

GCSE ENGLISH LANGUAGE 2017

SCRIPT ANALYSIS

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GCSE ENGLISH LANGUAGE 2017: SCRIPT ANALYSIS

1.0 METHODOLOGY

This analysis was carried out on GCSE English Language scripts from the June 2017 exam, the first year to operate the grading scale 9 (highest) to 1 (lowest). A sample of 60 scripts was provided by Edexcel, comprising 20 scripts each at grade 4 (equivalent to grade C); grade 7 (grade A) and grade 9 (grade A*). It is important to note that the designation of grade is based on overall grade awarded for Paper 1 and Paper 2, not just the writing question.

The methodology used in this analysis was a modification of the methodology used for three previous studies (QCA 1999; Myhill 2008; Myhill 2015) which will permit some comparison of outcomes, although in this case, grades below 4 (C) were not analysed. For the sentence level syntactic analysis, a sub-sample of 100 words was used to allow for a fine-grained analysis of syntactical and sentence level features. To avoid any bias caused by greater attentiveness at the start, the sample was taken further into the text wherever possible. The counting of the 100 words began at the first sentence which started after the 30th word of the script. A word was indicated by a space before and after, even if the writer's word division is wrong (eg *foot ball* would count as two words if written with a space.)

The syntactic analysis combined frequency counts of predetermined linguistic features with the capturing of qualitative examples, which provided exemplification of how the feature was used, and allowed for further qualitative analysis of differences in usage. The features counted are outlined below:

Sentence and Clause Features	Sentence Openings
<input type="checkbox"/> Number of sentences <input type="checkbox"/> Number of words in shortest sentence <input type="checkbox"/> Number of words in longest sentence <input type="checkbox"/> Minor sentences <input type="checkbox"/> Number of clauses <input type="checkbox"/> Number of finite verbs <input type="checkbox"/> Number of finite subordinate clauses <input type="checkbox"/> Number of coordinate clauses <input type="checkbox"/> Non-finite infinitive clause <input type="checkbox"/> Non-finite present participle clause <input type="checkbox"/> Non-finite past participle clause	<input type="checkbox"/> Subject : Noun Phrase <input type="checkbox"/> Subject: pronoun <input type="checkbox"/> Adverb <input type="checkbox"/> Adverbial: prepositional phrase <input type="checkbox"/> Adverbial: Non-finite clause <input type="checkbox"/> Adverbial: Finite subordinate clause <input type="checkbox"/> Verb
Syntactical structures	
<input type="checkbox"/> Subject Verb inversions <input type="checkbox"/> Noun phrases: premodified <input type="checkbox"/> Noun phrases: postmodified <input type="checkbox"/> Length of longest noun phrase	

Table 1: showing the linguistic features analysed at sentence level

Coders used a coding frame to capture data which were then entered into a purpose-designed Access database.

2.0 SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS

2.1 Sentence length

Most published written texts are characterised by sentences which vary in length. This variety serves two rhetorical or compositional purposes. Firstly, texts composed dominantly of sentences of very similar length tend to read rather monotonously, with an absence of textual rhythm or emphasis. Altering the length of sentences, for example, by juxtaposing a long sentence with a short sentence, or by repeating two or three short sentences sequentially helps to establish a rhythm to the text. As Perera (1984:187) noted *'lack of variety in sentence patterns is not necessarily evident in oral language because the speaker is able to vary the rhythm, speed and volume of delivery and to place the intonation nucleus anywhere in the clause. In writing, however, these paralinguistic and prosodic features are absent, so monotony of grammatical structure is thrown into prominence'*. Of course, variety in sentence length is only one aspect of this, as other syntactical choices within the sentence, such as the use of the passive, subject-verb inversions, and beginning sentences with a structure other than the subject all contribute to establishing a textual rhythm. Secondly, sentence length can be used for specific rhetorical effects, such as a short sentence to emphasise a key point, or draw attention to a dramatic moment; or a sequence of short sentences to create pace in a narrative; or a long sentence to express a complex argument. Minor sentences (ie a sentence without a finite verb) are usually short and are also characteristic of more crafted writing.

The analysis of the GCSE scripts shows some slight differences at different grade levels in sentence length and the use of minor sentences (Table 2).

Mean number of: (per 100 words)		Sentences	Words in shortest sentence	Words in longest sentence	Range between shortest and longest	Minor sentences
G R A D E	9	5.75	6.2	33.2	27.0	0.4
	7	6.9	6.0	28.6	22.6	0.55
	4	6.6	6.6	30.0	23.4	0.1

Table 2: showing the analysis of sentence length

Grade 9 writers wrote the fewest sentences per 100 words, and also showed the greatest range in sentence length. They also showed greater control over sentence length and punctuation for clarity of meaning: of the longest sentences used by grade 9 writers, only 10% were judged to have confused expression or punctuation errors, compared with 30% at grade 7 and 35% at grade 4. Minor sentences are significantly more likely to be used at grades 9 and 7, than at 4.

