



Course report 2024

National 5 English

This report provides information on candidates' performance. Teachers, lecturers and assessors may find it useful when preparing candidates for future assessment. The report is intended to be constructive and informative, and to promote better understanding. You should read the report with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

We compiled the statistics in this report before we completed the 2024 appeals process.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2023: 48,999

Number of resulted entries in 2024: 49,925

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade.

A	Number of candidates	18,521	Percentage	37.1	Cumulative percentage	37.1	Minimum mark required	72
B	Number of candidates	13,722	Percentage	27.5	Cumulative percentage	64.6	Minimum mark required	61
C	Number of candidates	9,837	Percentage	19.7	Cumulative percentage	84.3	Minimum mark required	50
D	Number of candidates	5,163	Percentage	10.3	Cumulative percentage	94.6	Minimum mark required	39
No award	Number of candidates	2,682	Percentage	5.4	Cumulative percentage	100	Minimum mark required	N/A

We have not applied rounding to these statistics.

You can read the general commentary on grade boundaries in the appendix.

In this report:

- ◆ 'most' means greater than 70%
- ◆ 'many' means 50% to 69%
- ◆ 'some' means 25% to 49%
- ◆ 'a few' means less than 25%

You can find more statistical reports on the [statistics and information](#) page of our website.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Across all components, the assessments performed as expected and provided opportunities for candidates to demonstrate what they had learned during the course.

Markers noted that candidates were generally well prepared and had a good understanding of the requirements of the question papers.

There was an increase of approximately 1,000 candidates from last year. The cohort has increased by 4,000 since 2019.

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

This question paper performed as expected and assessed candidates in the skills of reading for understanding, analysis and evaluation at SCQF level 5.

The unseen non-fiction passage 'Random acts of kindness' was adapted from a piece of feature writing in *The Observer* by Sally Howard. We received positive feedback from candidates who responded well to the passage's themes of generosity and selflessness. Feedback from teachers and lecturers suggested there was appropriate challenge in the level of reading and the skills assessed. In most candidate responses to questions, they demonstrated a good understanding of the content and ideas contained in the passage and were able to offer detailed analysis and evaluation of the writer's use of language.

Most questions sampled candidates' understanding of the writer's main ideas or analysing and evaluating the writer's use of language. There were two questions on the writer's use of structural techniques.

Question paper: Critical Reading

This question paper performed as intended and gave candidates the platform to demonstrate knowledge, understanding, analysis and evaluation of the texts they had studied as part of the course.

For the Scottish text section, Norman MacCaig's poetry was again the most popular option, followed by *Tally's Blood* by Ann Marie di Mambro, *Sailmaker* by Alan Spence, and poems by Carol Ann Duffy, Edwin Morgan, and Jackie Kay. Prose was the least popular genre for Scottish texts. Anne Donovan had the highest uptake, followed by Iain Crichton Smith and Robert Louis Stevenson.

There are no restrictions on choice for critical essay texts, and it was encouraging to see some teachers and lecturers trying new texts and selecting texts which reflected candidates' needs in terms of diversity and contemporary relevance. Some markers noted that there was a more diverse choice of texts and some evidence that larger or longer texts were more prevalent than has been the case recently. Texts from the Scottish set text list were again reasonably common choices for the critical essay.

For the critical essay, almost 50% of candidates chose prose. Poetry and drama each had similar numbers, followed by film and TV drama.

The following are examples of some of the texts studied for the critical essay:

Drama

An Inspector Calls by J.B. Priestley, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, *A View from the Bridge*, *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller, *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams, *Whose Life is it Anyway?* by Brian Clark, *DNA* by Dennis Kelly.

Prose

The Pedestrian, *The Veldt* by Ray Bradbury, *On The Sidewalk Bleeding* by Evan Hunter, *The Test* by Angelica Gibbs, *The Lighthouse* by Agnes Owens, *The Lottery* by Shirley Jackson, *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, *A Hanging*, *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, *Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit* by Sylvia Plath, *The Sniper* by Liam O'Flaherty, *Loose Change* by Andrea Levy, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, *The Tell Tale Heart* by Edgar Allan Poe, *Flowers* by Robin Jenkins, *At The Bar* by William McIlvanney, *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson, *When the Wasps Drowned* by Clare Wigfall, *Father and Son*, *Secrets* by Bernard MacLaverty, *Rupert Bear and the San Izal* by Alan Spence, *The Bike* by Fred Urquhart, *The Remains* by Simon Armitage, *The Flowers* by Alice Walker, *The Test* by Sylvain Neuvel, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo (which is also appropriate for poetry).

