevant to the ideas in them, marks in Level 4 were usually awarded. These comments were usually less selective and included some details which were factually accurate but not persuasive, such as details about how podcasts worked or the benefits of listening to podcasts while doing domestic chores. More general, if valid, ideas were also typical at this level with many responses including suggestions about how to limit the use of podcasts at work which were not quite the purpose of the task.

Examiners usually awarded marks in Level 3 for Reading where there was some coverage of the texts, and some selection of ideas from them, but where these were listed or simply recorded. Often, there was a clear paraphrase of both texts but limited comment on them. Where there were some brief opinions, usually at the end of the response, they tended to be more general and not strongly anchored in the specific ideas in the texts. There was some misunderstanding at this level with some reference to podcasts as having visual content or in some cases the second bullet was not addressed. The anecdotal style of Text B was sometimes replicated but the point being made about obsessive podcast use was missed.

Comments made at this level were given mostly in candidates' own words. Less successful responses tended to paraphrase and list ideas and many given marks in low Level 3 and below contained much copied material. In a few cases the entire response was copied from the texts. Where a mark of 6 was awarded, some firmer roots in the passages were needed, whereas 5 was generally given for thin or mainly lifted responses in which there was some insecure grasp of the ideas in the passage.

## **Marks for Writing**

25 marks were available for style and register, the structure of the answer and the technical accuracy of spelling, punctuation and grammar.

### **Style and audience**

Candidates needed to adopt an appropriate style and register for a polite and formal but persuasive letter to a figure in authority in the workplace. Most responses showed a clear understanding of the required formal register, even where technical writing skills were weak, and this allowed for Examiners to consider marks for Level 4 and above where a 'sometimes effective style' was required. Some attempted to acknowledge the

right of the boss to set the rules for the workforce but respectfully asked for some reconsideration of the podcast rule. Some high scoring responses used a more rhetorical style, presenting their arguments in a respectful way but making their case effectively and with some impact. At the highest level, responses were pitched at quite a subtle level, challenging the boss's assumptions without overstepping the mark in terms of Where a less nuanced approach was adopted and the tone was more obsequious, responses could be a little more limited and less use made of the reading material.

In the middle range of marks, Examiners could sometimes award marks in Level 4 even where more technical writing skills were lacking if the style and register adopted were appropriate for the task and the audience. A clear, consistent attempt to engage the boss by appealing to his commercial interests worked well. Conversely, some responses were generally accurate but were largely summaries of the reading material rather adopting the style for a formal letter or the register appropriate for the audience. Sometimes, in reaching for a formal register, the style could be rather strained.

Level 3 marks were usually awarded where the reading material was largely reproduced so that the organisation and sequence of sentences and paragraphs reflected the original and were not adapted to create a coherent style. Where the reading material was heavily lifted or copied, there was often little of the candidate's own style for Examiners to reward, though these kinds of responses were rare. More commonly, phrases and sentences were lifted, such as 'Podcasts are generally perceived as a more intellectual form of entertainment' and 'research suggests that silence is beneficial to cell development in the region of the brain central to memory and emotion and relieves tension.' In more effective responses, ideas were incorporated into the writer's own style and selected for their usefulness to the overall argument rather than copied.

### **Structure**

Responses awarded high marks for Writing handled the material confidently and presented their arguments cogently. The issues addressed were combined so that the judgements which emerged was clearly derived from the ideas in the texts, but the response was not dependent on them for its structure and sequence. At the highest level, the lines of argument were set from the introductory paragraph and the issues in the two texts were addressed but as a cohesive piece. The opening and concluding sections of the most effective responses tended to introduce and sum up the main points, with the intervening sections arguing a coherent case. The argument being pursued determined the sequence of ideas in these responses rather than the sequence of the original texts.

Responses given Level 5 marks for Writing tended to reflect a range of points made in each text but were reordered in a response which was sensibly structured and paragraphed. This often avoided the repetition of similar or contradictory ideas which appeared in both texts, such as the notion that podcasts reduced stress as mentioned in Text A, but that silence was necessary to relieve tension, stated in Text B. An overall coherence and structure were required for this Level which was usually less evident in responses below Level 5.

Less effective responses sometimes struggled to provide a coherent argument and were more dependent on the sequencing of the original texts. In most cases the information given in the texts was offered with some rewording but not reordering of ideas, with some contradiction as implied above. While some brief opinion was sometimes given at the end of the response, these views were asserted and imposed on the structure of the original texts rather than argued for.

### **Accuracy**

Accomplished writing which was accurate and controlled as well as subtle in tone and register was given a Writing mark in Level 6. These responses were not only engaging in style and convincing in their arguments but fluent and virtually free of error. There was a range of precisely selected and complex vocabulary and sentence structures varied and were consciously used, often rhetorically, to engage the reader.

Some complex sentences structures were chosen which helped to balance and weigh up contending views and complex clauses were controlled by careful punctuation within sentences.

Level 5 responses were usually purposeful and clear, though perhaps not as ambitious and wide ranging in vocabulary or as precise in register or style as those given higher marks. Level 4 responses, as described in the marking guidelines, were 'sometimes effective' but not consistently so. Although the style was usually plain, the language used was generally accurate. A range of quite basic errors was made at this level which limited the effectiveness of the style but did not affect clarity of meaning. There were lapses in the use of definite and indefinite articles (usually omission) and some grammatical disagreement, often between plurals and verb forms. 'Podcast' was very often used instead of 'podcasts' and some disagreement occurred as a

result. Common spelling errors in this mark range included some frequently used words in the texts such as 'colleagues', 'entertainment' and 'benefits'.

Faulty sentence structures, fluctuating tense use or too much lifted or copied material often kept Writing marks for **Question 1** below Level 4. These responses often showed reasonable clarity in conveying meaning but there was a wide range of quite basic punctuation and grammar errors which meant that Examiners could not award marks in Level 4. The omission of definite or indefinite articles was quite common, as were tense errors, and agreement errors were more frequent and more damaging to meaning at this level. In rare cases, material from the texts was copied and responses where this occurred more substantially could not be given marks in Level 4 for Writing or for Reading because neither the content nor the style of the response was the candidate's own.

#### **Ways in which this type of answer could be improved:**

- **be prepared to challenge the ideas in the reading texts**
- **look for contradictions in the arguments and point them out**
- **group ideas from both texts together and discuss them rather than repeat them**
- **think carefully about the kind of style which suits your task and the audience**
- **check your writing for basic punctuation errors, such as missing definite or indefinite articles, weaknesses in grammar or misspellings of key words which are in the passage.**

#### **Section B**

##### **Descriptive writing**

**Describe an object that has been broken for a long time.**

**Write a description with the title, A special building – inside and outside'.**

Both descriptive writing questions were popular choices for candidates and Examiners awarded a wide range of marks for these responses. Both questions elicited responses about a wide variety of objects and buildings which Examiners could reward appropriately. In the first task, there were many detailed, organised and effective descriptions of different kinds of neglected and broken objects. Often, candidates made use of the implied sense of nostalgic memory in the task, with responses imbued with some kind of significance for the writer which helped to elevate the description from simple, concrete details. The second question elicited a range of different kinds of buildings, from iconic structures such as tourist landmarks to buildings that were personally 'special' to the writer. In both questions, the choice of object or building to be described was important to the success of the piece: objects and buildings which could be brought vividly to life because of a strong connection between them and the writer tended to elicit more vivid and effective responses while objects described more clinically or buildings which didn't seem very special to the writer sometimes carried less impact and effectiveness.