These statistical patterns relate to the effectiveness of the writing. The qualitative analysis shows that grade 7 and 9 writers are better able than grade 4 writers to create textual rhythm through varying the length of sentences, and they are able to use short sentences to draw attention to information, or for deliberate stylistic effect (such as the use of short rhetorical questions). These features were often present in grade 4 writers but were less well-controlled. The two texts below exemplify this:

What does it mean to be organised?

This is, no doubt, a question you ask yourself each day, as you drag yourselves out of bed, catching a glimpse of the time and immediately having to plan which parts of your morning routine you need to skip in order to get to school on time. This is probably the same question you continue to ask yourselves as, for the third time this week, you chose to skip the wrong parts of your routine, prioritising snapchat stories over breakfast, choosing to allow yourselves ten valuable minutes for slapping on makeup rather

than finishing that question on Pythagoras' Theorem you promised yourself you would finish after facetimeing your best friend rather than completing it last night.

Out of breath yet? [Grade 9]

"You'll be late for school." Mum yelled.

Good. I thought. I accumulated any motivation I had to detach myself from the dressing table. With a deep breath – I went downstairs – opened the front door, and waited for the inevitable to happen. School.

Apprehension. [Grade 4]

Sentences for the grade 9 writer vary from 4 words to 69 words, and the shortest, minor, sentence, '*Out of breath yet?*' is employed as a humorous device, showing that the preceding sentence has been deliberately fashioned as an exaggeratedly long one, with the pile-up of clauses mirroring the state of frantic panic caused by being disorganised, thus providing a frame of reference for the advice that follows in the rest of the piece. The two rhetorical sentences are deliberately placed as one-sentence paragraphs, and have different functions. The first one introduces the topic and establishes a relationship with the peer audience, through direct address, with the next paragraph cumulatively illustrating the problem, while the second sounds a light-hearted tone that is entirely appropriate for the audience, and that has been set up through the use of parallel structures in the two sentences forming the middle paragraph: '*This is, no doubt, a question you ask yourself... This is probably the same question you continue to ask yourselves...*'

In contrast, the grade 4 writer shows weak control over internal and boundary punctuation, creating ambiguity (the more likely meaning being '*Good, I thought.*'). There is no obvious reason for the use of one-word minor sentences ('*School*'; '*Apprehension*') and placing them as separate paragraphs unhelpfully draws attention to the oddness of their use. Similarly, the use of a pair of dashes to mark the first of three coordinated clauses ('*With a deep breath – I went downstairs –*') suggests the writer has weak understanding of clause grammar as well as contributing to the disjointed sentence rhythms. There is a sense here of the writer attempting to vary sentence length in order to create narrative tension but employing 'formulaic' techniques to do so; for example, the student has edited the writing to replace commas with dashes, perhaps as a way of providing a greater range of punctuation.

Looking more closely at the shortest sentence in each script analysed, it is clear that many writers have attempted a rhetorical purpose and effect. They include rhetorical questions and tag questions which show strong audience awareness (eg '*What really makes a possession so 'prized' anyway?*'; '*Flabbergasted yet?*' '*Possessions are odd, aren't they?*' '*Let's actually learn what organising means, shall we?*') and short sentences which make a clear statement, emphasise a point, or mark an important moment in the plot (eg '*But losing my sister meant losing the will to live*'; '*But to me they're more than just old photos*'; '*I had just been introduced to someone new*'; '*I started to panic*'). The difference between grades showed in the appropriateness of vocabulary choices within these short sentences, in the deliberation with which short sentences were placed in the text, and in the emphasis created through accurate punctuation. The texts below exemplify these differences:

When you organise things according to how important they are to you it will take stress off you. When you do this you realise you are able to do things you never believe you can do, set a timetable this will improve your life and well-being. [Grade 4]

Here, weak boundary punctuation minimises the potential both of the pithy advice, ‘*Set a timetable*’ and the summary point that ends the paragraph: ‘*This will improve your life and well-being*’.

Now when I say organise I don’t mean organise everything in alphabetical order nor live your life in alphabetical order, that’s just OTT. [Grade 7]

In this example, comma splicing again dilutes the impact of the three-word sentence and the choice of ‘*OTT*’ is perhaps over-informal and imprecise, whilst the repetition of ‘*organise*’ and ‘*alphabetical order*’ sounds careless rather than deliberate. In the script below, an appropriately conversational tone is more carefully crafted through choice of pronouns, highlighted in the fronted adverbials, while the short rhetorical question at the end of the paragraph adds to text cohesion, referring back to the repeated ‘*being organised*’ and signalling the elaboration that will follow.

