



Coimisiún na Scrúduithe Stáit
State Examinations Commission

LEAVING CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION 2013

ENGLISH

CHIEF EXAMINER'S REPORT

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1. Introduction

1.1 Syllabus Structure

A revised syllabus for Leaving Certificate English was introduced in schools in 1999 and first examined in 2001. The syllabus, which is downloadable from www.education.ie, outlines an integrated course, organised around two general domains: (i) comprehending and (ii) composing. Opportunities for the development of such higher-order thinking skills as analysis, inference, synthesis and evaluation are detailed throughout the document. The importance of students' knowledge and control of the more formal aspects of language, e.g. register, paragraphs, syntax, punctuation and spelling is also reiterated. For practical purposes, the syllabus classifies language under five different headings: the language of information; the language of argument; the language of persuasion; the language of narration and the aesthetic use of language. The requisite skills and knowledge are itemised in an extensive series of learning outcomes. Section Six of the syllabus sets out the course requirements at both Higher and Ordinary level.

This report should be read in conjunction with the examination papers and the marking schemes for 2013. These are available for downloading from the website of the State Examinations Commission at www.examinations.ie.

1.2 Assessment Structure

The examination at both Higher and Ordinary levels consists of two written papers, each with an allocation of 200 marks, giving an overall total of 400 marks. Paper 1 has two sections designed specifically “to test the comprehending and composing abilities of students” (*Leaving Certificate Syllabus, English*, para. 7.3). Section I comprises three unseen texts on a specified theme: Section II, of a choice of seven composition assignments. Paper 2 consists of three sections and is designed to “test the students’ knowledge of and response to a range of texts” (*Leaving Certificate Syllabus, English*, para. 7.4). Section I covers the range of prescribed single texts from which one is chosen: Section II focuses on comparative material: Section III includes unseen and prescribed poetry. Two hours and fifty minutes are allocated to complete Paper 1. Paper 2 has a time allocation of three hours and twenty minutes.

The Leaving Certificate English Syllabus outlines the aims, learning outcomes, levels of provision and attainment as well as the requirements of the course. The extent to which candidates are successful in meeting these is assessed using four generic criteria for assessment, applied discretely or in combination. These criteria, outlined in the Marking Scheme, are – Clarity of Purpose (P): Coherence of Delivery (C): Efficiency of Language use (L) and Accuracy of Mechanics (M).

Candidates' capacities at the level of recall and reproduction are, for example, tested in relation to appropriate levels of accuracy in spelling, expressed as a "fundamental requirement" of the syllabus (*Leaving Certificate Syllabus, English*, para. 5.3). These skills are assessed under the heading "Mechanics" (M). Higher order skills, involving strategic and extended thinking such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation and creation are also measured in the examination. This can be seen, for instance, in all areas requiring composition on both examination papers. The requirements in relation to composing tasks are set out variously in the Learning Outcomes and Levels of Provision and Attainment in the syllabus. Aspects of these skills are assessed under the headings Clarity of Purpose (P), Coherence of Delivery (C) and Efficiency of Language use (L). The syllabus requires candidates to develop concepts and processes such as: "the ability to think, reason, discriminate and evaluate in a wide variety of linguistic contexts..." (*Leaving Certificate Syllabus, English*, para. 3.4.1). Such extended thinking is required to develop the "mature and critical literacy" described as "the overarching educational aim of the syllabus" (*Leaving Certificate Syllabus, English*, para. 6.1). These skills are measured in the examination using elements of the criteria (P) and (C) involving concepts such as focus, relevance, continuity of argument and management of ideas.

1.3 Participation Trends

In 2013, 65.5% of the candidature elected to take the examination at Higher Level while 34.5% took Ordinary Level. It is important that candidates take the examination at the level most appropriate to their skills and abilities

Table 1. Participation Rates at Higher & Ordinary Levels

Year	Number of Candidates (Higher Level)	% of Total Cohort	Number of Candidates (Ordinary Level)	% of Total Cohort	Total Cohort Size
2009	32,864	64.4%	18,169	35.6%	51,033
2010	33,007	64.1%	18,492	35.9%	51,499
2011	31,783	63.0%	18,672	37.0%	50,455
2012	32,965	65.3%	17,553	34.7%	50,518
2013	33,279	65.5%	17,538	34.5%	50,817

2. Performance of Candidates

2.1 General Commentary on Engagement and Performance

The outcomes achieved by candidates at both Higher and Ordinary levels are broadly in line with candidates' achievements in recent years.

