GCSE

English Language

8700/2

Report on the Examination

November 2025

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Summary

Overall performance compared to last year

Performance this November has demonstrated that the level of students' skills as exemplified in the exam is stable. The mean mark for this series is 34.3 marks which is slightly higher than the mean mark in November 2024 of 32.8 marks. This suggests that a rise in the number of students sitting the exam this November – an increase from 48,000 entries in November 2024 to 59,000 entries in November 2025 – has seen the level of performance sustained and very slightly improved, although there are likely to be a number of factors affecting any difference in performance.

Question paper and source texts

The source texts used in this series are based on houses and renovations. The texts were written 150 years apart but both deal with the challenges of maintaining and renovating homes where people live. In 'Manifesto', published in 2021, Bernardine Evaristo writes autobiographically about her childhood home and conveys her shifting perspectives on what the house represented for her as a child – frustration and embarrassment – and as an adult – gratitude and appreciation. On the other hand, Octavia Hill writes in 1869, in an essay entitled 'Organised Work Among the Poor', about how she took ownership of a group of houses in London with the intention of renovating them and improving the conditions experienced by the tenants. Students engaged enthusiastically with the concept of home improvements and responded to the various motivations and perspectives expressed by the two writers about their experiences.

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Assessment objectives

AO	Common student errors
AO1 Identify and interpret explicit and implicit information and ideas. Select and synthesise evidence from different texts.	Students often found it easier to make inferences about the ideas in the texts than to synthesise what they understood and make connections between the two texts.
AO2 Explain, comment on and analyse how writers use language and structure to achieve effects and influence readers, using relevant subject terminology to support their views.	Students found it difficult to make good choices of language examples from the given section of text and often resorted to using synonyms to explain the meaning of adjectives, for example.
AO3 Compare writers' ideas and perspectives, as well as how these are conveyed, across two or more texts	Students offered some understanding and comparison of perspectives, but many students did not comment on the methods used by either of the writers.
AO5 Communicate clearly, effectively and imaginatively, selecting and adapting tone, style and register for different forms, purposes and audiences. Organise information and ideas, using structural and grammatical features to support coherence and cohesion of texts.	Although the terms of the task were clearly well-understood, many students struggled to generate concrete ideas to help them develop their arguments clearly.
AO6 Students must use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.	The most common errors were those of demarcation and agreement. Many students found it difficult to control the agreement of their sentences and demarcate them securely with full stops or other appropriate punctuation

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Individual questions

Question 1

Performance on Question 1 was at the higher end of the range of achievement, with 75% of students awarded the full four marks. This is very similar to the 76% in November 2023 who were also awarded four marks, but much higher than the 40% who scored full marks in November 2024. The reason for the variation in marks across different series is to do with the nature of the statements and the possibility of students misunderstanding the specific vocabulary or phrasing in the text. It is not a straight-forward task to predict which words, phrases or ideas students will find challenging to retrieve accurately. There was a combination of explicit information and implicit ideas in the designated section of text in Source A, as has been the case in previous series.

Common strengths

The students who scored full marks were able to identify the information accurately; made effective inferences regarding the narrator's experience and were able to track the information in the eight statements chronologically through the given extract. There was a far higher incidence of correctly completed answers in this series, which is a positive sign of improvement. Students were able to process the eight statements methodically and make their choices systematically, recording their answers clearly and efficiently.

Common misunderstandings

There were several statements which students found challenging. To identify statement A (The house was new and modern) as false, students needed to understand that the house described as 'Victorian' meant it was built at least a century earlier. Likewise, students needed to interpret the word 'rundown' as meaning it was neglected and therefore in less than perfect condition to select statement D as true (The house was in poor condition). The two other statements commonly selected incorrectly by students were statements G and H which both required students to engage with the slightly ironic and idiomatic style of the writer. To identify statement G as correct (Concrete flooring and walls are now seen as fashionable) students needed to infer that 'hip urban hangouts' are fashionable places. A significant number of students selected statement H as correct (The writer's parents were explorers), adopting a literal understanding of the writer's ironic assertion that her parents were 'actually interior design pioneers.'

It continues to be frustrating that a significant number of students select more than four statements as true. This results in an automatic reduction in the student's mark as for each choice they make beyond the required four, they lose one mark. Students must be made aware that if they hedge their bets and chose more than four statements, they are only penalising themselves.

