English A extended essay

For grade boundary information, please refer to the Grade boundaries for Diploma programme coordinators document available on the PRC.

Extended essay

The range and suitability of the work submitted

Examiners reported a reasonably wide range of literature (categories 1 and 2) and text types (category 3) that, even when the script was not particularly strong, did point towards candidates taking ownership of the EE. However, popular authors and texts continue to be recycled (Atwood, Orwell, Huxley, Scott **Fitzgerald and indeed anything considered 'dystopian') which some candidates can struggle to use** purposefully. In terms of suitability, particularly when it comes to RQs, it is important to stress that this is a Language and Literature EE and while social or cultural issues and the lure of the zeitgeist may inspire candidates the primary focus should be close literary or linguistic textual analysis, and this was not always the case.

Category 1

A range of literature was selected though a over-reliance on white Western authors (Wilde and Tolkien in particular this year) with questions of identity endures. However, this year did see a notable increase in the use of African, Asian, Middle Eastern, Australasian, and South American literature that was encouraging with evidence of palpable enthusiasm for the texts, which is to be welcomed. Prose continues to be the most popular genre though where poetry is selected, we continue to see some thoughtful and focused work (for example, an insightful analysis of the work of Ada Limon) with an increasing interest in the work of Rupi Kaur. Some interesting dramatic texts were explored this year (for example, indigenous Australian **playwrights and Kane's** *4.48 psychosis*) that moved beyond the conventional focus on Miller and Shakespeare.

Category 2

Category 2 submissions continue to often be well-considered with thoughtful textual choices and pointed analysis that can result in strong and well-forged arguments. There were some interesting pieces this year exploring classical texts alongside recent re-**workings, such as Miller's** *Circe*. Weaker category 2 essays tend to make less informed text selections and end up presenting two disparate discussions. Indeed, candidates can struggle with the comparative element of category 2 and need to be mindful of its centrality when selecting this category. Again, some texts were selected to make a social or cultural observation and the textual analysis tended to get left behind. Schools also need to ensure that candidates are complying with the component rubric regarding not selecting two texts in translation.

Category 3

Category 3 seems to offer a fertile space for candidates to explore their own interests; however, this can result in the central exploration of language being left behind in favour of issue-based or context heavy discussions. Along with the conventional choice of political speeches (Trump a very popular choice) and advertisements (often questioning gender representation) examiners are increasingly seeing a notable rise in the popularity of song lyrics, specifically rap, and in particular the work of Kendrick Lamar that are submitted as category 3s. Please note that song lyrics are considered literary texts belonging in the poetic

literary form (see EE guide). Therefore, a*n extended essay focusing on song lyrics will be either a category 1 essay if the texts are not in translation or a category 2 essay if there is a comparison involved between a text written originally in the language of the essay and others written in another language.* There were several EEs that focused on comic books, video games and specific varieties of English that failed to clearly identify specific texts under analysis and thus struggled to shift past a general discussion of medium or context. There has been an increased interest in film, and in particular TV, with a wide range in performance. Where candidates are clearly focused on identifying and exploring the interaction between specific verbal and/or non-verbal modalities and ground that analysis in the screenplay the work tended to be stronger (for example, a thoughtful analysis of the *Sherlock* TV adaption). However, some candidates were lacking both the subject knowledge and appropriate terminology required for this type of textual analysis and this was reflected in the marks awarded. Thus, schools and supervisors have a responsibility here to ensure candidates are supported in selecting categories they have the requisite skill set and knowledge and understanding to tackle.

Candidate performance against each criterion

Criterion A: focus and method

Where the research question is clear and focused on exploring a specific feature of the text/s it tends to serve the candidate well. However, examiners are still seeing research questions that are not posed as a question and that are convoluted or are too broad, along with research questions that are clearly formulated but not consistently explored or addressed. There also seems an increase in the number of research questions that are politicised with a focus on globalised socio-cultural issues, such as racism or gender, with the text/s almost a footnote for a wider sociological or philosophical discussion. In support of the research questions, introductions vary widely in effectiveness ranging from the purposeful introduction that clearly frames the research question – contextualising the research, outlining methodology, justifying the topic, and providing a rationale for text selection - to those that struggle to shift past a recap of narrative and plot.

