



Examiners' Report Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2023

Pearson Edexcel GCE
In English Literature
Non-Examination Assessment (9ET0/04)

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Publications Code 9ET0_04_2306_ER

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General Comments

Thank you to all centres for their submissions for the 2023 series of NEA/coursework. The majority of centres and candidates responded with increased confidence on this more independent component, after last year's return to normal assessment practice. Evidence suggests that many centres had taken advantage of the relative freedom of choice offered by this task, which enables candidates and teachers alike to pursue personal interests and passions in reading and writing about literature. This report will highlight areas of best practice and offer guidance for those centres who have some gaps in current knowledge and practice with this component.

This was the second year of electronic submission of NEA via the Learner Work Transfer (LWT) portal. There was improvement in the presentation of folders, as centres demonstrated greater confidence with the system. A few centres presented problems linked to scanning or sample completeness; this was time consuming for all concerned.

Moderators commented on the high standard of work typically seen at this level, with some excellent folders submitted, several of which moved beyond the descriptors required for this level of study. There was a return to more ambition and innovation in text choices from some centres, which worked successfully where there was keen oversight of literary quality and corresponding availability of quality literary criticism. This component is designed to cultivate candidates' confidence with independent wider reading and it is always heartening to see evidence of personal engagement in choice of text(s), focus of enquiry or wider contextual or literary-critical reading. There are times when moderators have been genuinely delighted at reading a thoughtful, independent response, by a candidate displaying real academic engagement with their texts.

Most centres continue to use the resources provided by Pearson, most crucially the exemplar material, when assessing work for this component. The majority are working within the rubric outlined in the specification and applying the marking grids, informed by the published guidance on question setting and text selection, to underpin their support for candidates. There are a few centres where annotation using the words of the marking grids does not align with the candidates' written work or the final marks awarded. There is occasional evidence of the use of primary texts that do not best facilitate the assessment criteria for this level. Some candidates this year have struggled with broad or potentially confusing focuses for study. In these cases, further centre engagement with published exemplar materials, free coursework standardisation training run in the Autumn of each academic year and use of the Coursework Advisory Service, will ensure their candidates are best supported and work is marked at the national standard.

Text choices and themes

This year saw a mixture of established coursework texts and titles and some newer choices and ideas. Centres offered various models for supporting this component, with free choice of text and title at one end of the spectrum, to the now rarer model of two taught texts. While centres will make their own professional judgements in line with their specific cohorts and staffing, this unit is designed to foster a level of independence, which is best met where candidates have some level of choice. Moderators were pleased to note the many centres where candidates had been enabled to follow their personal literary interests via independent text choices; this worked best where careful centre oversight was in place for candidates, in line with JCQ guidance, to guide their independent planning, research and argument and maintain a central focus on literature, via the two primary texts. Where this is secure, moderators often saw real flair and engagement in candidates' folders, not just at the highest attainment levels. Independent choice of texts presented less well where weaker candidates offered independently focused pieces on titles that directed away from the literary and studied texts where literary quality did not obviously facilitate the analysis of AO2 expected at this level. As previous years, a common text, with candidates selecting from a range of second texts, was a secure model for many centres.

1984, *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Color Purple*, *The Glass Menagerie* and *Death of a Salesman* were widely offered this year. Despite the challenge in ensuring readings are not overshadowed by general online study guides of these popular texts, many candidates demonstrated strong and original engagement, particularly when pairing these with a less commonly studied text. *The Great Gatsby* and *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* seemed most subject to overuse of such materials, which frequently hindered candidates in establishing a discerning critical argument. In general, the Carter collection was serving candidates less well this year, particularly because many were not examining appropriate depth and breadth of the collection. Centres are advised that study of a collection will take some careful planning by individual candidates to ensure they read the whole literary text and make the appropriate selection of textual material across the text in line with their essay focus to demonstrate relevance, breadth and depth. Moderators were heartened to see a reduction in the use of *The Yellow Wallpaper* this year, which, whilst published as a text in its own right, is extremely brief and offers somewhat limited scope for candidates at this level.

