

# Guidance from Principal Examiners

Cambridge  
International  
AS & A Level

## Cambridge International AS & A Level English Language

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# Introduction

The aim of this document is to highlight the following information:

- the key messages about each of the papers in the series
- the issues candidates faced
- how candidates could improve.

The layout of this document is shown below.

Each paper is covered separately.

## Paper 2 – Writing

### Key messages

- Candidates should focus on the instructions for each question.
- Time management is important. Spending too long on Section A leads to short responses in Section B which leads to a loss of marks. Writing a short plan is an easy way to avoid this.
- At all costs pre-prepared, formulaic answers should be avoided. They do not address the questions accurately and so cannot reach the highest marks.
- Wide reading of newspaper and magazine articles is useful preparation for this paper.

These are the general points about each paper.

In this column the specific problems identified in candidate responses are listed.

Issues identified	How candidates could improve
Responses are sometimes hampered by failing to focus on ways to establish structural control. For example, a lack of paragraphs or failure to use language devices to create effects. Tense confusions can also cause problems.	A strong command of tense, language effects and structure means that the responses engages the reader and can demonstrate a sense of place, character or atmosphere. For example, tense control can be used to separate action sequences or dialogue from description. Controlled paragraphing can organise topics or separate different characters' speeches and effective use of structure can guide the reader to focus on the given topic of the question.
Responses do not use conventions or forms sufficiently well to match the target audience.	Considering who the target audience is and adopting the language and structural techniques to match this is important. Writing a brief plan should help with this and allow a logical answer to develop.
Answers fail to address the specific requirements of the question because pre-prepared responses are used. Questions from previous papers are often (correctly) used as possible general templates for exam preparation, but candidates sometimes use these too much in the exam itself.	The words in the question should give focus to the response. If the topic for the present exam question is similar to one in a previous exam series, do not simply repeat answers from memory as there will be differences in the focus of the question.
Responses are predictable, repetitive and fail to explore a wide range of terms. In some cases they are too generalised and are not well developed.	Avoiding formulaic responses requires a thorough understanding of the format being used and an ability to analyse and use language effectively. Generalising can be avoided by writing a plan and considering how each point might be supported.
Many answers fail to achieve higher band criteria because of unclear expression and/or basic technical errors, such as wrong subject/verb agreement, spelling errors, absent punctuation, comma splicing or missing definite/indefinite articles.	A thorough understanding of the skills required in writing standard English grammar and syntax is essential to avoid the loss of marks due to technical errors.
Often an overlong section A answer is followed by a short section B, because candidates spend too much time writing a narrative response.	Careful reading of the question is needed to ensure that the specific focus is addressed in the response. Underlining key terms and writing a plan can help to avoid these problems. An overall plan for both answers is recommended and a strict adherence to spending half the available time on each section can help. Time management skills are important.

These are suggested ways in which candidates could improve their answers.

# Paper 1 – Passages

## Key messages

- Candidates need to have read, and be familiar with, the conventions and language of a range of material. This might include travel writing, memoirs, autobiographies, newspaper articles, blogs or advertisements.
- Candidates must be able to comment on the effects and qualities conveyed by words and phrases.
- Candidates should be able to comment on the way passages develop due to the use of subject, mood and tone.
- Candidates should have the ability to contrast sections of text. They should be able to identify essential aspects of language and consider this in relation to the context of the extract.
- As candidates write, they should focus precisely on the style and tone needed. To do this, they must adapt their writing according to the directed tasks.
- Technical accuracy is needed at all times.

