Most of the 87 candidates performed well, doing good preparation in a few set areas and turning in scripts of a steady and workmanlike character. There were also a few who wrote superbly fluent, creative and informative answers. All but two of the 23 essay questions were answered, and all in all, Chaucer’s diversity found its match in the spread of questions attempted. The best scripts were thoughtful, careful, and measured in their amounts of writing. The worst, despite the six hours allowed, were written in a disappointingly chaotic manner. Several scripts were too long. The handwriting of most scripts was legible. Some critical terms, ‘apology’ for instance, were misused or misunderstood, but on the whole standards in written English were mostly passable. The best commentaries succeeded by being based on an idea about what the given passage or passages meant, one which was then illustrated by the quotation and analysis of words, phrases or occasionally pairs of lines. The least successful commentaries read Chaucer’s language as if it were Modern English, with some finding that ME write rhymes with lighte. It was clear that Chaucer’s language was an unknown territory to some. Some candidates seem to have read Chaucer in translation. The best essays were planned and structured, made apposite reference to two or three pertinent texts, and delivered a conclusion. The less successful scripts revealed less preparation: a patchy reading or understanding of Chaucer’s works and literary background. Sometimes there were attempts to fit prepared material to a question where it did not belong. The examiners thought that Troilus and Criseyde had been read in most cases just in beginning and end, and in some cases through plot summary. Many essays also referred to historical background. The best answers used this information to contextualize Chaucer’s works, although some candidates were better informed than others. There was a reluctance in some scripts to write on matters which seemed controversial, such as the anti-Judaism of The Prioress’ Tale, and medieval people were still seen as prudish and licentious. Candidates are reminded that it is all right to laugh.
Shakespeare
As always, scripts this year were marked by general competence and, more encouragingly, occasional flair. The very best scripts for this paper showed ambition in their choice of paired texts, incorporated secondary works deftly, and produced some genuinely impressive readings that went beyond seminar topics and lecture themes. There is, clearly, still room for original readings of Shakespeare’s works. Candidates who ventured unusual comparisons or essayed unfamiliar connections tended to mount the best, most convincing, most engaging arguments.

As in previous years, a handful of scripts resorted to plodding plot summary, forfeiting the generous opportunities afforded by the six-hour format of this paper to prepare answers carefully, to devote time to analysis, to organise thoughts into a structured argument, and to draw selectively from the open book. The most successful scripts not only analysed in detail their two plays per question, but sought to locate those plays in the rest of Shakespeare’s canon and career, even occasionally glancing sideways to the work of other playwrights or to other contextually-relevant pieces of literature. In keeping with other years, weaker scripts failed to get much beyond analysis of character, whereas most sophisticated readings ventured into performance history (cinematic as well as stage) which was integrated well on the whole, engaged with the textual instability of Shakespeare’s canon, and carefully interwove historical context. These approaches tended to provoke the most rewarding analysis, and the intellectual payoff was generally considerable.

In their handling of the critical tradition, stronger answers foraged more adventurously and deployed recent criticism thoughtfully, rather than rely on just one or two very canonical critics. More impressive answers were alert to tensions in Shakespeare’s works, and resisted the temptation to rush to familiar, hackneyed critical paradigms, or to reach reductive conclusions. The very best scripts were responsive to multiple readings and were aware of critical debates and trends in recent scholarship.

Astonishingly for a six-hour exam, a number of scripts presented catastrophically short third answers. Candidates are reminded of the need to divide their time evenly between questions, and to present three full answers. In addition, candidates should ensure that they answer the question, paying careful attention to its terms: as on every paper, questions on the Shakespeare Exam are not invitations to parade irrelevant material, however interesting, but should be treated as prompts to think carefully about Shakespeare’s work and to tailor evidence in a precise and nuanced way.
Critical Commentary and Analysis

There was a large number of solid scripts this year, and a handful of outstanding ones. Students on the whole showed a good understanding of the passages, talked convincingly about literary effects rather than cataloguing techniques, and organized the essays well according to key themes or ideas rather than going through the passage section by section. The very best answers didn’t stop at providing (insightful) observations on the texts, but were also driven by an argument. Rather than seeking to merely catalogue features and themes, these strongest answers also tended to use the details of the text(s) to open up questions raised by the passages. This often involved picking up the hint provided by the rubric – for example, question 7 led to nuanced reflections on how Lydia Davis’s ‘sign’ shared characteristics with the short story form itself, and candidates explored the significance of writing poems on dramatic characters in question 3. In other words, the best answers didn’t seek simply to explain the texts, but used their close readings to point towards the literary questions they raised, their contradictions, and complexities.