There were some interesting combinations this year which forged meaningful links and connections. Examples included *Paradise Lost* with *The Sorrows of Satan*; *Dr Faustus* with *American Psycho*; *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* with *The Color Purple*; *Heart of Darkness* with *Cry, the Beloved Country*, *Beloved* with *The Poisonwood Bible*, *The Kite Runner* with *All the Light We Cannot See*, and *Half of a Yellow Sun* with *The God of Small Things*. Some centres usefully drew on prescribed texts from

the specification which they were not offering for examined components, with some strong responses on *Home Fire*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Beloved* and *Mrs Dalloway* for example. It is important that all centres scrutinise the Text Coverage Checks as part of their submission; in a few cases this had to be revisited by the moderator, to ensure there was no crossover between texts submitted for component 4 and the examined components. This was sometimes because candidates had inadvertently ticked their coursework text as also being presented for Component 1 or 2, or simply failed to complete the form as required.

The most common topics this year were the oppression of women, the American dream and power more generally, often in relation to dystopias and *The Handmaid's Tale* in particular. There were some fruitful combinations addressing diversity and inclusion; moderators read some engaging pieces on literary texts that seemingly linked with candidates' own lives and personal interests. Examples included consideration of *Brick Lane*, *Midnight's Children*, *Giovanni's Room*, *Orlando* and *Girl, Woman, Other*. Other titles directed candidates towards writer's method or consideration of genre, such as narration, structure, the science fiction genre and the detective genre; these channeled candidates towards useful aspects of AO2 and 3 and supported them in anchoring their piece in literary study.

There was a rise in candidates submitting pieces on popular bestsellers this year, perhaps stimulated by recent serialisations and films. Many of these did not offer strong potential for this component, with particular limitations on AO2 and 5. Occasionally there were candidates that responded with flair, particularly when pairing with an established and demanding text, but such instances were rarely seen by moderators and tended to be at the highest level. While many university courses will offer modules on such texts, as they do with YA fiction, both categories are presenting some limitations at A level. Centres' guidance to their candidates on NEA texts should consider how far assessment objectives are facilitated and the availability of literary critical reading of good provenance to meet AO5 requirements. There was a tendency for such selections to focus on topics such as suicide, psychopathy, sexual abuse and mental illness. Many candidates choosing these texts were drawn away from objective literary analysis towards popular psychology, often with some conflation of AO3 and 5. Linked bibliographies were extremely limited, with candidates often listing online book reviews and blogs in the place of quality literary criticism. Examples of such texts included *Room*, *Flowers in the Attic*, *Gone Girl*, *Girl interrupted*, *The Virgin Suicides* and *The Girl on the Train*. Moderators were otherwise pleased to note some reduction in candidates focusing on the topic of mental health, which, as noted in the guidance in previous reports, was tending to divert some away from literary analysis.

Centres are reminded that young adult titles, and those established as GCSE texts, are not advised for this coursework component. Mostly, these texts are difficult to write about well in a way that will address all assessment objectives and have been judged to be suitable reading level for younger readers. At A Level, students have the opportunity to select texts which require a greater level of demand. Texts

written or deemed suitable for younger readers, such as *Little Women*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and *The Giver*, are advised against for this component. Rubric infringements were extremely rare this year; centres must be careful to avoid texts written by ghost writers, and texts in translation. Complete published texts must be studied.

Fewer centres selected plays for this component, and it was rare to see poetry collections, though moderators did note a couple of impressive responses on Plath's poetry and Milton's *Paradise Lost* where individuals had clearly followed their personal passions. Two centres offered Duffy's *Standing Female Nude* and *The World's Wife*, which paired appropriately with a range of novels. Where drama was selected, some candidates had dealt very well with the potential of AO2 in relation to this genre to enhance their achievement and there were some worthy submissions on texts by John Osborne, Jez Butterworth, Christopher Marlowe, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. This could be particularly rich where there was a genre comparison in the pairing. It is worth reminding candidates to pay attention to the genre of each of their texts and consider the specific writers' methods that apply, in order to exploit the potential comparisons presented. Many do write their whole folder without acknowledging that a text is written for the stage or analysing the relevant AO2 aspects, which is a missed opportunity.

