Performance on this year’s Chaucer exam was, on the whole, excellent. The majority of students showed an admirable knowledge of both Chaucer’s own writings and the texts that informed these. The understanding of both was, for the most part, impressive – in some cases very impressive indeed. A sizeable number of candidates had ventured widely – sometimes very widely – in their reading, and were able to use this to make enlightening points about Chaucer’s works. Students deserve commendation for the hard work that, in most cases, they had clearly put in to studying for the paper.

Less successful scripts often failed properly to answer the question that the candidate had selected; this was particularly (although not always) the case with the question about representations of women’s voices in The Canterbury Tales, which was more complicated than quite a few candidates thought it was. Students are reminded always to pay attention to exactly what a question is asking them to consider, and to answer with relevance to this throughout. Other recurring problems were answers that were too long to sustain focused thinking and argument, and – despite the warning in the rubric to the paper – very poor handwriting.

Candidates are reminded to avoid factual inaccuracies in their answers; to ensure that the logic of what they are wanting to say is clear and easy to follow; to avoid simply paraphrasing what happens in a commentary passage, or in Chaucer’s works more widely; and to give their answers structure and direction. They should, in addition, ensure that their assertions are backed up by cogent evidence, and check that when they invoke details in passages for commentary, they are clear about what these mean, and how they fit into the Middle English that surrounds them. These were not problems for very many students this year, however, and the standard of the scripts consequently was very high.
In general, this was another run of solid scripts, showing decent coverage of texts from Shakespeare’s canon, some interesting use of performance history and textual scholarship, particularly good awareness of period contexts – political, theological, and philosophical – and, in a number of instances, nuanced understanding of critical positions. The examiners felt that the questions elicited a wide variety of responses – particularly perhaps in Section B where each question was tackled from a range of angles – and we found many instances of students applying their original research in order to approach questions from unexpected but engaging positions. As ever, answers that went well beyond lecture and seminar content demonstrated pleasing intellectual flair, and evidence of strong personal research practice which we were keen to reward: in contrast, answers which presented sometimes rather predictable recitations of lecture material found fewer opportunities to announce their originality or individual interpretive insights. The length of the exam paper, the number of directly relevant primary texts available, and the vast scope of critical positions available to students on this module, should, ideally, mean that students feel encouraged to pursue individual interests even in the exam setting. The open-book nature of the exam continues to mean that many answers are characterised by some really lovely moments of close textual analysis, underpinning the best answers with a backbone of detailed textual interaction: students should beware of the temptation to use the desk-copy to provide extended plot-narration, and look to use it to prove local nuance and analytic precision to their answers.

This year the rubric change allowed students more opportunity to use Section A texts as part of their answers to Section B. By far the most popular Section A text was MND, with 47% of students answering on MND for section A, and a further 20 uses in Section B. However, it doesn’t seem that the rubric change had an appreciably negative impact on the range of texts covered, although a good number of students did take the opportunity to answer on set texts in Section B. Macbeth in particular was employed in Section B, by 44 students (MND had 20; 1HIV had 12; WT had 10, usually used in the settings question). Some of the weaker scripts took the most advantage of using set-texts, while stronger scripts were often better at selecting apposite texts from a wider reservoir of familiarity in order to find texts that better suited the question. It does seem that seminar-texts attract the majority of answers, and some text combinations became rather familiar. For example, race was a popular topic, so Oth, MofV, A&C, Temp. all come high on the list as texts suitable for discussions of cultural conflict, but students might consider exploring slightly further afield, or to complement a seminar text with something less familiar. There is no inherent value in employing some of the less canonical texts, but there are clear benefits to having a range of texts from which to draw best-fit examples: one oddity, for instance, is that A1 and 2 drew so many of the gender-based answers that Taming of S was only used once in Section B. Equally, it is perhaps a little surprising that so few students took the opportunity to show contextual genre knowledge of 1HIV by using related
history plays: 2HIV, HV, both Richards, HVI, all get very little attention, and nobody thinks to consider Falstaff in MWW.

