

WHAT DID WE DO?

We analysed the writing response in a sample of 90 scripts (30 each at grades A, C and F¹), looking at sentence and text level features. At sentence level, we looked at sentence and clause features, sentence openings and syntax. The analysis of text organisation looked at how the openings and closure of texts framed the piece, at how paragraphs supported the overall structure of the text, and how effective paragraph shaping was. In addition, the analysis considered whether the writing was appropriate to the purpose, audience and genre of the examination writing task.

It is worth noting that a significant number (40%) of F grade examination scripts had no writing response at all. Candidates who do not attempt the writing question at all put themselves at a serious disadvantage, and it seems likely that lower ability candidates may have a particular problem managing their timing.

WHAT DID WE DISCOVER ABOUT STUDENTS' WRITING IN THE GCSE EXAMINATION?

- ❑ **Sentence length:** F grade candidates write generally longer sentences and they have the least variety in sentence length whilst A grade candidates show the greatest variety. F grade candidates also had a significant proportion of sentences where the expression was confused, whilst C and A grade writers use minor sentences effectively. These patterns relate to the effectiveness of the writing: both A and C grade writers create textual rhythm through varying the length of sentences, and use short sentences to draw attention to information.
- ❑ **Clauses:** A grade writers make different and more varied choices about how to express ideas at sentence level: they use more simple sentences; they elaborate information within the sentence more than writers at lower grades; and they express information more economically through non-finite structures (*commuters feel healthier, using alternative transport methods*) than through more verbally lengthy finite structures.
- ❑ **Sentence openings:** Both F and C grade writers are more reliant on the subject to start the sentence, with F grade writers over-using repeated personal pronouns (*I, she, he*), and C grade using more adverbial starts (*firstly, in my opinion, clearly*). A grade writers have more varied openings, including more substantive use of non-finite clause openings (*Using alternative transport methods causes...*). The writing tasks encouraged candidates to voice their opinion so it is not surprising that *I think* is frequently repeated in the sentence start, especially at grade F, but also at grade C. Overall, A and C scripts show considerably more variety in sentence openings, reflecting their greater focus on audience and purpose.
- ❑ **Noun phrases:** F grade writers are more likely to use a noun or pronoun on its own, with no elaborating detail or information. In contrast, both A and C grade writers elaborate their nouns with pre- and post-modification, and write longer noun phrases.
- ❑ **Outlining:** The only evidence of students' thinking about writing tasks holistically is some form of written outline or plan. However, it is striking that only eight candidates had any form of outlining evident in the

¹ It is important to note that the designation of grade is based on the overall mark awarded: performance might not necessarily be consistent across all sections of a paper.

examination booklet: four of these were at A grade; three at C grade; and one at F grade. These outlines took the form of spider diagrams (3), a list or linear plan (3); notes (2).

- ❑ **Task representation:** Some of the outlines showed candidates making key notes about the demands of the task, for instance, a note that the text is to persuade or express an opinion and a note that it is transactional writing. One C grade candidate used the acronym *PAL* (Purpose, Audience, Language) as a reminder of key writer considerations, and the writing demands of the Purpose and Audience are elaborated further. Another C grade candidate jotted down the acronym *FLAP* (Form, Language, Audience, Purpose) and an F grade candidate used the acronym *SPAF* (Subject, Purpose, Audience, Form) to think through the task. Although these examples suggest there is a limited consideration of task demand, there was no evidence of how this related to what was actually written.
- ❑ **Openings and endings:** Awareness of the need for an opening and ending is high, although there are variations in the quality of the execution: many F grade candidates did not produce a clear opening or ending to their responses whereas all C and A grade scripts had some kind of opening and ending.
 - In general, management of **openings** is more secure than closures. The weakest openings were limited to an opening sentence or part of a sentence with no development of the opening idea. Stronger openings were developed as introductory paragraphs and they developed in a more sustained way the purpose of the text and an emerging core argument.
 - Many candidates at both A and C grade, and some at F grade, shaped appropriate **endings** to their writing, although it is evident in the far higher number of errors in endings that time was a pressure here. There were numerous examples of omitted words, grammatical errors or awkward wordings. The weakest attempts tended to be single-sentence final statements, tagged onto the end of the last paragraph. Other endings were a little more developed, but offered somewhat perfunctory conclusions or directly addressing the reader in a simple fashion. The phrase '*In conclusion*' was a common occurrence.
- ❑ **Paragraphing:** It was evident that candidates understood the need to use paragraphs. At F grade, although there were a substantial proportion of single block responses, there were also a good number who did use paragraphs. Whilst there is generally secure understanding of how paragraphs organise a text thematically, there was less sense of confident use of paragraphing to build a strongly cohesive text, with ideas connected across paragraphs as well as within paragraphs.
 - Paragraphing in F grade texts was often strongly cued by the bullet point prompts in the question. However, even at A grade, many scripts contained just three or four paragraphs, with many examples of paragraphs over a page long. The problem is organising paragraphs thematically at too high a level so that each paragraph covered a very broad range of content. Take, for example, the A grade candidate who, after a straightforward opening, begins the second paragraph with '*There are so many great reasons to start walking or cycling...*' and then elaborates for almost a page on all the arguments in favour of cycling. The next paragraph follows with well over a page detailing risks, which rolls into a final sentence offering a simple ending. That there is limited building of argument in responses like this is evidenced by the fact that the 'for' and 'against' paragraphs in many cases could be reversed in order without any significant impact on the overall effect of the text.
- ❑ Some A grade scripts however showed more careful management of paragraphing to create a well-structured text. There were scripts where paragraph length was varied across the piece with some very short paragraphs to make an important point. There were also scripts which used adverbials or noun phrases to signal a sequencing of argument, albeit sometimes a little heavy-handed (*firstly, one of my ideas, a third idea*).