Assignment Setting

Assignment setting remains crucial to the success of candidates in this component. In general moderators, reported that there was continuing confidence with this aspect in many centres; even with titles where all assessment objectives had not been explicitly flagged, candidates tended to know they should include these aspects. Many centres offered a clear structure for assignment setting, often mirroring the structure of the examination questions for the prescribed components, where 'compare', 'how the writers,' 'relevant context', 'wider critical reading' was used to flag the assessment objectives. A specific reminder of 'critical' reading seemed to help some candidates remember that AO5 is linked to the literary views of others in this component with reference to their literary text, rather than simply wider reading generally, which may instead provide evidence for AO3 but not AO5.

Nevertheless, there were definite patterns of weakness across some centres in the wording of titles. In such cases, candidates would benefit from a check on texts and title, via Pearson's Coursework Advisory Service, before they start planning and writing. Common challenges for such candidates included:

- Complex titles that presented multiple focuses that were tricky to address via a holistic argument
- Use of a quotation, prior to the assignment title, where quotation and

focus were not aligned or the quotation introduced an extra aspect

- Titles which attempted to summarise a complete argument about a text, allowing no room for any independent thesis by the student to develop across the body of the essay
- Very broad titles, (For example, 'Consider how relationships are presented...'); occasionally this worked well if a candidate then refined the focus down via their own thesis statement outlined in an introduction
- Titles that focused simply on particular characters or relationships, which tended to encourage weaker candidates to illustrate and consider characters as real, rather than analyse craft and writer's intention, thus limiting achievement
- Titles that focused on a theoretical standpoint, weighting study away from the literary texts themselves to an essay driven by a psychological, political or sociological position. Candidates sometimes then responded illustratively, using examples from the text, rather than focusing on literary argument
- Titles that did not flag writers' craft or 'how.' These tended to encourage candidates to illustrate an aspect by walking through examples, rather than analysing *how* the writer crafts and why.

Effective title choices allowed for meaningful comparisons to be made throughout, shedding light on both texts rather than being driven by an interest in one. The best examples of assignment titles tended to be those that clearly stated the focus in line with the assessment objectives and allowed the candidate to demonstrate their skill via the essay's argument, rather than an artful, embellished title.

Assignment marking and standardisation

The majority of centres marked carefully and in line with the national standard across both assessment grids. The best marking clearly demonstrated centre judgements to the moderator, with annotations throughout the folders identifying the assessment objectives and tracking their respective levels, to inform a best-fit judgement. Careful attention to slips and weaknesses at sentence, paragraph and whole-text level typically informed the most accurate centre marking. A summative comment is required on submissions, and these are most informative where centres indicate the performance on each AO, to inform the best-fit marks for the two assessment grids.

Scanning of copies of the assessment grids with ticks and shading is not required from centres and does not help provide moderators with a narrative on the candidate's performance.

Occasionally there was evidence of centres using the wording from the assessment grids to justify judgements that were not in line with the national standard. In such cases, more careful use of exam board exemplars is needed to inform understanding of what each descriptor looks like in practice.

Moderators were pleased to receive an additional note to explain where a centre was limited to a single assessor and therefore evidence of moderation was not possible. Many centres demonstrated robust internal moderation, where meaningful dialogue was recorded in different coloured ink or initialled comments, to demonstrate why any changes had been agreed. Adjustments without any explanation by a second marker were far less helpful and there were a few centres where it was unclear why mark changes had been made. A simple signature and tick did not reflect the moderation process required for this component.

Assessment objectives

The most accurate marking seen was where centres used the three divisions within the levels- based mark scheme and provided commentary on how they arrived at the 'best-fit' in terms of overall marks for the two mark-grids.

AO1–AO3

AOs were appropriately rewarded across this grid in most centres. In the best responses, centres invariably rewarded sophisticated academic expression and noted the critical evaluative argument of the most able candidates (AO1). Such folders were marked by driving personal argument supported by critical evaluation of a range of writers' craft, with neatly interwoven relevant context informing this; assessors will note the way AOs cluster to support each other in an integrated way at this standard. Written control and discrimination at word, sentence, paragraph and whole-text level mark the criteria at Level 4 and are a prerequisite for the highest level of achievement. Prolix writing, where overly complicated language is employed without control or clarity of argument is sometimes over rewarded by centres; the best candidates command precise written expression without unnecessary density or superfluous flourish.