Most EEs did include a literature review of some sort; however, these are variable with EEs at one end of the scale including no literature review or with one listing for questionable sources such as Shmoop or SparkNotes, while at the other end we see reams of references that the candidate struggles to use purposefully to construct an informed and balanced argument. Indeed, there is a particular type of candidate that presents an EE that relies far too heavily on secondary sources to construct an argument at the expense of their own close textual analysis, and this results in a piece that is little more than an extended literature review. Therefore, candidates need to be encouraged to be mindful of balance and be **judicious and select secondary texts that they 'use' to inform and develop their own crafted analysis.** Stronger candidates engage critically with secondary sources and challenge assertions that are integrated into their own argument while weaker scripts merely report or describe them often in place of their own analysis.

Criterion B: knowledge and understanding

Knowledge is generally good, understanding sometimes less so with weaker candidates resting on description and a retelling of narrative and plot at the expense of close analysis of literary or language features. This can particularly be the case for knowledge and understanding of socio-cultural and historical context where candidates can make grossly generalised assertions about periods, attitudes, and experiences that they awkwardly try to map onto the text/s.

Examiners observed that students who often displayed a generally sound to good knowledge and understanding of their primary text/s sometimes struggled to match this with use of appropriate terminology. For example, if candidates are going to approach a text through a multimodal lens, then they

do need some work on developing a sound knowledge and understanding of the discipline and key concepts and ideas in this subject area before launching into a category 3 piece. Critical theory was often presented and sometimes grappled with, but middling and weaker students often stop at presenting this theory struggling to know how to 'use' it and thus fail to integrate it into a coherent argument. This can often be the case where feminist theory is drawn from, and texts boldly declared as feminist.

Criterion C: critical thinking

With 12 marks available it is not surprising that this is where examiners see the widest range of performance, and thus marks awarded, with the most common weakness a struggle to shift past description with limited and underdeveloped analysis.

Description most commonly takes the form of a simple recount of narrative and/or plot or a description of characters and their relationships. Equally, with essays that take a context heavy approach there is a sustained description of social, cultural, or historical context and often biography of the text producer (at times awkwardly conflated with the text) that it not used in any purposeful way to inform analysis.

Candidates are often providing sound interpretation and assertions that demonstrate encouraging thought about an aspect or specific feature of a text, but these are not always clearly and consistently (a) supported with specific evidence and/or (b) explored or discussed in terms of their meaning, significance and/or effect. Indeed, a lack of clear and specific substantiation is more common than would be expected and thus some assertions struggle to shift past conjecture. Equally, where evidence is included, it is not always being (a) effectively integrated and presented and (b) 'used' with candidates presenting evidence (often in the form of a quotation) and then leaving the reader (or in some cases a secondary source) to do the analytical work.

There is also a tendency (often with those works strongly focused on a socio-cultural issue) to be reductive and boldly declare texts as feminist, racist or Marxist with a limited attempt to substantiate this claim. Indeed, critical evaluation of research that is clearly relevant to the research question distinguishes the stronger scripts. This is often accompanied with an avoidance of generalisation and a thoughtful and careful integration of context that feeds into and informs the textual analysis.

Most scripts had an identifiable structure but the more effective tended to skilfully use structure to engender pointed analysis with thoughtful and progressive headings that were in conversation with the research question, clear topic sentences, thesis statements, paragraphs constructed to facilitate systematic analysis and purposeful conclusions that moved beyond a repeat of the introduction.

Criterion D: presentation

While many candidates perform well here, examiners are consistently surprised, and concerned, by the number of scripts that are submitted that are poorly presented. Missing elements are more common than expected with missing titles, no table of contents (and where one is included it is poorly presented and/or the sub-headings vague and thus ineffective); no page numbers; poorly formatted pages and poorly presented and/or integrated quotations or visual evidence that sadly suggests a carelessness and lack of close edit. Structure of work could often be improved with more thought given to the purpose and impact of sub-headings, and many students are still including identifiers on their cover page – these should not be included. The inclusion and presentation of visual evidence in category 3 essays can often be poor. Category 3 essays that include consideration of visual elements should include these visuals as evidence in the body of the essay as they would any other evidence - or at the very least include them as an appendix and give some thought to their careful integration. With a clear understanding of the requirements for criterion D and some time spent carefully planning and editing work there is no reason candidates cannot easily secure a score of 3-4 here. There were also several EEs this session with low word counts and, of course, this is self-penalising and will impact marks available across the criterion.

