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# A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7717/1B Literary Genres: Aspects of comedy  
Report on the Examination

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7717  
2017

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Version: 1.0

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## Introductory Comments

This is the first year of the new A-level examinations for LITB and it is very pleasing to report that the papers were well received and some interesting and insightful responses were seen on all four papers. Students had clearly engaged well with their studies of texts which had been read through the lenses of both traditional and cultural genres. Most students seemed to have managed their time effectively in responding to the three required questions, though for some there were issues of time management; and some students seemed to think that they needed to write for the full three or two and a half hours that were allotted to the examinations regardless of whether they had anything new to say. Students need to think about the questions and what they are saying rather than just writing.

It is appropriate to focus on the four papers together at the start of this report since they are so closely connected and to an extent are interdependent (just as the four papers are in AS). They share the same philosophy, the same mark scheme and the same structure. The marks available for each question are also the same and all the assessment objectives (AOs) are tested in all questions in the same ways. In terms of marking, all answers are marked holistically with the AOs seen as fluid and interactive. The only difference is that Paper 1 is a two and a half hour examination and Paper 2 is three hours.

The texts on this specification are grouped together through aspects of genre, so when students write about the particular aspects of tragedy and comedy or elements of crime and political and social protest writing that are set up in the questions, they are automatically connecting with the wider genre. This means they do not need to compare texts. Given the interconnectedness of the papers, their identical philosophies and methods of assessment, the strengths and weaknesses in student performance across the four papers were, understandably, very similar.

## The importance of students answering the questions set in all their details

In all AQA courses for Specification B, in all official communications and in all our support materials on the website, it is clearly stated that in order to be successful students must answer the questions set in all their details. Answering the question is our mantra and is the single most important thing that teachers need to tell their students. There are no hidden requirements that students have to try to guess. When they focus sharply, keep to the task and construct a relevant argument, they do well. They do less well when they try to shoehorn in extraneous material, unrelated context and unrelated comments about aspects of tragedy and comedy or elements of crime and political and social protest writing that are not required by the question. Although students are studying the genres of tragedy and comedy, the tasks do not require them to write everything or anything known about the genre including what Aristotle, Hegel and other theorists have said. They have to write about the specific aspects or elements of the genre that are set up in the questions or those which are evident in the passages in Section A. If students subvert questions they get into a muddle. What they need to do is construct meaningful and fresh arguments, thinking for themselves about the specific features of the genre they are writing about.

In the Section A questions of all four papers, students were asked to explore extracts and passages from texts in terms of the genre. This meant they had to read the passages and see what specific features emerged and which opened up meanings. In Section B and Section C the specific aspects and elements that should have been focused upon and debated were made clear in the questions, for example Iago's villainy in *Othello*, marriage in *The Taming of the Shrew*, the process of detection in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

### **The importance of students knowing their texts and then reading them through the lens of genre**

Students need to know that they are looking at their texts *through* the lens of genre and not *at* the lens of genre itself. The text, its story and the narrative arc must have priority before other work can begin. Although Papers 1 are closed book exams and Papers 2 open book, there is an expectation on both papers that students have secure textual knowledge. Although this might seem obvious, they need to know what happens and how the story ends. They also need to be able to write relevantly about specific parts of the text and have ideas about what can be analysed in terms of the genre. Knowing texts is not the same as knowing quotations, though knowing quotations and using them judiciously always helps. Students who had a secure understanding of the chronology and characters of their stories could make good choices. They could focus on particular events, use appropriate details and write in an informed way. Making good choices is crucial.

The student's selection of material is often a good indicator to examiners of whether the question has been understood. Having secure textual knowledge gives students confidence; it is the base from which all else springs. Some students made poor choices that led them away from the task. These poor choices were often made because of inadequate textual knowledge and this resulted in students struggling with the tasks, often writing in a general, vague and inaccurate way. Several students tried to disguise their lack of knowledge by making things up, particularly quotations, and they then wrote about their invented words as if the words belonged to the authors. Inaccurate and made up quotations and textual details are often so glaring that they detract from students' arguments. If students do not know quotations then they would be best advised to simply explain their ideas using their own words and, providing that their explanation and discussion is relevant to the question, they will be credited.