Table 2 Grades achieved at Higher Level 2009 - 2013

Year	A1	A2	B1	B2	B3	C1	C2	C3	D1	D2	D3	E	F	NG	TOTALS
2009	3.8	6.5	5.2	8.8	13.0	10.3	13.6	14.8	8.9	7.4	6.0	1.6	0.1	0.0	32,864
2010	3.9	6.4	5.4	9.1	12.4	11.9	14.0	13.5	10.5	6.6	4.6	1.5	0.1	0.0	33,007
2011	4.3	6.0	5.8	9.3	12.0	12.2	14.2	12.9	11.2	6.5	4.1	1.2	0.1	0.0	31,783
2012	4.1	6.2	5.4	8.9	12.3	11.8	13.7	14.0	9.6	7.1	5.0	1.7	0.2	0.0	32,965
2013	3.6	6.1	5.1	9.1	12.5	12.2	14.4	13.1	10.9	6.8	4.5	1.6	0.1	0.0	33,279

9.7% of candidates who took the examination at Higher Level in 2013 achieved an A grade. 1.7% of candidates at Higher Level were awarded an E grade or lower. Examiners were of the view that candidates in receipt of a Grade E or lower would have been better served by taking the subject at Ordinary level.

Table 3 Grades achieved at Ordinary Level 2009 - 2013

Year	A1	A2	B1	B2	B3	C1	C2	C3	D1	D2	D3	E	F	NG	TOTALS
2009	2.7	6.3	4.4	9.4	16.4	10.5	14.0	14.2	6.70	6.40	5.7	2.3	0.8	0.2	18,169
2010	2.0	5.9	3.5	9.0	17.4	9.0	14.7	14.5	8.0	6.7	5.7	2.8	0.8	0.1	18,492
2011	2.3	5.8	4.7	9.8	17.2	11.3	14.7	13.4	7.4	5.8	4.8	2.1	0.6	0.1	18,672
2012	2.7	5.6	6.1	9.7	16.3	10.5	13.2	13.2	6.8	5.9	6.3	2.7	0.8	0.2	17,553
2013	2.0	5.4	4.2	9.1	15.6	11.9	14.8	12.9	8.5	6.5	5.3	2.6	0.8	0.2	17,538

At Ordinary Level, 7.4% of candidates who took the examination in 2013 achieved an A grade. 3.6% of the candidature at Ordinary Level was awarded an E grade or lower in the examination. The language skills exhibited by candidates who obtained an E grade or lower at this level were generally poor. An analysis of the work of candidates who obtained an E grade or lower revealed that in some cases entire questions or even entire sections of the examination, including Paper 1, Section II, Composition, were omitted by candidates. Some candidates displayed little knowledge of studied

texts whilst others either misread or misinterpreted the questions they were asked. Some of these candidates wrote extremely short answers to questions, others responded at length but lacked coherence.

2.2 Higher Level

The following are the average marks attained by candidates at Higher Level in the various sections of the examination. These figures are based on an analysis of a random sample of candidates' results.

Table 4 Higher Level Average Marks by Question

Question	Average Mark Attained	Average Percentage Attained
Paper 1 Section I Comprehending QA	34/50	68
Paper 1 Section I Comprehending QB	34/50	68
Paper 1 Section II Composition	67/100	67
Paper 2 Section I The Single Text	38/60	63
Paper 2 Section II The Comparative Study	42/70	60
Paper 2 Section III A Unseen Poetry	11/20	55
Paper 2 Section III B Studied Poetry	33/50	66

These figures reveal a reasonably consistent performance by candidates at Higher Level across all elements of the examination.