Issues identified		How candidates could improve
Language features such as hyperbole or alliteration are simply identified. Some responses only provide a narrative of the text.	→	Demonstrate good analytical skills by interpreting the use of language in the passages and the effect this has on the reader. Language features should be exemplars of linguistic analysis.
Responses do not stay within the prescribed word limits.	→	Do not waste time by writing an opening paragraph that simply summarises the passage or introduces the audience.
The tone of the passage is confused with its subject matter, e.g. a passage is wrongly described as having a 'medical tone'. Words such as 'informal' and 'formal' are over used and are too imprecise.	→	Passages often change in tone and good responses recognise this and are able to accurately describe these changes.
Some candidates do not make full use of the reading time and in may only focus on the earlier parts of the passage.	→	Make sure that all answers are given equal time. Complete the commentary first so there is familiarity with the form, style and linguistic techniques in the passage.
Paraphrasing of the passage is not a good way to respond to the directed writing task.	→	Directed writing is an opportunity to demonstrate writing skills whilst using the style and linguistic features seen in the passage.
Candidates repeat or simply reinforce the same points where there are many things to comment on in a passage.	→	Where there are many aspects in the passage to comment on, make a point succinctly and then move onto a different example.
The implication of key words and the way they can develop an argument is often missed.	→	As well as commenting on linguistic devices, key words and their effects should be considered.
Sometimes candidates misread or forget to address all parts of the question.	→	Checking for key terms in the question is important. Using the same subheadings as in the passage can often help to inform responses and develop purposeful writing.
Providing lengthy quotations or writing about considerations outside of the passage lead to answers that lack focus.	→	Close examination of the key words and linguistic devices is required. This should be supported by short, relevant quotations. Moving away from the content of the text should be avoided.
Responses stray from the original text. For example, when responding to a passage that has an argument, candidates may simply write as a representative of one side. In other cases writing about something that is liked or disliked can distract from the style and language of the original.	→	At all times responses should use the original passage as the model for the style, tone and language. Responses must be focused and should not drift into irrelevant information or present personal views. Focus on technical accuracy is important.

## Paper 2 – Writing

### Key messages

- Candidates should focus on the instructions for each question.
- Time management is important. Spending too long on Section A leads to short responses in Section B which leads to a loss of marks. Writing a short plan is an easy way to avoid this.
- At all costs pre-prepared, formulaic answers should be avoided. They do not address the questions accurately and so cannot reach the highest marks.
- Wide reading of newspaper and magazine articles is useful preparation for this paper.

Issues identified	How candidates could improve
<p>Responses are sometimes hampered by failing to focus on ways to establish structural control. For example, a lack of paragraphs or failure to use language devices to create effects. Tense confusions can also cause problems.</p>	<p>→</p> <p>A strong command of tense, language effects and structure means that the responses engages the reader and can demonstrate a sense of place, character or atmosphere. For example, tense control can be used to separate action sequences or dialogue from description. Controlled paragraphing can organise topics or separate different characters' speeches and effective use of structure can guide the reader to focus on the given topic of the question.</p>
<p>Responses do not use conventions or forms sufficiently well to match the target audience.</p>	<p>→</p> <p>Considering who the target audience is and adopting the language and structural techniques to match this is important. Writing a brief plan should help with this and allow a logical answer to develop.</p>
<p>Answers fail to address the specific requirements of the question because pre-prepared responses are used. Questions from previous papers are often (correctly) used as possible general templates for exam preparation, but candidates sometimes use these too much in the exam itself.</p>	<p>→</p> <p>The words in the question should give focus to the response. If the topic for the present exam question is similar to one in a previous exam series, do not simply repeat answers from memory as there will be differences in the focus of the question.</p>
<p>Responses are predictable, repetitive and fail to use appropriate ideas for content.</p>	<p>→</p> <p>Avoiding formulaic responses requires a thorough understanding of the task, an original approach and a clear attempt to engage the audience with a strong sense of voice. Writing a plan can help to control the structure of the answer and encourage the use of imaginative language which creates specific effects on the reader.</p>
<p>Many answers fail to achieve higher band criteria because of unclear expression and/or basic technical errors, such as wrong subject/verb agreement, spelling errors, absent punctuation, comma splicing or missing definite/indefinite articles.</p>	<p>→</p> <p>A thorough understanding of the skills required in writing standard English grammar and syntax is essential to avoid the loss of marks due to technical errors.</p>
<p>Often an overlong section A answer is followed by a short section B, because candidates spend too much time writing a narrative response.</p>	<p>→</p> <p>Careful reading of the question is needed to ensure that the specific focus is addressed in the response. Underlining key terms and writing a plan can help to avoid these problems. An overall plan for both answers is recommended and a strict adherence to spending half the available time on each section can help.</p> <p>Time management skills are important.</p>