Poetry

War poetry (often *Dulce et Decorum Est* by Wilfred Owen), *Havisham*, *In Mrs Tilscher's Class* by Carol Ann Duffy, *Mid Term Break*, *Digging* by Seamus Heaney, *Telephone Conversation* by Wole Soyinka, *The Jaguar* by Ted Hughes, *The Hill We Climb* by Amanda Gorman, *Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou, *Nothing's Changed* by Tatamkhulu Afrika, *Vultures* by Chinua Achebe, *Remains* by Simon Armitage, *Death in Leamington* by John Betjeman.

Film and TV drama

Psycho, *1917*, *Dunkirk*, *Shutter Island*, Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet*, *Get Out*, *The Dark Knight*, *Children of Men*, *Shawshank Redemption*, *The Truman Show*, *Cruella*, *The Angel's Share*, *Black Mirror*.

Very few candidates chose the Language section of critical essay, but those who did included responses to a text written by Marcus Rashford and the features of language used by groups with common interests or beliefs.

Portfolio-writing

Candidates had to submit one portfolio piece for external assessment. This was chosen from either broadly discursive or broadly creative writing and completed under some supervision and control. Performance was very similar to last year, and the overall quality of the writing was good.

In most cases, ideas and content were sufficiently developed, and most pieces were close to the word limit. There were fewer pieces with lower marks than in previous years. The focus on one piece has perhaps helped candidates to demonstrate their writing skills effectively, as the language was mostly clear and technically accurate. Candidates showed engagement and authenticity in their writing, which was reflected in the marks awarded.

There was no clear preference for candidates between broadly creative or broadly discursive writing. Candidates wrote equally well in either category. For broadly creative, most candidates wrote on an aspect of their own experiences. Some candidates submitted a piece of creative writing, which was mostly prose fiction writing, but some candidates chose poetry.

Candidates chose a wide range of topics for the portfolio-writing. The following are examples of some broadly creative and broadly discursive topics explored for the portfolio-writing:

Broadly creative

- ◆ Moving to Scotland
- ◆ My ambition of becoming a flight attendant
- ◆ Trip to Lahore
- ◆ Story from the point of view of a watch
- ◆ Winning the league
- ◆ Lost purse – personal experience
- ◆ Rally car story
- ◆ First holiday
- ◆ Billy Eilish, Nightfall – chapter of prose fiction
- ◆ Being tall – fiction
- ◆ Popularity – personal reflective
- ◆ The shipwreck – fiction
- ◆ A parent's illness – personal experience
- ◆ Dyslexia – personal experience
- ◆ Wearing glasses – personal reflective
- ◆ Marilyn Monroe's diary
- ◆ Personal growth
- ◆ A war poem
- ◆ Disappearance – short fiction
- ◆ Double celebration – personal reflective
- ◆ My charm bracelet – personal reflective

- ◆ The shadows of war – short fiction
- ◆ Young love – personal reflective

Broadly discursive

- ◆ Deforestation
- ◆ Benefits of social media
- ◆ Football matches are too expensive to attend
- ◆ The elegance of old Disney films
- ◆ How Young Sheldon presents family dynamics
- ◆ Hillsborough
- ◆ Tattoos and piercings
- ◆ PlayStation v Xbox
- ◆ Vapes should be banned
- ◆ Support for the trans community
- ◆ Britain and climate change
- ◆ VAR
- ◆ NATO's role in Ukraine conflict
- ◆ Combat sports
- ◆ Child poverty
- ◆ Brooklyn 99 TV show
- ◆ Gymnastics coaching
- ◆ Maths in schools
- ◆ Racism in football
- ◆ Homelessness
- ◆ I miss football
- ◆ David Beckham – report
- ◆ Mental health on social media

Performance–spoken language

This year marked the return of the assessment requirement for the performance–spoken language. As evidenced through verification sampling, teachers and lecturers used engaging tasks, and recorded assessment decisions using SQA documentation. Candidates were consistently able to achieve the aspects of performance. The performance–spoken language performed as expected. It is assessed on an achieved/not achieved basis.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