The theme of the 2013 Higher Level Paper 1 was “Story-Telling”. Section 1, Text 3, based on an article by Belinda McKeon, proved to be the most popular choice of the three texts available to candidates in this section. The next most popular was Text 2, an edited interview with writer William Trevor. Fewer candidates chose to answer on Text 1, an article from *The New Yorker* magazine concerning the role of cliff-hangers in narratives. Candidates' choice for Section I, Question B is influenced by their Question A selection, as both questions may not be answered on the same text. The most popular Question B at this level in 2013 was Text 1, this required candidates to write the text of a talk. This was followed by writing the text for the introduction to a book (Question B, Text 2) and an opinion piece to form part of a series of newspaper articles (Question B, Text 3).

The most popular essay at this level proved to be Composition 2, “Write a personal essay in which you explore the storytelling evident in music and song and its impact on you.” Other popular titles included Composition 1: Write a speech in which you argue for or against the motion, *We live in an un-heroic age.* and Composition 7: “Write a short story about a reunion.”

In Paper 2, Section I, The Single Text, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* proved to be by far the most popular single text studied, almost to the exclusion of the four other options. Other texts which appeared occasionally in candidates’ answers included Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* and Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Very few candidates presented answers based on Lessing’s *The Grass Is Singing* or *Antigone* by Sophocles. Examiners noted that many candidates benefitted from the appropriate use of apt and accurate quotation. They also observed that the careless use of quotation, observed in a significant number of responses, served to undermine answers.

In the Comparative Studies Section, *Wuthering Heights*, *Casablanca*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Lonesome West*, *The Constant Gardener* and *How Many Miles to Babylon?* proved the most popular texts. The Cultural Context was the most selected mode. Many examiners reported genuine engagement with the terms of the questions, combined with a fluid comparative approach. As in previous years, examiners also noted that a significant minority of candidates were hampered by a rigid and formulaic approach.

In recent years there have been few instances of the use of invalid texts in answer to the questions on Comparative Studies. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the use of some texts is not permitted in the Comparative Studies Section. Texts that are not valid are:

- a text already answered on as a Single Text
- a text not on the prescribed list for the current year
- the use of two films.

It is also worth noting that candidates taking examinations in Leaving Certificate English should be prepared to refer to three texts in answer to questions on Paper 2, Section Two, Comparative Studies. The unseen poem, “The Fist” by Derek Walcott, appeared to have appealed to candidates with examiners reporting an encouraging number of insightful answers. However, a number of candidates

did not answer on this compulsory section of the examination, resulting in a loss of up to twenty marks. Of the studied poets, the poet most favoured by candidates in the examination was Sylvia Plath followed by Bishop, Mahon and Hopkins in that order. Candidates were most successful when they avoided a formulaic approach and demonstrated the ability to link and cross reference the work of their chosen poet in the course of an answer. The syllabus requires students at Higher Level to “study a representative selection from the work of eight poets... Normally the study of at least six poems by each poet would be expected.” (*Leaving Certificate Syllabus, English*, para. 6.3). Candidates who had taken the time to engage fully with the work of a poet were better placed to select judiciously, comment intelligently and respond constructively to questions posed in the examination.

2.3 Ordinary Level

The following are the average marks attained by candidates at **Ordinary Level** in the various sections of the examination. These figures are based on an analysis of a random sample of candidates’ results.

Table 5 Ordinary Level Average Marks by Question

Question	Average Mark Attained	Average Percentage Attained
Paper 1 Section I Comprehending QA	36/50	72
Paper 1 Section I Comprehending QB	31/50	61
Paper 1 Section II Composition	63/100	63
Paper 2 Section I The Single Text	40/60	67
Paper 2 Section II The Comparative Study	39/70	58
Paper 2 Section III A Unseen Poetry	13/20	65
Paper 2 Section III B Studied Poetry	28/50	56

This table reveals a slightly greater variation across the elements assessed when compared to the equivalent table of data for Higher Level candidates. The scores attained for comprehension on Paper 1 and in the Unseen Poetry question on Paper 2 suggest a welcome confidence on the part of candidates when handling unseen material.

The theme of the 2013 Ordinary Level Paper 1 was “Humour”. Text 1, an extract from Des Bishop’s book, *My Dad was Nearly James Bond*, proved most popular with candidates. This was followed by an extract from Michael McIntyre’s autobiography, *Life and Laughing*. The more visually based text, on Gary Larson cartoons, proved least attractive to candidates but was generally well managed by those who selected it.

