



Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority

GCSE English

Review of standards 1999–2002

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Introduction

In 1998 QCA conducted an inquiry into standards over time in GCSE English. The results were published in a report, *Five-year review of standards: GCSE English*, available on the QCA website (www.qca.org.uk). The key issues identified by the inquiry were considered as part of the work on the present review.

Syllabuses in 1999 and 2002 conformed to the criteria for English in England and Wales, and in Northern Ireland. The revised national curriculum came into effect from September 2000, but there was no change to the subject criteria or core content requirements for English between 1999 and 2002.

Tiering arrangements, by which candidates are entered for either foundation- or higher-tier examinations, remained unchanged in the period 1999–2002. There was no overall change in the arrangements for the pre-release materials or anthologies which are provided with some of these syllabuses.

The syllabuses in this study accounted in total for about 85 per cent of the 674,000 candidates who took GCSE English in 2002.

Key issues identified in the 1995–8 review of standards

Syllabus demand

- For CCEA there was concern about the type of reading tasks (specifically the absence of a comparative task, and the type of response to Shakespeare expected of candidates), and about the amount of help given to candidates for written tasks.
- In the WJEC 1998 syllabus the coverage of range of writing was not secure.

Performance

- There was some evidence of a slight decline in 1998 as against 1995 in writing skills at the grade C/D boundary, for Edexcel and CCEA (the awarding bodies for which the fullest evidence was available). Technical accuracy at the grade C/D boundary, across awarding bodies, rarely reached the expected levels.¹
- At the grade F/G boundary, none of the scripts in the review met the expected standards of technical accuracy.¹
- Edexcel scripts at the grade C/D boundary were judged marginally weaker than others overall, especially in writing.

Pre-release material

¹ The 'expected' standard in the 1995–8 review was derived from the published grade descriptions for the subject. The expectation was 'that work appropriately graded as borderline would be judged just below the description which represented mid-grade performance'.

The review found that pre-release material had no clear overall effect on demand.

Examination demand 1999–2002

Materials available

Reviewers considered the 1999 and 2002 syllabus documents, question papers and mark schemes from each of the awarding bodies. Details of the syllabuses included in the review are given at Appendix A.

Assessment objectives

There were no changes in the assessment objectives for English, or their weightings. There were, in both 1999 and 2002, three areas of assessment for English: Reading; Writing; and Speaking and Listening.

Syllabus content

Reading

Both the 1999 and the 2002 syllabuses required responses to a range of reading as identified in the national curriculum. This range included a play by Shakespeare; non-fiction and media texts; coverage of a range of periods and genres of literature as identified in the English literary heritage; and reading texts from other cultures.

In some syllabuses, parts of the reading requirement were supplied either through an anthology (issued to students at the start of their course of study), or through pre-release material (issued at a specified time before an examination). Such prescribed reading was comparable in standards across the two years within those syllabuses. For Edexcel there was an increase in the quantity of reading required from the anthology used by the syllabus. Whereas in 1999 the required study was five poems and four non-fiction passages, in 2002 the requirement was fourteen poems and six non-fiction passages, representing some increase in reading demand. This was the only change in reading requirements over the period of the review.

In both 1999 and 2002 there were variations across awarding bodies in the weightings given to aspects of the reading requirements. The study of poetry could account for 5 per cent or less of the overall marks for CCEA and OCR, as against 10 per cent or more for AQA (2002), and Edexcel, where the use of anthologies appeared to support a fuller representation of poetry within the reading requirements.

Writing

In both years of the review, the syllabuses required the range of writing assessed to include writing to: (i) explore, imagine, entertain; (ii) inform, explain, describe; (iii) argue, persuade, instruct; and (iv) analyse, review, comment.

The balance of types of writing required varied quite significantly across awarding bodies. Writing to analyse, review and comment had a low weighting in AQA (2002), and OCR. CCEA gave a high weighting to writing to argue and persuade, particularly in the 2002 examinations. In WJEC, writing to explore, imagine and entertain could be much more heavily weighted than the other areas

of writing combined. Where a syllabus, or its assessment, narrowed the intended range and balance of writing, this was likely to reduce the overall demand.