Clearly it is imperative in this specification that students also have an understanding of how genre works in their set texts, both in terms of how the texts connect with a traditional pattern and how they may disconnect as seen when writers consciously play with and subvert genre. Several students seemed to think that there are generic absolutes or templates which writers are always trying to model. Genre is a loose set of conventions which are modified or reinforced with every text produced.

### **The importance of students understanding question format and understanding that all questions invite debate**

In Section B, all four papers have the same kind of question format in that a debate is set up around key aspects of tragedy or comedy where students are invited to explore a view. This is also the case with Section C of Paper 1. The word 'significance' is used in the Shakespeare passage based question, the unseen questions and Section C of Paper 2 and is the trigger that tells students that they need to consider potential meanings.

All questions are framed around AO5 and AO4 so that students can engage with what is really interesting about literature – considering how different meanings arise, thinking and debating different interpretations of their literature texts, having views, expressing opinions, understanding that their own interpretations are valid. Those students who embraced this performed very well. Those who took ownership and argued independently and relevantly were particularly impressive. Several students cited critical opinions or wrote about critical positions, often using the Critical Anthology, and this worked for students who understood the task and who used critical voices relevantly. For some, however, it did not. Some students used critical material that was not clearly

understood and tacked it on to arguments. The message here is that unless critical ideas can be used to specifically further the student's argument, they are best left alone.

### **The passage based questions**

All four papers have one question in which students are required to work with a passage from either their Shakespeare play or an unseen text. These passages have been carefully chosen and the reason for their being printed is that students are expected to explore them in some detail.

Passages in the Shakespeare questions are provided to enable students to demonstrate their skills of responding to a section of text in a tight and detailed way and then relate their observations about aspects of tragedy or comedy to the wider play. On Paper 2, students are given unseen extracts so that they can show their understanding of the crime writing or political and social protest writing genres, applying their knowledge to extracts that are new to them. In all cases students need to read – or reread - the extracts carefully ensuring that they see its narrative, dramatic and tragic or comedic trajectory. They need to see that it is telling a part of a story, which has its own mini narrative, while belonging at the same time to a much bigger whole, a known story on Paper 1 and an unknown story on Paper 2. Students need to engage with the narrative that is taking place. As they construct their arguments, they have to work with specific details that are in the passages. This is made clear in the questions.

In the Shakespeare passage based question, it is important that students establish an overview of the extract and that they see its shape and the dramatic and narrative development within it. Fundamentally they need to see it as drama – part of a story that is written to be performed on stage. They need to think about how the passage begins and ends, whether it contains a crisis or critical moment and how the extract contributes to the overall dramatic tragedy or dramatic comedy. Centres could profitably spend time helping students to develop the skills to construct overviews in brief and telling ways that will give them an anchor for their responses to the bullets. Clearly students need to know the play well so that they can see the structural relationship between the extract and the parts of the dramatic narrative that come before and after it. This is not to recommend a formulaic approach overall as students should engage naturally with the passages and be autonomous readers and writers. As long as the passage is the central focus of the writing there is no directive as to how much time and attention is given to other parts of the play though, of course, other parts of the play do need to be discussed.

When writing about the tragic or comedic aspects set up in the question, students have to be mindful of the playwright's dramatic construction. They have to think about the interplay between the actions that are taking place as audiences watch and, in its broadest sense, the speech that is being heard. This means the dialogue, the asides and soliloquies, the kinds of exchanges between characters; it does not mean a discussion of single words which is rarely productive and invariably take students away from tragic and comedic drama. All comments about dramatic method should be integrated seamlessly into the students' arguments.

In the unseen passages of Paper 2A and 2B, again students need to have a secure sense of what is actually happening in the extract and although they do not know what happens in the rest of the text, they do know the genre and they are given some information in the question which they can work with as they think about what is being revealed.

### **Authorial and dramatic methods**

In all questions students have to incorporate comments on authorial methods. Again much has been said about AO2 in training sessions and in LITB resources. The strongest responses were seen by students who integrated relevant comments about method into their arguments and connected them to the aspects of genre set up in the question. The weakest responses were by students who ignored the part of the question about authorial method or who bolted on material – usually detached analysis of single words. A particular problem for some students is that they write about features that they do not understand. This was particularly true of iambic pentameter, blank verse and prose in questions where the text was a Shakespeare play. It was surprising how many students did not know what the terms mean and ended up writing inaccurately. Across all papers, the best responses included focused comments on structure, voices and settings and these were integrated into the students' arguments. Fortunately fewer students this year were writing about punctuation, but there were still some who tried to find meanings in commas, exclamation marks and full stops.