Candidates’ choice for Section I, Question B is influenced by their selection of Question A, as both questions may not be answered on the same text. The Section B questions associated with Text 2 and Text 3 (writing a letter and review for a school magazine) proved equally popular with Ordinary Level candidates in 2013. Examiners observed that in some cases candidates did not appear to appreciate that writing a review requires more than providing a summary of the relevant text (or programme or event) and an expression of the reviewer’s verdict in terms of “stars” awarded or marks out of ten. Better answers provided a more reflective view of the subject under review, highlighting the aspects that the reviewer particularly enjoyed and noting anything that detracted from the experience for the reviewer. Fewer candidates opted for Text 1, Question B which required candidates to write the text of a talk. The apparent lack of enthusiasm for the latter option may have had more to do with the immense popularity of the comprehension questions based on the Des Bishop extract rather than any issue with the Question B task.

Examiners reported that compositions which required candidates to write a short story proved popular. Composition 1: “Write a short story in which one character’s opinion of another character changes dramatically.” and Composition 4: “Write a short story in which an animal or animals play an important part.” attracted most candidates. Writing a personal essay (Compositions 2 and 5) or an article (Compositions 3 and 6) also attracted significant numbers of candidates. Fewer candidates chose the final option, a speech (Composition 7).

On Paper 2, nine texts were prescribed for study as single texts in 2013. The frequency with which these texts appeared in candidates’ work may be seen in the table below:

Table 6 Frequency of single texts at Ordinary Level

Most Popular	<i>How Many Miles to Babylon?</i> by Jennifer Johnston, <i>Sive</i> by John B. Keane <i>Macbeth</i> by William Shakespeare.
Frequently appearing	<i>Circle of Friends</i> by Maeve Binchy, <i>Wuthering Heights</i> by Emily Brontë <i>The Great Gatsby</i> by F. Scott Fitzgerald.
Least popular	<i>The Grass Is Singing</i> by Doris Lessing, <i>Antigone</i> by Sophocles and <i>Home Before Night</i> by Hugh Leonard.

In responses to questions on various single texts, candidates generally managed to fulfil the syllabus requirement to demonstrate an understanding of “...text at a literal level” and make “some inferences.” (*Leaving Certificate Syllabus, English*, para. 5.5). However the more demanding requirement, “to relate texts to their own experience, generate personal meanings, discuss and justify those meanings, and express opinions coherently” (*Leaving Certificate Syllabus, English*, para. 5.5) was less frequently achieved successfully.

The most popular texts referenced by candidates in answer to Section II, Comparative Studies were: *I'm Not Scared* by Gabriele Salvatores; *Casablanca* (Dir) Michael Curtiz; *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemmingway, *Children of Men* (Dir) Alfonso Cuarón, *The Lonesome West* by Martin McDonagh and *Brooklyn* by Colm Tóibín.

Social Setting was the mode most favoured by candidates at this level, with most choosing to answer Section A, Question 1. In Section B, the Aspect of Story most commonly chosen to write about was “Tension”. Many candidates clearly demonstrated “banks of knowledge” in answer to questions in this section. However, in order to score well in the examination, candidates were required to demonstrate an ability to manage this knowledge in answer to the specific questions asked. This latter requirement proved challenging for some candidates.

Some examiners noted that they were pleasantly surprised by the quality of responses to the unseen poem, “Earbud” by Bill Holm with reports that 2013 was “a stellar year for the unseen poem”. Candidates responded well when required to express their own opinion or to answer based on their reading of the poem. In the main, responses were shaped appropriately including some justification supported by suitable reference. Candidates’ preferred options in Studied Poetry were Question A on

Paul Muldoon's poem, "Anseo" and Question C on an extract from Elizabeth Bishop's, "The Fish". Answers on the Shakespearean sonnet, "Like as the Waves" were not as prevalent and very few candidates chose to answer questions on Penelope Shuttle's, "Jungian Cows". Some answers were marred by failure to attend to *all* of the requirements of the question e.g. the teacher's attitude *and* behavior towards the pupil in a question on Muldoon's, "Anseo". In some instances candidates demonstrated very cursory acquaintance with the poems, occasionally obviously misunderstanding or misinterpreting that with which they should have been familiar.