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Question 2

The question focused on the work being carried out to improve the houses in each text. There was ample material for students to draw on with the house in Source A being described as rundown and as an ongoing project. There were details of walls rebuilt only to fall down again, a garage built without a roof and the interior left undecorated for decades with bare walls and floors. In Source B, the houses were described to be in disgraceful condition, with further lists of poor infrastructure and interior problems being worked on by the new owner.

There was plenty to infer across the two texts, with the work on the house in Source A demonstrating a level of incompetence, inexperience, disorganisation and procrastination on the part of the writer's father; as opposed to the impressive level of organisation, experience, pragmatism and stern decision-making of the owner of the properties in Source B. There were fewer instances of students being distracted by the writers' attitudes and a better focus on the work itself than in previous series, which is reassuring. Indeed, examiners reported that Q2 saw some of the best and most comprehensive answers to the three longer reading questions in Section A.

Common strengths in responses

The strongest responses were those where the students made clear interpretations about the work being carried out. Those working at Level 3 were often able to identify the catalogue of failed, amateur attempts to repair the house in Source A where the basics of home improvement were carried out with limited success; or in Source B to comment on the planning and execution of a list of works, which suggested a strategic overview and determined focus on achieving the overall aim.

Students were also required to synthesise their ideas, at Level 3 offering a 'like for like' synthesis. For example, the degree to which the home improvement tasks were completed or left unfinished, and the professionalism of one schedule of works compared to the amateur efforts of the other. Finding a common factor between the two texts – such as how far the works were completed – is key to a Level 3 synthesis of ideas.

To achieve Level 4, students needed to extend their understanding in detail or to be perceptive. Such responses were rare but there were some students who were able to explore the random, haphazard approach of the father in Source A who spontaneously started jobs but inexplicably never finished even the most basic requirements, such as the roof. This contrasted with the owner of the houses in Source B who appeared to plan and organise the works, managing a team of professionals to ensure the works were carried out and completed in a timely and disciplined manner.

Common misunderstandings

There were many weaker responses where students struggled to do more than select quotations and paraphrase or repeat details about the works being carried out on both

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houses. These were typically awarded marks in Level 1. Students working at level 2 were often able to comment on the work being carried out and identify this as lazy or unfinished in Source A and quick to get started or strict in Source B, but without the explanation which would have moved them into Level 3 as clear. The differences identified by students at Level 2 tend to be mismatched, with students typically linking the failure to finish the roof of the garage in Source A with the piles of rubbish which need clearing in Source B. Students need to focus these differences on common aspects from both texts in order to move into Level 3.

Question 3

The task in Q3 was to explain how the writer in Source B uses language to describe the houses and their surroundings.

There was a slightly narrower range of language features to choose from and, as usual, students tended to opt for the same few: 'the damp crept up the outer walls'; 'like a slow tide' 'the smaller children clawed' and the numerous lists used to show the accumulation of detritus. Many students demonstrated that they were able to select these details appropriately and identify them using the right subject terms but were unable to comment clearly on their effects. This is the key skill and determines the level. Naming language features and selecting details are supporting skills and cannot determine the student's overall level.

Common strengths in responses

Students rewarded at Level 3 offered clear explanations of effects, for example, of how the writer used a simile to describe the progress of the *damp* creeping up the walls as if it were a thief or an intruder, secretly, silently infiltrating the houses without being seen or noticed. Similarly, they took the image of the tide and explained how the simile reflects the stealthy, unstoppable progress of the damp, like the sea moving up the beach as the tide comes in.

Responses at Level 4 were rare. Some students were able to comment on the image of the children clawing by providing an accumulation of detail in their analysis of the connotations and ideas created by the language choice, explaining how this created the effect of dehumanising the children, creating an image of feral creatures, reduced by poverty or hunger to behave like animals amongst the kitchen waste, grasping at anything edible with claws rather than hands in their eagerness to find food. It is in the building up of detail that students can move into Level 4, as well as by offering perceptive or conceptualised understanding of language.

Common misunderstandings

At Level 1, students tended to select examples of language and identify language techniques with more or less accuracy, but offered a generic or generalised comment, such as '…which shows us how bad the houses were.' Students often selected more challenging words such as 'dilapidated' which they could only offer a generalised comment on, such as to say how

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disgusting it was. They tended to choose adjectives to write about, not recognising that they would be difficult to explore in sufficient detail to move into Level 2.

