

English Communications

2010 ASSESSMENT REPORT

English Learning Area

ENGLISH COMMUNICATIONS

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GENERAL COMMENTS

The study of English involves the recursive development of skills, and this was admirably demonstrated in the collection of tasks that comprised each student's work. It was often evident how a student's skills had improved over the course of the year and across a range of different tasks. Students who completed English Communications have been exposed to a wide variety of texts and forms of writing that will serve them well when they leave school.

The preparation of the student folders for moderation was generally managed very well. Teachers are reminded that all extraneous materials such as drafts and background research notes should be removed. It was noted by moderators that the inclusion of detailed notes, or transcripts for oral presentations made the moderation process more efficient, even when various recorded presentations were part of the package.

The number of merit students was pleasing. Moderators commented that when reading a merit folder they felt compelled to read everything that the student had submitted. This engagement reflects the level of excellence across all of the assessment components and against all assessment criteria. The students' analysis of texts, literary and non-literary, was comprehensive and insightful and their communication skills were very sophisticated. The demonstration of original thinking and a strong personal voice were features of merit students' work.

Students are advised that when they have the opportunity to choose their own texts for study, either in text response or communication, that they consider the audience who will be viewing their work. Work presented in folders must not be offensive to those whose task it is to read it, whether it be at the school level or at moderation. Similarly, text production pieces must not contain overly offensive language, inappropriate levels of violence, gratuitous sexual content, or an excessively negative world view.

ASSESSMENT COMPONENT 1: COMMUNICATION

A range of communication items was selected by teachers and students to complete this assessment component. The trend over the last few years has been for a wider range of computer-mediated texts as a source of study. Blogs, social networking sites, podcasts, on-line forums, and business web-pages were all evident in a number of student folders. Students are reminded that simple descriptions of these forms of communication do not meet assessment criteria to any great extent.

In successful comparisons students discussed two texts in parallel rather than separately. This demonstrated their knowledge of the two items that they were comparing, as well as a sophisticated use of language as they moved from one text to the other within paragraphs. When completing the comparative task, some students considered whole newspapers, magazines or news bulletins. This proved problematic because it resulted in an unwieldy task that could not be completed comprehensively within the word count. Students who compared sections of mass-

media items were able to analyse each item more thoroughly, and their comparisons were meaningful and discerning.

Some students created more than one item for task two in communication and this affected the quality of the explanation. Instead of providing a detailed analysis of the form of communication they had created, covering purpose, audience, form, language and context, they resorted to describing these items. The creation of very short items of communication, such as an SMS message, did not provide students with enough material to meet the assessment criteria at a high level. An interesting variation on creating an advertisement for task two was to create an advertisement for a product that was less than desirable. Students were able to write effectively about their intended audience and their use of language in such a task.

Comparison tasks that asked students to compare similar items, such as two advertisements from the same type of magazine, two commercial television current affairs programs, or popular daytime programs like *Oprah* and *Ellen*, did not allow students to discuss significant differences because the contrasts tended to be superficial rather than actual differences in purpose, audience, form, language or context. On the other hand, if similar items from different eras were compared then students tended to respond well. When choosing items to compare it is important to ensure that at least one of the elements that must be analysed (purpose, audience, form, language and context) is significantly different. For example, comparing two children's programs with different contexts, or programs about motor cars designed for different purposes worked very successfully.

Speeches, both historical and contemporary, appeared more often this year for comparison and creation. Students were able to write confidently about the purpose, audience, form, language and context of the speeches they were comparing – or those they had written, because they made their analysis explicit. On the other hand, moderators commented that they saw more comparisons where students had compared two media of communication, such as mobile phones and email, rather than individual items within these media. Such comparisons were often poorly explored because the comments about audience, purpose and form were generalised, and specific examples were not used to support observations.

The understanding of 'audience' was, at times, too limited as students usually confined their comments to age or gender. Students who were able to comment on other aspects of an audience, such as cultural background, level of education, income, social sub-group niches, and place of residency, were able to demonstrate a more sophisticated understanding.