3. Analysis of Candidate Performance

In analysing the performance of candidates in 2013, attention was paid to evidence relating to two particular areas: candidates as users and interpreters of many genres, and critical literacy evident in responses. Skills within each of these areas can be categorised from lower to higher order, moving from remembering through understanding, application and analysis to evaluation and creation. The assessment of these skills is not discrete in English examinations and this is taken into account by the application of the criteria for assessment marking matrix – the P/C/L/M grid.

3.1 Candidates as Users and Interpreters of Many Genres

The Leaving Certificate English Syllabus states that, “Developing control and power over language is the most essential educational achievement for all students if they are to become confident, thoughtful and discriminating adults and citizens”, (*Leaving Certificate Syllabus, English*, para. 3.5). The importance of key language skills is emphasised throughout the Marking Schemes for Leaving Certificate English and candidates who exhibit competence and control in the use of language are rewarded. It should be remembered that candidates’ language skills are continuously assessed in the marking of answers to *all* questions on both Papers 1 and Paper 2 of the Leaving Certificate English examination. The criteria for assessment (outlined in Appendix 1 of the Marking Schemes) are applied in the case of every answer at both Higher and Ordinary Levels. This means that candidates who exhibit fluency appropriate to the task are rewarded in relation to every question answered. It is worth noting that some examiners identified candidates who were able to demonstrate knowledge of a text or texts but were less able to deliver this knowledge in a lucid and coherent fashion.

An appropriate awareness of grammatical and syntactical conventions contributed to the cohesiveness of better answers in the 2013 examination, as did the use of correct spelling and punctuation. Weaker responses tended to be characterised by an inability to organise answers in a logical and coherent fashion and a lack of clear expression. The syllabus requires that, “all students will be expected to be assiduous in their attention to paragraphing, syntax, spelling and punctuation.” (*Leaving Certificate Syllabus, English*, para. 5.3). Examiners at both levels voiced a degree of concern with the level of control of the more **formal aspects of language** displayed by some candidates. Candidates at both Higher and Ordinary Levels benefited when they exhibited an ability to structure their writing, organise paragraphs, spell accurately and correctly employ punctuation.

The criteria for assessment also make explicit reference to the “use of lively interesting phrasing, energy, style and fluency”. It is essential that candidates are aware of the many purposes for which language is used and the diverse forms it can take, to appropriately serve particular purposes and audiences. Creative and thoughtful users of language were rewarded in the 2013 examinations.

Comprehension skills are critical for success in Leaving Certificate English examinations and candidates must strive to be effective readers. Candidates need to carefully read and correctly comprehend every question that they attempt on the examination papers. Reading comprehension skills are most overtly examined in Paper 1, Section A. Candidates are expected to be able to engage with a diverse range of texts, both written and visual, and variously demonstrate the ability to retrieve information, draw inferences from what they have read or seen, synthesize the material, and question or critically evaluate it, as required. Candidates demonstrated these skills in varying degrees. The most successful candidates, i.e. those in receipt of high marks in the 2013 examinations, were able to analyse and evaluate the language and concepts they encountered in texts. They were able to appreciate how meaning was shaped. High scoring candidates were also skilled in shaping their own writing, as required, in the appropriate register and genre.

The Leaving Certificate English Syllabus envisages the subject “English” as “not limited to the written word” (*Leaving Certificate Syllabus, English*, para. 2.6) and it identifies the importance of **visual literacy**. At both levels, examiners noted that close “reading” of visual images was not always strongly evident. Candidates taking the examination in 2013 were variously required to draw inferences [OL Paper 1, Text 3 Question (iii)], consider the effectiveness of visual images in developing understanding [HL Paper 1, Text 1, Question (ii)] and engage with the imagery [HL Paper 1, Text 3 Question (ii)]. Candidates would benefit from a greater acquaintance with the concepts and terminology of visual literacy, including those associated with films.