□ **Audience and voice:** Across the whole sample, including F grade scripts, there was evidence that candidates understood the demands of audience and had made an attempt to match their writing to the audience.

- Candidates consistently chose the appropriate first-person voice for the writing and made widespread use of second-person address to their reader. This was done more extensively in the teenage magazine task as these tended to establish a more informal tone and speak directly to their readers more than the newspaper letter task where there was a higher level of formality. These differences are appropriate to the relevant tasks. At Grade F, this simple use of first-person authorial voice and second-person address to the reader was often the only indication of taking account of audience, whereas C and A grade candidates used first- and second-person voice in more deliberative ways to establish a reader relationship. Frequently A and C grade candidates used first- and second-person voice skilfully to create a more conversational relationship with the reader, especially in the teenage magazine article (*No, you say! Well, I can tell you... Hear me out!*).
- Many candidates used rhetorical questions to invite their reader to think or speculate, and imperative verbs to suggest action. However, for the magazine article, A grade candidates also made use of discourse markers such as *well, now, so, you know* and tag questions, both of which reinforced the conversational quality of the writing. Another characteristic which occurred predominantly at A grade in the magazine article was the shifting of the determiner from the definite (*the*) or indefinite (*a*) article to *those* or *that* in a way that mirrors conversational use, and which would be inappropriate in more formal writing (*work on those bikini bodies; taking in that lovely oxygen*).
- Occasionally candidates used personal anecdotes to support their arguments and create an authenticity in voice. Two A grade candidates assumed a character voice for their letter: one taking on the role of a ninety-year-old lady in hospital reflecting on violence in society, and the other taking on the role of a father of two boys aged 12 and 13 concerned about the violence they may encounter. These roles gave the writers different opportunities for positioning and argumentation, which strengthened the voice in these pieces.
- The two writing tasks made different demands in terms of formality. At grade F, formality was handled less well generally. In the magazine article, there were good examples at both A and C grade of establishing a voice which combined the use of humour, including puns (*slouch potato*), colloquial vocabulary (*wonga*), and informal contractions (*gonna*), with more formal vocabulary, particularly in relation to the scientific or intellectual argument about the benefits or otherwise of exercise.
In general, candidates adopted a more formal tone in the newspaper letter, recognising its appropriacy for the broader unknown readership. One way this was achieved, particularly at grade A was through the use of more sophisticated and formal vocabulary choices (*patronising, reformation, ludicrous*). Noticeably, in the opening of the letter, whereas F grade candidates wrote openers such as *I am writing this letter...*, many C grade candidates paralleled this with *I am writing to inform you...* whereas A grade candidates had more variations, signalling small shifts in levels of formality.
- Overall, the analysis of voice and the establishment of a relationship with the audience underlined that A grade candidates drew on a broader repertoire of strategies for creating voice, and were more creative in how they achieved this. At grade C and also occasionally at grade A, some scripts focused more on the expression of argument, using some of the well-taught persuasive devices (emotive language, statistics, rhetorical questions) but these were less carefully shaped to match the needs of the specified audience.

KEY MESSAGES FOR TEACHERS

For all candidates

□ Planning/outlining

Developing candidates' ability to spend five minutes productively on preparation for writing is likely to bear fruit in gaining a better global sense of the text before they begin writing. Teaching candidates how to jot down their possible content ideas, and consider the overall structure and sequence of their writing is helpful: various strategies such as spider diagrams, flow diagrams, notes, or linear sequencing may be helpful. The key thing here is that candidates know there are two things they need to think about: 1) the content and ideas of their text and 2) the overall structure and organisation of their text. The point of this activity is not so much to prepare a detailed outline plan of the text but to go through the thinking processes which help the writer think about the text as a whole and their authorial intentions before they start.