Especially for our age, being organised is a must. But before I elaborate more on this, you need to know exactly what being organised is. So what is it? [Grade 9]

Writers at all grades showed awareness of rhetorical techniques, sometimes listing these as part of their planning (for example, use of a ‘*one-sentence paragraph*’ and ‘*list of three*’). Tentatively, the analysis suggests that grade 9 writers are more selective and deliberate in their use of a technique such as rhetorical questions or short sentences, and capable of creating more subtle or sophisticated effects. For example, in the grade 9 writing quoted first in this report, the carefully placed rhetorical questions were the only two used in the whole script, whereas the grade 7 writer below forms one paragraph with three successive rhetorical questions which are not as carefully chosen and which suggest an order of material in the script which is not actually followed through.

What does it mean to be organised? What are the best and worst things about being organised? Why is it good to be organised?

The analysis of longer sentences in the transactional writing scripts showed that they tend to be those which articulate a complex point, or provide supporting evidence for an argument. Longer sentences in imaginative writing tend to detail a series of simultaneous events or actions, or provide layers of descriptive detail. Here the important distinction is that writers are increasingly able to manage or control the expression of complex or multiple ideas within one sentence. As noted earlier, 35% of the longest sentences in grade 4 scripts were confused or grammatically problematic, as here:

It was day 2 in my new house I didn’t stay in it for that long because I was bored I just wanted to make some friends. So I went outside to see if any of them boys were there and they were it was to ask them if I could play football with them In a shy way not being able to talk properly because I was that nervous but I forgot that they couldn’t understand me but I tried my best to ask.

This has been coded as 5 sentences with the longest, starting ‘*It was to ask them*’, being 42 words and ignoring the capitalisation of ‘*In*’ but accepting ‘*So*’ as the start of a sentence as punctuated. However, it is just as feasible to code as 4 sentences, considering ‘*so*’ as a co-ordinating conjunction used within a sentence. Writers like this one appear to struggle to articulate their ideas within the sentence and they may be composing the sentence as they write, starting with an idea, and then adding to it as the sentence develops.

It also seems to be closer to the patterns of oral language, than writing. This chimes with Bereiter and Scardamalia’s concept of ‘*knowledge-telling*’ (1987), where ideas are developed in a linear, chained fashion with little overarching shaping or craftedness. More advanced writers are ‘*knowledge-transforming*’; that is, they take an idea but they shape it within a sentence or text to maximise its communicative or rhetorical efficacy. Greater confidence in this kind of management or transformation of an idea is evident in grade 7 and 9 scripts:

To be organised doesn’t mean you have to wake up at the crack of dawn, or be the smartest student; it means getting tasks done beforehand so you have an easier time in the future. [Grade 7]

As the rest of the group murmured their responses, quickly turning into a debate on whether ghosts were, or were not, real – I thought about the girl’s question. [Grade 9]

The control of ideas in longer sentences draws not only on well-selected syntactical structures but also on effective use of punctuation, as illustrated above. Grade 4 scripts are more likely to omit both boundary and internal sentence punctuation and this contributes to the challenges of clear articulation. Even at grade 9, however, there is scope to strengthen candidates’ use of punctuation to support clarity in long sentences. The sentence below, from a grade 9 script, reveals uncertainty in how to use punctuation to manage the ideas and descriptive detail in the sentence:

We had to get onto an airplane in two days to go back home which is really miserable and damp, so it’s just an overall depressing place to be since we barely get any summer which is actually rain free and hot enough to go to the beach and the winters are just non-existent it just gets colder, but even if snow falls it’s barely enough to set down and only stays sludgie (?) for a couple of hours...

Here, the detail contained in the subordinate clauses is not clearly highlighted and is in fact largely redundant to the narrative, and there is no real reason for the ellipsis at the end of the sentence.

2.2 Clauses

This element of the analysis considers the clause types used in the 100 word sample, and illuminates both how information is connected within the sentence and how it is elaborated. The results (Table 3) are broadly consistent with previous studies showing a trajectory towards greater use of subordination than co-ordination, and towards less heavily-claused sentences with fewer finite verbs.