Candidates need to guard against an overly literal interpretation of language. The Leaving Certificate English course facilitates engagement with a wide range of texts of exceptional quality providing an opportunity to experience **language that is both rich and nuanced**. The syllabus requires students to be able to re-read texts, “encountering rich and diverse levels of suggestion, inference and meaning.” (*Leaving Certificate Syllabus, English*, para. 4.5.1). Examiners reported a tendency, on the part of some candidates, towards an overly literal or concrete interpretation of

language. For instance, Higher Level examiners noted that a number of candidates failed to appreciate William Trevor's nuanced reference to the word 'fashion' in Higher Level Paper 1, Text 3. Where this occurred it impacted negatively on the ability of candidates to understand what the writer meant and consequently on their ability to best respond to the questions set.

Skills in **letter writing** also require attention. These skills were examined in the 2013 Ordinary Level examination on Paper 1, Section I, Question B where candidates were required to write a letter to cartoonist Gary Larson, regarding a cartoon of his that appeared on the examination paper. The option to write a letter was also presented to candidates in questions on a number of studied texts on Paper 2. Production of well-crafted letters, with a register appropriate to the intended recipient and fulfilling the content requirements of the task, was rewarded by examiners. In future examinations where candidates are required to write letters in answer to questions greater attention will be paid to the rubrics appropriate to the task (e.g. return address, date, salutation and closing signature). Any standard formatting of these rubrics will be acceptable.

In the area of **composition** (Paper 1, Section II) examiners at both levels praised well crafted pieces of writing that gave voice to original work. The following is a selection of the compliments paid to candidates by examiners at Higher Level in relation to compositions presented for assessment: "the best compositions were fresh, well-organised, confident responses"; "there were great examples of aesthetic writing, poetic flourishes, and well observed situations"; "the quality of dialogue and description impressed"; "it was pleasing to see the varied and imaginative ways that students were able to approach the instructions in the questions". On the other hand, examiners at that level also observed that: in a small number of scripts compositions were "extremely brief and lacked development" and "some candidates fail to grasp the fundamentals of short story writing".

At Ordinary Level positive observations made by examiners included: "personal essays written from the engaged "I" perspective made for very interesting and original reading"; Re Composition 5, "Some fine compositions from people who have a real love for music. "A treat to read."; "Many mature essays – insightful with a personal perspective." Regarding some of the better short stories: "elements of a short story were in evidence – one main character, usually well drawn, action, a turning point, conflict, dialogue." There were reports of "interesting, lively, informed, reflective and well-developed responses." Less positive observations included, "it is difficult to sustain a response

or develop a range of ideas necessary to acquire maximum marks if the answer is brief in the extreme.” and “some candidates lacked the necessary awareness of central elements of different genres.” Examiners noted that fewer candidates engaged incorrectly with the terms of the composition titles than in previous years.

Writing in the correct genre using an appropriate register are skills required of candidates not only when writing compositions but also throughout the examination, such as when responding to tasks on Paper 1, Section I, Question B and wherever genre or register are specified in questions on texts on Paper 2, e.g. “Imagine you are Sive. Write two diary entries...”. Examiners pay particular attention to a candidate’s efforts to tailor their writing to the audience in question and to write in an appropriate register. This may involve writing in a particular style (e.g. formal, informal, rhetorical etc) and using language appropriate to the context.

It is imperative that candidates who choose to write in a particular genre be familiar with the conventions of that genre and show evidence of this knowledge in the course of their writing.

The **short story** is a genre with perennial appeal to candidates at both Higher and Ordinary Levels. Examiners remarked positively on some candidates’ skills in crafting memorable short stories. These candidates displayed confidence in their handling of elements of short story writing such as: narrative shape; effective characterisation; developing a coherent plot; attention to aspects of setting (including time, period and place); the use of dialogue and the creation of atmosphere (including the skilful use of drama and tension). Short stories are more effective when the readers are drawn into the story through the effective use of suggestion and a well-controlled narrative structure. Examiners have reasonable expectations of what can be achieved by young and inexperienced writers under examination conditions and candidates’ efforts to craft fresh and original work in a thoughtful fashion were suitably rewarded.