ASSESSMENT COMPONENT 2: TEXT RESPONSE

Students responded well to a wide range of texts. Challenging and complex texts tended to provide an excellent source on which students could base their responses, even for students whose skills of analysis were not particularly strong. Using different versions of the same text for two text studies, for example *Educating Rita* the play and film, can be problematic because it limits the variety, or scope for response.

When students were given a number of response options and a variety of forms in which they could present their responses, the results were generally very successful. In most cases the different questions all addressed the same assessment criteria, but the variation allowed students to choose a question that best matched his or her knowledge, as well as a preferred form. Where students received very structured

notes and advice about how to answer a question, the responses were very formulaic with no discernable personal voice.

Tasks designed specifically to address the different features of the *analysis* criterion served students well. The most successful folders had at least one text response dedicated to the ideas explored in the text, and the way these connected to the student's ideas; and another dedicated to the analysis of the characteristics of the text type. Theatre productions that focused on contemporary social issues were used well to address the former. At times the connections between the ideas in the text and those of the student were somewhat forced because the social or historical context of the text was too far removed from the student's world. Most students were able to effectively demonstrate their analysis of text types mainly through film, poetry, and drama texts. One of the few criticisms of poetry tasks was that students had analysed too many poems and this resulted in responses that were over the word limit, lacked depth, or were just a list of poetic techniques with no links between the poems. Two or four poems usually provide students with the necessary material to complete an appropriate response. When students were given the option of choosing their own poems or song lyrics, many did not select for literary merit, and this limited their comments to description rather than analysis. Film texts and live drama productions were also accessible means by which students demonstrated their knowledge of text types. Whether students responded to the text as a whole, or a significant section of it, they were usually confident about discussing how the author had used the characteristics of the text type to communicate ideas and influence the reader's response.

Working in groups to complete tasks is best avoided. For example, when students were asked to add a scene to a play and groups of four to five individuals had to each contribute up to six minutes to the scene, the task became difficult to manage and assess. Creative text responses are also best accompanied by an explanation that explicitly makes connections between what the student has created and the text into which it fits.

ASSESSMENT COMPONENT 3: TEXT PRODUCTION

Text production is a versatile and creative component of English Communications. The collection of pieces is an excellent way in which students can show their skills and ability to compose texts for a variety of purposes and audiences, using a number of forms. Most students presented four written pieces, but some also completed oral or multi-modal texts that incorporated written, visual and/or audio elements. In order for moderation to proceed smoothly, students are asked to clearly name each of the four items and state what form they have employed in each piece.

The supervised tasks were generally completed well, but some anomalies were observed in the conditions under which some students produced the task. The English curriculum statement and the *Learning Area Manual* outline these conditions and it is essential that teachers and students abide by the rules. Topics must be unseen and, therefore, students should not take notes of any kind into the 90-minute supervised task, and certainly no teacher-drafted versions of their work. Having access to the Internet during supervised tasks is also prohibited. Where students want to include statistics and other supporting evidence for supervised expository tasks, they can 'create' data for the purposes of the task. A successful approach to a supervised expository task was for students to produce instructional or informative writing. Topics such as 'How to be cool for the over 60s' or 'How to organise a significant event' were dealt with well because such topics relied on logically

sequenced information, and often included humour, rather than hard data. Finally, teachers should not set a single task that offers no choice in the form of writing that students employ. For example, asking students to write a poem in the supervised task is as restrictive as providing only one topic. The presence of poetry in text production is certainly legitimate, but it can be completed more successfully under non-supervised conditions – or at least it should not be compulsory under supervised conditions.

Text production pieces should not be based on a text, literary or non-literary, because the end product becomes a response to the text. Using an idea or theme from a text studied in another assessment component as a starting point (e.g. redemption, solitude) is permissible, and, indeed, led to some thoughtful text production items.