### **The significance and influence of contexts**

The contexts that students need to write about are those which emerge from the texts and those which are set up in the questions. The students who understood this were able to respond to the questions crisply and in an unhampered way. Some students, unfortunately, thought they had to force in all sorts of information, ideas or assertions about historical and biographical contexts, much of which was sweeping and not well understood. In the weakest answers there were all sorts of claims and often these took up space that would have been better given to discussion of the text in relation to the argument.

### **'Shocking'!**

Examiners across all papers reported the rather strange and prolific use by students of the word 'shocking' (or 'shocked') in relation to how students imagined audiences and readers of different times would have reacted to narrative events or language used by writers. 'Appalled' and 'horrified' were other popular words attributed gratuitously to audiences of former years. There are a number of issues to raise here. Firstly it is unwise for students to claim that audiences of any past time would have felt anything unless there is specific evidence to support the claim. Secondly, students need to think more about what they are actually saying. Would an audience (all the people in the theatre – or even any person) viewing *Othello*, for example, on any particular day – or all days – really have been 'shocked' when they heard the word 'devil' or when they heard Katherina or Gonerill speak out against men? Are students aware that literature (and particularly drama) across time has plenty of references to the diabolical, to religion, to sex and to feisty and outspoken women? Are they aware that audiences were and are different human beings with different ideas, thoughts and human appetites? Unfortunately the claim that audiences would have been 'shocked' was not just made about drama and the Elizabethans and Jacobean. There were also assertions about Victorian readers and audiences, 20<sup>th</sup> century readers and those 'enlightened' readers of today. The answer to this is simple. Students should avoid any sort of claim that cannot be evidenced and look more closely at the question to see what is being asked. At no point is there a requirement to guess what others thought or might have thought or felt. The personal pronoun in the tasks is 'you': 'To what extent do **you** agree with this view?'

## **Writing skills**

The ability of students to construct logical and coherent arguments is of course essential in a specification which places so much emphasis on debate. Many students were able to shape their ideas and write about them impressively. Some students expressed themselves in sophisticated and accurate ways and they were duly rewarded. To write impressively does not mean to flood writing with critical, tragic and comedic terminology, often using that terminology for its own sake and not really understanding it anyway. Some students unfortunately wrote in a style that was awkward and cluttered, sometimes making little sense. Such writing was often marred by technical errors. It is important that students write in a clear, structured and accurate way and time needs to be spent working on writing skills since AO1 is tested in every question. It is also worth emphasising the importance of focusing on the task from the start and making a telling comment in the first sentence. Far too many students write introductions and conclusions which are vague, general or empty and which do not gain them marks.

## **Freeing students up and giving them ownership of their writing**

Too often, some students were burdened with material they felt they had to include. The needless incorporation of contextual material was one such burden, but there was also the unnecessary insertion of all kinds of literary, tragic and comedic terminology which may not have been understood. This terminology often seemed to be included simply because students had learned the words and felt that they would gain marks if as many as possible appeared in their writing. It is very rare that words like anagnorisis, stichomythia, and zeugma, for example, have a place in answers, especially when their inclusion seems to be the main point of the sentence. Often English, rather than Greek or Latinate, expressions would make much more sense and be understood more by those who are using them.

Similarly some students seemed desperate to make comparisons with other texts, often at the expense of the question. Comparison is not required in this specification as the AO4 strand is met when students are connecting with the wider genre through focusing on the key tragic, comedic, crime and political and social protest writing aspects of the question. Too many students felt that they had to bolt on references to other texts and very rarely did the references add anything to the argument. A comparison only works when it highlights something specific about the text being discussed and the question itself, and although some students could use their wider knowledge of literature to make telling points, it is not a requirement to do so. For most students references to other texts got in the way.

It is important that students are told that they should only write about things they understand. Writing about what is not understood leads to very muddled writing.