Speaking and Listening (AQA, Edexcel, OCR, WJEC) and Talking and Listening (CCEA)

In 1999 and 2002, syllabuses required three activities to be assessed for speaking/talking and listening, demonstrating candidates' ability to: (i) explain, describe, narrate; (ii) explore, analyse, imagine; and (iii) discuss, argue, persuade. A common approach for speaking and listening (agreed in conjunction with QCA) had already been instituted across awarding bodies at the time of the previous review. This common approach was still applied during the period of the present review, and comprised the range of assessed activities, the criteria for assessment, and the methods for moderation of assessment of standards across centres. There was nothing in these arrangements to suggest any change in the standards expected.

Schemes of assessment

Foundation and higher tiers were available in each of the syllabuses. In a common structure across awarding bodies, these tiers targeted grades C–G and A*–D respectively.

The overall schemes of assessment were similar across the awarding bodies and across the two years. Each syllabus had two externally assessed (written examination) components in both tiers, with each paper weighted at 30 per cent and including a proportion of the assessment for reading and writing. Between them, the externally assessed components for each awarding body contributed 60 per cent of the overall mark for each syllabus, 30 per cent for reading and 30 per cent for writing, and this pattern was consistent across the two years.

Written coursework accounted for 20 per cent of the overall mark for each syllabus, apportioned as 10 per cent for reading and 10 per cent for writing.

Speaking and Listening (AQA, Edexcel, OCR, WJEC) and Talking and Listening (CCEA) accounted in each case for 20 per cent of the overall mark.

Summary of schemes of assessment across both years 1999 and 2002

Awarding body	Number of components	Externally assessed (examination) components	Total length of examinations
AQA	4	2	4 hrs
CCEA	4	2	4 hrs
Edexcel	4	2	4 hrs
OCR	4	2	4 hrs 20 mins
WJEC	4	2	4 hrs

The two examination components, and the two coursework components comprised the scheme of assessment in each case. The longer examination times in the OCR syllabus included 10 minutes reading time for each examination. Syllabus reviewers judged that this additional time was commensurate with the relative demand of the reading material, and overall did not unbalance the demand across awarding bodies.

Options

The only overall optional route within each of the syllabuses was the choice between the foundation and higher tiers. The overall route was otherwise common within each syllabus.

Within written coursework and Speaking and Listening, all tasks were chosen by centres and candidates, within specified areas of content and assessment objectives.

The pattern of optional routes within papers is presented below. The same patterns applied in each case to both tiers.

Number of routes within examination papers²

	<i>First paper</i>	<i>Second paper</i>
AQA 1999	1	1
AQA 2002	3	35
CCEA 1999	1	1
CCEA 2002	1	1
Edexcel 1999	1	1
Edexcel 2002	1	1
OCR 1999	2	1
OCR 2002	2	1
WJEC 1999	5	1
WJEC 2002	5	1

While the large number of optional routes through one of the AQA 2002 papers might have posed additional burdens for standardisation of marking, it was not likely to impact on demand, as the options, across three subsections of the examination paper, offered comparable challenges. The

² The numbering system of papers was different across the awarding bodies, as was the content coverage of the papers. This table is only intended to give an overall picture of the degree of optionality within the externally assessed components.

optional titles and starting points for writing tasks in the first WJEC paper in both years were all intended to lead to narrative responses, and were judged to be similar in demand.

Question papers

There were no significant changes between the two years. Within awarding bodies the content coverage, number and type of questions remained consistent over the period. Between awarding bodies there were some differences in breadth and depth of content. CCEA and WJEC papers covered a more restricted range of types of reading and writing tasks than other awarding bodies. In CCEA the tasks were relatively straightforward for the higher tier. OCR reading material and tasks appeared to be particularly demanding, but candidates were supported by pre-release material and an allowance for reading time.

Some awarding bodies set examinations with a common theme or topic running through the questions, enabling candidates to use the reading task as a stimulus to writing. This was more common in those papers using pre-release material or anthologies, and in papers which differentiated tasks entirely across the two tiers. On the basis of the assessment materials and candidate work seen, reviewers came to no overall conclusion about the effect of this thematic coherence on the demand of the papers, or on candidates' management of the time demands of examinations.