Candidates generally responded well to questions on analysis and evaluation. Questions requiring candidates to show understanding using their own words remain the main area of challenge for candidates. Candidates were slightly less successful with structure questions than last year.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question 1: this question assessed candidates' understanding of the opening paragraph of the passage, requiring them to 'explain how Marilyn Devonish's actions were unexpected and/or kind.' Three clear points were required for full marks, but many candidates were only able to put forward one or two with accuracy. The use of own words was a significant obstacle for some candidates.

Question 3: in this question on structure, candidates were asked to select and comment on 'any part of the sentence in line 16.' Some candidates did not make a relevant selection and dealt with the sentence as a whole. This prevented them from gaining marks.

Question 5: asked candidates to 'summarise what we learn about Vic Woods's beliefs and/or actions.' Five key points of understanding were required, but many candidates were not able to draw clear distinctions between the writer's ideas. Candidates were often unable to render key ideas in their own words.

Question 7: this question, which asked candidates to 'identify three positive effects of kindness' was challenging for some candidates. A degree of inference was required, and some candidates were unable to draw a distinction between the writer's ideas and tended to quote back the wording of the passage instead of demonstrating their own understanding.

Question 9: most candidates were able to make an appropriate selection, but many were not able to explain how it contributed to the passage's effective conclusion. Perhaps due to issues with timing, some candidates did not provide a response to this question.

Question paper: Critical Reading

There was again strong performance overall in the Scottish text section where candidates had clearly worked hard on, and engaged with, the texts they had been studying. In the critical essay section, there were some exceptional responses that showed a very good understanding and a thorough awareness of the texts studied, but overall performance was slightly weaker than last year. Some markers reported that candidates produced especially successful critical essay responses when responding to a drama text, or longer prose text.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Some candidates did significantly better in the questions on the published extract than in the final question on the remainder of the text or the wider group of texts. A small number did not complete or attempt the final question. In both the Scottish text section and in the critical

essay, some candidates relied too heavily on summarising the content of texts rather than demonstrating analysis.

Overall, performance in the critical essay was again slightly weaker. Some candidates did noticeably better in the Scottish text section than in critical essay. A few candidates produced essays that resembled a set of bullet points or notes, rather than coherent, structured pieces of critical writing. Some critical essays stayed very relevant to the question, others less so. A very small number of candidates had difficulty in navigating the options available in the question paper.

Portfolio-writing

Candidates were well prepared for the portfolio, and performance was very similar to last year. As is generally the case with the National 5 portfolio, there was a personal authenticity to the writing, and in most cases, candidates had taken care to demonstrate fully the skills they had learned. There were indications that candidates had taken advantage of the amount of free choice available for this component. A few essays were exceptional and were of a standard at the very top end of National 5, and beyond.

Overall, personal pieces that communicated genuine thoughts, feelings or reflection and were reasonably well crafted achieved good marks.

In creative writing, some candidates were able to make effective use of a created narrative voice and atmosphere. Some candidates had a good awareness of which features should be expected for a given genre; this was especially true for some types of short fiction and poetry.

Discursive pieces were generally well structured with a clear line of thought; topic sentences and linking words or phrases were used successfully. There was often evidence of a reasonable amount of independent research.

Most pieces contained expression which was sufficiently clear and accurate. A small number of candidates submitted writing that contained errors in paragraphing and sentence structure.

Areas that candidates found demanding

In short fiction, a few candidates had difficulty in devising a coherent narrative or plot.

For personal writing, less successful pieces were thin in reflection and lacked creativity in use of language.

In a few cases discursive writing relied too heavily on ideas featured in the quoted references, with insufficient commentary from the candidate.

Performance–spoken language

Teachers and lecturers offered a wide range of engaging tasks for the performance–spoken language, very often linked to candidates' wider context of learning. For example, presentations linked to discursive essay topics being covered in the portfolio–writing, or group discussion linked to aspects of literature being studied for the Critical Reading question paper. These integrated approaches to assessment are good practice and worked well for candidates.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper: Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

This question paper is an assessment of candidates' general reading skills. The best way for candidates to prepare for it is to read widely, thinking about the content, ideas and language of what is being read. Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation requires precise reading of texts that are detailed in content and use of language.

