

GCSE Examiners' Report

English Literature
GCSE
Winter 2026

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Introduction

Our Principal examiners' report provides valuable feedback on the recent assessment series. It has been written by our Principal Examiners and Principal Moderators after the completion of marking and moderation, and details how candidates have performed in each unit.

This report opens with a summary of candidates' performance, including the assessment objectives/skills/topics/themes being tested, and highlights the characteristics of successful performance and where performance could be improved. It then looks in detail at each unit, pinpointing aspects that proved challenging to some candidates and suggesting some reasons as to why that might be.¹

The information found in this report provides valuable insight for practitioners to support their teaching and learning activity. We would also encourage practitioners to share this document – in its entirety or in part – with their learners to help with exam preparation, to understand how to avoid pitfalls and to add to their revision toolbox.

Further support

Document	Description	Link
Professional Learning / CPD	WJEC offers an extensive programme of online and face-to-face Professional Learning events. Access interactive feedback, review example candidate responses, gain practical ideas for the classroom and put questions to our dedicated team by registering for one of our events here.	https://www.wjec.co.uk/home/professional-learning/
Past papers	Access the bank of past papers for this qualification, including the most recent assessments. Please note that we do not make past papers available on the public website until 12 months after the examination.	Portal by WJEC or on the WJEC subject page
Grade boundary information	Grade boundaries are the minimum number of marks needed to achieve each grade. For unitised specifications grade boundaries are expressed on a Uniform Mark Scale (UMS). UMS grade boundaries remain the same every year as the range of UMS mark percentages allocated to a particular grade does not change. UMS grade boundaries are published at overall subject and unit level. For linear specifications, a single grade is awarded for the subject, rather than for each unit that contributes towards the overall grade. Grade boundaries are published on results day.	For unitised specifications click here: Results, Grade Boundaries and PRS (wjec.co.uk)

¹ Please note that where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

Exam Results Analysis	WJEC provides information to examination centres via the WJEC Portal. This is restricted to centre staff only. Access is granted to centre staff by the Examinations Officer at the centre.	Portal by WJEC
Classroom Resources	Access our extensive range of FREE classroom resources, including blended learning materials, exam walk-throughs and knowledge organisers to support teaching and learning.	https://resources.wjec.co.uk/
Bank of Professional Learning materials	Access our bank of Professional Learning materials from previous events from our secure website and additional pre-recorded materials available in the public domain.	Portal by WJEC or on the WJEC subject page.
Become an examiner with WJEC.	We are always looking to recruit new examiners or moderators. These opportunities can provide you with valuable insight into the assessment process, enhance your skill set, increase your understanding of your subject and inform your teaching.	Become an Examiner WJEC

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Executive Summary

The entry for the Unit 1 January series was lower than in previous January series, with most candidates responding to questions on *Of Mice and Men*.

The questions on both Foundation and Higher Tier posed few problems and candidates were well prepared.

In responses to the extract questions, the majority of candidates were able to write about the characters in the questions with some detail and understanding and tried to track through the extract. More successful responses focused on the writers' choice of language and imagery and probed the characters and their relationships with insight and clarity.

In responses to the essay questions, most candidates seemed clear on the assessment objectives and most engaged with the questions set. More successful responses combined the discussion of a range of specific incidents and events from the text with detailed and specific discussion of context. Less successful responses were usually brief. They showed some understanding of relevant themes and the characters but discussed them in a generalised way.

In the poetry responses, most candidates were aware of the requirement to address both poems and to compare them. However, on Foundation Tier, some candidates wrote about the poems without comparing them. This inevitably had a detrimental effect on the overall mark as the comparison element is heavily weighted in the poetry assessment.

There were still some rubric infringements, mainly on Foundation Tier and some candidates did not respond to the poetry question at all.

