Performance in this year’s exam was generally good. Most candidates showed commendable knowledge and understanding of the Old and Middle English texts they had studied over the course of the year. There were some excellent scripts, which handled extremely well analysis of the passages for commentary – in both Old and Middle English – and, in the essay section of the paper, were able to refer to precise details of the text(s) that the candidate had chosen to discuss. A few candidates wrote with real style.

Less successful Old English commentaries on the passage from The Wanderer tended to paraphrase what the given lines said, rather than analysing the details that they contained. A few students did not focus on the passage closely enough, or, unfortunately, misunderstood what it said. A common fault was inattention to the ambiguity of who speaks what in the passage, the opening of the poem.

The translation of the unseen passage of Old English was the least successful element of many candidates’ scripts. It was disappointing to see that some students did not know that hiera means ‘their’, rather than ‘his’, and perplexing that a number of people ignored the translations of words in the passage that were provided for candidates. A very few students worked out that gesihpe means ‘sight’ or ‘vision’.

The main problems with commentaries on the passages from the Middle English texts were, again, paraphrasing what was being said in the extracts (not always correctly), rather than analysing their details, and not focusing on the passages themselves closely enough. Some candidates needed to analyse the details of the passages in greater depth: to think more about the significance of the details that candidates registered. While there were some very good answers on the passage from Malory’s Le Morte Darthur, many students might have been more sensitive to the status of the passage as the emotional climax of the text.

There were many impressive essays on both the Old and the Middle English texts; this was the best part of many candidates’ scripts. Some answers, though, could have been more structured, or have done more to shape the material discussed around the question. Other candidates needed to anchor their arguments more in the details of the material that they were discussing. Some answers included contextual or other material that was not obviously relevant to the question that was being tackled – or at least the candidate did not make the relevance of the material clear. A few students incorporated claims that were incorrect – something that is bound to undermine the good impression that other aspects of an answer may create.

Despite the fact that the rubric to the paper warned candidates of the importance of legible handwriting, a number of people produced scripts that the examiners found extremely difficult to read, and so to follow. Some candidates need to work at expressing themselves with greater clarity,
coherence and succinctness; at their spelling; and at punctuating their writing correctly. It is important that candidates communicate as effectively as possible what they are wanting to say.

**Sessional Examinations 2017: Narrative Texts / Intellectual and Cultural Sources**

**Examiners' Report**

Most students performed creditably this year, demonstrating a good level of knowledge of the ICS and NT. In the stronger scripts, that knowledge was shaped into coherent arguments precisely addressed to the questions. In the strongest scripts those arguments were not limited to thematic questions but encompassed matters of form and mode, and in particular evinced a sensitivity to literary tone and nuance. Weaker scripts were mostly characterized by insufficient attention to detail - in particular, in the NT essay, an absence of quotation - which resulted in vague generalisation, boiling texts down to moral commonplaces or historical stereotypes. On the other hand, in the NT commentary, too much quotation or paraphrase of the passages was often the problem, filling up space which should have been devoted to analysis. Only a small minority of candidates made the two fundamental errors of examination practice which generally lead to the lowest marks: (1) writing too fast and at too great a length to allow for proper thought, and consequently producing shapeless and repetitious answers; (2) 'downloading' information from lectures and seminars which may be accurate but is not relevant to the question at issue.

Two of those points are worth clarifying. First, the desirability of attending to 'form and mode'. This does not mean flourishing technical terms such as 'tricolon', 'asyndeton' and 'polysyndeton'; at school, the use of such terms might in itself have attracted marks, but no longer. Another hangover from school evident in a number of scripts was the tendency to attribute considerable significance to occurrences of alliteration, assonance or other forms of sound patterning. Sibilance was often said to be suspicious, even Satanic, but would that be the case with 'sun and sand'? Or, again, if dentals connote harshness or violence, what about 'dear daughter'? As those examples indicate, claims for the mimetic significance of sound are usually - except in cases of outright onomatopeia - just descriptions of the plain meanings of words. 'Subtle seduction' sounds ... well ... subtle and seductive. Proper attention to form and mode is something richer and deeper. For example, in the ICS extract from a speech by the Chorus in *Oedipus Rex*, discussing the wider dramatic function of the Chorus, its collective status and lyricism. Or, in the comparison of two scenes of reading from Douglass's *Narrative* and *The Mill on the Floss*, discussing the importance of the fact that whereas Douglass paraphrases the arguments of 'The Columbian Orator', George Eliot directly quotes the passage which particularly affects Maggie in Thomas a Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*. Or again, in the comparison of the passages from *The Rape of the Lock* and *The Prelude*, noting that both involve varieties of comic tonality, and considering how those different pitches of comedy inflect meaning in each case.

Secondly, the matter of making arguments. Candidates who did not shape their answers into arguments were putting themselves at a disadvantage, and the terms of the questions made this clear. Thus, for instance, the ICS essay question about 'authority' asked how authors went about 'constructing' such authority, not just where it was to be found. Similarly, the NT essay question on 'recurrent images' directed students to consider how such imagery was used, not merely to list mentions of hair in *Paradise Lost*, rocks in *The Waste Land*, or water in *Beloved*. However, whilst arguing with direction and purpose is to be encouraged in exam answers, students need to take care that their arguments do not become dogmatic and reductive. In the NT commentary exercise in particular, there was a noticeable tendency to turn the activity of comparison into a 'zero-sum' game,
allowing Douglass to set the terms by which George Eliot was found wanting, or Wordsworth to expose the flaws in Pope. This was particularly likely to happen where candidates treated each passage separately, rather than keeping them together in a more dynamic and reciprocal dialogue. The most persuasive answers were those which managed to elicit connections between the passages without forcing one passage to submit to criteria of judgment appropriate only for the other. The weakest answers were damaged by a form of dogmatism which students should particularly beware of in future - namely, moralizing about texts, authors, or characters. Quite a number of candidates spent time debating which of Frederick Douglass or Maggie Tulliver, and Belinda or the Maid of Buttermere, was the more oppressed - an unproductive endeavour which often produced some rather sanctimonious writing. Likewise, Pope and Wordsworth were regularly convicted of misogyny or patriarchalism on the basis of reductive, if not flatly erroneous, readings of the set passages, which ignored narrative aspect and stylization, and at times misrepresented the plain sense of the words.

Finally, the examiners noted with some regret how many candidates answered on a narrow range of the ICS and NT - generally from the modern end of the spectrum. Woolf was by a country mile the most popular author in the ICS commentaries, with Homer not far behind, and then Freud. Hardly any candidates took on Boethius or Montaigne, and only a few grappled with Foucault. Where the NT were concerned, this flight to modernity was even more felt, with more than a quarter of candidates tackling the Douglass / Eliot comparison and then answering on at least one - and sometimes both - of those texts again in the NT essay. Only a handful of these candidates actually repeated material to the extent of infringing the examination rubric against such repetition, but the examiners did feel that an element of 'playing safe' was apparent in too many scripts. We would urge future first-year students to be more adventurous in their studies, to open their minds to texts on the NT and ICS courses which may be 'other' to current mores, to explore the syllabus in all its diversity!
taken and demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of the intellectual climate out of which it emerged. The examiners were particularly impressed by essays which mounted a measured critique of the excerpts’ partialities, limitations, or contradictions as part of their overall appraisal. Weaker answers paid little attention to the ideas, method, or style of the given excerpt, tending instead to sketch impressionistic accounts of the wider work, or, in some cases, discussing other matters altogether.

Candidates are reminded of the importance of legible handwriting. A number of scripts were indecipherable in places.