Students may wish to note that it is rarely fruitful to spend time considering whether a character is ‘relatable’, and to engage in speculation about the lives of characters. Similarly, attempts to identify the date, location, or gender of the passage/writer were only really effective when this information could be seen to have a central bearing on the argument. Comparisons with other writers worked nicely, again, when these were woven into the argument (for example, in order to analyse the gothic conventions used by preface a) of question 6, allusions to Radcliffe and Walpole were very sensible, and in fact the passage was written by Walpole himself). However, less obvious echoes were occasionally unhelpful, and sometimes distracting.

Though all passages were answered on, the most popular questions featured, respectively, a twentieth- and a twenty-first century text, neither involving an element of comparison. It is entirely possible to produce excellent answers on recent, single passages, but it was striking to note that many of the better answers ranged across periods. While chronologically familiar material may seem easier, and a single text more manageable, these factors do not always elicit better answers.

Finally, the examiners would urge candidates to spend more time checking their scripts for spelling, grammatical and punctuation errors; there were very few scripts that were entirely flawless on these counts.
Examiners’ report for Modern English Language 2014-15

This year there were eight candidates for the Modern English Language paper.

There were 16 questions on this examination paper this year. There was a reasonable spread of answers: only four questions were not attempted. Questions 2, 5, and 11 were the most popular. Other questions answered were 3, 8, 9, 10, and 12-16.

There were some excellent answers this year, across the range. All candidates had evidently prepared well for this examination and demonstrated a good understanding of the topics being discussed. The answers that were less successful involved minor errors and a lack of precision in their use of terminology. Some did not go beyond rather unfocused, vague discussion, or lacked illustrative examples. As in previous years, on occasion candidates used examples that were more complicated than was necessary for the task at hand.
Literary Linguistics examiners’ report, 2014-15

Literary Linguistics course essays submitted this year covered a diverse and eclectic range of topics and material. Some students seized the opportunity to write about modern texts that held personal interest, from rap lyrics, to comic books, to recently published fiction like *Gone Girl*; others looked at more well-known and established texts, for example renaissance drama or poetry, classical epic, or translations of a nineteenth century Russian novel. The focus of essays was also wide-ranging, from rhetoric and poetics, to pragmatic theory, to free indirect discourse or the representation of thought. The best course essays presented thoughtful, critically engaged readings which were well-informed and had a clear sense of focus. Some candidates made interesting and original connections between texts from different periods or by different kinds of writers; others compared features of more similar works in detailed and sensitive ways. There were also several essays informed by carefully chosen and challenging secondary reading, written by candidates who showed real initiative in finding relevant sources. The weakest work did not go beyond description of either texts or context, or presented only vague or general discussions that lacked precision or detail. Some students did not allow enough time for in-depth analysis of texts, spending too much time on background or superficial generalisations. Some work could have been better written and seemed to be rather hurried, and not all essays were proof-read carefully.
History of the English Language: examiners’ report

The History of the English Language course did not run in 2014-15, so only a small number of candidates sat this exam this year. Papers covered a wide range of topics and periods, including borrowing, seventeenth-century Bible translations, attitudes to English in particular periods, the relationship between social change and language change, and slang. Across the board answers were impressive, showing careful preparation and good attention to detail. The best answers were illustrated by helpful, well-chosen examples, and showed a good understanding of linguistic change and features of the language in different periods. Some weaker answers tried to cover too much and therefore didn’t have time to go into depth about particular points; others answers relied very heavily on one secondary source, or made generalisations that were over-simplified. However, candidates were generally careful to direct their answers to the questions being asked.
Old Icelandic Literature
Examiners’ Report 2014-15