As in previous years, students are encouraged to use critical material with discernment: certain combinations – of Bradley and Tillyard alongside Greenblatt, Adelman, or Fernie – show limited awareness of the specific critical context or positions of these wildly divergent writers, conflating some acutely different positions and thereby ascribing continuities between critical periods where actually there is often only antagonism. There is nothing wrong with using Wilson Knight or Bradley as critical support, but it would be good to feel that the student understood what type of older criticism is being employed here, what sort of stance they are therefore adopting, and even that the student could see the potential limitations of, for example, 1930-50s character-criticism. Very simply, it is always worth asking why a critic is writing something, not just what they are writing. In general, this year did not see a particularly wide range of critics being employed, although some of the stronger scripts showed genuine and considered engagement with some extremely interesting, often more contemporary critics.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY AND ANALYSIS

Examiners’ Report, 2016

The examiners were impressed with the overall standard of the answers submitted for this course. Nearly all of this year’s candidates managed at least satisfactory performances in the Commentary and Analysis examination. Some very weak scripts did not contain three complete answers, but the vast majority of candidates showed a reasonable understanding of all of the writing they discussed. Nearly all of the students could say meaningful things about the relationship between meaning and form. Spelling, syntax and grammar were good on the whole, and only a very small number of scripts had handwriting that was difficult to read.

The best answers were able not only to make good sense of the passages discussed, but also to discuss elements of style, form, vocabulary, and, at times, to think in intelligent ways about the importance of historical context. Many answers were too long, and would have been improved if more effort had been made to distinguish more significant parts of the texts in question, and to attempt to convey an overall sense of the passages. Many answers on some of the longer texts relied too much on paraphrase and plot summary, extensive descriptions of the passage in question which were not sufficiently analytical. Sometimes students were inclined to read too much into particular poetic features: half-rhyme and pararhyme might be inventively employed by the poet, but aren’t necessarily indications of humanity’s imperfections. Commentaries also needed to be more attentive to the particularities of genre. Sometimes discussions of poems seemed to treat poetry as discursive prose. The extract from a novel (question 6) was frequently discussed as an exercise in symbolism, with little thought given to how it might be working as part of a narrative.
Efforts to date passages were sometimes completely unsuccessful; on the other hand many fine answers made sense of the texts without attempting to date them. Candidates should beware attempting to identify a passage as belonging to a particular period unless they are very confident in doing so and can make this identification a meaningful part of their answer. There were some surprising weaknesses. Some candidates seemed to assume by default that some of the authors or narrators were male. Some candidates seemed too ready to assume that the authors of the extracts of travel-writing were racist, and failed to consider how they might be working against the preconceptions of their time. Complexities and ambiguities in the passages often received too little attention. At other times candidates attributed too much importance to things that were not done in extracts, forgetting that something left out of the extract might be discussed elsewhere in the piece from which it was taken.

We felt that many of the scripts would have been stronger if the candidates had spent more time analysing the passages carefully before writing about them. The best answers were able to demonstrate very nuanced understandings without being overly long.

**MODERN ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

Examiners’ Report, 2016

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

This year on this examination paper there were fifteen questions. Only five questions were not attempted. Questions 1, 5, and 11 were the most popular. Other questions answered were 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, and 13.

This year’s results were very good indeed. There was evidence of a solid understanding of the material and an excellent engagement with the questions asked. It is clear that all candidates had prepared well for this examination. The less good answers were those in which terminological errors were made (e.g. confusing aspect and tense, the different types of modality, etc.) and/or which showed a lack of precision in the use of terminology.

**LITERARY LINGUISTICS**

Examiners’ Report, 2016

There were a relatively small number of course essays for Literary Linguistics this year, since the course did not run in 2015-16. Even so, these essays showed an interesting and diverse mix of topics, including the representation of speech and thought, the construction of feminine identity, transitivity, and the rhetoric of resistance. The texts that provided a focus for essays ranged from literary texts such as the prose and poetry of Thomas Hardy and more modern works by John Dos Passos and Cormac McCarthy, to non-literary texts such as those
associated with the civil rights movement and self-help books. As in previous years, it was encouraging to see students writing on material that holds personal interest, and some of the most successful pieces were obviously the result of real fascination with or enthusiasm for a particular author or discourse type. In general, this year’s essays were impressive, showing careful research and thoughtful treatment of their chosen texts. The most successful pieces had a clear focus, and engaged with the linguistic features of their texts in detail and with attention to their significance; there were some very insightful discussions that showed real sophistication and critical engagement with both texts and linguistic theory. Some students were resourceful and ambitious in the secondary reading that informed their essays, and this paid off. On the other hand, some essays were not very well-structured, and either forgot to introduce the texts or topic at the outset or rushed sections. As well as this, some students simply stated conclusions rather than really arguing them, and not all explanations were as clear and precise as they needed to be.

HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Examiners’ Report, 2016

Ten students sat the exam this year. Students wrote on a range of topics relating to different periods covered on the course, including the following:

the relationship between Old and Modern English; the notion of Standard English; the significance of the Bible for historians of the language; the impact of particular books or individuals on the language; lexicography and its historical context, and the differences between different dictionaries; sources of new words; the relationship between speech and writing; nostalgia and language use/study; British vs. American English; English as a global language; prescriptive attitudes to features of English.

Overall, the examiners were impressed by the thoughtfulness and level of detail in this year’s papers. Most answers showed a very good knowledge of different periods, and careful attention to the relationship between the language and its historical context. The best answers were well-informed and precise, drawing on interesting and specific examples and going beyond superficial description; several papers showed real subtlety and confidence in the way they discussed aspects of language and changes within and across periods. There were answers on topics as diverse as the language of the Bible and Middle English loanwords which were clearly motivated by great enthusiasm for the material and very wide reading. The least successful answers appeared to be pre-prepared and slightly side-stepped the questions being asked; in one or two cases good material was used but not directed towards the question. There were also answers that suffered from over-simplification or a lack of precise detail, or discussed the topic in a superficial way, but these were in the minority.
OLD ICELANDIC LITERATURE

Examiners’ Report, 2016

This year four candidates sat the exam. The translations of seen passages in Qu. 1 (3/6) were done mostly fairly poorly, with Modern English renderings either overliteral or prone to paraphrase. However, the range of passages attempted, which encompassed texts from Skírnismál to Njáls saga, was pleasingly wide. The other questions were handled with more confidence. Although nobody attempted the question consisting of commentaries, the essays were all handled with conceptual and critical sophistication, with knowledge of literary and historical contexts and sometimes in the more obscure corners of the subject as well. There was evidence of good preparation and while Þrymskviða and Hrafnkels saga were more popular choices than other works in the essay questions, the range of knowledge was again wide. While the best essays answered the question precisely and illustrated their answers with examples, it is fair to say that all essay answers were handled professionally. Examiners were pleased to see the high critical level although also concerned that the linguistic capability sometimes did not match this.

OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE I

Examiners’ Report, 2016

Four candidates sat this exam. The quality of answers to Question 1, which requires four translations from set texts, varied. Nobody left out a passage but occasionally some words and phrases were rendered with gaps in the translation, something which examiners believe serves no purpose when at least an informed guess might deliver the right result. Some basic poetic vocabulary appeared to be unknown. The range of passages attempted, from the story of Cædmon’s Hymn to The Seafarer to The Riddles, apart from the obligatory Beowulf, was comprehensive. The commentaries required by Question 2 were handled: partly imaginatively and well; partly not, where the exercise of close reading was confused with essay writing and the context of the passage even misplaced. The better commentaries showed good preparation and knowledge of sources; the less good ones were short, somewhat remote from textual engagement and lacked focus. The essays addressed a variety of texts and topics, including the Elegies, Riddles, women and Beowulf and in other heroic poems. Although the range of knowledge was often narrowed to the texts in question, with spare reference to the texts, these essays were sometimes written with creativity and imagination.
OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE II

Examiners' Report, 2016

Nine candidates sat the examination. A good range of questions was answered across the three sections of the paper: all the passages set for translation and commentary were attempted by at least one candidate, and essays were written on the prefaces, the Old English Boethius, the Life of Æthelthryth, The Battle of Maldon, Judith, and Old English as a ‘language of eloquence’.

Several candidates produced excellent translations, which were not only accurate but also fluent and idiomatic. Weaker candidates showed a lack of grammatical or lexicographical knowledge, but were sometimes able to pull up their marks through imaginative guesswork in relation to the context. The best commentaries engaged closely with the passage and also related their observations perceptively to broader issues; at the other end of the spectrum, the weaker answers tended to be descriptive, unstructured and verbose. Some of the essays were terrifically energetic and well informed, showing a fine understanding of the texts and their implications. Candidates should ensure they pay attention to cogency of argument and to maintaining an analytical approach throughout. Overall the examiners were pleased by the range and quality of the responses to the questions set in the paper.

MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE I

Examiners' Report, 2016

Performance in this year’s examination was very solid. Answers demonstrated a good understanding of the texts, as well as an awareness of important contextual and thematic issues. It was also very pleasing to see that there was a good understanding of the Middle English language. In the commentary exercise, responses showed a sound range of knowledge and commented well on language and word choice. Comparison of two extracts was successfully done and some very solid observations regarding points of similarity and/or difference were drawn. Nonetheless, these answers could have been strengthened if there had been a closer analysis of the specific features of the two extracts, as well as greater critical reflection on the significance of points observed. The essay questions yielded some promising responses. These answers typically demonstrated a very good familiarity with the chosen texts and an ability to reflect on genre, as well as historical context and literary traditions. Candidates should ensure, however, that they always focus consistently on the question and avoid lapsing into a general consideration of the text under discussion.
MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE II

Examiners’ Report, 2016

Candidates did well in this year’s examination and a wide range of questions were answered. Commentaries often demonstrated a good knowledge of the texts, as well as a confidence with reading the Middle English language. The strongest commentaries were those that were able to contextualise the passage or passages, considering issues of transmission and/or reception whilst also maintaining a consistent level of close analysis and discussing a range of critical points. Answers which compared two extracts were good, with students drawing some very interesting points of comparison and discussing the passages as a pair rather than switching from one to another. Sometimes commentaries suffered from either being overly descriptive rather than analytic, or from ranging too widely from the passage itself. Essays were answered on a wide range of texts, demonstrating a thorough and often enthusiastic engagement with the teaching of the course, and eliciting some imaginative responses. Commendable use was made of secondary criticism and broader reading of primary texts, as well as historical and literary context. Many essays also made commendable use of primary quotations. The strongest essays were focussed and insightful, demonstrating a thoughtful response to the question, as well as an awareness of the relevant literary or historical concerns of the period. Less strong essays were those that failed to engage closely with the implications of the question, and that summarised rather than analysed works.

RENAISSANCE LITERATURE

Examiners’ Report, 2016

All questions were answered on, apart from 18 (heroism in English Renaissance drama), 21 (the sonnet) and 23 (poems as social acts). The best candidates combined copious and accurate recall with the ability to mount convincing, multi-faceted arguments. However, writing a lot is not the same as writing effectively, and some other candidates would have been well advised to plan more and write less. Across the board, more attention could have been paid to spelling, grammar and style. There was a broad spread of material, with less of a pull towards tragedy than in past years, and it was good to see evidence of reading well beyond the canonical (e.g. Elizabeth I, Anne Clifford, George Gascoigne, Henry King, Rachel Speght). Real efforts were made to supply context, and, even within the weaker scripts, major historical howlers were few. However, discussions of genre and other formal qualities of works were often uncertain.

The examiners noted that Paradise Lost, a set text in the first year, was answered on at length more than once in question 5a (Milton and resistance). The question of overlap with other Finals scripts did not, of course, arise, and the subject-matter was undeniably relevant; such answers worked best where they
demonstrated incremental knowledge, assessing *Paradise Lost* in the light of more recently studied works by Milton.

**RESTORATION AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURY**

**Examiners report, 2016**

There were 37 candidates this year, and the majority performed well. All but the few weakest demonstrated that they had paid close attention to the course, and most gave some evidence of having built on what they had been taught through independent research. The best candidates showed, both by the content of their answers and through their style, that they had taken intelligent pleasure in the literature and culture of the period.

A good range of authors and topics were addressed, with only eight out of the 30 questions on the paper eliciting no responses. However, the examiners were sorry to find that rather fewer candidates than in previous years had material to offer on authors or works not specifically lectured on or taught in seminars – in fact, only three did. Tutorials offer students the chance to pursue their own enthusiasms within this and every other period they study, and it would be sad indeed if candidates were becoming increasingly reluctant to exploit this potential for diversity within our curriculum. We were also concerned to note a certain lack of breadth across individual scripts and within individual answers. Successive examiners’ reports for this paper have warned that, while answering on set texts in Section B is permitted under the rubric, candidates who do this risk being penalised for thinness of coverage unless they have taken care to read widely within the set author in question. Despite these warnings, several candidates answered qu. 12 on Pope’s self-fashioning exclusively on the basis of the two set poems, the *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot* and *An Epistle to a Lady* (indeed, some referred to just one). More generally, Section B answers tended to limit themselves to texts taught in seminars; the stronger candidates consistently marked themselves out by their ability and willingness to invoke a second novel, for instance, as comparison or contrast to the one prescribed for class.