3.2 Critical Literacy

One of the aims of the Leaving Certificate English course is to “develop in students a mature and critical literacy to prepare them for the responsibilities and challenges of adult life in all contexts.” (*Leaving Certificate Syllabus, English*, para. 3.1). The syllabus invites students to “adopt a variety of critical stances, to question the authority of texts and to compare and contrast texts.” (*Leaving*

Certificate Syllabus, English, para. 3.5). The *Draft Guidelines for Teachers of English*, developed by the then Department of Education and Science (DES) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), outlined what is meant by skills in critical literacy:

Critical literacy enables the reader to resist the ‘persuasiveness’ of a text, perceive from whence it is coming in terms of values and assumptions, enter into dialogue and ultimately assess these values and assumptions.

(Draft Guidelines for Teachers of English, p.18)

Candidates at both Higher and Ordinary Levels were presented with a variety of opportunities to demonstrate appropriate **skills in critical literacy** in the course of the 2013 Leaving Certificate English examinations. It is important to note that questions on Leaving Certificate English examination papers are framed to invite candidates to engage with them but not necessarily to agree, either wholly or in part, with the premise put forward in the questions. Teachers and candidates should note that while it is essential that candidates fully engage with the terms of any question attempted, challenging the terms of a question, perhaps disagreeing with some part or the entire premise outlined, is an acceptable way in which to approach an answer. Such a possibility is often encouraged by the phraseology of questions e.g. “to what extent do you agree or disagree with...”. It is catered for in the marking schemes by the inclusion of points of disputation and also by use of the term “*et cetera*” to cover any possible worthwhile answers offered by candidates. Examiners sometimes report that candidates can appear to adopt an overly reverential approach to questions. This can affect candidates’ ability to demonstrate skills in critical literacy.

When candidates choose to take issue with the premise outlined in a question it is important that, as with any answer, the question set is the question answered. Any points of view expressed should be well grounded in the relevant text or texts and supported by reference to those texts. Examiners in 2013 were impressed when candidates presented lucid responses to questions based on their knowledge and understanding of the text(s), augmented by a well expressed reasoned argument, point of view or opinion. Candidates are rewarded for skills in critical literacy under aspects of the assessment criteria “Clarity of Purpose” and “Coherence of Delivery” such as: focus, relevance, continuity of argument and management of ideas.

The Comparative Study is one of the areas where candidates have an opportunity to demonstrate skills in critical literacy. It is possible for candidates to challenge, wholly or in part, not only the premise put forward in questions but also the views and opinions they encountered in the course of studying texts. Many candidates showed **evidence of critical engagement** with the texts they had studied and a mature critical literacy was seen in the work of some candidates. Examiners were pleased when they saw candidates trust in their own personal response and demonstrate a willingness to challenge the ‘fixed meaning’ of texts. The best answers managed to remain grounded, both in the question asked and in the text. Examiners reported that examples of under-achievement in the area of comparative studies could often be attributed to a loss of focus in terms of the requirements of the task. Some candidates did not show evidence of ‘reading’ in an astute and reflective manner. The quality of evidence cited to support an opinion was a significant discriminator used by examiners.

At Ordinary Level, candidates are also rewarded for evidence of **an appropriate level of critical literacy**. Candidates are invited to offer their own opinion on texts and topics throughout the examination. As noted in **Table 5** above, candidates at this level scored best in Paper 1, Section I, Question A, the comprehension section of the examination. Candidates displayed their skills in critical literacy in answers to questions such as whether they found a particular image to be either funny or disturbing or both, such as in Ordinary Level, Paper 1, Text 2, Question (iii),(a). Another opportunity to demonstrate such skills was available to candidates who chose to answer Question A 1(a) Section II of Ordinary Level, Paper 2. This question required candidates to, “Explain, with reference to at least one aspect of the social setting...why you would or would not like to live in the world of that text.” Examiners reported that candidates need to be encouraged to read such questions slowly and carefully, highlighting the different parts of the question in order to best ensure that the question is properly addressed.

All candidates are reminded of the practical imperative of managing their time during the examination carefully and of the need to complete all of the requisite elements of the examination papers.