Responses, as is always the case, were more effective if they contained vivid and specific details rather than more general or stereotypical ideas and images. In both questions, some responses lacked real clarity, so the object described was incongruous or difficult to picture and in the second question buildings such as shops or cafes seemed rather ordinary rather than special. Lower in the mark range, responses to both questions were rather prone to narrative though Examiners rewarded description wherever it appeared. In the first question particularly, a sizeable minority of responses included narrative sections about how the object came to be broken or were entirely narrative in intent.

Some effective responses to the first question included interesting and evocative details about an object found in an abandoned room or attic. Grandfather clocks featured quite often, with some engaging play on the concept of time having been stopped in some responses. These included a level of detailed observation that gave the description credibility and interest rather than relying on cliché and often incorporated memories of a time the object was not broken. One response recorded the slow decay of an abandoned car in a secluded area which became an object for children to play in as they grew up before being engulfed over time by nature: 'Now, many years later, the car is still there but only really visible in the undergrowth to those of us who had played in it every summer as it gradually sank into the landscape.' In another response, a doll which had belonged to the writer's sister as a child was described, hinting at the guilt evoked in the mind of the writer who had deliberately broken it: 'Its grotesque, badly aligned eyes hung out of the sockets, as if looking balefully at the warped and twisted limbs lying in a heap in the box.' Some less domestic settings also elicited successful responses, such as various kinds of agricultural machinery on abandoned farms. In some highly



effective responses, the decaying object was shown to symbolise an old way of life now superseded by modernisation.

In the second descriptive writing question, some responses focused on a building which was remembered as 'special' but was now neglected or abandoned, an approach which sometimes allowed for some engaging contrast between past and present: 'My childhood home with its comfortably old-fashioned, crumbling brickwork porch now sported a chic, glimmering glass atrium which displayed the wealth and status of the new owners for all to see.' Some buildings were special in other ways, such as old schools or otherwise unassuming shops remembered from the past. Buildings with iconic status also featured, such as well-known tourist sites, cathedrals or civic landmarks, and where these were recreated with convincing detail, Examiners could award high marks.

In both descriptive writing questions, unusual, closely observed details created engaging, evocative scenes in the best responses. Where such scenes were sustained and developed and showed skill in building a detailed, convincing overall picture, Examiners could award marks for Content and Structure in Level 6. These consciously crafted pieces held the reader's attention by linking the different elements described in an interesting, cohesive response. Level 6 responses were characterised by this cohesive structure, often provided by the narrator's reactions or a specific atmosphere, as well as carefully chosen detail and striking images or extended motifs which held the piece together.

Level 5 responses tended to use a wide range of details and were well-constructed, if a little less effective and cohesive overall. At the bottom of Level 5 and in Level 4, responses were sustained and competently organised but usually a more predictable. Selected scenes and details at this level tended to involve less striking images and more stereotypical ideas. In the first question, the object described was not always easy to visualise from the description or lacked salience or significance. In the second question, the building described, often shops or homes, had less sense of being special and were simply pleasant or comfortable.

Level 4 descriptions for Content and Structure tended to become more narrative in intent, especially in the first question, with accounts of how an object was broken rather than a description of it. While most responses at this level were organised and often paragraphed, the details included were simple and there was less use of images or a range of vocabulary.

Some lack of awareness of the essential elements of descriptive writing was evident in responses at Level 3, although they were sometimes accurately written. These were sometimes entirely narrative or the object or building described was not readily identifiable.

High marks for Style and Accuracy often reflected the precise and varied vocabulary used as well as the technical accuracy of the writing. In both descriptive tasks, similar details were often included but better responses had a much wider range of vocabulary, precisely deployed to create specific effects. Highly effective responses showed a confident ability to use both simple and complex language, striking images and personification, as well as a range of sentence structures to create subtle, complex atmospheres. In less effective responses, vocabulary was sometimes wide-ranging and complex but used with less precision. In a few cases, this insecure use of language resulted in a style which was difficult to follow and the credit which could be given for a wide-ranging vocabulary was lost by its imprecise use and lack of clarity. Obscure, sometimes archaic language sometimes revealed a lack of understanding of its meaning rather than a wide range of vocabulary.

As is often the case in less secure descriptive writing, tenses switched between past and present, sometimes within sentences. Incomplete or verbless sentences also affected marks given in the middle range, even where other technical aspects of style were more accurate. These instances were perhaps a little more frequent than has been the case in the recent past. Lapses in grammar, perhaps minor in isolation but more damaging when persistent, also kept responses out of Level 4 for Style and Accuracy. These included disagreement, especially between pronouns and verbs, and the omission of definite and indefinite articles was also common and damaging to otherwise quite accurate, if simple, style.

#### **Ways in which the writing of descriptions can be improved:**

- **try to avoid clichéd scenarios and consider a more individual and original selection of content**
- **choose a scenario which gives you a range of details on which to focus**
- **keep your focus on details which will help you evoke a specific atmosphere**
- **write sentences with proper verbs and do not switch tenses**
- **use vocabulary precisely: complex words used wrongly do not help your style.**

## **Narrative writing**

**Write a story which includes the words, ‘... I realised I had been here before ...’.**

**Write a story with the title, ‘The ball’.**

Both narrative writing questions were popular choices for candidates across the mark range and there was a very wide range of plots, characters and scenarios in these responses. Examiners occasionally saw narratives which did not comfortably fit with either title and which, on occasion, seemed more suited to titles set in previous examinations or were pre-prepared. In some cases this lack of relevance affected the mark for Content and Structure.

Effective responses were well organised and thoughtful interpretations of the title which used engaging, credible ideas to create developed stories. An ability to shape the narrative and to produce moments of tension, mystery or drama and to vary the pace of the story were essential elements of more effective responses to both questions. In **Question 4**, better responses usually included the quotation in the question as a pivotal point in the narrative rather than some simple realisation that a place had been visited in the past. Some made productive use of a more metaphorical interpretation of the title, suggesting that some turning point or state of mind had been experienced before. Other interpretations involved a moment of recognition that some pattern of behaviour, such as self-destructive habits or a failure to strive for desired goals, was about to be repeated, often with quite optimistic conclusions where the expected chain of events was broken.