## **The importance of clear and independent thinking**

While content and skills clearly have to be taught, students need to be given the confidence to think and respond independently. Questions need to be looked at with fresh eyes and students need to know how to do this. They need to approach the paper and questions without any preconceptions, always taking the time to read carefully.

Those students who could think independently and creatively about questions were rewarded.

## Section A

Many examiners reported reading excellent responses to the extract-based tasks. Most students clearly knew their texts and were able to begin their writing with a brief overview of the action in the extract, and contextualise the extract within the wider story of the play. *Twelfth Night* attracted more responses than *The Taming of the Shrew*, but for both texts, the extract focused on the setting up of comedic problems which came to fruition later in the play. Both extracts featured the introduction of key characters in the drama. Students therefore saw the structural significance of these parts of the comedy and wrote well about the relevance of the extract to later parts of the story.

Section A tasks invite students to write about the plays as comedies. Unfortunately, a handful of able students wrote fluent answers which had little reference to comedy. Instead, these answers got lost in accounts of social and historical matters, or accounts of performance history and plot. The starting and ending point for this component is comedy, but unlike Section B tasks (which name specific comedic aspects in the question), Section A tasks allow the student to decide which are the best comedic aspects to focus upon. It is not expected that students will deal with every comedic issue in the extract – the best answers focused on the most useful comedic elements to write about. The ability to choose wisely is an essential skill which the best students possessed.

The extract from *The Taming of the Shrew* invited thoughtful comments about the initiation of the comedic problem around marriage. The establishment of character, and the comic rivalry of Katherina and Bianca were well handled. Issues around stock comedic characters and Lucentio's attraction to Bianca proved useful springboards for students to show how these issues were developed later in the text. The more obviously comic dialogue and role of Gremio was another sensible area explored in responses. Ideas around role-playing and disguise was just one productive link to events later in the drama.

Effective responses to the *Twelfth Night* extract saw the comedic significance of the introduction of Feste and his comic spat with Malvolio, which then led to useful comment about how that particular relationship developed later in the text. The role of Feste as a licensed fool (a concept slightly misunderstood by some students) and his comic interaction with Olivia was another sensible area explored, with insightful comments on repartee, wit and status being made. Likewise, the structural significance of the arrival of the disguised Viola and the subsequent transformation in Olivia's character were effectively handled.

For both plays, responses worked best when the larger comedic aspects were dealt with, such as the initiation of the comedic problem, disguise, the dramatic role of opposing characters (and the comedy arising from that), or the presence of darker comedic edges in the extracts and elsewhere in the text. Less successful answers tended to pick out and label smaller aspects such as double meanings and individual words, without saying much about their significance. It often proved difficult to make and develop meaningful points about small bits of text. Likewise, students did well when they avoided writing about small linguistic features and remembered that dramatic method is central: points about asides, entrances, roles, physical action, dialogue and dramatic irony were embedded into the most successful responses. It's not expected that students should identify a

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dramatic method and spend a paragraph writing about it: writing about the comedic aspects is the heart of the task – points about method should be in support of this.

Choosing relevant aspects to write about and developing thoughtful points is the way forward and many students were able to identify and make cogent observations about comedic aspects such as rivalry, inversion, role reversal, satire, folly and make perceptive points about them. Some terms, such as black comedy, *schadenfreude* and incongruity, were misapplied or used loosely. Students sometimes used comedic theories or named critics, but this wasn't essential. Theory should be used carefully: references to Frye, Bakhtin or Aristophanes – or other Shakespeare comedies which students probably hadn't read - were used with variable success. No extra marks are made available for name-dropping critics, terms or other plays. Some responses used critical material well and judiciously. Some students amassed full marks without mentioning any existing theory. Either approach can result in success.

When making links to the rest of the play, it is best for those links to be comedic ones rather than simply about character. For instance, ideas around folly in the *Twelfth Night* extract led to much more meaningful points than just writing generally about what Feste says and does elsewhere in the play. Similarly, it was more beneficial to write about the comedic transformation (or otherwise) of Katherina and Bianca rather than use the extract as a starting point for a general essay on women. Where cultural issues surfaced in the extract (such as power or gender) they could lead to sensible points, but there was also the danger that pre-learned material about Puritanism or Renaissance attitudes to marriage were wheeled out at the expense of comedy.