But perhaps the most striking feature of the examination this year was the comparative under-achievement of candidates in the Section A commentary exercise. More often than not, the commentary answers were the least impressive element of the scripts, and usually this was because candidates failed to find the balance asked for in the rubric between discussion of the set passage in itself and ‘in relation to the work from which it is taken’. A few candidates emphasised the latter to the exclusion of the former, producing general essays on the minutiae of the passage at length (often exaggerating the importance of trivia such as alliteration or allegedly mimetic sonic or formal features) and forgetting to relate it to the work more largely. Some in fact treated the passages as if they had been set on a ‘Critical Commentary and Analysis’ paper. But even the strongest candidates sometimes overlooked details which gave clear opportunities to situate or contextualize the passages: not a single candidate...
identified ‘Atossa’ in the Pope passage as partly based on the Duchess of Marlborough, or the quotation at the end of the Boswell passage as from Johnson’s ‘The Vanity of Human Wishes’; while only a couple pointed out that Pamela’s reference to the ‘Closet’ reminds the reader that Mr. B is hidden there as she lays out her clothing bundles.

One very welcome improvement as against previous years was the noticeable reduction in the number of irrelevant answers. Here candidates did seem to have heeded the warnings of previous examiners that answers which blatantly ignored the terms of the question, however well informed and argued they might be, would be penalised. The converse is also true – answers which are fairly weak in themselves will be rewarded if they make a clear attempt to address the question – and the examiners were happy to be able to credit a number of candidates for remembering as much this year.

AMERICAN LITERATURE TO 1900

Examiners’ Report, 2016

The examiners were on the whole pleased with these scripts. They revealed a good understanding of early American writing, and of 19th century American fiction in particular. We would have liked to have seen a few more essays on poetry, but there were some fine commentaries on Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, and some interesting analyses of Whitman’s Civil War writings. The best candidates, who scored marks in the 70s, developed interesting and original arguments that responded in detail and with sophistication to the questions asked. Many excellent connections were made between the culture of the period and the texts under discussion. These scripts were elegantly written, thoughtfully structured, and avoided clichés. They also managed to explore the representation of topics such as slavery or the conflicts between the Native Americans and the Puritans without losing sight of the genres in which the texts under consideration were composed.

The scripts in the 2:1 bracket were competent, lively, and lucid, but tended to be rather more predictable than those that scored First Class marks. These candidates were less likely to bring in texts other than the work of the ten writers discussed in seminars. That said, writers such as Emerson, Stowe, Jefferson, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, did feature in a number of answers in this category. These essays often demonstrated a good understanding of the way texts illustrated themes important to the evolution of American writing, and American politics and culture generally, and were attentive to the historical pressures shaping writers’ perspectives and intentions.

The scripts marked below 60 contained many unsubstantiated generalizations, and were often vague or repetitive.
The Last of the Mohicans was by some distance the least popular of the set texts. There was, otherwise, a pretty even spread among the 9 other set writers, and in the best essays interesting comparisons were often made between them. It was pleasing to find discussions of various 1890s texts such as Kate Chopin’s The Awakening and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s The Yellow Wallpaper, which are now eligible for discussion in this course, since its end date has been pushed forward to 1900. We were, however, somewhat disappointed to find so few candidates willing to venture beyond the set texts: all the answers on Melville addressed ‘Benito Cereno’ or ‘Bartleby’ or both – not a single candidate mentioned Moby-Dick, despite the optional extra seminar offered on this whale of a book. Essays on Twain were exclusively concerned with Huckleberry Finn. Many candidates would undoubtedly have scored higher marks if their essays had demonstrated knowledge of works other than those taught in seminars.