Most responses to this question were more literal but, in some cases, equally effective. Being taken, often reluctantly, to a barely remembered location such as a childhood home or a grandparent’s house was a common scenario, with more effective narratives focusing on the strange feelings of familiarity and confusion evoked: ‘There was a red swing gently tilting in the breeze in the tiny front garden. My whole body seemed to feel the surge of the swing, the coldness of the chains as I held on and as I stood transfixed the sounds of tinkly voices drifted on the wind from some faraway place.’ Dreams in which places or people featured which were then seen in real life were also common. While in some cases the link between dream and reality was made by some supernatural sense of prescience, others ended in less likely, unexplained violent events as the nightmare came true. Some such nightmares turned out to be simple repeated dreams with limited context and characterisation to bring them alive. Most narratives addressing this question were chronological accounts with varying degrees of development, characterisation and shaping although some candidates chose more ambitious structures, telling the story from the vantage point of hindsight. While such structures were more difficult to control, and tenses were sometimes used insecurely, Examiners could often reward these approaches for their ambition and engagement.

**Question 5** also allowed for a wide range of interpretations. There were many ball games of different kinds which had varying degrees of tense moments and while these were usually middle range responses, there were some which had enough characterisation and context to create interest beyond the outcome of the match itself. Some very effective responses used the title to create a convincing scene of a social event, a ball, of some significance to the narrator. There were some end-of-year balls in which school friends stole each other’s partners in small scale but convincing narratives, while other responses were set in stately mansions in the past in which some drama would occur. There were also literal balls which were lost and followed into dangerous territory or balls with magical properties which led protagonists to various locations and dilemmas. In most cases, the effectiveness of the narrative was not so dependent on what happened but on the care taken to include interesting, well-realised characters and believable scenarios, however the story unfolded.

More commonly in the middle range, narratives were straightforward accounts in which events tended to dominate and there was more limited attention paid to characterisation and setting. Plotlines involving football matches or balls lost in forests tended to lack some credibility although most were organised and paragraphed.

Examiners awarded marks in Level 6 for Content and Structure for narratives which created convincing, interesting scenarios and characters in responses to both questions. While the events in a story were important in creating such credibility, Level 6 responses paid attention to characterisation and how events were driven by character traits, relationships and choices.

Narratives given marks in Level 5 were usually more straightforward in structure and approach but nonetheless cohesive and reasonably credible for the reader. Examiners could award marks in Level 5 for Content and Structure where the narrative was organised and there was a clear attempt to create a developed, relevant story. Responses in this range were more usually chronological accounts but were

cohesive and balanced and contained a suitable ending depicting some satisfying, if not always engaging, resolution. For the first question, this often included the use of the quotation in the question to create some sense of déjà vu which was resolved but not always in engaging ways. Whichever interpretation was given to the tasks, literal or more figurative, for Level 5 marks for Content and Structure stories needed to be well-managed with some conscious shaping of the narrative beyond a simple retelling of events.

Level 4 marks for Content and Structure were awarded for stories which were relevant to the task but were less developed and used fewer elements of effective narrative writing. Characters and narrators tended to be more simply drawn and responses were often more dependent on a series of events, lacking attention to characterisation and setting. A simplicity of content or a lack of development rather than weaknesses in organisation were typical at this level. In the first question, these sometimes involved simple accounts, such as one response in which a recurring dream was revealed to be yet another version of the same dream. At this level there was a tendency to say simply what happened or to state who the characters were rather than drawing the reader in by characterisation and setting. Characters were identified but there was more time and emphasis given to relating events than developing characters as credible and rounded. While most less effective narratives had some simple but clear sequence of events, there were fewer features of a developed narrative, and the reader was less engaged as a result.

High marks for Style and Accuracy were given for responses where the writing was engaging and varied in vocabulary and where different sentence structures were controlled and used to create effects. The characteristics of Level 6 writing included a fluent and flexible use of language which was subtle enough to create a range of effects to engage the reader. Punctuation within sentences, especially in the use of dialogue, was secure in responses in Level 6 and where coupled with a sophisticated and precise range of vocabulary, the highest marks were given. Responses awarded marks in Level 5 tended to be less ambitious and complex but still mostly accurate while Level 4 responses were plain in style and lacked some range in vocabulary. Speech punctuation was usually problematic at this level, sometimes creating confusion as to who was speaking and often without punctuation other than speech marks. However, the writing at this level had few serious errors which affected the clarity of meaning, such as weak sentence control, sentence separation and grammar errors.

Common errors of grammar and expression appeared increasingly in responses given low Level 5 and Level 4 marks, such as disagreements, missing articles and imprecise, occasionally over-ambitious vocabulary. Errors in sentence control and separation, as well as lapses in tenses, limited otherwise competently told stories to Level 4, as did frequent errors in basic punctuation or grammar. Incorrect use of capital letters, the omission of definite and indefinite articles, the incorrect use of participles or errors in grammatical agreement contributed to a lack of fluency and accuracy which kept many responses out of Level 5. Similarly, basic punctuation errors, such as random capitalisation and the misspelling of simple words and wrongly selected homophones sometimes appeared in otherwise competent writing and were sometimes frequent enough to affect the mark for Style and Accuracy.

A common reason not awarding Level 5 marks to otherwise clearly written stories was weak demarcation of sentences, most commonly the use of commas where full stops were needed but sometimes sentence separation was missing altogether. Though the mixing of tenses and the use of incomplete sentences were perhaps more prevalent in the descriptive writing, these weaknesses also limited the marks available in the narrative writing.

#### **Ways in which the writing of narratives can be improved:**

- **think about how to interest and intrigue the reader in shaping your narrative**
- **consider imaginative ways to tell your story, apart from a chronological account**
- **characters' thoughts and feelings help to engage your reader; do not rely on events**
- **check your writing for errors which will badly affect your mark, such as basic spelling and punctuation mistakes; accurate speech punctuation will help to lift your mark**
- **use complicated vocabulary with precision and consider the power of simple words and sentences to create particular effects.**

# FIRST LANGUAGE ENGLISH (9–1)

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Paper 0990/03  
Coursework Portfolio 03

## Key messages

Candidates did well when they:

- adapted their writing style to demonstrate an understanding of the needs of different audiences and context for each of the three assignments
- read critically and thoroughly evaluated the implicit and explicit ideas, opinions, and attitudes they identified in a text in **Assignment 1**
- assimilated ideas from a text to provide developed, thoughtful and sophisticated responses in **Assignment 1**
- supported their analysis, evaluation and comments with a detailed and specific selection of relevant ideas from a text in **Assignment 1**
- wrote original and interesting responses which reflected their personal ideas, feelings and interpretations of events and situations
- wrote with confidence using a wide range of vocabulary with precision and for specific effect in all assignments
- sequenced sentences within paragraphs in a way which maintained clarity of arguments, description, or narrative
- demonstrated a high level of accuracy in their writing
- engaged in a process of careful editing and proofreading to identify and correct errors in their writing.

