The Narrative Texts/Intellectual and cultural sources exam yielded a large number of very solid responses, with a small handful of particularly outstanding scripts.

The strongest essays tended to consider the passages and texts discussed for the comparison (Section B) and final essay (Section C) side by side, rather than one after the other, using the similarities or contrasts to drive the essay. The strongest essays in sections A and C were often the ones that supported their arguments with extensive details, whether in the form of specific examples or quotations, rather than through plot summary. The best ICS essays (rather than commentaries) often made a clear and strong case for bringing together two or three different texts, and made links between them in original and productive ways.

Candidates answering the ICS commentaries should aim to find a balance between engaging with the details of the passage, and relating it to the text as a whole. For example, good answers on Woolf (who attracted the most commentaries) were able to relate the discussion of anger to Woolf’s later discussion of the place of anger in female writing. Many students commendably attempted to analyse the language of the ICS extracts, but struggled with how to discuss translations, leading occasionally to points that required further clarification or caution, for example on the use of alliteration in the Communist Manifesto.

In the comparative exercise in section B many candidates discussed imagery and tone effectively, but few went on to consider verse or prose forms, or to make much of more complex linguistic effects. On the whole, students were good on similarities between the passages, but some struggled to explain their differences without making historical generalisations; a surprising number of students skirted around the innuendo in Tristram Shandy.

Weaker essays tended to interpret the questions too loosely, and in some cases seemed to try and fit pre-prepared answers into the topic. This was particularly the case with the ICS essay question on ‘conflict’ (often taken to mean any kind of tension) and the NT essay on ‘authority’; the NT question on bodies produced numerous answers on gender more broadly. Similarly, the question on ‘books and reading’ prompted a large number of students to answer on intertextuality/allusion, rather than books as physical objects, or the act of reading. Future candidates are therefore encouraged to respond to the questions as directly as possible.

The rubric does not prevent candidates from writing on the same Narrative Text twice, but candidates should make sure that they do not repeat material, and may want to give some thought to how they can demonstrate their range of reading. Candidates who answered the Narrative Text essay question by relying heavily on the Narrative Text commentary passages also missed an opportunity to show more range.
Handwriting was, as so often, an issue; candidates are strongly advised to, at the very least, write on alternate lines, and to cross out essay plans.
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There was a good deal of impressive, articulate close reading for all three questions on this paper. The examiners were struck by the quality of analysis on display, and by candidates’ abilities to think on their feet and to use textual evidence sensitively and persuasively. The best scripts were attentive to nuance, form, structure, and tonal complexity, and sought to combine a range of literary and stylistic features into a coherent reading, rather than just focus on a few isolated details gleaned from a text. Weaker scripts tended to paraphrase content, or failed to get much beyond analysis of major themes or consideration of character. These answers were also typically marked by a linear response to the passages, offering a line-by-line (or stanza-by-stanza) running commentary, whereas the better essays showed evidence of careful planning and effective organisation of materials into cohesive paragraphs that helped to advance a central conceit or reading.

One particular tendency noted among some of the less strong papers this year was a laissez-faire approach to evidence. At times, a candidate would correctly name a stylistic figure, but then fail to discuss its effect, or fail to demonstrate exactly why a caesura, or an oxymoron, or a run-on line connoted misery, or joy, or wantonness. Rather than merely identifying literary features of note or dwelling repetitively on just a handful of favourite devices, candidates are encouraged to construct coherent, evolving readings that pay close attention to the complexity and subtlety of the unseen extracts on offer. It is not enough merely to list the ingredients of a passage, nor to assume that simply identifying a rhetorical figure ‘proves’ a particular reading or interpretation. Those scripts that offered a critical reading of the texts, or that were willing to pursue an argument, made for especially potent responses, although some candidates who attempted this lapsed into an unhelpfully presentist or anachronistic brand of stridency.