	Mean number of: (per 100 words)	Clauses	Finite verbs	Finite subordinate clauses	Co-ordinated clauses	Infinitive non-finite clauses	Present participle non-finite clauses	Past participle non-finite clauses
GRADE	9	18.35	13.2	3.8	1.95	1.95	3.1	0.05
	7	17.3	13.15	3.45	2.25	1.7	2.15	0.3
	4	19.25	14.7	4.25	2.45	2.2	1.75	0.5

Table 3: showing the analysis of clause types

Grade 4 writers made greater use of finite subordinate clauses than did writers at grades 7 and 9. They also used a narrower range of subordinating conjunctions. Whilst close to 60% of the finite subordinate clauses

for all grades were composed with just 4 subordinators, the most frequent for all grades being 'that' (including zero 'that'), grade 9 writers made use of 22 different subordinating conjunctions, compared with 14 different ones in grade 4 writing, where just 7 (*that, as, if, what, when, which, because*) accounted for 87.5% of usage. This lack of variety, coupled with use of simple subject-verb patterns, was evident in several grade 4 scripts, often highlighted by the use of the same structure in successive sentences, as in these examples:

The advantages of organising things is that when you are organised you make your life very easy. When you organise things according to how important they are to you, it will take stress off you. When you do this you realise you are able to do thing you never believe you can do.

As I got closer to the school, loud voices and thumping feet collated (?) around me. As I walked up to the golden gates, with my fresh, crisp blazer wrapped around me and my pigtails swinging side to side. I took one step into the building and could sense the mixed feelings within the air. As my shoes banged, clinked and shuffled along the polish marble glass, I met a girl stood by the side of the stairs.

Ironically, for a writer who seems to be making very deliberate rhetorical choices (eg 'fresh, crisp blazer'; 'thumping feet'; 'banged, clinked and shuffled'), the over-reliance on the subordinating conjunction 'as', and the fact that the second subordinate clause has not been completed with a main clause, comes across as an unfortunate lack of control.

The greater variety of subordinating conjunctions evident in higher grade scripts often led to less repetitive sentence structures and more economical expression, as here:

We had found a perfect cave in a ledge on the side of the mountain to camp in overnight. It was suitably big for the three of us, so that we could comfortably fit in, but we were still warm. However, after reluctantly leaving my sleeping bag and venturing out into the open, I noticed something strange. There was no rope where we had hammered it in the night before, which was extremely secure. [Grade 9]

However, it is important to note that syntactic variety is not created simply by using a wider range of subordinating conjunctions. In the example above, the grade 9 writer achieves precise description and rich textual rhythm by also employing present participle non-finite clauses, by varying the position of subordinate clauses within each sentence, and through careful choice of lexical verbs and modifying adverbs: *comfortably fit; reluctantly leaving; venturing out; hammered; extremely secure*. One of the 100 word samples contained no finite subordinate clauses, the student using a succession of present participle non-finite clauses to provide an economical summary of events, although not fully controlled. These have been underlined for ease of reference.

My initial excitement had turned to despair on arriving at Moscow's main airport, Sheremetivo, finding myself standing for over four hours at passport control, or rather elbowing my way through the scrum of angry travellers. [Grade 7]

The numerical data on the use of non-finite clauses does not present a clear-cut picture. For example, on average, grade 4 writers made greater use of infinitives than did grade 7 and 9 writers, but they used a narrower, more repetitive range of lexical verbs: *to be, to go, to get, to do, to ask* were frequent choices at grade 4 compared with more expressive choices at grade 9, such as: *to allow, to complain, to achieve, to ensure, to explain, to reassure*. This type of clause was also heavily used by a small number of students at

each grade: 3 students at grade 9 accounted for 38% of occurrence; and in each of grades 7 and 4, 3 students accounted for 41% of use. In the grade 4 writing below, overuse results in sentence patterns echoing informal speech and a repetitive chronological chaining of events, not helped by the punctuation problem:

She asked me if I wanted to facetime doing a call with her to make it easier to talk which led to us wanting to meet with each other we agreed to meet in Leicester and to watch a film with my brother.

The higher number of present participle non-finite clauses in grade 9 writing might possibly be influenced by the fact that more students' scripts (7 out of 10) were on the topic of 'being organised' than on the topic of 'prized possessions'. In the question rubric, 'being organised' featured three times, and it was used by several grade 9 students to keep arguments cohesive within and between paragraphs, as in these examples:

Being organised typically makes you think of colour-coordinated books, CDs in alphabetical order or even having a label on everything that you own. However, this isn't necessarily it. Being organised means that you are prepared for future events. That is it. As simple as that.

Being organised is when you sort plans, files or ideas into certain sections...//Being organised is much more complicated than you probably think it is.