In preparation for this assessment, candidates should:

- ◆ read the passage carefully, thinking about and isolating the writer's key ideas
- ◆ read each question carefully, and make sure that key words and all aspects of the question are addressed
- ◆ practise expressing responses coherently, using own words as far as possible (where required)
- ◆ be careful not to base responses on the words of the question or key words from the passage

The practice of using a 'translation' approach to understanding questions is limiting and potentially misleading. As part of their approach, some candidates quoted sections of the passage and then tried to render them into own words, word for word by synonym. Often, this did not allow candidates to demonstrate full understanding of the writer's ideas.

Candidates should pay careful attention to the requirement to use their own words to demonstrate their understanding of key ideas in the passage. The expression 'own words' is emboldened where appropriate to remind candidates of its importance. Direct lifts of significant words or expressions from the question and/or passage will gain no marks for this type of question.

In questions that require the analysis of a writer's use of language, a helpful model to follow is 'reference plus relevant comment'. At National 5, appropriate references are awarded 1 mark. A further 1 mark is given for a relevant analytical comment. Candidates should make their language selection clear (either quotation or reference) and should try to explain their analytical comments as clearly and as fully as they can, making sure that their response stays relevant to the question.

To aid the separation of ideas into clear, distinct points, it can be helpful to organise responses to 'summary' or 'identify' questions in bullet point form.

For a structural link question, candidates must make a selection from the sentence quoted in the question: retrieving and basing a response on the whole sentence will gain no marks. Candidates must approach it as a question on structure, not a 'word choice' question.

Candidates should be mindful of time management so that all questions can be answered.

Question paper: Critical Reading

Candidates should revise overarching ideas, themes or issues when preparing a play, novel, collection of short stories or poems for the final question in the Scottish text section. When answering the final Scottish text questions key aspects of analysis, which are relevant to the question, should be addressed.

For the Scottish text section, candidates should be careful not to repeat key words of the question and use them as the basis for analytical comment. This is especially true in the final question. The skill of analysis is required for this question and candidates should not rely on just a narrative summary of the texts studied. Similarly, an approach which is based heavily on quotes learned may suffer from a lack of relevance to the question. References are just as valid as quotations, especially with longer texts.

When choosing texts for critical essay, it is important to promote good quality literature while ensuring that candidates feel included in and represented by the texts they study. Equally, texts should expand candidates' imaginative, intellectual and emotional horizons.

When constructing critical essays, candidates should remember that these are pieces of critical writing, which should have coherence and a line of thought relevant to the question selected. The essay should not merely be a list of separate points or a collection of notes. Importantly, language used by the candidate should communicate a line of thought at first reading: paragraphing, sentence construction and spelling should be sufficiently accurate.

Candidates who are handwriting their responses in the examination could practise this skill to ensure that they can write clearly and legibly under timed conditions.

All candidates should be made aware of the requirements of the question paper and be reminded of how to navigate the range of options successfully.

Portfolio-writing

Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to explore different genres and types of writing. The piece submitted for assessment should suit candidates' personal strengths: personalisation and choice promote candidate engagement in the task. A whole cohort approach to type and/or genre of writing is unlikely to meet candidates' needs.

In creative writing, candidates should be aware of, and try to use, the key features of the genre chosen. In personal writing, candidates should attempt to express an exploration of, or reflection on, their thoughts, feelings, and reactions to an experience, rather than offering merely a narrative summary of events.

In discursive writing, candidates should ensure that their writing contains their own ideas and commentary. There should not be an over-reliance on the ideas contained in quoted or referenced sources. Candidates must acknowledge all sources they use in preparation for writing. Taking time on the organisation and acknowledgement of sources improves presentation, assists markers, and helps to develop good study habits.

Candidates should aim for clarity of expression and structure in their writing. They should take care with verb tense, making sure that any changes in tense correspond with intended effects.

When preparing candidates for assessment in 2024–25 onwards, we remind teachers and lecturers of the [new conditions of assessment](#):

‘Candidates are given the opportunity to demonstrate their writing skills at the most appropriate time in the course. That is, when their writing skills have reached the level of development and maturity required for National 5 English. There is no time limit for the production of this coursework, and the writing process can take place over a period of time. However, the first draft of the assessment piece must be done in class under supervision over a period of up to 4 hours. This may take place over several sessions, if required. There is no requirement for a formal timed write-up.