For Question 3, which invites commentaries that consider the ‘approach to criticism’ shown in the passages excerpted from the Criticism ‘study pack’, better answers paid close attention to the extract in question, where less convincing readings tended to speak in generalising or vague terms about the author of the passage or that author’s wider oeuvre. As for the unseen passages in Questions 1 and 2, close stylistic engagement with the lexical choices, terminology, and precise phrasing of the extracts in Question 3 is strongly recommended, and candidates are also advised to place the excerpt in the wider context of the work from which it is taken. The best answers for Question 3 ventured problems with the critical philosophy espoused by the author concerned, and were quick to map out possible difficulties, or inconsistencies, or faultlines in the writer’s theory, methods, and critical assumptions. The strongest answers to this question were able to think more broadly about what an ‘approach to criticism’ might be, and how it might be demonstrated. Candidates are reminded of the importance of legible handwriting. This year’s scripts contained an unusual number of examples of truly dire penmanship.
A total of ninety-four candidates sat the examination this year. The standard of the responses was generally solid and most candidates demonstrated both a good understanding of the works studied and some appreciation of context. The best responses were those which approached the commentaries and essay question with thoughtfulness and sensitivity, showing an understanding of the texts’ wider thematic issues and evidence of original thought. Answers of this kind were invariably well written, with a clear focus and strong line of argument which was reinforced by a structure.

Overall, candidates demonstrated a good command of the Old English language in the first section of the paper. The commentaries on the extract from *The Wanderer* were generally sound and most candidates were able to identify the passage and work with the language, offering PDE translations of quotations. Although this is certainly commendable, students should be encouraged to engage more closely with the original Old English text (rather than with a Modern English translation), and should seek to comment on style, word choice and syntax in more detail. Indeed, rather than concentrating solely on explaining the themes of the extract, candidates should consider how such themes are communicated specifically through the language and style of the selected passage. The unseen translation also produced some excellent results, with many students showing a good knowledge of the workings of the Old English language. Although some translations would have been improved by a more careful consideration of the grammar of the passage (such as the identification of plural nouns), many students were able to translate most of the passage accurately. It should be noted, however, that a number of scripts only did part of the translation.

The commentaries on passages from the Middle English works were generally of a good standard, with the best responses engaging consistently with the passages on a critical level, as well as adopting a focused and sensitive approach. Candidates are reminded that a successful commentary is a close reading of a passage, not a pretext for general comments or for writing an essay on the text as a whole. Such lapses in focus were repeatedly evident in the less successful responses. In such cases, candidates were often prone to paraphrasing the extract or listing observations, rather than considering why the features they observe are important and how this is communicated. As noted above, when writing a commentary, candidates should seek to engage critically with the passage and should explore points fully while retaining a sharp focus.

There was a good spread of answers in the essay questions. Candidates who chose to answer on a single text generally showed a good knowledge and understanding. Those who chose to write on two or more texts also did well, in most cases, with some candidates producing imaginative and intelligent responses to the thematic-based questions. However, a number of candidates who wrote on two or more texts should make sure that they offer a balanced discussion and should be
careful not to spread their answer too thinly by discussing too many texts. Overall, the very best answers to the essay questions were those which not only showed flashes of original thought but were clearly structured, well informed and, perhaps most importantly, had a clear and consistent line of argument that was directly relevant to the question. Less strong answers were distinguished by poor structure, irrelevances, contradiction and a lack of clarity or direction or both. To avoid these pitfalls, students are reminded of the benefits of planning essay questions in exams in order to ensure that the answer builds an argument in response to the question and is not simply a series of observations or comments without structure or coherence.

In all cases, students should watch their written English. Many scripts were blighted by poor grammar and expression. All candidates are reminded of the need for accurate syntax, spelling, punctuation and good English. Students are advised, for their own good, to write formally, accurately and clearly in all parts of the examination. They should also make sure that they are familiar with the exam description and that they follow the rubric on the exam paper.