This year four candidates sat the exam. The translations of seen passages in Qu. 1 (3/6) were done mostly with accuracy if not always idiomatically, while memorization played a smaller role. Only in a couple of translations were gaps deliberately left in the absence of attempts to intuit or guess the meaning of a word. Tenses were not always grasped. Although it is acceptable to use a Modern English preterite for an Old Icelandic present, occasionally there was a reversal and the present was used for a preterite in a way which did not serve the translation well. The other questions were handled with confidence. Two candidates attempted an essay plus the optional commentary question on two passages already translated (Qu. 2), while two just did two essays. One way or another, the poems (Skírnismál, Atlakviða and Prymskviða) were more popular choices for writing than in previous years. There was much fine work in these answers, with evidence of good preparation such as the memorization of quotations from primary and even from secondary sources, and here the Legendary Sagas (Völsunga saga and Hrólfss saga kraka) were also the subject of fine essays. The best essays were those which answered the question precisely and developed their answers with a structure and conclusion.
Twenty-four candidates sat the paper this year, with some very good responses produced across the board. The language element of the exam posed the greatest challenge this year. The best translations were clear and fluent, demonstrating genuine engagement with Old English. Weaker translations were clunky, fragmented, and overly reliant on memorisation. The standard of translation sometimes fluctuated quite considerably within a single paper, suggesting that candidates were perhaps more familiar with certain works than others. That said, it is good to note that every candidate at least attempted the required number of translations, even when the results contained more blank space than text. Greater familiarity with the set texts, with more emphasis on revising language than memorising passages, would help here.

It is important that candidates read and follow the rubric carefully, as there were a number of violations regarding the commentary. The exam calls for two separate commentaries to be produced, rather than a comparison. The best commentaries were those that presented engaging and original readings of the passages, paying close attention to language as well as themes. Although commentaries should focus on the passage at hand, some consideration of context can be helpful; several candidates made assertions about passages that are directly contradicted in the rest of the text. Some occasionally baffling claims were also made. This can be avoided either through clearer expression or giving a bit more thought to the implications of an assertion.

Many of the essays were thoughtful and imaginative. The strongest were those that paid close attention to the implications of the question, demonstrated familiarity with a range of Old English texts, and had arguments that were well structured and clearly expressed. There was sometimes a tendency, both in the commentaries and the essays, to try to pack in as much material from seminars as possible. While this does show commendable engagement with the course’s teaching, candidates should be confident in their own abilities and should aim to use the exam as an opportunity to demonstrate their independent approaches to literary analysis.
Examiners’ Report