Moderators observed that some tasks invariably led to pieces that limited students from achieving in the higher grade bands because they did not demonstrate excellent achievement against the assessment criteria. Examples of such tasks included writing biographies of famous people as expository items, writing diaries for recounts, or children's storybooks for narrative. The possibility of plagiarism, prose that is too simplistic, and writing that is too derivative of other texts, is high. Students are not given an advantage by completing tasks that are intended to be less complex.

Free choice was approached by a genuine willingness to be creative and explore different genres and forms. Descriptive, speculative, horror, thriller, speeches, and poetry were all presented, and allowed students to achieve against the *application* criterion for this assessment component.

ASSESSMENT COMPONENT 4: APPLICATION

All eight topics were well represented in the work presented at moderation, with *writing for publication* and *interacting* the most popular choices. It was clear that students had been encouraged to explore, research, and analyse models of the product they had chosen to create; but at times it became apparent that this stage of the application was too extended and took time away from the student's own product. This was shown in the oral reflection where some students spent too much time discussing the models of writing, film, or website that they had analysed rather than the decisions behind their own creation. Journals may be a way for teachers to validate their students' work, but for the purposes of moderation the journal is not taken into account. Finally, the word count and time limit of the two parts of the application must be adhered to at all times.

Evidence of the oral reflections for application must be detailed and accessible for moderation. Students' oral notes or transcripts were greatly appreciated by moderators even when recordings and PowerPoint presentations were included. Students are reminded that descriptive recounts of the process they undertook to complete their application are less likely to address the *understanding* and *evaluation* criteria than orals that focus on why certain approaches were taken, the creative ideas behind the product, and how successfully the product achieves its purpose. Extensive teacher notes about what was presented in a presentation are insufficient evidence to receive a mark for the application component. Occasionally moderators commented that students had completed the product of one topic but covered the oral reflection requirements of another; this happened most often for *interacting* and *investigating*. Students and teachers are advised not to mix requirements across topics.

Film-making, multimedia web authoring, language, and oral language were usually selected by students who had particular interests and skills in these areas, and their products were generally of high quality. The quality of the reflections showed greater variation and was often the differentiating factor between the very successful applications and those that were less so. A high proportion of students who completed *oral language* delivered their speeches to a real audience, which resulted in some excellent analyses of the speeches and their effectiveness.

Students who completed the *interacting* topic chose from a number of contexts, ranging from groups of students in their own school, to community groups such as the CFS, local government, and special interest groups. It was apparent that students who organised their interactions around people they did not know well had more successful oral reflections than those students who focused on family members or other people they knew well. Having a defined focus for the interaction also assisted students to write clear reports that gave the reader an understanding of what they had achieved as a result of the interaction. The oral reflection had to focus on the quality of the interaction that took place.

Students who chose to complete *investigating*, based their studies on a wide range of topics. Occasionally there was some confusion about the report format for the product. The curriculum statement specifies that if students use the report format then it must be a news report rather than an academic report. As part of their oral students can also comment on the construction of the news report, as well as the way in which they collected their information while acting as an investigative journalist.

There is no advantage to be gained from writing more than six *workplace writing* documents as specified in the curriculum statement. The word count should be met by six items and not by numerous shorter pieces. The most successful students produced six very different documents for a business or organisation that they had 'created'. The orals that accompanied the folio of documents were more informative and analytical if the audience and purpose differed for each document.

Writing for publication was a popular choice and students produced some excellent writing. Articles for specialised magazines were clearly enjoyed by students judging by the professional appearance of the end product. Ultimately, though, it is the quality of the writing that is assessed and not the technical computer skills required to produce it. At times, illustrations in children's books also took precedence over the narrative and affected the overall quality of that application. Successful *writing for publication* were those pieces that had given equal consideration to the oral reflection that explained the language choices students had made in the construction of their piece of writing, and to the demonstration of their understanding of the conventions and structural features they employed. When students chose to write short stories, it was not unusual to see excellent stories accompanied by less than excellent orals because they did not clearly articulate the features of the short stories that they had used. Reviews were well represented with the most successful being restaurant reviews which were verifiable and original. Moderators most often raised the question of authorship when students chose to write film reviews – because of the accessibility of such material on the Internet.

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