LONDON IN LITERATURE

Examiners’ Report, 2016

The paper was done rather well, with candidates on the whole able to range across literary texts with a measure of confidence and fluency. The best answers rose to the challenge of reading literature with particular reference to topography but without putting the texts in straitjackets. Boswell, Dickens (Boz, Oliver Twist, Our Mutual Friend), Conrad, Ackroyd, and Sherlock Holmes were popular as were Alan Hollinghurst, Zadie Smith, and Sarah Waters. The range stretched from 18th-century London to the latest writings and films about the metropolis. Gothic London featured as did Hazlitt’s and Blake’s city (briefly). There were no answers on mediaeval or early modern London in what was admittedly a small sample of scripts (12) in the off-year of the course.

THE ROMANTIC PERIOD

Examiners’ Report, 2016

The spread of answers was encouragingly wide this year, with more than one answer on the authors of all eleven set texts. The largest number of answers were on Lyrical Ballads, Austen and Keats. Section B of the exam also included discussion of a welcome range of writers, including Burns, Clare, Cobbett, Hogg, Lamb and de Quincey. Quite a number of candidates wrote on women writers of the period. The most popular, as ever, was Austen, followed by Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley, with essays often ranging beyond Frankenstein. There were also a number of essays on Radcliffe, whether as a set author or in relation to the Gothic novel, and a few candidates discussed Mary Robinson, Dorothy Wordsworth, Helen Maria Williams, Sara Coleridge and Mary Lamb.

Although the breadth of authors discussed was encouraging, the examiners were disappointed that only a minority of candidates showed that they had read widely in the works of the authors they discussed. Fewer still had engaged
critically with the secondary literature on these figures, or seriously considered their place in the period considered more generally. Candidates whose reading and thinking was more ambitious tended to do better. There was a strong correlation between depth of research, breadth of reading, and the quality of discussion.

The weaker scripts in this examination often failed to address the question, and produced answers that were either irrelevant or that failed to engage with the specific thrust of the question posed. Stronger candidates paid close attention not only to the phrasing of the question but also, in several cases, engaged in detail with the quotations provided, in ways that often prompted them, it seemed, to move beyond pre-prepared material. Other candidates were held back by clichéd or reductive responses.

Although there was evidence of solid understanding in almost all the examination work for this paper, and candidates generally seemed to be in secure command of their arguments and primary materials, the examiners felt a certain intellectual timidity in the run of scripts taken as a whole. Few students evidenced a freshly understood sense of the momentousness and extraordinariness of the period. Not many made use of the secondary literature to challenge or extend their own views, and very few showed that they understood the historical development of views of this period. Candidates seemed to be particularly anxious about discussing political thinking and writing in this period, shying away from questions that asked them to consider this directly, and there was almost nothing on the changes in philosophical thinking at the time, even in relation to Coleridge. Candidates who were ambitious in their choice of texts and arguments almost always produced high-scoring work, and the examiners would encourage students to be bold in their reading and thinking for this paper.

THE VICTORIAN PERIOD

Examiners’ Report, 2016

21 candidates sat the exam this year. 16 of the 24 section B questions were tackled, which made for pleasantly varied responses. However, not all the Section A set texts were covered: sadly, no candidate chose to write on either Rossetti or George Eliot, while nearly half opted to write on Tess of the d’Urbervilles.

The strongest papers tended to be those that engaged in detail with the question, often challenging it or considering it from different angles, and playing with the nuances of individual words in the quotations provided on the exam paper. The strongest answers also put forward a clear argument, were structured according to ideas and arguments rather than plot summaries, and stayed clear of generalisations about Victorian society (such as simplistic assumptions about the oppression of nineteenth-century women).
First-class answers also tended to be those that displayed a range of reading that reached far beyond the course’s lectures and seminars: it was highly enjoyable to come across answers based on works such as Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Collins’s *No Name*, Hardy’s *The Well-Beloved*, and Wells’s *The Time Machine*. The most impressive answers on the set texts were those that exhibited an awareness of some of the relevant authors’ other works, and a sense of the genres within which they were operating. Overall, the best answers were dynamic, detailed, and a pleasure to read.

Weaker responses included those that tried to twist a question to fit what felt like a pre-prepared answer, those that stuck to generalisations about works without providing either examples or quotations, and that limited themselves to summarising plots. These responses often stayed very close to lectures and seminars, and contained both factual and spelling errors (‘Dicken’s’ was a serial offender).

There were no rubric violations, but some candidates came close by barely discussing a second work in their section B answers; candidates should seek a good balance between the 2 (or more) works chosen for discussion. The rubric does not explicitly forbid students from discussing the same set text twice in Section B answers, but candidates should think carefully about whether it is in their best interest to do so.