This year six candidates sat the exam. The translations of seen passages in Qu. 1 (4/6) were handled mostly well, with evidence of preparation in select areas which in most cases bore fruit with renderings in accurate and nuanced Modern English. Most answers dealt with passages from Ælfric and The Battle of Maldon, with those from Wulfstan and Genesis B rather less in evidence. Those translations which did less well were carried out clearly with less knowledge of the Old English language, and such cases were sometimes laid bare by failures in the still active facility of students to memorize translations in advance. Candidates are reminded that it is always better to guess at the meaning of unknown words in these translations rather than to leave gaping blanks. The commentaries for Qu. 2 (2/4/6 of Qu. 1) were without exception undertaken as close readings: a positive development from the essay-style ramblings of previous years. If there was a difference, however, between those which did well and those of a more average kind, this lay in the ability to form the reading around a thesis or guiding idea. The best commentaries in contrast were able to find and then communicate a literary purpose or effect, giving their readings structure and rounding them off with a conclusion. The essays were handled all either competently or well, showing preparation in the works of literature concerned as well as a command of their detail. Only in a few cases was there evidence of fitting such prepared work awkwardly to the needs of the question. The best essays had cogency, i.e. had the structure with which to develop an idea, as well as a conclusion. There were some essays which were equally perceptive and made many fine points, but which were sprawling or lacked organization: it was a shame but inevitable that these did not do so well. Future candidates are reminded not to write essays without attempting both development and conclusion. All in all, this year’s scripts revealed candidates who, having prepared well, delivered work of a usually steady, occasionally exemplary, and always professional kind.
For both the commentaries and the essays, students answered a wide range of questions indicating a broad reading of texts from the course. The best commentaries were those that focused closely on the passages, were fluently and confidently expressed, and drew their individual points together into an overarching argument. For the most part, the commentaries demonstrated a good degree of confidence with the Middle English language. There was a tendency in weaker commentaries to summarise rather than analyse the passages, or to make general observations about the work as a whole rather than focussing on the passage at hand. Many of the essays demonstrated a commendable breadth of wider reading and a good knowledge of relevant historical context. The best essays were those that gave consideration to the implications of the question being asked, and provided specific examples to support their points. There were some particularly engaging essays that presented original and thoughtful approaches to the question. The less strong essays were those that made sweeping generalisations or assumptions, failed to engage with what the question was actually asking, or lacked clarity of expression. As with the commentaries, there was an occasional tendency to simply summarise the texts.
The performance in this year’s Middle English II examination was very solid, with candidates demonstrating a good range of knowledge and, in some cases, a careful appreciation of the texts. Candidates generally performed well in the commentaries, producing answers that were largely focused on the particulars of the extracts and which showed a sound understanding of the major themes and issues. The majority of candidates chose to answer Question 2, which involves the critical comparison of two extracts. The most successful of these responses were those which chose to discuss the extracts as a pair, highlighting their similarities and differences in terms of style, themes, and tone. At times, some of the commentaries would have been strengthened by greater precision and clarity; indeed, some answers would have benefitted from a more critical engagement with the extract in order to sustain the specific points being made. In the responses to the essay questions candidates often demonstrated a good understanding of the texts under discussion and, on occasion, showed evidence of wider reading. Answers focusing on medieval drama, particularly the York mystery cycle, were especially popular with candidates. Some essay answers would have been improved by greater concision and, moreover, by greater specificity: students should ensure that the material included in their answers is always directly relevant to the question. The best essay answers were those which offered imaginative and thoughtful responses, combining a clear line of argument with a critical and explorative approach. Such responses also often demonstrated a detailed appreciation of the period and its major themes and traditions, which was particularly pleasing to the examiners.
Renaissance Literature 2015

The paper was done by 44 candidates. The single most popular question (13 answers) was about Donne’s ‘true escape from courtly or ascetic idealism’ (Grierson). Revenge tragedy attracted 11 answers while Marlowe’s ‘I count religion but a childish toy’ was attempted by 10 candidates. So was the ‘everyday’ in Herbert’s poetry. The ‘corrosive energy’ of Marlowe’s drama was done by 7 candidates, making Marlowe the single most popular author on the paper with 17 answers in total for his (a) and (b) questions. Death in Webster attracted 7 answers while ‘conversation’ in Milton was pleasingly popular (6 answers); as were Jonson practising (or not) what he preached, ‘tensions between word and image in the literature of the period’, ‘grief and violence’ in religious writing, and Marvell’s treatment of time, each of which was done by 5 candidates. Four questions were not attempted: no-one wrote on either the ‘rude’ and the ‘great’ in Spenser, or on Spenser’s management of verse form. C. S. Lewis’s bathos in Southwell was not chosen and neither was censorship and the manuscript and print culture of Renaissance England.

The best scripts dealt with complex authors and diverse materials with impressive verve. The examiners were pleased to encounter intelligent analyses of Sidney’s Arcadias, of Nashe’s and Bunyan’s prose styles, lively engagement with Wyatt’s poetry, astute discussions of Milton’s verse, alert critical reflections on the role of Redcrosse in the Faerie Queene, and incisive essays on Jonson’s plays, including ones like Bartholomew Fair and The New Inn, which had not been taught specifically on the course. The best scripts ranged across the poetry, prose, and drama of the period, including Marlowe, Webster, Kyd and Middleton as well as manifesting curiosity about less familiar texts such as the poetry of Southwell and Lovelace, and Foxe’s Actes and Monuments. Among critics and Renaissance scholars favoured by the candidates were Martin Butler, Richard Dutton, Robert Ellrodt, Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Sawday, and Gary Waller.