□ Task representation

It was evident that some students had an acronym to help them think about the requirements of the writing task, but it was less evident that they were using this in their writing. It is important that candidates develop the capacity to move beyond the identification stage to thinking about what that means: if the form is a newspaper article, what are the genre characteristics of a newspaper article? If the purpose is to provide information, what are the language features of an instructional text? If the audience is non-experts, how might the writing need to be adapted to make it accessible to this audience?

□ Reviewing during writing

Encourage candidates to pause regularly as they write to re-read what they have written and to remind themselves of their intentions in terms of form, purpose and audience. Often re-reading a paragraph helps generate new ideas for the next but it also helps keep the sense of the text as a whole in the writer's mind. Teach candidates how to 'read aloud in their heads': this helps us to hear our text and be the reader of our own writing. Encourage candidates to pause before they get to the end of the writing and think just for a moment about how to bring the writing to an effective ending.

For lower-ability candidates

□ Managing examination time

Many F grade candidates did not attempt the writing task at all, or did not finish it, so one clear implication is supporting these candidates in how to manage time in an examination.

□ Re-reading sentences whilst writing

F grade candidates have a tendency to write long, rambling sentences which managed information poorly. It is likely that these writers 'just write' and may need support with strategies that help them think a little more about what they are writing and how best to say it. It may help these writers to learn how to orally rehearse sentences or parts of sentences in their head before they write them down. They would also benefit from looking at examples of poorly-managed, overlong sentences and playing with how to rewrite them to make them more effective.

□ Using some short sentences

The lack of text rhythm and a tendency towards rather monotonous structures was another feature of responses from F grade candidates. Look at examples of short sentences in different texts and discuss their effect, both on how the text sounds when read aloud and the impact on meaning. It is important to help

these candidates understand that it is not just a case of having some short sentences, but making good choices as a writer about how to draw attention to an idea, description, point or so on by giving it the weight of a short sentence.

For average-ability candidates

❑ Avoiding repetition of similar structures in a text, such as *I think/I believe*

Using some authentic texts as models, look at alternative ways of expressing a personal stance, including alternative verbs to *think* and *believe*, and adverbial positioning, such as *in my opinion*, *clearly*, *without doubt* and so on. Look also at how the *I think* start point of a sentence can often be omitted but still retain a sense of a personal perspective.

❑ Using paragraphs more effectively

C grade candidates in general have understood well that paragraphs need to be organised thematically, and have also learned some standard adverbials which support the connection of ideas across a text. Their writing would be strengthened by a more sophisticated use of paragraphing, particularly using thematic organisation to build argument sequentially, rather than organising the text essentially around 'for' or 'against' paragraphs, or the bullet point prompts of the question. One element of this is developing a broader repertoire of ways to link ideas across paragraphs. This is not simply through a better use of a more varied range of adverbials, but also through: lexical connections, such as the use of repetition, synonyms or antonyms to link ideas in two paragraphs; the use of *This* to refer back to the previous argument; and stronger topic sentences (or thesis statements) in paragraphs to flag the line of argument.

For high-ability candidates

❑ Using clause structures which support the expression of arguments

The most basic way to express an argument is through simple subordination such as *because*, *if* and *unless*. However, it might be helpful to introduce high-attaining writers to some of the clause patterns which allow arguments or points of view to be expressed in a more sophisticated way through parallel structures such as: *not only... but also*; *neither... nor*; *either... or*; *if... then*; *although... nevertheless*.

❑ Being creative in approaching the task

In the sample of scripts analysed, it was only A grade candidates who took a different approach to the writing task, and even at A grade there were few examples of this. Encourage candidates to feel able to take on different character roles to bring a different perspective to the task, or to develop an alternative viewpoint from the one implied by the question (no-one wrote about why our society is not a violent one, for example).

❑ Avoiding overlong paragraphs

The points made above in relation to developing paragraphing also have resonance at a higher level, but as a consequence of candidates' ability to generate more ideas and write a greater length. Using some authentic texts presented as unparagraphed prose, experiment with different ways of paragraphing, including looking at the effect of the occasional short paragraph, and discussing the impact of different choices for subdividing by theme. Support these writers in understanding that theme can be an over-arching theme or a sub-theme, and that sometimes 'big ideas' need breaking down into smaller ideas to develop an effective argument. Links could also be made here with using the pre-writing preparation stage to think about the number of ideas and sequencing in a more strategic way.