In contrast, less assured writers repeated the clause unnecessarily, as here:

There are many advantages and disadvantages for being organised. Being organised enables you to be ready for your day ahead... [Grade 4]

However, there were examples from all grades of how non-finite clauses can be used to communicate ideas economically and effectively, as in the three sentences below (the non-finite clauses have been underlined for ease of reference):

I believe that the basic part of organisation is being ready for what the world throws at you by structuring your life in a way that gives you certainty of what to do while also being flexible enough to bend with any unexpected occurrences. [9]

I and many others think that organising means utilising your space and what you have. Fixing a routine for yourself and keeping tidy in order to live a healthy lifestyle. [7]

You can be organised for many things, anything from being organised for school, ensuring you have all of your essential equipment ready and that your homework is done, to even being organised for your big day, the day you hold the person's hand you are happy with spending the rest of your life with and saying I do. [4]

Wherever there is a non-finite clause, a longer finite clause could have been used, making for a more verbally 'wordy' way of expression (eg the second sentence above could have been written thus: *I and many others think that organising means that you can utilise your space and what you have, so that you can fix a routine for yourself and so that you can keep tidy, in order that you can live a healthy lifestyle.*) Both the grade 7 and 9 writers have avoided this kind of unnecessary repetition and have achieved an economical balance and connection between ideas. Although the sentence from the grade 4 script is rather clumsily ended, the writer

has attempted an ambitious structure, with the non-finite clauses used to broaden the topic to encompass an imagined life beyond school - a novel idea that helps lighten the tone of the speech.

In summary, qualitative analysis of the use of clauses in the 100 word samples broadly fits with previous findings which suggest that high-grade writers make different choices about how to express ideas at sentence level: they may use more single-clause sentences, deliberately contrasting shorter with longer sentences; they may elaborate information within the sentence more than writers at lower grades; and they may express information more economically through non-finite structures than through more verbally lengthy finite structures. The following opening sentences from a grade 9 script illustrate the effectiveness of these types of choices:

Midnight Memories

We all have them. Possessions, I mean, not memories. Though it's the memories that mean something. I don't mean everyday possessions, just items you own, things you forgot you had. Prized possessions is what I'm talking about.

There has been a recent survey asking the public about their prized possessions, and though they mean something to certain people, I'm not sure we're on the same page. The photo frame you got for your birthday is lovely, really, but why is that a prized possession of yours? No, I'm talking about the real things. [Grade 9]

Here, the writer's use of varied sentence lengths and types helps shape the content of the piece, foregrounding and exemplifying the central question of what constitutes a 'prized possession' through the repetition and contrasts in parallel structures, for example: '*possessions, I mean, not memories*'; '*though it's memories that mean something*'; '*I don't mean everyday possessions*'; '*prized possessions is what I'm talking about*'; '*I'm talking about the real things*.' Syntactic variety also creates the distinctive authorial voice, which strikes just the right balance for a magazine article of lively informality and informed authoritativeness, heard for example in the choice of the colloquial '*I'm not sure we're on the same page*', the touch of sarcasm in the parenthetical '*really*', and the direct challenge to readers of the rhetorical question: '*but why is that a prized possession of yours?*'

2.3 Sentence Openings

The most common syntactical structure to be positioned at the start of a sentence is the subject, but if every sentence begins with the subject, the repeated structure contributes to a sense of monotony in a text, particularly when the writing also lacks variety in sentence length. Altering the opening syntactical slot can also subtly shift how information in the sentence is conveyed, and what information comes first or last in the sentence. The analysis (Table 4) indicates that at every grade the subject start is the most frequent, as one would expect, but that grade 4 and grade 7 scripts exhibited a greater usage of subject starts, and a greater proportion of pronoun subject openings, compared with grade 9 scripts (although because grade 9 sentences were longer, they had fewer sentence openings to analyse). Both writing tasks required use of the first person, so that the frequency of pronoun openings is not surprising; in the transactional writing task, which required either a magazine article or the script of a speech to peers, pronoun openings included 'you' and 'we' as well as 'I', as part of a direct address to the imagined audience. However, grade 9 writers found more ways of reducing repetitive pronoun openings, for example by using adverbs or non-finite clauses. Figure 1 below represents these data visually, and makes it more visible how grade 9 scripts make less use of subject

starts. Grade 4 writers made more use of finite subordinate clauses as sentence openings, and least use of non-finite clauses, whereas this picture was reversed in grade 9 scripts.

		SUBJECT		ADVERBIAL				
Mean number of: (per 100 words)		Noun phrase	Pronoun	Adverb	Prepositional Phrase	Non-finite clause	Finite subordinate clause	Verb
GRADE	9	1.45	2.0	1.4	0.25	0.5	0.25	0.3
	7	1.35	3.35	1.45	0.45	0.25	0.35	0.15
	4	1.5	3.2	0.85	0.5	0.1	0.7	0.25

Table 4 showing the range of syntactical structures used in sentence openings.