Tiering

The overall tiering arrangements were common across the years of the review and across awarding bodies. However, there were some differences in the examining strategies used by awarding bodies. AQA (1999), Edexcel and OCR set different tasks for the foundation and higher tiers throughout their examination papers. AQA (2002), CCEA, and WJEC set separate reading tasks for the two tiers but common writing tasks. Tasks within foundation papers sometimes had more guidance on the content of responses than higher-tier tasks, but this was not consistently the case. All awarding bodies set comparative reading tasks within their higher tier, and most set such tasks in both tiers. Edexcel provided the clearest explanation of the principles of its tiering within its syllabus, and the principles were carried through into its examination papers. The different approaches to tiering did not have significant effects on levels of demand.

Coursework

The coursework requirements within awarding bodies were unchanged between 1999 and 2002, except insofar as two different syllabuses were represented in the AQA materials.

Written coursework requirements

AQA 1999	5 units: 1 Writing: (fiction) to explore, imagine, entertain 2 Writing: (non-fiction) to inform, explain, describe 3 Reading: Shakespeare 4 Reading: pre-1900 5 Reading: post-1900
AQA 2002	4 units: 1 Reading: Shakespeare 2 Reading: pre-1900 prose and post-1900 text 3 Reading: media text(s) + Writing: to analyse, review, comment 4 Writing: to explore, imagine, entertain
CCEA	4 units: 1 Reading: poetry (may include other cultures) 2 Reading: Shakespeare (as represented in another medium) 3 Writing: to argue, persuade, instruct 4 Writing: to explore, imagine, entertain
EDEXCEL	4 units: 1 Writing: to explore, imagine, entertain 2 Reading: other cultures + Writing: to analyse, review, comment 3 Reading: Shakespeare 4 Reading: prose pre-1900/1914
OCR	3 units: 1 Writing: to inform, explain, describe 2 Writing: to explore, imagine, entertain 3 Reading: Shakespeare; prose and poetry; pre- and post-1900 literature + Writing: to analyse, review, comment
WJEC	4 units: 1 Reading: Shakespeare 2 Reading: fiction or poetry pre-1900/1914 3 Reading: other cultures (any genre) 4 Free choice writing

The differences between awarding bodies reflected different ways in which requirements were met across the examination papers and coursework together. Neither the number of units nor the content coverage of coursework represented differences in demand.

Summary of key findings

- The overall conclusion was that there was no significant change over the period of the review in the syllabus requirements and examinations. The level and type of demand within each awarding body were very similar in 2002 and 1999.
- For Edexcel, the quantity of reading from the anthology was increased in 2002. This increased the opportunity for candidates to access the material in the anthology, but did not add unduly to the overall demand of the syllabus.
- Adherence to the national curriculum requirements and the Northern Ireland regulations maintained a broadly similar scheme of assessment and level of demand across the awarding bodies.
- Where there was an imbalance in the weightings given to different elements in the syllabus this lowered the demand marginally.
- Reviewers came to conclusions similar to those of the previous review about the relatively lower demand of the CCEA syllabus, though the requirement for a comparative task brought the syllabus more closely in line with other awarding bodies in 1999 and 2002 than in 1997.
- Reviewers judged, as in the previous review, that the coverage of writing in the WJEC syllabus could be unbalanced, with a relatively heavy weighting on narrative and imaginative writing.

Standards of performance at grades A, C and F 1999–2002

Materials available

In this part of the review, a sample of candidates' work from each of the key boundaries A/B, C/D and F/G was analysed for both 1999 and 2002 from all of the awarding bodies. Work comprised the external written papers together with the coursework covering Reading and Writing. There was no evidence available about performance in Speaking and Listening. Details of the scripts reviewed are given in Appendix B.

Performance descriptors

Reviewers were asked to identify key features of candidate performance in 2002, based on the work seen at the A/B, C/D and F/G grade boundaries. The reviewers drew up performance descriptors for each grade boundary, focusing on the assessment objectives as well as allowing for additional features of performance. These are set out here.

Performance at the grade A/B boundary

Reading

Candidates understood whole texts and could interpret and explain them. They could select appropriate and relevant material for a variety of purposes. They showed insight, understood implicit meanings and sustained their interpretations of text coherently. They could identify authors' purposes and intentions and show how facts and opinions might be used to support particular purposes.