The best practice for the production and presentation of coursework portfolios was when:

- centres followed the guidelines and instructions set out in the Course syllabus and the Coursework Handbook
- a wide range of appropriate texts were used for **Assignment 1**, which contained ideas and opinions to which candidates could respond, and were relevant to their interests
- centres set a range of appropriately challenging tasks which allowed candidates to respond individually and originally to topics and subjects they were interested in, or of which they had personal knowledge or experience
- teachers gave general advice for improvement at the end of the first drafts
- following feedback, candidates revised and edited their first drafts to improve their writing
- candidates checked, revised, and edited their final drafts to identify and correct errors
- teachers provided marks and summative comments at the end of the final draft of each assignment which clearly related to the appropriate mark level descriptors
- teachers indicated all errors in the final drafts of each completed assignment
- centres engaged in a process of internal moderation and clearly indicated any mark adjustments in the coursework portfolios, on the Individual Record Cards, and on the Candidate Assessment Summary Forms.

## General comments

A significant number of candidates produced interesting coursework portfolios which contained varied work across a range of contexts. There was evidence to show that many centres set tasks which allowed candidates flexibility to respond to subjects related to their personal interests or experiences. The majority of coursework portfolios contained writing of three different genres. There were very few incomplete folders seen by moderators.

Moderators reported an improvement in the number of centres following the instructions in the coursework handbook and in this session most centres provided the correct paperwork and completed all relevant forms

accurately. The Moderation Team reported that many centres provided summative comments closely related to the mark schemes at the end of each completed assignment. These were extremely helpful in helping moderators to understand how and why marks had been awarded and centres are thanked for following the process as instructed in the Coursework Handbook.

The major concern for all moderators was that some markers of the coursework portfolios did not indicate errors in the final draft of each assignment and/or provide a summative comment which referred to the marking level descriptors to justify the marks awarded. Some folders had no teacher annotation or marks on the assignments at all. Failure to follow this process often resulted in inaccurate or inconsistent marking and was one of the main reasons for adjustment of marks by moderators.

### **Administration**

Successful administration was when centres:

- completed the centre checklist and included it in the coursework sample
- annotated all errors in the final draft of each assignment
- carried out a thorough process of internal moderation which was clearly signposted on the assignments themselves as well as on all relevant documentation
- supplied marks and specific comments relating to the mark schemes at the end of the final draft of each assignment
- accurately completed the Coursework Assessment Summary Form (CASF) and ICRC, including any amendments made during internal moderation and listed the candidates in candidate number order on BOTH documents
- ensured that each coursework folder was stapled or tagged and securely attached to the Individual Candidate Record Card (ICRC)
- submitted their sample of coursework folders without using plastic or cardboard wallets.

### **Internal Moderation**

Centres who followed the instructions for carrying out internal moderation as directed in the Coursework Handbook are thanked for engaging in this important process. There was a general trend of greater accuracy of marking by centres where there was clear evidence of internal moderation than centres where no internal moderation process was evident on the coursework folders and documentation.

Some centres did not record changes made at internal moderation on the candidates' Individual Candidate Record Cards (ICRCs) which caused some confusion about the final mark awarded to candidates. Centres are requested to ensure that any changes made at internal moderation are signposted clearly on the work itself then also recorded on the ICRC as well as on the Coursework Assessment Summary Form (CASF). This is essential to ensure that the correct marks are recorded for all candidates.

### **Using the coursework handbook**

A cause of concern for all moderators was that some issues persist even though there are clear instructions in the Coursework Handbook, and the same concerns have been raised in previous Principal Moderator Reports. To ensure effective and accurate marking is achieved, and that all paperwork arrives safely for moderation, it is essential that all the instructions given in the Coursework Handbook, and on the relevant forms, are carefully followed. Centres are now required to complete a checklist and include it with the sample to ensure that all administrative procedures have been followed correctly.

Below highlights the three most significant issues related to the administration and annotation of candidates' work which led to mark adjustments by moderators:

#### **1 Indicating all errors in the final version of each assignment**

- Some of the assignments showed little or no evidence of complying with the instruction in the Coursework Handbook that markers should indicate all errors in the final draft of each assignment. This process helps markers to effectively and accurately evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a piece of work and to apply the most appropriate 'best fit' mark from the mark scheme. If this process does not take place, it is difficult for markers to make a balanced judgement. In several centres there was evidence across all three assignments that markers had awarded marks from the higher levels of the assessment criteria to work containing frequent, and often serious, errors that had not been annotated

by the marker. This inevitably led to a downward adjustment of marks by the moderator. It is important for all who mark the coursework portfolios to fully understand the importance of indicating and taking into account all errors in the final draft of each assignment. To avoid adjustment of marks for accuracy, it is essential that centres engage in this process and clearly indicate errors in their candidates' work.

## 2 Individual Candidate Record Cards (ICRC)

- Some centres did not attach the portfolios of work to the ICRC in accordance with the instructions in the Coursework Handbook and point 4 on the electronic version of the ICRC (although this was a smaller number than in previous sessions).
- Some confusion was caused when a small number of centres included ICRCs for the whole cohort as well as the ICRCs for the sample sent; centres only need to send the ICRCs (securely attached to the coursework portfolio) for the candidates in the sample submitted for moderation.
- On some folders there were errors in the transcription of internally moderated mark changes, or it was unclear which mark was the final one. Where internal moderation has taken place, any mark changes should be transferred from the assignment to the ICRC to ensure that the moderator has a clear understanding of all mark changes.

## 3 Coursework portfolios

- A small number of centres did not collate the individual assignments into complete coursework portfolios but instead placed loose pages of work into the grey plastic envelopes and despatched them to Cambridge; this caused moderators some difficulties when assembling the coursework folders and delayed the moderation process. Centres should secure each individual coursework folder using tags or staples with the ICRC securely fastened as a cover sheet.
- Moderators reported that some centres used plastic or cardboard wallets to present candidates' work as an alternative to securely attaching the individual assignments to the ICRC; this caused extra work for moderators and increased the risk of work being mislaid. Centres are requested not to place coursework folders into plastic or cardboard wallets and are reminded of this on the coursework checklist.
- Some centres included more than one rough draft; this is unnecessary and can lead to confusion. Please ensure that the rough draft included is clearly labelled as a draft.
- Occasionally rough drafts contained annotations and specific feedback; centres are reminded that when markers offer feedback on rough drafts, it should be general advice. No errors should be indicated, and the marker should not offer corrections or improvements. Overmarking of rough drafts can be raised as malpractice by moderators.
- Some centres included documentation not required for the moderation process; the only paperwork that should be included in the sample is clearly indicated in the Coursework Handbook. There is also a checklist for all submissions which centres should complete and include with their coursework sample.

### Comments on specific assignments

#### Assignment 1

Candidates were successful when:

- they responded to interesting and appropriate texts which contained engaging content
- they demonstrated analysis and evaluation of the individual ideas and opinions identified within a text
- the form, purpose and intended audience of their writing was clear to the reader
- they wrote in a fluent, accurate and appropriate style.