## Paper 3 – Text analysis

### Key messages

- Candidates should have a sound understanding of linguistics which they can apply to their own piece of directed writing.
- Candidates should be able to comment on the style and language of their writing in relation to the accompanying text.
- In reworking the original text, candidates should aim for the highest standards of accuracy and expression in their writing.
- When analysing the texts, candidates should be able to identify specific features of the text and examine and how these effects are influenced by the purpose, context and audience of the piece.

Issues identified		How candidates could improve
Rather than analysing the text, candidates often try to gain information from the exam questions or simply quote large sections of the text.	→	A sound understanding of linguistics would allow candidates to carefully analyse the texts in a comparative way.
Some responses were too brief and showed insufficient technical skill. This meant candidates were unable to express themselves clearly.	→	Candidates must practise changing the tense and point of view from the original text to suit the requirements of the question. Paying attention to details in the original text and using these in their responses should help create detailed pieces of directed writing.
In the directed writing activity answers sometimes fail to adopt an appropriate voice – for instance, if an email report is required.	→	Being able to construct sentences with the correct word-order should help convey information in a concise way. Appropriate sentence structure should help to develop a mature and authoritative tone appropriate to the task.
Candidates deal with each text separately when comparing and analysing the style and language.	→	An efficient approach is to identify the comparative points to be made and then discuss these in light of both texts. By doing this, candidates save time and are also more likely to identify and explain the differences between the texts.
Textual references are made without drawing conclusions concerning their function or lexical properties.	→	Simply identifying techniques, language and style is not enough. Candidates must comment on the effects of these and how they function within the text.
Candidates list all of the linguistic devices they can find in a text.	→	Any points raised should be supported by concise quotations. Accompanying these should be a comment showing that the candidate appreciates the effects these devices create.

## Paper 4 – Language topics

### Key messages

- Candidates should make good use of the embedded quotes from the passage whilst arguing their points.
- Answers should be full, balanced and articulate.
- Any appropriate theoretical examples should be well developed.

Issues identified		How candidates could improve
Candidates unfamiliar with the conventions of transcription are at a significant disadvantage.	→	Seeing a variety of text types will help candidates to understand different conventions. Being familiar with these will support the analysis of the texts in the examination.
Candidates simply work through the text making comments as different features appear.	→	Spotting features of the text is not enough. Candidates must consider the purpose of the text and apply theoretical analysis to what is being said or written.
Candidates fail to understand the conventions of the text presented. This can lead to incorrect description or analysis of points.	→	Careful reading and analysis of the text should help to prevent such issues as this. If there is not clear evidence for a statement, candidates should not include this in their writing.
Responses simply gave the name of theorists to support the points made.	→	Candidates should give full explanations of any relevant theoretical principles they wish to include. This helps to support the analysis and shows how any argument or counter-argument in the answer is being sustained.
Some answers begin to engage in sociological or behavioural analysis.	→	Focus must be maintained on the linguistic analysis of the texts at all times.
A restricted view of 'correct' English can often limit responses.	→	Candidates should be able to discuss 'standard' and 'non-standard' English and be able to argue for the advantages of these forms. There should also be an awareness of the differences between pidgins and creoles and how these are created and used.
Long answers discussing the history of the English language lack focus.	→	There must be a focus on the question and the emergence of a global language. Simply giving a history of language development fails to address the key parts of the question.
Answers referred to non-standard forms in a child's speech as 'mistakes' which are evidence of limited intelligence or low social status.	→	Candidates must recognise the on-going nature of language acquisition. This could be supported by the state of achievement demonstrated in the script, including tense, pronoun, turn-taking, topic management and object permanence.
Providing an overview of the subjects in covered in a conversation is sometimes offered as a response.	→	Simply stating the content of the conversation does not lead to clear analysis of the talk. Instead the context and purpose of the talk should be the main points of reference.

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