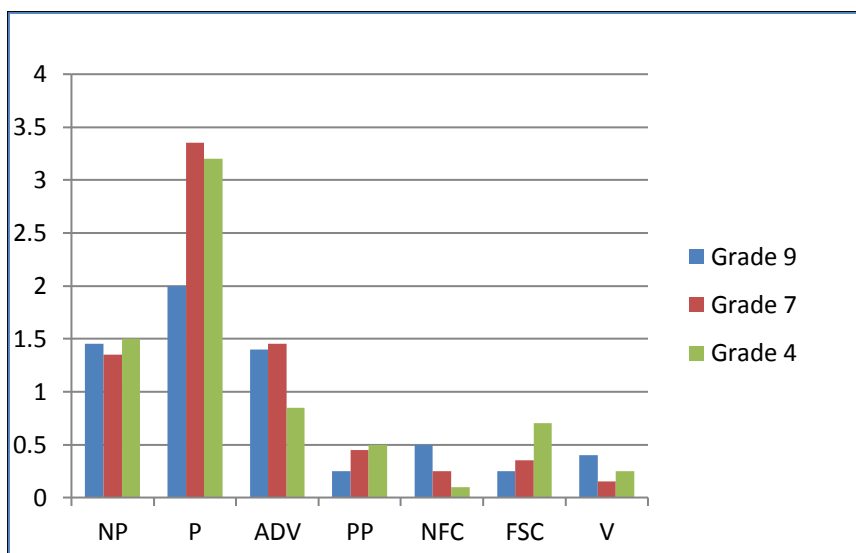


Figure 1 showing distribution of sentence opening structures by grade awarded.

The qualitative analysis reveals that the grade 4 scripts tend to overuse personal pronouns, particularly *I*, *we* or *they*, and especially in the narrative responses where they were often repeated over several sentences, as here:

I will never forget the time I met Jess...We had started talking on social media...We shared a lot about ourselves...We both had a talent for art.

I couldn't see a thing. I heard children shouting as they was playing. I was so confused. I stood up and used my phone for light.

In the grade 7 and 9 scripts there was evidence of a broader range of pronouns, including deictic *this* and *that*, *those*, *these* and *everyone*, for example:

We all have them. Those simple objects in life which make our days brighter and our worst times a little greater. Everyone has something different... [7]

I'm sure that is what's on your mind; organisation helps bring the stress off our everyday life. Those who acquiesce and get out of bed ten minutes earlier.... [9]

Overall, grade 7 and 9 scripts indicate that students were drawing on a broader repertoire of sentence openings, for example in order to avoid repeating pronoun starts in the first person narratives. The three extracts below exemplify these tendencies. Candidates are writing about 'a time when something strange or unusual happened to you or to someone you know.'

With slippers guarding my feet, I strode with purposeful gait into the minefield. Glass turned to dust under my tank like feet. Barely able to see upon this June day where appliance and weather turned to war against me. So humid was the air that the walls dripped... [9]

Motionlessly, I stood at the foot of the stairs, staring into the darkness below. I knew I had to disappear back into there - they would come for me otherwise. Both of them. They would drag me helplessly along the floor and ignore my screams, cries, shouts; the pain I would encounter. Yet I couldn't bring myself to move. [7]

I'm walking down the pavement on a cold freezing day and suddenly my body flew over to a building and froze it. I slap myself as hard as I could to believe that I was in a dream but unfortunately for me. This was reality. I rush over to my house in my Ferrari which I've recently just bought...I notice that my house is no longer there... [4]

It is worth noting that the first of these examples is grammatically inaccurate, since clauses lacking a finite verb have been punctuated as a complete sentence, and there were several instances of this in high-grade writing, where students seemed to be using non-finite clauses for rhythmic emphasis, such as here:

I and many others think that organising means utilising your space and what you have. Fixing a routine for yourself and keeping tidy in order to live a healthy lifestyle.

Walking, walking, walking, into nothing but oblivion.

In other circumstances I would have joined in. But I couldn't. Not after what happened on the mountain. I couldn't play with my sister like nothing had happened. Not after what I'd done.

Where sentence punctuation was generally sound, as with these candidates, free-standing subordinate clauses seemed a deliberate rhetorical choice, comparable with starting sentences with 'And' or 'But' to emphasise an idea or to vary narrative pace. There was other evidence in grade 7 and 9 scripts of this kind of crafting for rhetorical effect, suggesting a stronger awareness of the impact of language choices on a reader, and the need to establish a distinctive authorial voice. In the choice of narrative sentence openings, for instance, grade 7 and 9 writers exhibited more varied structures than grade 4 writers, with more evident striving to avoid repetition and to engage a reader's interest. Grade 4 writers were less inventive, or relied on known structures regardless of effectiveness. These tendencies are exemplified in the following extracts:

Suddenly, it was time for every student to go home, so I went home quickly as I can. Meanwhile, I took the short path... [Grade 4]

All of the sudden it started getting dark, Within a few minutes after getting dark there was nowhere to go. [Grade 4]