4. Conclusions

- Candidates engaged well with all aspects of the examination papers and the examinations proved sufficiently challenging to provide the necessary level of discrimination.
98.3% of candidates at Higher Level and 96.4% of candidates at Ordinary Level achieved a D grade or higher in their respective examinations.
- The Paper 1 themes of Humour (Ordinary Level) and Story-telling (Higher Level) engaged candidates' interest, provoking many enthusiastic responses. This year, based on an analysis of a random sample of candidates' results, candidates at both Higher Level and Ordinary Level scored slightly better on Paper 1 in Section I, Comprehension than in Section II, Composition.
- In general, on Paper 2, candidates at Higher Level scored best in the Studied Poetry Section while Ordinary Level candidates achieved their best scores in answer to questions on the Single Text. Some candidates at Ordinary Level did not appear to be sufficiently familiar with the poems in the Studied Poetry Section.
- The more demanding requirement, "to relate texts to their own experience, generate personal meanings, discuss and justify those meanings, and express opinions coherently" (*Leaving Certificate Syllabus, English*, para. 5.5) was less frequently achieved successfully.
- At both levels, examiners noted that close "reading" of visual images was not always strongly evident.
- Many candidates showed **evidence of critical engagement** with the texts they had studied and a mature critical literacy was seen in the work of some candidates.
- Candidates who displayed a capacity to communicate fluently and effectively were rewarded. However, the management and control of language continues to pose problems for some candidates and, in particular, poor attention to the formal aspects of language, such as spelling, grammar and punctuation, was noted in some responses.
- The enduring appeal of Shakespearean texts was attested to by the popularity of *Macbeth* as a Single Text at Higher Level. Jennifer Johnston's *How Many Miles to Babylon?* proved to be the most popular Single Text with Ordinary Level candidates.
- While there was encouraging evidence of some candidates' critical engagement with texts in the Comparative Study section, candidates in general scored less well here than in other sections of the examination paper. Formulaic approaches, to answering questions in this section can hinder candidates by inhibiting their engagement with the terms of the questions and curtailing the

expression of independent opinion. This in turn impacts on their ability to score highly in the examination.

- Candidates varied in their ability to shape and adapt their knowledge in order to write appropriate responses to questions posed.
- A small number of candidates did not complete all necessary sections of the examination, inefficient time management may have been a factor in this.

5. Recommendations

- Candidates need to ensure that they elect to take the examination at the level, Higher or Ordinary, to which they are best suited.
- Greater attention should be paid to the knowledge and control of the formal aspects of language by students at all levels.
- Adopting a process approach to writing, whereby students learn to research, plan, draft, re-draft and edit their writing (as laid out in the *Leaving Certificate Syllabus, English*, para. 3.4.1) would be of significant benefit to all students of Leaving Certificate English.
- Students benefit from exposure to the written word. In preparation for the examination, candidates should read widely from a diverse selection of texts in a wide range of genre. Such reading would help students develop the necessary skills to shape their responses with greater control and confidence.
- Candidates would benefit from a greater acquaintance with the concepts and terminology of visual literacy, including those associated with films.
- Where candidates are required to write letters in answer to questions, greater attention should be paid to the inclusion of appropriate rubrics (e.g. return address, date, salutation and closing signature). Any standard formatting of these rubrics will be acceptable.
- It is important to note that questions on Leaving Certificate English examination papers are framed to invite candidates to engage with them but not necessarily to agree, either wholly or in part, with the premise put forward in the questions. Teachers and candidates are advised that while it is essential that candidates fully engage with the terms of any question attempted, and where appropriate, support their answers with suitable reference to a text or texts,

challenging the terms of a question, perhaps disagreeing with some part or the entire premise outlined, is an acceptable way in which to approach an answer.

- Opportunities to appreciate the power of language to move beyond the concrete to more expressive levels should be exploited.
- It is important that teachers avail of all of the opportunities offered by the Leaving Certificate English course to develop students' critical thinking skills and to enhance students' skills in critical literacy. Students should be encouraged to assess the validity of assertions in texts, to challenge the ideas presented and form independent views.
- Students at Ordinary Level would benefit from a greater acquaintance with the poems prescribed for study.
- Students should be assisted to develop the skills needed to shape, manipulate and adapt their knowledge to produce measured, informed and reflective responses.
- Students are reminded of the necessity of organising their time efficiently when sitting the examination. Omitting questions or parts of questions inevitably has a deleterious effect on outcomes.