The main impression left by the weaker answers was quite how narrow a number of them were in their choices of texts, dealing with only a handful of poems by Donne, Herbert, or Marvell, for example, or limiting themselves to the bare minimum of most canonical plays by Jonson or Marlowe. At times the thinness of coverage in such scripts bordered on rubric violations; actual cases of such violation, penalised by the examiners, included answering on one text in Section B of the paper or recycling material from answers in Section A. Several answers appeared to be overly indebted to particular lectures on the course, giving little indication that candidates had used those lectures as prompts to their own further inquiry. There was little off-piste thinking in the weaker papers – indeed, hardly any venturing beyond the texts taught in lectures or seminars. The examiners were concerned to note that a number of candidates ‘downloaded’ prepared answers rather than genuinely seeking to address the questions. Where this led to outright irrelevance, it was penalised; conversely, candidates whose answers authentically engaged with the questions were credited accordingly.
Restoration and 18th Century examiners’ report 2015

This was a year in which the Restoration and Eighteenth Century course had not been taught, so there was a relatively small number of candidates. 13 students sat the exam and 6 submitted Course Essays. The examiners’ overall impression was of a high level of competence, but perhaps a rather conservative range of reading.

Rochester’s poetry was the least popular of the works to be addressed in Question 1), but apparently only because a significant number of candidates (7) wished to write on Rochester in response to a question elsewhere in the paper. In total 9 out of the 13 candidates chose to write two out of their three answers on set authors. Boswell’s Journal was the most popular of the set works addressed in Question 1), but neither Boswell’s writing nor Johnson’s was discussed by any candidate answering questions elsewhere in the paper.

With a small number of candidates taking the paper, it is unsurprising that a number of questions went unanswered by any candidate. In this exam, no one wrote about Dryden, Swift, Defoe, Johnson or Cowper, and outside the set text question Pope’s poetry featured very little. By far the most popular question was on fear in Rochester’s poems. Popularity did not mean mediocrity: Rochester had clearly intrigued students and several wrote about him with real verve and insight. Also relatively popular this year were Restoration and eighteenth-century dramatists in general, and Aphra Behn (as playwright, poet and fiction writer) in particular. There was much evidence of conscientious engagement with the course, though in a few cases candidates tended to reproduce lecture notes rather than presenting their own ideas.

Aside from those answers on comic drama, it was very rare for candidates to compare the work of more than one author, and questions that invited them to do so (e.g. on irony, or on time in fiction) were not answered. Perhaps those who wished to undertake such comparative work elected to submit Course Essays.

Several candidates seemed prone to misquotation. Quotations can be very useful markers in an essay, and invaluably help focus attention on detail, but misquoted lines of poetry undermine any examiner’s confidence. Some other candidates were less than clear about which question on the paper they were actually answering. However, overall this was a group of well written and well evidenced scripts.
There were only 22 candidates. There were nine altogether unanswered questions; and correspondingly there was pronounced bunching in, for instance, the passages in Q. 1 (John Smith getting 8 answers, Hawthorne 5, Douglass 4, Poe 3 and Twain 2 – with Cooper and Dickinson getting zero). A number of candidates paid insufficient attention to the rubric of the question and did not very successfully balance comment on the particular passage and the work with ‘other writing… studied for the course’. In the paper as a whole, ‘Bartleby’ did well considering it was not a set text, appearing in 5 answers, while Benito Cereno managed 6. Candidates did not in general explore the less trodden ways of American literature, or even of topics lectured on, though there were enterprising exceptions – but the standard of work was very respectable in most cases, and there was particularly adventurous and outstanding work on the Civil War, Poe and Brockden Brown, Wigglesworth, Ambrose Bierce, Dickinson and captivity narratives.
London in Literature

Answers to this paper ranged very widely in quality.