After a few minutes of walking I reached the abandoned street I had to walk through. I paused for a moment to reassure myself before walking through. As I got about halfway down the street, I heard a quiet noise. [Grade 4]

Whilst admiring the beautiful world around us and listening to the wind sing with the trees, it happened. [Grade 7]

My legs ached. Standing for five hours straight will do that to you...Still, it was a pretty typical watch, peasants were wandering aimlessly, as usual. Constant hammering of the blacksmith was the only thing keeping me awake. [Grade 7]

Scratching delicately at the side of me, he looked up and gave me those puppy-dog eyes I had been seeing for what felt like an eternity. How can a seven year old be so manipulative? [Grade 9]

Isn't it crazy how time flies? One minute you're staring directly into the eyes of your soon to be lifelong best friend and the next minute we're here in this mess. [Grade 9]

The linguistic analysis also investigated candidates' use of subject verb-inversions, not necessarily at the start of a sentence, but anywhere in the sentence. Such inversions allow a writer to alter how the information is revealed for a variety of possible effects: creating suspense or delay; foregrounding information which is not the subject; giving emphasis through end weight and so on. Beyond the subject-verb inversion that occurs in questions, there were very few examples in the scripts, with none at grades 4 and 7 and 8 at grade 9, 3 of which came from one candidate repeating the same structure ('*being organised is...*').

2.4 Noun Phrases

The noun/noun phrase is a crucial element of the sentence: together with the verb, it is a key component of communication at sentence level, occupying both the subject and object position within a sentence. It is versatile in that it can be simply a single noun, or it can be highly extended with pre and post-modification. The linguistic analysis looked simply at whether the noun was pre or post-modified, and the length of the longest noun phrase.

Grade	Pre-modified Noun Phrase	Post-modified Noun Phrase	Number of words in longest NP
9	6.45	3.7	11.0
7	6.2	3.35	10.35
4	5.55	3.05	8.6

Table 5 showing the pattern of noun phrase modification and length

The data show (Table 5) that candidates at all the grades make considerable use of both pre and post-modification, and that use increases from grade 4 to grade 9, as does the average length of the noun phrase unit. Interestingly, the amount of pre-modification was more than double that counted in the analysis of grade A and C scripts from the 2015 exam.

A closer analysis of these data reveal differences in how noun phrases are used. The pre-modifying detail in grade 4 scripts often consisted of a single determiner before the noun, which not only led to repetitive structures but often meant there was very little specific detail or information provided, for instance that

would enable the reader to imagine the scene or characters being described. This is exemplified in the following grade 4 scripts, where the pre-modified noun phrases have been underlined for ease of reference:

I was sitting on a bench in a park. Something unusual happened as the park was completely empty...

The place I had to walk through was deserted...I'd heard many stories about the place...

I rush over to my house...as I arrive in my estate, I notice that my house is no longer there...I decide to go to the hospital.

In a very few scripts, pre-modifying adjectives were 'piled on' without contributing convincing detail to a scene, as here:

I came downstairs to find breakfast...my glass of fresh, ice cold orange juice... The sky shone upon my face like a glazed donut...loud laughing voices and thumping feet collated around me...I walked up to the golden gates, with my fresh, crisp blazer wrapped around me...

In stronger grade 4 scripts, and frequently at grade 7 and 9, pre-modifying detail was made specific through more carefully-chosen determiners as well as through sparing use of adjectives, as in these examples:

Good ways to keep organised are by having certain rooms for certain activities. [4]

To some people this might seem crazy, but for me it's comforting. [7]

As you strolled around that corner, everything was in slow motion... [9]

I broke out of my trance to see the same girl staring at me. [9]

Our so-called prized possessions may be sitting at the back of a dusty cupboard right now. [9]

In all scripts, but especially at grade 9, there were numerous examples of well-managed noun phrases, which served to provide well-chosen detail, elaboration or description relevant to the writing task. Post-modification often enabled candidates to express an idea or capture a scene with economy and precision, as well as contributing to strong textual rhythms, as here:

- *the memory behind the cards from my 15th birthday [4]*
- *the memory that links to that certain object [4]*
- *the toughest mum that I have ever met [4]*
- *a hotel of monumental size and importance [7]*
- *the pink scar at the right edge of his lips; the three moles that were arranged at the base of his spine [7]*
- *a place of hospitality for travellers to rest their limbs and baggage [7]*
- *an old video of my primary school play [7]*
- *the best and worst things about being organised [7]*
- *a wedding hosted at a vineyard in Rome [9]*
- *the penny you found on the street, a shiny bronze contrasted against the dull grey of the pavement [9]*
- *a perfect cave in a ledge on the side of the mountain [9]*
- *the entire profile of the rock and ice around the cave [9]*
- *the dress you wore to prom and never wore again [9]*
- *the set of furniture your parents gave you when you first moved into your new apartment [9]*
- *the memories associated with our possessions [9]*
- *a recent survey asking the public about their prized possessions [9]*

- *that question on Pythagoras' Theorem you promised yourself you would finish after facetimeing your best friend [9]*
- *our emotional connections to those items that we could never, ever bring ourselves to part with [9]*

As illustrated above, Grade 9 candidates were more likely than other grades to include non-finite clauses in the post-modified noun phrase; grade 4 candidates were more likely to post-modify with relative clauses (especially with 'that', including zero 'that') and with prepositional phrases.