**MODERN LITERATURE I**

**Examiners’ Report, 2016**

We were very pleased with the general performance of students on this exam. While the period has a fairly narrow canon, there were answers on a wide variety of texts and authors. In section 1, Eliot and to a lesser extent Woolf received a large amount of attention, though some excellent work was produced on all four authors and Charlie Chaplin. Some students seemed hard pressed to move beyond the set authors across the whole of their exams, answering on them in some cases on all three questions. While this is permissible, it nevertheless might seem to display a narrowness of reading and preparation.

While the novel was the most popular form, poetry, film, and drama all received some thoughtful and persuasive attention. As always, the best responses were driven by a central argument or claim, whereas less successful answers resorted to plot summary or thematic exposition. It is, further, extremely important for students to take the terms of the questions seriously, and not attempt to shoehorn prepared answers into unlikely spots. The candidates who did best were invariably those who seemed provocatively stimulated by the questions and really tried to answer them rather than diverging away from the question posed.
MODERN LITERATURE II

Examiners' Report, 2016

Answers to this paper ranged widely in quality. The best scripts were frankly dazzling, demonstrating keen insight and acute literary sensitivity – keeping their chosen questions in view at all times and answering them in essays which combined knowledge and interpretation, incisiveness and elegance, appreciation and intellectual skepticism. Strong answers often quoted judiciously from a wide range of primary and secondary sources, interweaving complex ideas with close engagement with literary texts, and building arguments that were both unexpected and persuasive. Weaker scripts, by contrast, typically failed to engage with their chosen questions, sometimes veering away from their subject from the outset or gradually drifting further and further away from their self-appointed theme.

A number of students restricted their answers in both sections to set-text material. This is of course permitted, and produced some very fine and original answers, but the examiners were particularly impressed by candidates who ventured further afield, discussing a wide range of authors not taught in seminars.

Examiners were dismayed by the uncritical espousal of ‘theory’ displayed in a number of scripts. Many essays seemed to assume that gestures towards theoretical discourse, and in particular to some of Derrida’s most quoted pronouncements, were de rigueur: all too often, the invocation of theory and the repetition of some of its most worn declarative formulae seemed to usurp the place of intellectual and aesthetic engagement with texts. While apposite reference to theory can form part of superlative essays, students should bear in mind that there are many fruitful ways of approaching any question, and that only some of these involve recourse to abstract general frameworks. Theory should be used and valued not as an endpoint in itself, to be adduced and paraded as a final truth, but as a stimulus to thought, open to critical interrogation and requiring the same historical contextualization as any other statement would.

LITERARY REPRESENTATION AND THE HISTORY OF HOMOSEXUALITY

Examiners' Report, 2016

The results show that there was a good deal of excellent work this year and almost all the essays were of a high standard. Examiners noted, for instance, writing that was ‘sophisticated, intellectually ambitious, articulate and comfortable with theory’, ‘thorough, detailed, and wide-ranging’, and that showed a ‘confident grasp of relevant theory’. Other commendations included ‘an enterprising and genuinely scholarly treatment of an obscure topic’, ‘personal engagement with the topic alongside scrupulous and even-handed research’, a ‘fine discussion of genre’, and a ‘confident grasp’ of theoretical paradigms. Many of the scripts were lively and enthusiastic; the better ones succeeded in moving convincingly from social and
biographical circumstance to cultural analysis. The most successful essays managed to engage independent-mindedly with recent critical writing; many of them showed adventure in their choice of texts and were elegantly and incisively written.

The main failings that examiners specified in the less successful essays were a 'tendency to paraphrase rather than analyse', too much reliance on 'plot rehearsal', 'arguments signposted rather incoherently', 'not making the move from a survey of instances to a purposeful argument', 'recourse to clichés', and in one or two cases insufficient care over presentation and proof-reading.

The essays took on a range of topics and showed a variety of approaches. The majority of the essays dealt with the culture of the last hundred years. Topics included triangular relationships in Renaissance drama, female same-sex love and epistolary writing in the eighteenth century, queer women and ageing in the graphic novel, and Margaret Thatcher as a gay icon. There were also essays on travel writing, AIDS writing, the Beats, James Baldwin and the Harlem Renaissance, the male-male gaze in recent fiction, and queer theatre.