The vast majority of students were rewarded with marks in Level 2, indicating that they were able to make some attempt to comment on the effects, but they did not fully explain how or why the writer had chosen that particular word, phrase or image, often providing inferential understanding instead of analysis of language. Many students offered comments on the personification of the *bins* and the *puddles* in the text which were *standing* in the courtyard. They attempted a variety of ways to explain why they stood there, like soldiers, guardians, or symbolic of the rubbish everywhere. This misidentification of the language device was rewarded at Level 2 as they were attempts to engage with the language but there is nothing to suggest from the text that this was the writer's intention and they were therefore not rewarded as clear.

Question 4

The task in Question 4 was to compare the writers' feelings and perspectives about their experiences of their respective houses. This expanded the focus beyond the renovations and home improvements which were the focus of Q2 and invited students to engage with a broader view of their experiences overall. In Source A, this enabled students to shift their focus away from the writer's father and his 'cack-handed' DIY and engage with Evaristo's perspectives on her childhood home. There were several different sections to focus on: from her embarrassment about her house and family standing out as unconventional; her jealousy of her friend's normal, suburban home; her irritation at having to share a bedroom with her siblings; and finally a sense of gratitude and appreciation for the warmth and freedom of her chaotic home.

In Source B, students were divided between those who saw Octavia Hill as a ruthless landlord, driven to improve the condition of her properties to maximise her profits and eject any unsuitable tenants along the way, and those who interpreted her actions as those of a social reforming, philanthropic owner of properties who sought to provide decent conditions at a fair rent for those tenants willing to collaborate with her mission. Either interpretation was accepted as valid, given that it was explained and supported by appropriate textual detail.

Common strengths in responses

Students found it easier to show clear understanding when they selected a discrete section of text in Source A. Many students were able to move into Level 3 on the basis of their clear understanding of Evaristo's frustration at sharing a room with her sister, with all that suggested about a teenager's need for freedom and independence, or the jealousy she felt in seeing her friend's luxurious suburban home and comparing how fortunate she felt the friend was to live somewhere that wasn't a continuous DIY project. Students interpreting Hill's actions as motivated by compassion were more likely to be clear as they were able to support their understanding by quotations where she expounds the joy and authority she felt in improving others' lives.

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The best responses were where students viewed the two extracts as a whole and recognised that Evaristo's childish frustrations and jealousy were a sign of her immaturity and only in retrospect was she able to appreciate with some gratitude that they had provided her with the freedom to make autonomous choices as an adult. Some Level 4 students identified the house as an extended metaphor or symbol of her childhood. Others compared the levels of responsibility felt by Evaristo as a powerless child living in her rundown house as opposed to Hill's professional and moral responsibility to renovate and repair the houses for the sake of her many tenants.

Common misunderstandings

Many students identified and compared the writers' feelings as being 'proud' or 'grateful' in Source A or feeling a sense of 'joy and 'power' in Source B. Unfortunately, these comments reused the same words used by the writers themselves to describe their feelings and could therefore be judged only as simple understanding in Level 1. Students needed to qualify their understanding by finding synonyms to use or explaining what they understood about her gratitude in Source A, for example or her joy in Source B. Too many students did not comment on methods at all and thereby limited themselves to the bottom half of the level. They need to select quotations which are sufficiently rich to provide them with opportunities to comment on how the writers' feelings are conveyed, as well as showing their understanding. It is a key skill for Q4.

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Question 5

The task in Q5 invited students to write a speech for their school or college peers to argue their point of view on the idea that happiness and success are the result of determination and hard work rather than luck or where we are from. This gave students six relatively abstract ideas to play with in their answers. Students appeared to understand and engage well with all these concepts.

There are some genuine positives to report in terms of structuring arguments; sequencing of ideas; incorporating introductions and conclusions; offering a range of appropriate rhetorical devices and adapting tone and style to suit audience and purpose. This was particularly noticeable as students were routinely able to channel the many assemblies and tutorial sessions they had attended and repeat many of the remonstrations and pleading of their teachers to work harder and show their grit and determination in school or college. These were all strengths which were very satisfying to note.