In Section A, answers focused very markedly on two of the set texts, with a large majority of candidates choosing to respond to the excerpts from *Trivia* and *Oliver Twist*; only a small clutch wrote about *The Secret Agent* and Boswell’s *Journal*, and none chose to comment on the Middleton and Hazlitt passages. Many of the essays composed in this part of the exam struggled to attend closely enough to the texts of the passages in question, sometimes pursuing unhelpful tangents or proffering irrelevant generalizations. The strongest answers successfully combined close readings—making apt observations about style, form, and genre—with apposite contextualization—situating the passage within its source text as well as within the larger literary-historical panorama of London literature.

Answers in Section B, like those on Section A, surprised the examiners by being so markedly bunched—very many questions in the paper were not essayed by any candidates, and a great many candidates chose to answer the same questions. The pattern suggested a certain lack of adventurousness, with few candidates departing from the paths trodden in seminars. One of the most noticeable facts about the answers in this section was a near universal tendency to ignore the prefatory quotations and respond solely—legitimately but somewhat unexcitingly—to the prompt itself.

The most accomplished essays demonstrated an impressive range of reading. They were clearly structured and dense with literary analysis as well as historical detail. Such essays typically rose to the challenge of trying to identify the transhistorical specificities of London literature, distinguishing writing about the capital from urban writing in general.

Weaker scripts, by contrast, typically failed to engage with their chosen questions, sometimes veering off-topic from the outset or in other cases gradually losing sight of their initial purpose. Such answers also tended to be overly descriptive, summarizing plot rather than articulating a comparative analysis, and failing to quote from the texts under discussion.
Romantics exam report

This year’s Romantics paper was for the most part competently answered. The best essays combined an elegant and cogent writing style with close attention both to the language of the texts on which they concentrated and to the relevant historical and literary-historical contexts in which these were produced. The weaker essays tended to be sloppily written and imprecisely argued, and they generally referred to only a few texts. Most answers on Keats, for example, confined themselves to the odes and therefore betrayed a disappointing lack of range. The single most striking limitation to the Romantics exam scripts was that a substantial number of candidates refused to engage directly with the quotations embedded in the questions they answered. Stronger candidates’ essays interrogated the question carefully and complicated its terms of reference. Also noticeable was the fact that very few candidates included any dates in their essays, including those of publications discussed in detail, an omission that seemed symptomatic of a sometimes loose grasp of the period.
Exam report, June 2015

The Victorian Period

72 candidates took the Victorians paper this year. The examiners were, on the whole, impressed with the scripts. The best candidates showed a wide range of reading, and their answers revealed detailed knowledge of individual texts, and drew from thoughtful engagement with historical, cultural and political contexts. A few of the strongest candidates had read well beyond material taught in seminars, exploring some of the lesser-known works by well-known authors, but also, on occasion, lesser-known works by authors largely forgotten, such as Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna. Some candidates were very perceptive about narrative technique, giving fine analyses of manipulative, secretive and unreliable first-person narrators, or on the use of cliffhangers in serialization. There were a number of good answers on sensation fiction, a few good answers on the influence of Darwin on Victorian literature, and some good answers on homosexuality and secrecy. There were relatively few answers on poets other than Tennyson and Browning, but a small number of candidates wrote perceptively about nonsense poetry, about Clough, Hopkins and Christina Rossetti.

Many of the weaker scripts seemed to draw from a small selection of often very short works. There were, for example, several answers on Browning which referred only to ‘My Last Duchess’ and ‘Porphyria’s Lover’, and several answers on Tennyson which referred only to ‘The Lady of Shalott’ and ‘Mariana’. (Interestingly, the examiners’ report in 2013 also complained about too many answers based only on these poems.) Some of the weaker answers on fiction seemed to confine themselves to responses to the plots of novels, and paid little attention to language and style. Attempts to discuss Victorian debates about aesthetics, about beauty and about art were often too reliant on broad generalization. Some weak answers discussed only one work when required to discuss at least two, and some weak scripts had a very short third answer.
Moderns I: Examiners’ Report, 2015