The task invites students to explore the significance of comedic aspects in the extract and the wider play. The best answers did this, with many superb responses being produced on both texts. It is clear that centres and students have put much effective preparation into this part of the exam.

## Section B

For many students, Section B responses were the strongest part of their paper. These types of task require an essay-based response to a debate about comedic aspects of the play. Essay construction skills are important here, and it is expected that students should write clearly and be able to develop points. Examiners understand that students are working under pressure and therefore writing isn't expected to be flawless, but for some students, phrasing and essay construction skills weren't as good as the quality of their ideas. Happily, however, many students appeared to have worked hard on their writing skills during their course and were able to produce controlled, engaging answers.

The need to deal with the key terms in the task is paramount: when Section B answers worked well, it was because students thought carefully about what the task asked them to respond to, and paid attention to all of the trigger words in the task. For instance, Question 3 contained several elements to focus on. The initial part of the question asked:

*'Audiences have to like Petruchio; he is a witty and resourceful comedic hero.'*  
*To what extent do you agree with this view?*

The focus here is character in relation to genre elements. This is a question about Petruchio and so the response had to focus on his actions and role. A handful of students tried to argue that it was Katherina who was the comedic hero, but this was a subversion of the task and ignored the question focus. The task posits a reading of Petruchio: students who engaged with key words such as ‘witty’, ‘resourceful’ and ‘hero’ gave themselves a good chance of doing well. The view that audiences ‘have to like’ the character was also worth exploring.

As has been mentioned before, students can produce responses which form a two-sided debate or they can argue a single point of view: neither approach is privileged - it is the quality of argument and thinking which determined a student’s mark. Some highly successful answers to Question 3 began by showing Petruchio’s ready wit in his dialogue with Katherina, before moving on to offering a counter view, which often focused on the cruel and domineering aspects of his taming strategy. However, other successful responses argued wholeheartedly in favour or against the view in the question, usually showing how the framing narrative always made us aware of the joke being played - or that modern audiences were acutely aware how issues of domestic abuse were reflected in Petruchio’s actions.

Tackling all aspects of a task is essential: Question 4 required students to deal with a ‘trio’ of ‘happy’ marriages, rather than only Petruchio and Katherina’s union. Clearly, the meat of most students’ responses focused on this couple, but it was expected that the other two pairings would feature in a response. The task also contained the phrase ‘ends with’, so most students began their answers by focusing on the events at the end of the narrative, making sensible points about the wager scene and Katherina’s final speech. While it proved fruitful to refer to earlier parts of the text, to ignore the ending seemed to be sidestepping the task.

Responses to *Twelfth Night* were equally successful when the full aspects of the question were explored. Thinking carefully about the trigger words in the task and working out the limits of possible counterviews is essential. For example, Question 5 asked:

*‘In Twelfth Night, humour primarily comes from situations involving cruelty and suffering.’  
To what extent do you agree with this view?’*

Here, students must obviously take on the view and deal with ‘cruelty’ and ‘suffering’, but the word ‘primarily’ is also key. When read carefully, the task offers potential for many potential counterviews. Some students chose to argue that while humour could be found in cruelty, it was buffoonery and wordplay which were more prominent sources of humour. Another approach was to argue that it was pity (rather than humour) which was aroused by cruelty and suffering. The question was wide enough to allow for a range of approaches and selection – many answers focused on the silliness of Orsino’s suffering or the sadness engendered by Viola’s predicament. Most students centred their answer on Malvolio’s experiences and produced some first rate arguments which demonstrated how the scene in the dark room was far from funny. Others argued successfully that the mockery of Malvolio was a constant source of humour, mentioning quite relevantly that in drama, much depends on performance. Examiners cheerfully went along with whatever approach students decided to take, as long as they took on ‘cruelty’ and ‘suffering’ in addition to any counter view – markers are instructed to reward quality of argument, rather than whether they agree with the student. The extent to which a *convincing* view is produced is important though – a student who would argue that the funniest part of *Twelfth Night* was Orsino’s pun on hart/heart would find it difficult to sustain this view.