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UNIT 1 PROSE AND POETRY

Overview of the Unit

For this series, as has always been the case on both Higher and Foundation Tiers, *Of Mice and Men* was the most popular text by a considerable margin and a small number of candidates had studied *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Responses on these texts often showed real engagement with the themes, characters and contexts addressed in them by candidates at all levels. As expected, the arrival of the new Language and Literature specification resulted in a much smaller cohort being entered for this exam and this winter none of the candidates entered had studied *Anita and Me* or *Chanda's Secrets*, with only a very tiny number studying *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* – too few to warrant specific comment on individual questions here.

Far fewer candidates than last year on Foundation Tier addressed questions on novels which they had not studied, though this rubric infringement remained a serious problem for those concerned, limiting their chances of a grade commensurate with their abilities particularly as the time wasted usually resulted in thin, under-developed responses on the text that the candidates have actually studied. A number of candidates on Foundation Tier did not respond to the poetry at all, making it impossible for them to achieve the grade they could have.

Responses to the extract questions posed no specific problems for candidates who were all able to write about the characters in question with some detail and understanding. The vast majority tried to track through the extract focusing on specific details and making sensible comments. Better answers increasingly focused on the writers' choices of language and imagery and candidates wrote about the characters and their relationships with some insight and clear understanding of subtext.

Essay questions were generally handled well and none of the questions caused specific problems. Interestingly on Foundation Tier there was an even distribution of responses across both essay questions on *Of Mice and Men* whereas on Higher Tier an overwhelming majority of candidates opted for the 'Crooks' question. Most candidates seemed clear on the assessment objectives that needed to be covered. As has been said in previous years, more successful text essays combined the discussion of a range of specific incidents and events from the text with detailed, specific discussion of contexts relevant to the particular task set. Less successful responses were usually brief and, whilst showing some understanding of the relevant themes or characters, discussed them in a generalised way without the close reference to specific detail and specific incidents or events needed for higher marks. Comments on context in these essays were also usually more sweeping and general.

In the poetry comparison on Foundation Tier, some candidates wrote about the poems without comparing them or only wrote about one of the poems. This had a damaging effect on their overall mark, particularly considering the weighting of the different assessment objectives for this task.

As mentioned last year, centres appeared to have responded to feedback about legibility issues positively and taken the action we had hoped; using word processors proved to be very helpful for candidates with significant handwriting issues.

Comments on individual questions/sections

Extract questions

The *Of Mice and Men* extract question focused on how Steinbeck presented the character of Curley. Successful responses paid attention to both assessment objectives to address the question, tracking through the extract with close reference to specific detail. Candidates discussed Curley's appearance in detail with most commenting on the significance of his boots. They also paid close attention to how he spoke and behaved towards the newcomers. There was much sensible and sometimes thoughtful and insightful discussion of the ways Steinbeck conveyed him as cold, hostile, aggressive, unwelcoming and unfriendly. There was also some thoughtful discussion about his obsession with power and status and his potential for violence and aggression. Candidates carefully discussed his characterisation and motivations with increasing focus on Steinbeck and how he had created and portrayed these.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird* the consideration of the ways the characterisation of Jem was created was well handled by candidates on both tiers. Again, better responses tracked through the extract making focused use of the detail and discussing language choices and their effects on the reader. Candidates wrote about how impressions of Jem were created, exploring his complex range of emotions and reactions to the death of Mrs Dubose and her final gift. Better responses included some perceptive focus on Jem's relationship with Atticus, his anger and his more reflective manner at the end of the extract.

Text Essay Questions

As stated in previous years, examiners needed to take account of the extent to which candidates had addressed the different assessment objectives relevant to each question. In most essay responses, a range of relevant references to contextual factors were given to show an understanding of how they influenced characters' lives, behaviour and aspirations. Most candidates used their contextual knowledge thoughtfully to inform their response to the essay questions, although there were some responses on both tiers where there was limited reference to context and a small number of candidates included no contextual comments whatsoever.