Where AO1 was over-rewarded at the higher levels, this was often because clear points sat separately, but did not form a coherent driving argument or any sense of overall thesis. This year, moderators noted a growing pattern of weakness in paragraphing, where candidates presented 3000-word pieces in three or four paragraphs; inevitably, a lack of planning and control in this area will impact the

coherence of an overarching argument. Slips and errors left unmarked by assessors also tended to fuel leniency in centre judgements. Basic proofreading is part of AO1 and there were many examples of consistent errors with capitalisation, text titles missing italics or inverted commas, and comma splicing. Some candidates struggled to maintain an academic register, which makes a mark in Level 4 or 5 very hard to justify; this was particularly the case when discussing character, and when issues of motivation and behaviour were in focus, as some candidates fell back on contemporary generalised shorthand such as 'toxic masculinity', 'relatable' and 'psychopathic,' rather than precisely considering the writer's intention and characterisation.

Where students had identified clear examples of the writer's craft such as the narrative frame, setting, characterisation, tone and lexical and syntactical choices, AO2 was usually noted by centres. Where there was inaccurate marking, this was often due to over rewarding of a very limited range of writer's craft and where candidates did not demonstrate clear or discriminating analysis of the text as a construction, instead engaging with characters and events as if real. In the weakest cases this was indicated by the general absence of the writers as the active agents in construction. Performance in the lower half of the marking grids, tended to rest on points of argument and on single quotations, rather than analysing a pattern of craft across a text.

Moderators noted that contextual factors were usually secure, with most students able to integrate relevant historical, biographical and political-social factors into the body of their argument. Literary context was less well addressed, and the strong anchor of genre context and intertextuality which can enrich understanding of AO3. Some excellent responses were seen when candidates offered discerning analysis of both context of production and reception, though the latter was less frequently considered; reception of texts, in a climate where attitudes to politics, race and gender, for example, are changing rapidly, is often an aspect worth considering. Some very able candidates presented impressive consideration of feminist ideology and context, though at times weaker submissions gave a somewhat uniform general offering on this topic or allowed such contextual considerations to overshadow the primary business of literary argument and analysis. Biographical context tended to play out less well where it was offered, with some candidates imposing unconvincing readings on texts linked to facts about writers' lives, while others included factual information that was interesting rather than relevant to literary analysis.

Centres are reminded that the AO3 mark should be based on how relevant contextual information is used to inform literary reading of the text(s) in focus. Texts which offer potential anchors with writers' biographies (e.g., Jeanette Winterson, Sylvia Plath) are best served by question areas that focus on writer's craft or wider themes, rather than biography.

AO4 and AO5

Moderators reported that links and connections were consistently addressed across responses, though it is often the marker of the higher levels when candidates can adopt a fully integrated comparative approach from the outset. Many candidates still prefer to consider each text in turn in alternating paragraphs. While this is secure, it lacks the flair of an able candidate where overarching discerning argument is fully controlled. There was less evidence this year of candidates presenting an uneven balance between the two texts, though this was a marker of weaker candidates where there was less confidence with one.

AO5 is a particular discriminator at the upper levels of the marking grids. Incorporating others' interpretations relies first on the candidate having established their own reading of their literary text to be able to position the interpretation of another reader, and secondly on such interpretations being relevant to the primary texts. Very often candidates who have read and fully absorbed a few, high-quality examples of literary criticism and are confident to develop, interrogate and challenge these readings of their literary texts, supported with textual evidence, are likely to 'explore' or 'illuminate' their critical position as required for Levels 3 to 5, rather than 'support'. There was some strong work offered by candidates considering colonial and post-colonial texts this year, applying writing by Edward Said, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Gayatri Spivak. Moderators were pleased to see reference to some seminal essays by literary figures such as Arthur Miller, Virginia Woolf, Margaret Atwood and Mary Wollstonecraft. Many candidates had sourced relevant literary criticism of good provenance on their specific texts. That said, the central focus of candidates' study, is the primary literary texts; critical or contextual reading is there to enhance the candidate's literary argument rather than dominate. Occasionally centres were erroneously crediting a student's own reading of the primary text(s) as AO5 rather than AO1. There was some evidence of conflation of AO3 and 5 in the marking by some centres, with candidate's bibliographies and points drawing on sociology and psychology (AO3 where relevant) being credited as AO5.