The examiners were pleased to see that answers ranged widely across the questions in Section B as well as Section A on the set authors. However the range of reading/viewing of the set authors was at times rather narrow and unadventurous. In particular, candidates who chose to answer on Woolf or Joyce often confined themselves to the most canonical of their texts. Some candidates’ answers in both Sections A and B tended to be more moralistic than literary. We would also have liked to see more evidence of understanding of the historical and cultural distinctiveness of the writings and other creative works of the period. For instance, many answers which paired works could have been more sensitive to differences of genre, date, and national culture. The best answers were from candidates who combined wide reading of primary material with thoughtful critical analysis, original argument in response to the questions, an awareness of the cultural and national backgrounds of the period, and clarity with style.
Exam Report

Modern Literature II

Forty-two candidates sat the exam this year. Some questions, for example on the treatment of the commonplace, were especially popular. Overall, there were some very strong answers and the examiners were pleased to find some unexpected answers on unexpected texts, a general ability to close-read texts to a good standard, and answers that, for the most part, were keen to invoke theoretical and critical ideas without abandoning the need to bring historical and/or contextual knowledge to bear on their analyses.

The best answers showed an ability to think critically about a range of texts and to write with flair, and avoided historical generalisations and crude or modish interpretations of theoretical and critical terms. They often performed deft linguistic analysis to support their arguments and avoided simply identifying literary techniques. Most importantly, these answers showed a real engagement with the question asked and did not attempt to simply download prepared material. They were lively and sophisticated, avoiding rigidity and achieving clarity and accuracy with strong textual recall.

Average answers showed a more limited range of material and produced safe, unchallenging and derivative arguments. They were frequently episodic in structure and had a rather basic and general sense of context. Many mistook the identification of literary techniques for the rather more difficult task of using that knowledge to cast new light on a piece of writing. Those that showed awareness of critical sources often cited them in an uncritical manner, suggesting dependence rather than engagement.

The weakest responses were heavily descriptive and only partly relevant to the question. They often showed clear attempts to shoehorn a pre-prepared essay to fit a particular question. These essays were frequently disjointed and full of unsupported claims and vague assertions.
Literary Representation and the History of Homosexuality

Examiners' Report 2014 and 2015

The essays submitted by the two year groups were of a high standard and many were outstanding. Examiners several times praised the combination of research and stylistic vigour. One essay, for instance, was ‘impressive in managing to keep its own voice and lines of discussion to the fore, while marshalling a very large range of primary and secondary material’; another was ‘lucid, thoughtful, polemical, showing evidence of wide-ranging research’; a third was ‘very well researched, featuring fascinating historical materials and illustrations’. Essays were praised for ‘showing a great deal of thoughtful engagement with the topic’, for being ‘lively and pleasingly original’, ‘engaged and engaging’, and ‘assertive, lively and forceful’. Some of the submitted work was ‘very mature’ and showed ‘real scholarly potential’. More than one candidate made good use of original research into unpublished archival and manuscript materials, both as evidence of the genesis of literary works and of social and biographical contexts. Other work was notably enterprising and scrupulous in its deployment of online resources, including visual images, film and the written word. A number of students were able to integrate ‘sophisticated critical terminology’ with ‘sensitive close readings’. Some of the strongest pieces managed not only to deploy critical authorities but to canvas debates and disagreements within recent criticism in the formulation of their own approach.

The less successful essays were nonetheless all of a creditable standard. The main failings that examiners specified were ‘insufficient analysis of central terms’, the rehearsal of ‘critical commonplaces’, and an unwillingness to go beyond ‘basic appreciation’. Examiners pointed to instances of superficial readings, lack of stamina and enterprise in the reading undertaken, poor expression, and insufficient attention to questions of genre. Most of the essays were lucidly structured, but some were repetitive.

Essay topics included a wide variety of genres including graphic novels and video-based art practice as well as poetry, prose, critical theory, and drama. There was for instance work on Marlowe and the Renaissance, on female friendship in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and on nineteenth-century poetry. The majority of essays, however, focussed on works from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including topics on the poetry of World War I, contemporary Irish fiction and a study of a single year (1928). There was a good deal of work on both British and American literature, and on both male and female authors.