Moderators commented that many candidates responded to texts which were of an appropriate length and challenge and which appealed to the interests of the candidates. Successful texts included articles exploring issues relevant to young people, for example, social media, the pros and cons of having tattoos, national issues in the candidates' own countries, and environmental issues. Less successful texts were those which were old and outdated, long informative texts on a given topic, or were of limited personal interest to the candidates. Texts selected for **Assignment 1** should be an appropriate length, explore ideas and offer opinions, and use rhetorical or literary devices designed to provoke or sustain the reader's interest to ensure that the text offers scope for candidates to fully engage and respond to it in a sustained piece of writing. Centres are encouraged to use a good range of relevant and up-to-date texts for **Assignment 1**. Other less successful texts were ones where the candidate fully agreed with and endorsed the writer's views and

opinions because they offered few opportunities for evaluating ideas and opinions, as required by the mark scheme. It is also crucial to select texts for their quality of written communication: moderators reported seeing a number of poorly written texts taken from a variety of websites. Many of these were too long and tended to be informative, offering very little scope for rigorous evaluation or analysis. Moderators also reported seeing texts which contained potentially offensive material despite this being mentioned in previous reports. This may indicate that candidates were allowed to make their own text choices, but centres are reminded that it is their responsibility to ensure that all texts used for **Assignment 1** are fit for purpose, and this includes avoiding offensive or unsuitable material. Disagreeing with completely unreasonable or offensive viewpoints also provides fewer opportunities for rigorous evaluation and can be far less challenging for able candidates. Responses which attack the writer should be avoided.

Some centres set one text for a class or sometimes whole cohort. When this approach was adopted by a centre there was usually a tendency for candidates to produce responses which were very similar in content and structure due to heavy scaffolding. This made it difficult for candidates to create the original and sophisticated responses expected of the higher-level assessment criteria and was sometimes a reason for adjustments of marks. Centres are advised that teaching a text to a whole class and offering a scaffolded plan for the response may be a useful teaching strategy for initially developing the necessary skills and knowledge for **Assignment 1**, but this approach should not be used for the final coursework submission.

If centres are unsure about how to approach and set tasks for **Assignment 1**, they can refer to the Course Syllabus and the Coursework Handbook. Both documents provide advice and guidance about task setting and text selection and can be found on the School Support Hub via the main Cambridge website.

## Reading

Although some centres were accurate with their marking of reading, as in the previous moderation sessions, there was a significant trend for many centres to award marks from the highest-level assessment criteria to work which more appropriately met the lower-level assessment criteria. Candidates who successfully met the higher-level assessment criteria were those who demonstrated a consistently evaluative approach to most of the ideas and opinions in a text, and provided a developed, sophisticated response which made direct reference or included quotes from the text. Candidates who engaged in a general discussion about the topic or subject of a text, or those who did not thoroughly evaluate a text, tended to produce work which more appropriately met the Level 4 assessment criteria in Table B (reading). The most common reasons for adjustments to a centre's marks for reading were when moderators identified a trend of candidates engaging in a general discussion about the topic of a text/s, or when the number of points covered were 'appropriate' rather than 'thorough'.

## Writing

Many candidates responded to texts in an appropriate form and style. Letters were the most popular choice of form, and many candidates demonstrated some understanding of audience and purpose. When candidates were less successful with writing, it was often because the form, intended audience and purpose of the writing was not clear. This made it difficult for the candidates to meet the highest-level assessment criteria and was a reason for adjustments to writing marks for **Assignment 1**. Successful responses to **Assignment 1** tasks were those in which the writing was highly effective, almost always accurate, and consistent throughout in the application of form and style. Work which showed insecurity with form and style, such as the omission of an appropriate ending to a letter, a limited or inconsistent use of rhetorical devices for speeches, or lack of clarity of the intended audience, tended to meet the assessment criteria for Level 5 or below, Table A (writing) or below. The moderators noted that there was a general tendency for many centres to award marks from the highest-level assessment criteria to work which more appropriately met the lower-level assessment criteria.

Another common reason for the adjustment of marks for writing was because of the accuracy of the candidates' writing. When errors impaired meaning, such as the incorrect construction of sentences or use of grammar, typing errors, or the incorrect selection of words from spellcheck, the overall quality and efficacy of the discussion was affected. Errors such as these are classed as serious and make it difficult for candidates to meet the higher-level assessment criteria; this type of writing is more characteristic of writing achieving marks from the middle to the lower levels of the assessment criteria. Moderators also noted a tendency for centres to over-reward vocabulary that had some merit in its selection but was not always used precisely or effectively in the response.

## Advice to candidates for Assignment 1

- thoroughly explore, challenge, and discuss the ideas in the text
- avoid making general comments about the topic or subject of the text, instead, ensure that comments are specifically related to the ideas, opinions or attitudes identified in the text
- avoid criticising or attacking the writer: focus on what the text says
- look for, and use inferences made implicitly in the text
- look for contradictions or misleading assumptions in the text and comment on them
- develop points to create a thorough, detailed, and clear line of argument or discussion
- make sure that the audience and purpose is clear and adapt the written style accordingly
- proof-read assignments to ensure punctuation, vocabulary choices and grammar are correct.

### Assignment 2 (description)

The majority of tasks set for **Assignment 2** were appropriate and encouraged candidates to write in a descriptive style. Many students wrote engaging and vivid descriptions from experience or their imaginations, which were a pleasure to read. Moderators also noticed that there were relatively fewer descriptions which slipped into narrative than in previous sessions, but this is still a regularly observed flaw in descriptive writing assignments, sometimes due to the nature of the tasks set. Moderators reported seeing some tasks which invited candidates to describe an experience or holiday which tended to lead to tasks more suited to narrative writing. Centres are reminded to set descriptive tasks and remind candidates to avoid using narrative writing techniques in their responses.

The most engaging and successful descriptions were those where the candidates had carefully selected vocabulary to create a realistic and credible sense of atmosphere, place or person, and which were well sequenced and carefully managed for deliberate effect. Successful responses included descriptions of towns or cities in which candidates lived, important rituals or festivals, or significant settings or places. Less successful tasks were those which asked candidates to describe events or scenarios of which they had no personal experience, or settings and situations in which the candidate clearly had no interest or engagement. Many of these responses relied on unconvincing descriptive writing which did not engage the reader. This type of writing is characteristic of work achieving marks from the middle to lower levels of the assessment criteria, although it was noticed that many centres awarded marks from the higher-level assessment criteria. This was quite often a reason for adjustment of marks from Table C (content and structure).

Whilst many candidates showed a secure and confident understanding of language, there was still a general tendency by a number of centres to award marks from the higher-level assessment criteria to work which contained ineffective overuse of literary techniques. Some moderators commented that this seemed to be actively encouraged by some centres. To achieve marks from the higher-level assessment criteria, candidates need to demonstrate a confident and secure understanding and use of language for specific effect. This is difficult for candidates to achieve if they over-use adjectives, include inappropriate images or idioms and/or use obscure or archaic language. The overworking of language and / or use of unconvincing imagery was a common reason for moderators adjusting marks downwards.