Word counts and bibliography

There was increased evidence of many centres strongly encouraging their candidates to adhere to the advisory word count, to good effect. This not only established robust academic practice, but also tended to encourage candidates to attend to written control and precision, which inevitably has a positive impact on outcomes. Nevertheless, extent was a significant issue for moderators this year with some centres wholly disregarding specification guidance and candidates presenting folders of excessive length. In many cases, this was self-limiting and where writing significantly exceeded the upper limit, the cogency and precision required for higher level responses was hampered. Many centres did not acknowledge such excess, either in their final comment or the marks allocated.

Where students were significantly below the word count, this was invariably due to a limited argument or lack of depth in the analysis needed for a clear and detailed exploration at Level 3. Usually, this was noted by the centre.

Bibliographies and references are a requirement of the specification. Whilst there is no prescribed referencing system, centres are required to teach a recognised referencing system for candidate's submission. While moderators were pleased to note less use of online revision guides in the place of quality literary criticism as required for AO5, the consistency and extent of bibliographies did seem to be a growing weakness in some centres this year. Moderators did note however that some candidates produced exemplary bibliographies that were worthy of undergraduate submission.

Malpractice and Plagiarism

It was pleasing to see that, despite many potential pitfalls available in 2023 in this area, the number of malpractice cases seen this year had reduced. In general, centres appear to be monitoring this and guiding candidates away from these serious areas of malpractice as part of the required teaching for this component. Some centres have helpfully included a note to the moderator to confirm the checks have taken place in this area.

Centres are expected to identify any instances where authenticity cannot be confirmed, prior to any submission. Assessors should be aware of the quality and ability of their candidates when assessing the final piece and confirmation on front sheets must reflect the centre's informed professional confidence in the authenticity of uploaded folders.

Administration

Centres had generally resolved any administrative issues experienced with last year's first online submission.

Moderators did note that there were occasional issues with how folders were scanned in and labelled. Centres are reminded to follow the Pearson guidance on file names. Moderators commented that the best centres had included everything together into one file, i.e., completed NEA authentication sheet (NAS) (including Texts Coverage Check), completed non-examination assessment piece, with marking and moderation evidenced on the piece in different colour pens.

Some centres had not scanned in work in the correct order, or had pages missing or upside down, all of which caused some considerable delay and difficulty for the moderator. Likewise, if work had not been scanned in colour, or if the assessor and internal moderator had used the same colour pen, it was difficult to identify where moderation was taking place. Use of pencil for annotation did not present

clearly for scanning and separate commentaries linked to different pages of each folder proved difficult for moderators to work with.

Most centres followed the guidance on sample sizes but in some cases the highest and lowest folders had not been included; if these are not selected automatically, the centre should upload them in addition to those requested.

While errors of addition, missing signatures or other administrative inaccuracies were not widespread this series, where they did occur, they tended to cause delays to the moderation process.

Some useful advice to centres:

- request candidates use at least font 12 and double-space their work
- Use the latest NAS and ensure that all candidate numbers and teacher/candidate signatures are appropriately completed before being uploaded to the portal
- ensure folders have the correct file name, are assembled and complete; candidates should number their pages to support this process
- text coverage checks need to be completed by all candidates, so the moderator can ensure the correct number and combination of texts have been covered for the qualification
- centre-assessors should ensure that marks for each set of AOs as well as the overall total out of 60 (ensuring correct adding-up of the two sets of AOs) are entered on the front cover, and that this tallies with the mark entered onto the system
- check the essay title and texts on the NEA authentication sheet matches the task actually undertaken by the student.

Conclusion

Overall, the majority of centres and candidates presented well organised evidence of varied and interesting literary study. There is clearly much excellent practice across centres delivering this specification, which is certainly worth sharing via this report. I wish you a successful academic year 2023-4 with your next A level cohort and the team look forward to reading their submissions next summer.