While the completeness of references is not assessed, examiners do escalate issues with referencing to the IB for further investigation. While most candidates do reference their sources, this continues to be problematic for some with missing, partial and/or poorly presented bibliographies with missing citations (sometimes for the primary text), cumbersome and/or poorly presented footnotes and in some cases no in-text references at all thus raising potential concerns around academic integrity. While it is clear that some candidates have some idea how to reference their sources it seems that a number of candidates do **not understand the basic principles of academic integrity and 'why' we reference. Schools and supervisors** need to ensure that time is spent with candidates enabling this and should ensure that they incorporate the document entitled *Effective citing and referencing* (available on the PRC) into their EE preparation opportunities with students.

Criterion E: engagement

Examiners were unanimous in expressing concern that many candidates are not fully taking advantage of the opportunities offered by this criterion with a struggle to shift past description holding many candidates back from the higher mark band of 5-6. Indeed, reflection does not always seem a central part of the research process but something that is done at the end. Some reflections read as almost generic cut and paste comments that do not clearly demonstrate individual personal engagement, reflection on process or intellectual initiative.

The EE is not a set classroom essay but a piece of independent research so candidates should be encouraged to view themselves as researchers and consider their own active involvement in and impact on the process (and final product) from the start, particularly when dealing with sensitive socio-cultural issues or questions of identity where the candidate has a strong personal position they wish to advocate. Teachers and supervisors should encourage some reflexivity and enable students to view themselves as active creators rather than passive recyclers of received ideas and views.

Effective reflections sustain a clear and purposeful sense of individual voice throughout. Researcher/writer voice varies widely from reflections that communicate little sense of agency where there is no real sense **of the candidate's voice and experience, to intensely personalised accounts that demonstrate a candour** that it is to be congratulated but that do not always focus on and thus meet the criterion.

Process is often restricted to a chronological account of what was done when (often focused on supervisory recommendations) with little to no evidence of analytical thinking re decisions made and their impact. Candidates need to be reflecting on the development of ideas, possible shifts and changes made in response to the research and writing process with some account of what they have learned about themselves through this process as a learner and critical thinker.

Candidates often struggle to explore and discuss challenges beyond the confessional about poor time management and/or motivation. What were the challenges? How were they overcome and what has been learned from them? Again, skills learned or developed are often overlooked beyond the conventional mention of learning to reference with no real consideration of the significance, relevance, or impact of that learning.

There is a tendency for some candidates who have clearly been captivated by a text or theory to use the RPPF as a platform for demonstrating their understanding of said text and/or theory and use this space to replicate the content of their EE. While these often communicate enthusiasm and engagement the process is often left behind with little on challenges or skills acquired and so again the descriptors of the criterion are not being fully met.

In the 2018 English A EE subject report it was stressed that candidates (and possibly some supervisors) did not appear to appreciate the purpose of the RPPF and rationale for its weighting in the assessment criteria,

and it recommended candidates were encouraged to take the RPPF more seriously. That advice is strongly reiterated this session.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

Some candidates are clearly suffering as a result of a lack of and/or poor supervisory guidance and support throughout the process and this impacts the quality of work submitted and thus grades available to the candidate. In view of this the following recommendations are made:

- More work on supporting candidates with the formation of research questions that sustain a clear and specific focus.
- Supervisors should be encouraging and enabling candidates to think carefully about their choices - selection of both category and text/s - and ensure the student has the requisite disciplinary knowledge and understanding to perform their chosen task.
- More work on terminology and use of that terminology in their work.
- Clear(er) guidance and support for presentation of work.
- Advising caution with research questions that sustain a heavy socio-cultural focus that is not consistently and clearly explored through the lens of the text/s.
- Ensuring as stated in the 2018 English A EE subject report that category 3 essays must be based on an identifiable text or texts, and not just a general discussion of an issue.
- Closer and more work is needed with candidates selecting to engage with category 3 texts, particularly those where multiple modes of meaning are being explored, such as film and TV, to ensure said candidates are equipped to cope with the demands of this type of text selection and that the EE meets the requirements for an English A rather than Film EE.
- More support with and work on reflection as an active and ongoing process and the enabling and nurturing of candidate voice for the RPPF.

Further comments

Supervisory comments are intended to provide some context for the EE and the three meetings and are not included as a means for supervisors to instruct the examiner what grade should be awarded or to attempt to influence their decision in either direction. They should also be anonymised.

Candidates must not be selecting texts that they have already studied in class.