Another common reason for adjustments to marks was when moderators identified a trend of awarding marks from the higher-level assessment criteria to writing that contained a limited range of sentence structures, incorrectly constructed sentences, or contained frequent errors with punctuation and grammar. Writing that achieves marks from Levels 5 and 6 of Table D (style and accuracy) is expected to be consistently accurate, consistent with the chosen register, and demonstrate an ability to use a range of sentences for specific effect. The moderators saw some writing which displayed these characteristics, but a significant number of the assignments receiving marks from centres from Levels 5 and 6 in Table D more frequently displayed the characteristics of writing expected from Level 4 or below. Many candidates ‘told’ the reader about the scene being described, rather than engaging the reader with a careful and precise use of vocabulary and images. The moderators also noticed a general trend for candidates to use repeated sentence structures and create almost list-like descriptions.

In addition, the work of a significantly large number of candidates contained frequent and serious errors which impaired the meaning and overall effect of the candidates’ work. The most frequent errors were missing prepositions and articles, tense inconsistencies, typing errors, commas used instead of full stops and grammar errors. Quite often, the meaning of sentences was blurred, or meaning was lost altogether. Errors which affect the meaning and clarity of writing cannot be considered as ‘minor’. As mentioned earlier in this report, the absence of the indication of all errors made it difficult for the moderators to determine whether errors had been considered when marks had been awarded; moderators noted that on some weaker assignments no errors had been annotated and the summative comment declared a high level of accuracy. Accurate and effective application of the assessment criteria is achieved through the careful weighing up of



the strengths and weaknesses of a piece of writing and the application of a mark which ‘best fits’ the assessment criteria. To achieve this, it is essential that errors are identified and indicated by the markers. Engaging in this process allows markers to effectively balance the strengths and weaknesses of a piece of writing and apply marks that are most appropriate to their candidates’ work.

Information and guidance on how to apply the mark schemes are given in the Coursework Handbook. Examples of good tasks and exemplification of the standard of work expected at the different levels of the mark scheme are also provided in the Coursework Handbook.

### Advice to candidates for Assignment 2:

- use a range of vocabulary suited to the context and content of the description
- create images appropriate for the context and content of the description
- create an engaging imagined scenario using language designed to have an impact on the reader
- avoid slipping into a narrative style
- proof-read responses to identify and correct common errors such as missing articles and prepositions, switches in tenses and typing errors
- avoid repetitive sentence structures; instead use a range of sentences to create specific effects.

### Assignment 3 (narrative)

Much of the task setting for **Assignment 3** was generally appropriate and moderators saw some engaging and effective narratives which were well controlled and convincing. Moderators reported seeing some tasks which did not invite narrative responses as they were too informative. Successful narratives were those in which candidates created stories characterised by well-defined plots and strongly developed features of narrative writing such as description, strong characterisation, and a clear sense of progression. The narration of personal experiences and events, or responses where candidates were able to create convincing details and events within their chosen genre, tended to be more successful. Candidates were generally less successful when their understanding of audience and genre was insecure, and the resulting narratives lacked credibility and conviction. Moderators commented that this sort of writing was often seen when candidates were writing in the genre of detective or murder mystery stories. Stories such as these, although containing a definite beginning, middle and ending, were often unrealistic and incredible, or lacked development of character or plot. Some responses failed to conclude properly, ending with an unconvincing or unsatisfactory cliff hanger. This sort of writing is classed as ‘relevant’ or ‘straightforward’ and should expect to be awarded marks from Level 4 or below from Table C (content and structure). Moderators noticed that there was a trend with a significant majority of the work sampled for centres to award marks from Levels 5 and 6 to writing which more appropriately fitted the Level 4, or below, assessment criteria. This was quite frequently a reason for marks being adjusted.

When moderators saw very accurate work containing precise well-chosen vocabulary, and which maintained a consistent register throughout, they could agree when centres awarded marks from Levels 5 and 6 in Table D (style and accuracy). As with **Assignments 1** and **2**, moderators noticed a significant trend for centres to award marks from the highest levels of the mark scheme to work which contained frequent and persistent errors and which more accurately met the assessment criteria from Level 4 or below in Table D. This was a common reason for adjustment of marks. The comments made for **Assignment 2** with regards to accuracy and the annotation of errors are also relevant to **Assignment 3** and should be noted by all who mark coursework.

### Advice to candidates for Assignment 3

- create stories that are realistic, credible, and convincing
- remember that characters’ thoughts and feelings help to engage the reader
- avoid clichéd scenarios and consider an individual and original selection of content
- carefully proof-read and check assignments for errors such as punctuation, use of prepositions and articles, tenses, and construction of sentences.

# FIRST LANGUAGE ENGLISH (9–1)

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Paper 0990/04  
Speaking and Listening Test 04

## Key messages

Centre administration was generally of a high standard with Submit for Assessment (SfA) working well and being used efficiently by centres.

It has always been a requirement that centres provide summary forms (OESF) for all the candidates entered for a particular series and that these forms contain a breakdown of the marks for **Part 1** and **Part 2** of the test together with the total scores for each candidate. Sending only the summary form for the candidates whose recordings have been uploaded to SfA as the sample is not acceptable.

Each candidate's test requires a full formal introduction to be made prior to the beginning of **Part 1**. This introduction should include the centre name and number, the candidate's full name and candidate number, the date on which the test is being recorded and the name of the examiner. This is important information for the moderator. The overwhelming majority of centres were compliant with this requirement and are to be congratulated on their diligence.

There were relatively few issues reported with the general rank order of candidates within centres though the level of accuracy of the assessment was not always appropriate. Where recommendations of scaling were made it was usually because centres had not differentiated appropriately between different levels of attainment, particularly in **Part 2** and specifically between Level 4 and Level 5, or where tests did not follow the stipulated timings yet were still awarded very high marks.

Where lenient assessment had taken place at the top end of the mark scheme for responses to **Part 2**, it was often because the candidates were given credit for responses that were not 'consistently' developed or where the examiner was in control of the conversation and the candidate was too passive. It is for this reason that a **Part 2 Conversation** based heavily on a question and answer model is discouraged.

Changes in the direction of the conversation in **Part 2** do not necessitate the examiner to introduce material that is not related to the topic chosen for the **Part 1** talk. It is rather a broadening out of the original ideas introduced by the candidate in **Part 1** and is included to test the candidate's understanding of a wider perspective pertaining to the chosen topic and to test the candidate's ability to further expand a conversation effectively.

Correct timing in the test is vital to successful performance. Generally, the timing of the tests across most centres was good with few instances of short **Part 1** talks or shortened **Part 2** conversations. As always, the candidates who observed the 3–4 minutes allowed for **Part 1**, through careful preparation and practice, were more successful. The timing of **Part 2** was generally accurate but it should be remembered that examiners must ensure a minimum of 7 minutes is allowed each candidate to enable a full **Part 2** to take place. Some candidates may well struggle to converse for a minimum of 7 minutes but in such cases the marks awarded should reflect the limited quality of the performance.