The *Of Mice and Men* question on Crooks encouraged candidates on both tiers to look at Steinbeck's characterisation of Crooks with particular focus on how he was used to tell us about life in America in the 1930s. Most were able to refer to a range of incidents and events from across the text that showed his personality, characterisation and lack of relationships with others and consequent loneliness and isolation. They also successfully discussed what he showed about status, friendship, hopelessness, and the effects of racism, and segregation in that era. Many explored his living conditions in detail and used the incident with Curley's wife to explore his vulnerability and the impact of the endemic racism of the era. Better answers showed some appreciation of how Steinbeck shaped our understanding of Crooks and a variety of ways in which he was affected as a solitary, vulnerable and powerless character on the ranch. They thoughtfully discussed how Steinbeck used the character to illustrate key themes, and as a vehicle to illustrate, and in some cases criticise, the social beliefs and values of the time.

The second question 'there are no heroes only victims' proved less popular on Higher Tier but was nevertheless handled equally successfully. In essay questions like this it is possible to argue for or against the statement in the question or provide a balanced response and all approaches are equally valid. Most candidates were in agreement with the statement here, and wrote about various combinations of Candy, Crooks, Curley's wife and Lennie. Some however, engaged in discursive style essays involving some thought provoking and interesting debate on whether George or Slim could be considered heroes. Again, better responses discussed a range of incidents and examples to illustrate their arguments. More insightful responses explored what Steinbeck was trying to show and do, and how he was commenting on life in that era. Less effective responses on both tiers tended to be more general than specific, and while context was usually addressed to some degree, the commentary was simple and general.

For those who studied *To Kill a Mockingbird*, both tasks elicited responses across the mark range on both tiers. The question on Atticus and Alexandra was mainly handled very confidently and candidates commonly highlighted their differences, such as their attitudes to racial prejudice and gender stereotypes and their contrasting reactions to the trial. Candidates also focused their discussion on Atticus and his 'teaching' parenting style, exploring his attempts to foster empathy, thoughtfulness and understanding in Jem and Scout in contrast with Alexandra and her old-fashioned conservative attitudes. Much was made of their contrasting attitudes to Calpurnia. The most successful responses showed understanding of the ways Lee was attempting to highlight and critique society's values. Better responses showed a thorough, detailed knowledge of the text and candidates made apt selections. Less successful responses tended to refer to fewer incidents and events and had a narrower grasp of the contrasts between the two characters which were discussed in more general terms.

The alternative Higher Tier question on Maycomb encouraged candidates to discuss how the town's attitudes and values were showing signs of the beginnings of change. Most candidates showed how Maycomb illustrated the characteristics of American Society in the 1930s and they had plenty of choice and freedom of which characters and events to write about to illustrate their points. Most chose to answer the question by focusing on the prejudice, racism and sexism evident in the prevalent attitudes of the time but many saw Atticus and other characters like Miss Maudie and Calpurnia as examples of how Maycomb was potentially seeing the first signs of change. There was some interesting discussion of the ways Boo Radley was used to show how some members of Maycomb society were beginning to change and the ways the trial began to shift society's attitudes. Better responses saw how Lee was trying to use Maycomb's characteristics to highlight injustices and prejudices in 1930s America and was using the town to provide a critique of 1930s American society. At a lower-level candidates concentrated on illustrating life in Maycomb in the novel with straightforward commentary.

Poetry

Higher Tier responses to the poems about the relationships varied in their interpretations but most candidates were aware of the requirement to address both poems and to compare them. As mentioned previously however, there was a substantial minority on Foundation Tier who lost marks by not comparing the poems, even when their commentaries on one or sometimes both poems showed reasonable understanding. Since the comparison element is heavily weighted in the assessment, this inevitably had a detrimental impact on some candidates' achievement.