Where students struggled was in generating ideas and developing those ideas into coherent, connected points of view. The task offered students, if they chose, the opportunity to explore their own definitions of concepts such as happiness or luck, and many did precisely that. There was, as always, the chance to agree or disagree with the statement. Although the majority chose to agree with the statement and presented homilies on the value of hard work, others took a different approach and explored the inequalities in society which mean that some start well ahead of others in the race of life, often asking the audience to compare the lives of two very different students and their learning environments. On this occasion, students who disagreed tended to find a richer vein of ideas to develop than those who simply agreed. This is not always the case.

As has been stated before in this report, but it is worth repeating - general, abstract ideas are encouraged in the writing task, but they need to be substantiated by specific examples and granular explanation. The reverse is also true: personal anecdotes and experience are also welcome but need to be expanded to take in the bigger picture and the big ideas.

Common strengths

The best responses were those where the student presented a coherent response to the statement which included some clear ideas about the concepts of happiness and success. Many offered suggestions about the power of generational wealth; the influence of having celebrity parents or the impact of private education on the life chances of a student. They were able to provide concrete examples of where young people had bucked the trend of their working-class peers to succeed against the odds, or conversely to bemoan the impossibility of achieving success when politics and society were stacked against you from the start.

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Students working at Level 3 developed their ideas within paragraphs, clearly explaining what lessons were learnt, how we have benefited from learning about them and how we should continue to appreciate their sacrifice. These clear connected ideas were expressed using a range of vocabulary clearly chosen for effect, with a scattering of linguistic devices used to engage their readers. Technically, responses at Level 3 were characterised by the word 'mostly' in that their range of punctuation, sentence control and spelling were mostly accurate, with a variety of sentence forms deployed for impact.

The very best responses were, as expected, few and far between in the November series, but there were some examples of compelling arguments. Students working at Level 4 were able to offer an original perspective, such as that of the student hoping to be an actor and finding that the progeny of celebrities are several rungs above her on the staircase to fame, criticising the instant notoriety of the Kardashians, for example – famous only for being famous – who have never done a hard day's work in their lives and trade on nothing more than their charisma on the fast track to success. The tone and style of these Level 4 responses are typically characterised by a sense of confidence, conviction and consistency.

These responses tend to be detailed and offer more complex ideas, reflecting the critical thinking and conscious crafting of the students. Technically, these responses are not without error but demonstrate either an ambitious range of skill or a higher level of accuracy. Students working at Level 4 are likely to be evidencing a confident and assured control of a range of more complex grammatical structures and a wider and more diverse range of punctuation, along with a more ambitious vocabulary which enables them to demonstrate the most complex and accurate spellings. However, the separation of the content and accuracy marks allows examiners to reward students for the quality of their ideas, regardless of the technical inaccuracies, as the AO6 mark is a completely independent judgement.

Common misunderstandings

In Level 1 responses, students typically took the six ideas in the statement and offered them back to the audience in the same or a different order. This over-dependence on the ideas in the statement meant that they provided only very simple ideas of their own and were often unable to demonstrate any variety in their own vocabulary. Level 1 responses tended to be brief and under-developed, with few attempts to sequence or link ideas or to structure their speech into paragraphs. There were occasional linguistic devices used and where they were deployed, students tended to demonstrate some technical skill too, in varying their sentence forms or increasing their range of punctuation.

At Level 2, students typically offered generalised responses; those who were able to offer a more interesting variety of relevant ideas were likely to be rewarded at the upper end of the level. Some students focused their answer on the importance of hard work and determination and tried to explain how these are linked to happiness and success without much sense of what they understood by those terms. Success was frequently assumed to be financial or professional and happiness was often tacked on as an additional benefit of either/both, without exploring the possibility that happiness could stem from any other aspect of life. At the lower end of Level 2, there was little offered other than repeated exhortations that the audience should work harder and be more determined because they could achieve anything. Without the addition of concrete examples and ideas to support these assertions, students struggled to move into Upper Level 2 or indeed into Level 3.

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There was some evidence at Level 2 of an intent to demonstrate variety of sentence structures and, as a consequence, of punctuation too, which is often the result of the use of a range of linguistic devices and is something worth encouraging students to consider as it provides dual benefits, for both AO5 and AO6. Poor control of agreement continues to be an issue, particularly for those students working in a second or third language. This is clearly an area for improvement but not one which is easy to target in the short space of time between the start of term and the November exam.

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