There was a tendency with some examiners to vocalise their agreement or interest during **Part 1**. Often this was well-intentioned but served to interrupt and cause the candidate to falter. Examiners should have the confidence to allow a candidate's rhetorical questions to remain unanswered and resist the urge to demonstrate audible agreements or surprise. The role of the examiner in **Part 1** remains that of a passive observer.

### Administration - General comments

For most centres, administration of the test was diligent, accurate and easy to follow. Summary forms were completed to a high degree of accuracy and samples uploaded to SfA were of a very good sound quality. From a moderating perspective, the introduction of SfA has been a very positive step forward and this seems to be reflected in the way centres have adapted to the system very professionally. It is hoped centres share moderators' enthusiasm for SfA as it does seem to make the whole process much more efficient.

Where there were issues the following guidelines may help to clarify administrative requirements:

- Every test should begin with a full introduction to include the date on which the candidate is being examined. Think in the same terms as for a written examination where each candidate would be expected to complete their own information at the beginning of the answer booklet. For Component 04 it is the examiner who should complete the introduction but the same principle of identifying key information on an individual basis is still relevant. Thankfully, there were few instances of centres using generic introductions to their cohorts as these remain unacceptable.
- Summary Forms (the OESF), including breakdowns of the marks for both parts of the test and the totals for the whole cohort entered, should be uploaded together with the sample recordings to SfA. There were some instances of only MS1 mark sheets being uploaded which are not helpful in the moderating process as they do not contain a breakdown of the marks for each part of the test.
- There were some instances where the total marks on the summary forms did not match the total marks for candidates whose recordings had been uploaded to SfA. It is important that the correct marks are uploaded and that the marks on SfA do match those on the summary forms.
- On a few occasions the recording uploaded under a specific candidate's name did not match that candidate but was a recording of an entirely different candidate within the cohort. This clearly leads to a disruption of the moderating process and subsequent delays whilst the correct recordings are traced and uploaded. It is important that centres check that the recordings are labelled correctly so this disruption does not occur.
- It is the centre's responsibility to check the quality of the recordings being made, preferably as an ongoing process during each recording session, to ensure that the recordings are clearly audible and without interference. On a few occasions the examiner was clearly audible but the candidates were not, presumably because of the examiner's proximity to the microphone but not the candidates. Any problems with the quality of recordings should be reported to Cambridge immediately so that candidates are not adversely affected by such issues.

### Conduct of the test - General comments

Overall, the standard of examining was very good with candidates being given plenty of opportunities to express their ideas and demonstrate their range of oratory skills productively.

Where there were concerns, the following advice is offered:

- It is strongly advised that each test should begin with the examiner's formal introduction and be followed immediately by the candidate performing **Part 1**, the Individual Talk. If an examiner feels that a candidate is very nervous and needs a moment of calming prior to the formal test beginning, it is recommended this is done before the recording is started. Examiners formally starting the test then engaging in 'off topic' conversation with candidates before asking them to begin their Part 1 task is strongly discouraged. Any pleasantries exchanged should be completed before the recording is started and the formal introduction is made.
- Given that both Speaking and Listening are assessed in **Part 2**, it is important that the conversations last long enough for candidates to demonstrate their strengths in both mediums. It is the examiner's responsibility to ensure this minimum expectation of 7 minutes is met so that candidates are given the fullest opportunity to demonstrate the range of skills they possess.
- If a candidate has exceeded the maximum 4 minutes for **Part 1** the examiner should not compensate by shortening the time allowed for **Part 2**. Candidates must be allowed the required 7–8 minutes to complete a full response to **Part 2**, irrespective of the length of the talk in **Part 1**.
- It is also important that the conversations offer sufficient challenge to allow candidates to demonstrate the range of skills they possess. Focused questioning and prompts are needed to move the conversation forward, together with an adaptability on the part of the examiner to absorb the candidate's previous comments and to extend the conversation as a result. A **Part 2** that is merely a question and answer session is not a natural conversation and as a consequence is limited in terms of the marks that should be awarded.

- Examiners who rely on a pre-determined set of questions disadvantage their candidates, in particular with regard to the mark for Speaking in **Part 2**. A question from the examiner should lead to an answer from the candidate which then may lead to a comment or prompt from the examiner that is connected to the same content matter. This will in turn lead to another connected response from the candidate; and so the conversation develops naturally.
- Examiners who dominate conversations or who frequently interrupt candidates during the conversation do so to the disadvantage of those candidates. Good examiners prompt candidates then allow them the opportunity to respond in full and to develop their ideas before moving the conversation forwards again.

### **Comments on specific sections of the test**

#### **Part 1 – Individual Talk**

The following comments by moderators reflect performance in **Part 1** in this series:

*Topics were usually personal and varied, with more able candidates choosing more challenging topics which allowed them to access marks in the higher bands. Where centres had overmarked at the top end, it was usually because presentations were mainly narrative in nature and showed insufficient thought-provoking material.*

*Higher level candidates used rhetorical questions, metaphors and other effective language techniques. There were some exceptionally interesting talks. Choosing a challenging, interesting topic and then researching and planning your talk makes for a successful Part 1 and gives plenty of scope for the conversation to follow.*

*Learning a presentation word for word and then trying to deliver it exactly as remembered does not always help candidates to achieve better marks in Part 1. Once the emphasis shifts from the performance to solely the content the more likely it is for the candidate to forget to use a range of language devices naturally and effectively.*

Apart from a small number of more creative talks involving candidates performing pieces of poetry or prose they had themselves written, all the responses to **Part 1** were in the form of a presentation. This format remains a safe and acceptable one, particularly if an attempt to analyse and reflect on personal experiences is included. For many candidates this choice remains a safe and productive way to achieve a good mark in **Part 1**, especially when well-timed and clearly structured. Less successful responses to **Part 1** tended to meander somewhat because a strong structure had not been created and time constraints had not been factored in. Largely narrative responses that follow a linear path, such as talking through the events of a holiday or simply restating facts about a topic choice, tend to be unimaginative and rarely achieve higher than Level 3.

Several centres allowed their candidates to use supportive material such as short PowerPoint presentations, photographs, graphs or charts. A limited use of such resources is permissible within the rubric but it was noted by moderators that sometimes the effect of using visual prompts was to impede the candidates' oral presentation rather than to enhance performance. Examiners are not allowed to respond to candidates during **Part 1** and the temptation to do so when prompted with, for instance, a holiday photograph, can lead to infringements of the rubric or awkward silences. Neither benefit the candidates in **Part 1**. It should be noted also that some centres need to explain clearly to their candidates that the examiner's role in **Part 1** is to be a passive listener. Directly asking a question to the examiner in **Part 1** and expecting an answer is not a successful strategy to employ and is considered poor conduct of the test by the centre. On the contrary, employing rhetorical questions is considered to be an effective use of a language device when the use is judicious.

