

C A R I B B E A N E X A M I N A T I O N S C O U N C I L

**REPORT ON CANDIDATES' WORK IN THE
CARIBBEAN SECONDARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATE[®] EXAMINATION**

MAY/JUNE 2012

**ENGLISH A
GENERAL PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION**

GENERAL COMMENTS

General performance this year declined when compared with the 2011 results. The percentage of candidates who achieved Grades I–III was 48 compared with 67 in 2011 and 66 in 2010. The overall mean was 77 compared with 88 in 2011, and 85 in 2010. The incidence of candidates being apparently wholly unprepared for the examination was higher than that of May/June 2011. Answers suggesting or demonstrating incompetence were higher in specific sections.

Generally, candidates appeared to have been taught the various aspects of the syllabus, but were unable to demonstrate the quality of skills that produce excellent responses. Most responses continue to fall into the category of being adequate. There remains strong indication that questions are not read carefully and not fully thought through, resulting in misinterpretation and inadequate responses.

DETAILED COMMENTS

Paper 01 — Multiple Choice

Performance on Paper 01 was satisfactory. Candidates generally continue to perform well on items of word choice, grammar and mechanics and on comprehension passages based on informative and persuasive discourse, and less well on literary items. Items presenting difficulty were those requiring recognition and evaluation of language devices such as irony and symbolism, as well as evaluating the use of connotative language and the choice of style in relation to the author's intention. The mean on this paper was 55 per cent compared to 64 per cent in 2011 and 57 per cent in 2010.

Paper 02 — Free Response

Section A: Summary

Question 1

This question required candidates to demonstrate skills in understanding, organization and expression. The material is usually drawn from informative discourse or exposition (essays, reports, scientific discussions, analyses) suitable to the secondary school age-group. The skills of selection and concise expression are targeted. The specific objectives are detailed in the syllabus under Understanding (a) and (b) and Expression (a), (b), (c). Included in the syllabus is the following advice: *Summaries require economy of language, the careful selection of the relevant main ideas, and the preservation of the intention of the original* (page 11).

The passage selected for May/June 2012 was considered to be well within the reading abilities of candidates. It was taken from a magazine article and required that candidate summarize a person's reflection on a very topical matter. The content focused on the nature of modern living, its negative consequences, and possible ways to avoid such consequences. The content of the passage was perceived to be familiar to candidates at this level, but many of them distorted the meaning of the passage or gave their own views on the topic. Only the very competent candidates managed to capture all the points made.

Weakness in selecting the crucial elements was exacerbated by lack of vocabulary when candidates attempted to use their own language. The age-old error of 'lifting' persists, and judging from the prevalence and persistence of this problem, it appears strongly that students are being *taught* to lift. This report draws attention to *plagiarism*, and stresses how vital it is for candidates to stay clear of the practice. A significant contributor to the candidates' difficulty is the apparent belief that the topic sentence of a paragraph must always come at the start of the paragraph. This belief is *wrong* and following it causes candidates to focus on minor features. As in the past, few candidates were able to maintain the correct relationships while reorganizing their points for brevity. They continued to cling steadfastly to both the pattern and the language of the original, a strategy that will work against conciseness. Candidates can be helped to learn how to.

- differentiate between topic and supporting sentences
- recognize the relationship between main points (cause and effect, solutions, alternatives)
- distinguish between explanations, illustrations, etc. and the main point
- determine when explanation is vital to good summary
- test their summaries for over-generalization.

The nature of summary (of the length required from candidates in the examination) is such that it eliminates all topic sentences, combining the information into a general thought (thesis). The candidate should therefore produce a single coherent paragraph. A close look at the syllabus section, *Notes and Suggested Activities* (specifically pages 6–12), will help both teacher and student to identify and hone summary skills. Strong support is also given in the new Nelson Thornes CXC English A Study Guide.

Section B: Comprehension

Section B is designed to test understanding, using two short passages, one literary and one expository. The skills tested are outlined in the syllabus under Understanding (a), (b) and (c) (pages 2–3). Each passage has a different focus: in the expository type of passage the objectives are outlined in (a) and (b); in the other – literary discourse – the greater number of questions satisfy Understanding (c). The results for Question 2 strongly suggest that reading and analysing writing of a literary nature needs to be given more attention. Pages 12–14 of the syllabus should be invaluable. Where questions require information obvious in the text, candidates gain marks, but fail to read between the lines, understand inference, purpose, techniques, and connotative language. These are areas which need to be stressed, as in the ‘real-life’ situation, the ability to penetrate the meaning of the written or spoken word is vital. Candidates with a weakness in responding to this kind of passage also find the Summary question very challenging. The mean on this question was 11 out of 30 marks.

Question 2

The selection for this question was a brief extract from a novel by Rosa Guy. The questions set followed the specific objectives of Understanding (c). This aspect of the syllabus is detailed on page 3 of the syllabus, with explanations and examples starting on page 12 (Notes and suggested activities). Questions asked for supporting quotations, recognition of atmosphere, inference to be drawn from a sequence of behaviours, and evidence. This question was poorly answered. Candidates scored marks on questions where the answers were obvious (Questions (a) and (g)). Questions that required an interpretation and the recognition of writer’s intent posed difficulties. Students should be encouraged to satisfy the requirements of questions — for example, “quote the sentence...” saw responses which quoted a few words.