They showed perceptive engagement with a range of texts, and could sustain their responses with appropriate supporting material or by developing a line of thought or argument. They could confidently identify and evaluate a range of linguistic, presentational and structural features. They could make apt comparisons within and between texts.

Writing

Candidates showed adaptability of style according to audience and purpose. They wrote clearly and fluently, and were able to engage the interest of the reader. They showed control and design in the organisation of whole texts. They wrote concisely where necessary, and developed ideas methodically and coherently, with sound use of paragraphing to underline and enhance meaning.

They used sentence structures confidently. Generally they showed evidence of either stylistic adventurousness or very good technical accuracy at this boundary.

Performance at the grade C/D boundary

Reading

Candidates had a firm grasp of the main ideas and themes of texts and they could select and summarise material or draw together points from different texts. They could retell narratives in detail. They had a clear understanding of the differences between facts and opinions, and showed some understanding of the ways in which authors' purposes and intentions are conveyed.

They could empathise with or respond to characters in literary texts. They could follow a line of argument clearly. They could draw inferences. They could offer a personal response supported by textual illustration. They showed awareness of a range of linguistic, presentational and structural features and could explain and evaluate some of them.

Writing

Candidates made suitable adaptation of form of writing to purpose, with some appropriate variety of style and register. They showed a generally secure awareness of audience. They communicated ideas in a straightforward and sometimes imaginative way. They organised information or ideas clearly, though often with thoroughness rather than selection. They showed appropriate use of paragraphing in most of their writing.

They wrote with control across some range of sentence structures, and with mostly accurate expression. They understood spelling conventions and were able to apply them with consistency. They punctuated simple sentences accurately, but they were less consistent in the punctuation of complex structures.

Performance at the grade F/G boundary

Reading

Candidates understood the main ideas and themes of texts and could restate the surface content. They could retell narratives in broad terms. They showed some awareness of the difference between facts and opinions. They selected main points when asked to discuss particular aspects of the meaning of texts. They could usually identify with writers' and characters' primary purposes and intentions.

They showed some personal engagement with the texts read. They could provide some simple response to the ways in which authors had presented their material. They could make relevant if unsupported assertions about texts. They could identify some straightforward uses of language.

Writing

Candidates showed basic awareness of the need to vary form and structure for different purposes, with some limited adaptation of register. While they sometimes had difficulty sustaining longer pieces of writing, they attempted to respond to tasks and to communicate some central ideas. They showed some control in narrative sequencing and organisation of familiar information.

They used a small range of sentence structures. They showed variable control of spelling across a generally simple vocabulary. They used some conventions of punctuation but without consistency.

Comparison of performance

There were no identifiable differences in standards between work from 1999 and 2002. Nor were there any differences in standards between awarding bodies in 2002. The concern that CCEA and WJEC might have less demand overall than other awarding bodies was not evident within the examples of candidates' work. Nor did the relatively high reading demand of some of the OCR examination material appear to be affecting the boundary standards when compared with other awarding bodies. At the grade C/D boundary reviewers found the same standards of performance in both tiers. As in the previous review, poor technical accuracy at the grade F/G boundary was a concern.

Summary of key findings

- Reviewers identified no differences in performance between 1999 and 2002.
- Reviewers found no change in standards of writing skills or technical accuracy in the years of this review. At the grade F/G boundary the standards of technical accuracy remained low.
- There were no consistent or clear differences between awarding bodies in the standards at any of the grade boundaries.
- No effects on performance were identified where pre-release material and anthologies were used, even though there were, characteristically, entirely separate examination tasks for the separate tiers, and thematic links between questions where appropriate.

Appendix A: Syllabuses used in the syllabus review

Year	Awarding body and syllabus				
1999	AQA/S (SEG) 2400P	CCEA G29	Edexcel 1202	OCR 1500	WJEC English
2002	AQA/N (NEAB) 1111	G29	1202	1500	150

Appendix B: Scripts used in the script review

	AQA		CCEA		Edexcel		OCR		WJEC	
Grade	1999	2002	1999	2002	1999	2002	1999	2002	1999	2002
A	15	15	15	15	15	13	15	15	15	15
C(H)	15	15	15	14	15	10	15	15	15	15
C(F)	15	15	15	15	15	11	15	15	14	15
F	15	15	15	5	15	8	15	15	15	15