Reading questions and their implications is clearly crucial. Question 6 linked together three comedic concepts: 'love' 'complications' and 'joy'. Here the phrase 'leads to' was important, as it suggested the typical comedic narrative where the path from falling in love to eventual happiness was beset with problems. Students did well when they remembered that any writing about complications and joy had to be connected with love – writing about any type of problem or happiness unconnected to love in the play wasn't fully dealing with the question. Thankfully, most students tackled the question in the way it was intended and saw the room for debate – that characters such as Malvolio, Sir Andrew and Antonio could be said to have feelings which went unrewarded. It was also entirely possible to argue that 'joy' wasn't applicable to any of the characters. On the whole, this question was handled well, with some impressive exploration of the superficial nature of the unions.

### Section C

Although students will have had two years to study the two texts they deal with in Section C, they will realistically only write for 20 minutes about each one. This means that the choices the students make are crucial. They need to know enough of the text to make the best selections for the question they opt to answer. There is no need to make running comparisons in the response. Virtually all students followed this advice and dealt with each text in turn. As ever, answering the task in full is the key to success.

Section C tasks are set up around broad comedic aspects or conventions. Question 7 focused on 'problems and difficult situations' being 'always resolved' (or otherwise). Clear identification of comedic problems was essential here. Sensible choices included Marlow's reticence in *She Stoops to Conquer*, the issue of identity in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and the birth of baby Michael in *Small Island*. Whichever choices students made, it was essential to closely focus on the resolution (or otherwise) of these same problems. Also in the task was the phrase 'no lasting importance', which some students overlooked. The nature of the drama texts with their tight comedic structures meant that many students argued effectively that problems were overcome, although Wilde's play indicates that deeper issues remain. In other texts, the narratives which resisted neat closure led to some interesting work. For instance, whether the central problems of the protagonist's weakness for alcohol and females in *Tam O'Shanter* is conquered is less clear cut. One student eloquently argued that the overcoming of the problem in *Emma* – her selfishness – *did* have lasting importance, allowing her comedic journey towards self-discovery to seem complete.

Question 8 also proved successful with students, inviting the students to debate whether their texts were 'only' intended to 'please'. The view in the question posited the idea that the comedy's prime purpose was entertainment rather than instruction. Many responses expertly explored the idea that comedy did have an instructional function, focusing on the moral instruction given to Swift's readership about the inescapability of judgement regarding one's moral crimes, or the implied message in *Small Island* about attitudes towards race and acceptance. When things didn't quite work, students took 'instruct' in a broad way and wrote a less specific argument about comedy being 'serious'. While this has some merit, it made arguments less germane.

## Conclusion

Throughout Paper 7717/1B, the very best students knew their texts well enough to select the most useful parts to write about, using a mixture of reference and direct quotation. In a closed book exam, it is demanding to learn and recall a range of quotations which suit different possible questions. Examiners are aware that some minor misquotation can occur, but this is never usually problematic if the underlying point is sound. Interestingly enough, some examiners reported that responses which were awash with direct quotation weren't necessarily effective - understandably, some students derive confidence from knowing lots of quotations, but they should deploy them wisely rather than trying to use all of them. Sometimes the desire to use quotation can get in the way: the most important aspect of a paragraph is the point being made, not the quotation. It would be unusual to read an excellent response which contained no direct quotation, but some full mark answers used quotations sparingly – the focus for assessment is always the quality of the argument as a whole, not the number of quotations used.

Brisk, focused answers were seen by many examiners. Students whose writing skills allow them to get to the heart of the question quickly, without regurgitating plotlines are very much admired. There is little correlation between length of response and quality - students who filled several answer booklets often ended up producing unshaped responses. In some answers, there persisted a desire to write about biographical material, which without exception added little to answers. In particular, paragraphs about Wilde's sexual orientation were often inserted, at which point, both the question and text disappeared. Students have a limited amount of time in Section C, so dealing head-on with the task is essential. Accounts of the Windrush generation or Regency England were diversionary at best.

For the majority of students this was a highly successful exam paper. Both the candidates and their centres are to be congratulated on the excellent preparation that was clearly undertaken, and the engagement with their texts which students displayed. The examining team encountered some answers which were an absolute pleasure to read.



**Use of statistics**

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.

**Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.