Question 3

The content of this extract dealt with retirement savings: the relevance of financial literacy and the instituting of plans. This information was also within the experience and interest of the candidates. It lent itself well to factual questions, but also included questions requiring higher order skills — deduction and inferencing. The performance on this question was significantly better than on Question 2. Here again, questions that required candidates to draw inferences were challenging: for example, (f) required candidates to deduce the point that was being made; (h) tested candidates’ understanding of the message in the last sentence, and to find the sentence near the start which gave the opposite view. Candidates experienced difficulty in providing precise answers. Many candidates showed an inability to differentiate between contextual meanings and literal meanings, treating both in the same ways, as in the case of ‘roadblocks’ in Question (e). As in Question 2, there is the tendency by many candidates to cite several sentences to answer a question when a word or phrase is required. In Question (g), for example, many candidates gave unnecessary or contradictory information. The mean on this question was 8 out of 15 marks.

Section C: Story Writing

Of the three questions in this section, most candidates attempted Question 5. Question 6 was the least popular choice. Some excellent responses were generated from all topics. However, most responses were quite mundane. The use of Standard English still proves to be a challenge for too many candidates, with obvious interference from the creoles and dialects used in the region. Many stories were poor in using the elements of story writing. Students must be advised that use of the stimulus is a **requirement**. They must also be encouraged to take careful note of the rubric.

Question 4

This question used a picture of a young man, sitting under a tree, with a laptop computer on his lap as a stimulus. Around him is an array of books, some of them being study texts for CXC. Candidates seemed generally comfortable with the picture stimulus, but it did not give rise to any out-of-the-ordinary responses. Story lines tended to be similar and generally predictable. Unfortunately, some candidates failed to carry out the designated task and instead produced essays on ideas like the value of computers/technology in education. For candidates who have not learnt to discriminate among the different genres, the picture still proved to be a problem. The mean on this question was 13 out of 35 marks.

Question 5

Question 5 used as stimulus, the idea of a storm and the urgent need to warn people who were seen as being special. Very good responses came from candidates who used 'storm' metaphorically. This approach allowed creativity and freshness. While most candidates attempted this question, it proved challenging for the following reasons: many candidates seemed confused by the tense and first person narration of the stimulus. These could not transition smoothly into their stories, so the beginning was used almost as a topic. There were many instances of confusion created by changes in point of view. Too often, there was little connection between the beginning and the content of the story. The mean on this question was 14 out of 35 marks.

Question 6

Descriptive writing is a challenge for a large number of candidates. Most often, too few descriptive details are employed and too many responses are mainly narrative with some description. Candidates should be encouraged to help the audience to 'see' the situation through the details they give. Most candidates who attempted this question still needed the framework of a narrative in which the description was incorporated. This is an acceptable approach to the question, since writing 'pure' description can be quite challenging. Problems arose when candidates simply told stories with no attempt to describe. Yet, there were a few candidates who demonstrated competent descriptive writing techniques and produced interesting and lively writing, as the question "was it real or science fiction?" triggered a wide variety of ideas.

Section D: Argument

Questions 7 and 8

The topics were well within the knowledge of candidates, and some very good work emerged. Nevertheless, as has been seen in the past, too many responses lacked adequate and well reasoned arguments/points and the requisite and appropriate argumentative devices to convince or persuade their audience. Question 8 was the more popular, but better responses were written to Question 7.

Question 7 required candidates to write an essay supporting the views of either of the following speakers:

Speaker A: The government should cut subjects like Music and Visual Arts from the curriculum to save money in these hard economic times.

Speaker B: No way! I think the government should find other ways to solve economic problems!

In general, candidates tended to go off-track in Question 7. The more competent candidates made the link between solving the economic crisis without removing the subjects from the curriculum. Many candidates completely disregarded the economic factor and dealt only with the value of the Arts in education. These answers were reasonably good. Weaker essays dealt with education generally, or with what governments should do generally. The mean on this question was 14 out of 35 marks.

Question 8 required a strong argument supporting or opposing the moot — “Education is the only avenue for success in today’s world”. There was much rambling and narration of anecdotes, rather than a focus on arguing the point. More careful reading and attention to the thrust of the topic “Education is the only avenue...” was needed. The mean on this question was 13 out of 35 marks.

Recommendations for Teachers

- The quality of answers in Argument suggests that time management is an issue for many candidates. The main evidence of this is the extended length of answers for Section C, followed by short, unplanned and therefore poor quality arguments. Students would benefit from some coaching in how to manage their time.
- The problem in Section C is partly caused by unawareness of the elements of short story, and of effective ways to use the strategies that will develop the stories. Students need experience in editing to get rid of details which do not help the story. For example, students will give a long list of friends who attended a party when those friends have nothing to do with the outcome; or they will spend time describing a morning when they need to focus on the night the event took place.

The points following have been made before, but bear repeating in this report since they persist.

- It is clear that large numbers of students across the Caribbean have not mastered the use of Standard English. There continues to be interference from dialects and patois used throughout the region; to these have been added the slangs originating from dancehall music and the North American ghettos and the abbreviations familiar to users of the messaging media of modern technology. For students who almost abhor reading, some methods must be found to encourage correct use of the language.
- Teachers need to continue to pay attention to having students use their own words when summarizing and to employ transitional words and phrases in order to develop their responses into a coherent whole. Oral and written exercises should be used to introduce these words into the active vocabulary of students. Practice in construction shifts and equivalent sentences would be useful.
- The teaching of comprehension can be combined with the teaching of summary as both require thoughtful reading and understanding of meaning.
- Students should be helped to focus on interpretation; much practice in listening, reading and reproducing meaning and attention to accuracy is necessary. Sensitivity to how words and sentences work in the language is important.
- Students need to develop a firm grasp of language structure through exposure — if necessary, in class — to the reading of good literature. This includes focusing their attention to paragraphing, grammar, spelling, diction and other conventions of writing.
- Students should be given ample practice in recognizing and using the elements of story writing and descriptive writing.
- Greater use should be made of literature to teach writing — immersion into how stories work.
- Strategies should be engaged to provide individual help to students so that individual needs can be addressed.