The early stages of the writing process can be completed outwith the learning and teaching situation. When candidates are ready to complete the first draft of the assessment piece, this must be done in class under the supervision of a teacher or lecturer and with access to appropriate resources (for example notes, outline plan, research and/or ICT, as appropriate). Following teacher or lecturer feedback on the first draft, candidates then complete the final piece of writing under some supervision and control. Note: centres should only submit the final piece of writing for external marking.’

Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to take care with the technical accuracy of their writing, especially when preparing their final drafts.

For poetry, a single poem is treated in exactly the same way as any other piece of writing: one piece is required. It is acceptable to submit a group of related short poems, but these are treated as one piece and will be marked as such. Candidates should not include introductory and/or explanatory comments.

Teachers and lecturers should remind candidates of the required word limits (1,000 words). There is no minimum number of words.

Performance–spoken language

Linking tasks to the wider context of learning, for example using literature being studied for the question paper, or research linked to the portfolio–writing is very effective practice.

We remind teachers and lecturers that the evidence for this component can be gathered and evidenced over a range of spoken language opportunities throughout the course rather than in one instance.

A detailed checklist with comments making clear the basis for assessment decisions is required for performance–spoken language. For example, teachers and lecturers might provide an indication of the topic or question being addressed by the candidate, how they responded or the original point and how it was developed or disputed giving detail of some of the content and language of their response. The detail in the checklist should be in line with that exemplified on the [Understanding Standards website](#).

Teachers and lecturers must use the detailed marking instructions in the [National 5 English course specification](#) when assessing candidates.

There are clear examples of assessment of the performance–spoken language available on the Understanding Standards website. This material includes detailed checklists for each exemplar which shows the type of detailed comments required. Teachers and lecturers should refer to these exemplars when preparing candidates and conducting their ongoing internal verification. Access to these materials is available via SQA co-ordinators.

The assessment has been designed to be as flexible as possible. If candidates struggle with individual presentation, then group discussion or naturally occurring classroom discussions should be considered as a basis for assessment. If teachers and lecturers have any queries about possible assessment arrangements or modified models of assessment, they should contact the assessment arrangements team at aa@sqa.org.uk.

Appendix: general commentary on grade boundaries

SQA's main aim when setting grade boundaries is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

For most National Courses, SQA aims to set examinations and other external assessments and create marking instructions that allow:

- ◆ a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional grade C boundary)
- ◆ a well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional grade A boundary)

It is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject, at every level. Therefore, SQA holds a grade boundary meeting for each course to bring together all the information available (statistical and qualitative) and to make final decisions on grade boundaries based on this information. Members of SQA's Executive Management Team normally chair these meetings.

Principal assessors utilise their subject expertise to evaluate the performance of the assessment and propose suitable grade boundaries based on the full range of evidence. SQA can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the discussion at these meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more, or less, difficult than usual.

- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more difficult than usual.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been less difficult than usual.
- ◆ Where levels of difficulty are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

Every year, we evaluate the performance of our assessments in a fair way, while ensuring standards are maintained so that our qualifications remain credible. To do this, we measure evidence of candidates' knowledge and skills against the national standard.

During the pandemic, we modified National Qualifications course assessments, for example we removed elements of coursework. We kept these modifications in place until the 2022–23 session. The education community agreed that retaining the modifications for longer than this could have a detrimental impact on learning and progression to the next stage of education, employment or training. After discussions with candidates, teachers, lecturers, parents, carers and others, we returned to full course assessment for the 2023–24 session.

SQA's approach to awarding was announced in [March 2024](#) and explained that any impact on candidates completing coursework for the first time, as part of their SQA assessments, would be considered in our grading decisions and incorporated into our well-established

grading processes. This provides fairness and safeguards for candidates and helps to provide assurances across the wider education community as we return to established awarding.

Our approach to awarding is broadly aligned to other nations of the UK that have returned to normal grading arrangements.

For full details of the approach, please refer to the [National Qualifications 2024 Awarding — Methodology Report](#).