There was very little use of apposition in noun phrases, with just two examples in the 100 word samples, both grade 7:

- *One of my friends, Jerry, a Scout in headquarters...*
- *Moscow's main airport Sheremetivo...*

There was occasionally less effective management of the post-modification, or a grammar error, as evidenced in the examples below. Some of these may be a consequence of the transactional task that asked students to write the script for a speech to peers, and which may have resulted in more informal sentence patterns that aimed to mirror talk. In the first example below, the candidate had started the speech by asking peers to rate their organisational skills on a scale of 1-10, and the noun phrase refers back to this:

- *the one sitting in my seat thinking that on the scale I was a two [9]*
- *a way that gives you certainty of what to do while also being flexible enough to bend with any unexpected circumstances [9]*
- *one of the most, if not the most important attribute you need to have and excel in [9]*
- *the biggest monster of them all, manipulative, evil and charismatic, with his "new ideas" which is basically to eliminate everyone similar to me [7]*
- *the sweet, colourful memories of my childhood filled with many precious moments spent with them [4]*
- *the pinnacle of my longboard which are the sabre cf38 baseplates [4]*
- *all our books in order with what subject it is from [4]*

3.0 Conclusions

As noted at the start, this analysis was conducted on scripts awarded Grades 4, 7 and 9 (or C and above in previous assessment norms). Compared with our previous analysis (in 2015), which considered grades F, C and A, the achievement distribution here is much narrower and thus the differences are sometimes less distinct. It was also the case in the previous analysis that grades A and C were more like each other, than grade F. However, the general pattern of development from grade 4 to grade 9 does broadly mirror the pattern in the previous report. As writing improves in quality, so the writing is characterised by greater variety in sentence length; the use of more simple sentences alongside multiply-claused sentences; greater variety in subordinators used; greater syntactical variety, particularly in the sentence opening; and longer noun phrases, with more post-modification. These developmental patterns underline the importance of grammatical variety in more successful writing, and correspond to writing which is increasingly reader-oriented and managing information on their behalf.

Strongly linked to this is the evidence of increasing craftedness in the shaping of writing with increasing grade. The grammar structures analysed have relatively little significance *per se*: it is how they are used which is

important. Students attaining grades 9 and 7 were shaping their texts with apparent greater deliberateness and a feel for how different language choices can have different effects. At grade 4, although many of the grammatical characteristics of higher-attaining writing were present, these writers did not always have full mastery, and at times were losing control when managing complex ideas in long, heavily-claused sentences. This was compounded by some punctuation problems in demarcating clauses or sentence boundaries. What is evident in this analysis, however, is that all three grades seem to be characterised by writers who have a strong sense of audience and purpose, and who are confident in making writerly decisions, even if it is less accomplished at grade 4. This contrasts with the grade F in the previous study, where the writers were demonstrably less assured in crafting writing and managing information with a reader in mind.

The test questions themselves do have an influence on the writing produced. As all the questions used the second person voice (you) to outline the writing task, the vast majority of students wrote texts in the first person. This in turn tended to trigger informality in tone and more speech-like patterns. This was not inappropriate to the tasks set, but it might be worth considering whether some questions which invite a more formal or third person voice might allow students to show a broader range of writing. Likewise, the response to the imaginative writing was often in the form of a personal narrative, not always rich in imagination. At grade 4 especially, a number of the transactional writing responses were also first person narrative, or morphed into first person narrative.

4.0 Key Messages for Teachers

The key messages for teachers relate to supporting students in achieving growing sophistication in shaping text to create particular effects and growing assurance in being aware of readers and the purpose of the text. The approach used in the *Skills for Writing* materials at KS3 and the *Grammar for Writing* support materials at GCSE remain relevant in developing appropriate pedagogical practices. Some specific points arising from this analysis would include:

- a greater emphasis on managing punctuation in longer sentences at grade 4;
- developing confidence in expressing information concisely through post-modified noun phrases at grade 4;
- encouraging students to develop understanding of the different voices and viewpoints possible when using first or third person and to think about what choice to make in the examination question.