On Higher Tier, candidates mainly understood that the first poem was a heartfelt appreciation of the love felt for her husband combined with meditations on mortality and the awareness that they may not have too many years left. In the second poem it is never stated whether the narrator's partner has, died, or is simply late, resulting in a panic attack. We were open-minded about a range of sensible interpretations here, though the more obvious was that the partner has died or left them. Very few candidates noted that the first poem was a sonnet but that was of little consequence if they discussed a range of detail meaningfully and purposefully and most recognised the positive tone that sometimes shifted to anxiety. In the second poem, many candidates picked up on the sense of loss and regret, and better responses explored the subtext, picking phrases like 'monstrous versions of you' and 'your absence inches forward until it is standing next to me' to really try to understand the narrator's mental state and mind-set. They also gave interesting interpretations of the imagery and there were some convincing explanations of the effects of the rhyme scheme in the first poem and the contrasting moods between the two stanzas of the second poem which helped them comment meaningfully about the structure. At the top end, candidates wrote with insight about the nature of relationships and the power of emotions. As ever, examiners rewarded a willingness to interpret ideas and images even where the overall interpretation was slightly unconvincing. In the best responses candidates tracked through both poems closely exploring a wide range of detail with focused commentary on how writers had used language and imagery to create effects. They offered insightful and sensitive commentary on the themes and meanings of both poems and a confident range of comparisons were made.

On Foundation Tier, first a reminder of points made earlier in this report; a significant number of candidates do not attempt the poetry response and many more either only write on one poem or forget to include a comparison. Some write about *Anita and Me* mistakenly thinking that the extract from that text is their poetry resource. For these reasons it is strongly recommended that pupils are reminded how to navigate the whole exam paper as close to the exams as possible as a very significant number of candidates have fallen into this category in the last two exam series and these factors have a very detrimental effect on pupils' grades.

The first poem was fairly well understood by candidates. Many wrote about the contents of the handbag and explored possible interpretations of 'the letters she carried through the war' and what had become of the father. Better responses had a good go at commenting on the ending of the poem and what was shown about the mother's personality through the line 'womanliness, and love, and anguish, and war.' The second poem was more open to interpretation as it is never stated who the previous owner of the coat was and we can only surmise as to her relationship with the current owner. Consequently, there were a range of interpretations; one or two candidates took the phrases 'skin of a matron' and 'orphaned body' literally which took their interpretations in an unusual direction. Many candidates made interesting comments that it was as though she felt she was becoming the previous owner when she put the coat on. Answers achieving higher marks at this level tracked through both poems commenting on a range of detail and began to explore some uses of language and imagery and finding several points of similarity and difference between the poems. Less successful answers wrote in general terms and lacked commentary or analysis of specific details.

Summary of key points

- Read the questions very carefully and remember which assessment objectives are being assessed in each.
- In text essays, refer to events and details to support your ideas and make sure focused contextual points are linked to the question set.
- In poetry questions, figure out what is happening in each poem first and look for evidence in the poems to support each point you make.
- Think about what the writer or poet is trying to express about the characters, themes, events and ideas in their text.
- Do not answer questions on texts you have not studied and make sure you understand the layout of the whole exam paper to avoid missing the poetry question and answering unnecessary questions on extra novels.
- Continue to use word-processing arrangements for candidates with significant handwriting issues.

Supporting you

Useful contacts and links

Our friendly subject team is on hand to support you between 8.30am and 5.00pm, Monday to Friday.

Tel: 029 2240 4291

Email: gcseenglish@wjec.co.uk

Qualification webpage: [GCSE English Literature](#)

See other useful contacts here: [Useful Contacts | WJEC](#)

CPD Training / Professional Learning

Access our popular, free online CPD/PL courses to receive exam feedback and put questions to our subject team, and attend one of our face-to-face events, focused on enhancing teaching and learning, providing practical classroom ideas and developing understanding of marking and assessment.

Please find details for all our courses here: <https://www.wjec.co.uk/home/professional-learning/>

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