Very strong performances in **Part 1** successfully combined excellent knowledge and development of a topic, a tightly defined structure timed accordingly and a confident delivery style. It should be noted that the bullet point descriptor 'lively' in Level 5 does not have to mean that a candidate delivers an animated performance. A candidate who delivers a talk in a confident and assured tone without being overtly 'lively' can perform equally well for the second descriptor in Level 5. Subtle changes of tone can be very effective in fully engaging an audience.

As always, it should be remembered that half the marks for the test are accrued in **Part 2** so candidates have to be prepared to discuss in some depth the topics they have chosen. Any lack of knowledge is quickly exposed as the conversation develops. When choosing appropriate topics candidates should seriously consider whether they can easily discuss and develop subject content for the allotted 7–8 minute conversation. Choosing a topic that can be explored and developed within the 3–4 minute time limit remains the first step to success. A topic chosen merely to impress a moderator with its supposed maturity or complexity but with which the candidate has little empathy, knowledge or experience will almost certainly lead to a lesser mark than one chosen because the candidate has a real enthusiasm for it.

It is accurate to say that almost any topic can be successful if used appropriately but some do seem to lend themselves more successfully than others.

Some examples of **Part 1** topics from this series that worked well include:

Positive discrimination  
Significance of a name  
Dealing with autism  
Perfectionism  
My tiger experience  
Gentle parenting  
My perfect life  
Music as a universal language  
Chemicals in food  
Astrology  
Thai culture  
Bilingualism  
Life on a farm  
Vietnamese legends  
Bird watching

Some examples of **Part 1** topics from this series that were less successful include:

Whale hunting (when chosen for its topical value only)  
Social media (when lacking specific focus on direction)  
Football (when lacking a specific focus such as the problem with VAR)  
Gaming (when too generalised and unstructured)  
My favourite footballer/celebrity/pop star (when based heavily on Wikipedia style facts)  
My trip to Brazil (when linear and unimaginative)  
My future (unless very focussed, **Part 2** can be difficult to sustain for 7–8 minutes)

Often these talks were poorly focused and lacked structure thus resulting in loss of interest for the audience and timing issues. Some less successful topics were chosen because of their perceived 'serious' nature by candidates who had limited interest in the actual issues involved. The resulting lack of knowledge was exposed in the **Part 2** conversation.

### **Part 2 – Conversation**

The following comments from moderators reflect performance in **Part 2** in this series:

*Most examiners conducted the conversations effectively and encouraged candidates to extend and develop the topics through their responses.*

*Candidates who had relied heavily on cue cards or memorised talks in **Part 1** were often stronger in **Part 2** when more natural, spontaneous speaking skills could be assessed.*

*It was evident that the examiner can influence the quality of the conversation in **Part 2**. The most skilful examiners asked open questions that fed directly from responses given by the candidates. The examiner's input is only important as a stimulus for bringing out full responses from the candidate.*

*The best examiners engaged fully with the topic and corresponding conversation and increased the complexity and subtlety of the questions in order to allow candidates to appropriately demonstrate their ability to deal with 'changes in the direction of the conversation'.*

*Consistently responding fully to questions and prompts in Level 5 for Listening cannot be achieved if the examiner does not allow the candidate to complete the response before interjecting.*

Generally, the **Part 2** conversations were well conducted and examiners asked appropriate and interesting questions which enabled the candidates to extend and develop their ideas. After initial questioning to stimulate the conversation, the use of prompts, instead of a steady stream of further questioning, was often more effective in eliciting developed responses from candidates. Unlike in **Part 1**, the examiner can influence the quality of the candidate's performance in **Part 2**. It should be noted that the 'changes (alterations) in the direction of the conversation' descriptor does not mean that examiners should steer the conversation away from the central topic to something completely different. 'Changes in the direction' can mean introducing a new perspective on the topic or challenging a previously stated opinion but any ensuing conversation should still be focused on the topic presented in **Part 1**.

Some examiners struggled to inspire candidates with closed questioning and by offering too many of their own ideas during the conversations. Indeed, where a candidate was moved down a level during moderation, it was often due to a lack of detailed response, caused sometimes by uninspired questioning. The use of pre-determined questions or a perfunctory question and answer technique limits the candidate's ability to engage in a real conversation where responses are elicited by what is said immediately before.

The skill of other examiners in conducting fluent conversations within **Part 2** was commendable. There were many excellent examples of examiners prompting very developed, interesting conversations about complex topics that fully extended the candidates and allowed them to demonstrate their full range of oral abilities. Key to this success was the examiners listening to the candidates' responses and structuring follow up questions or prompts based on those responses rather than resorting to asking somewhat unrelated pre-planned questions.

In the most successful conversations the examiners were mindful of timing ensuring candidates were given the full 7–8 minutes without falling short of this requirement, or indeed exceeding it.

### **Advice to centres**

- Adhering to the correct timings for each part of the test will allow candidates the best opportunity to be successful.
- Make sure candidates know the timings of the test. Ensure that their Individual Talk is 3–4 minutes long. You can help them in the test by interceding before 5 minutes and initiating the conversation.
- Helping a candidate choose the most appropriate topic is key to them being successful in the test. At the planning stage a gentle suggestion to choose an alternative topic may be very beneficial in some cases.
- Try to dissuade candidates from simply reeling off a memorised talk in **Part 1** that may have artificial fluency but lacks any emotional attachment and suffers from robotic intonation. It is much better to prepare using a cue card so that what is said has some level of spontaneity.
- Ensure a full 7–8 minutes is allowed for the conversation in **Part 2**. The examiner can control the timing of this.
- Administering the conversation in **Part 2** can be quite challenging for examiners so it may be necessary to practise just as the candidates should. Knowing the topic in advance and preparing some relevant back-up questions may help the examiner but they should not be restrictive and the candidate should have no prior knowledge of them.
- Scaffold questions strategically to encourage higher level responses from more able candidates. This will help them to access the higher mark ranges.
- Do not interrupt too keenly; another prompt given before the previous response is finished, or when the candidate pauses for thought, can affect the candidate adversely by limiting them from developing their ideas fully.

### **Advice to candidates**

- Choose a topic you are passionate about and one you can talk about for 3–4 minutes then discuss in even more detail for 7–8 minutes.
- Practise your presentation but do not learn it word for word.
- Have bullet point notes to help prompt you in **Part 1** but not the 'full speech'. You will be tempted to read it or, at the very least, deliver it without appropriate liveliness and intonation. 'Talk through' each bullet point in a confident and enthusiastic way.

- Structure your Individual Talk carefully, making sure that it develops points and stays within the 3–4 minutes allowed. Long talks do not earn more marks! On the contrary, an overlong talk will be regarded as not being ‘well organised’ (a bullet point required for Level 5 marks).
- Respond to the prompts and questions from the examiner in **Part 2** as fully as possible by developing your ideas, giving examples and leading off into other aspects of the topic if you can.
- Watch good examples of speeches/presentations/talks to learn how good speakers make their speeches engaging and interesting. Try to copy these techniques.
- Practise simulations of **Part 2**. There are as many marks available for **Part 2** as for **Part 1** so treat each part as equally important.