

# GCSE

# English Language

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**8700/2**

Report on the exam

June 2023

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## Summary

The source texts used in this series revolved around the theme of transport in general, and steam trains in particular. They set out to engage students in a nineteenth and twentieth century traveller's experiences of locomotive technology.

Peter Fleming's account of his long-distance journey aboard the Trans-Siberian Express introduced students to the relatively unfamiliar world of hospitality on a train. Through his eyes, they saw his contempt and disdain for the privations he felt he had been subjected to, and then saw how his perspective shifted once the train had crashed to a delighted sense of vengeance and satisfaction at the destruction of the train he had so abhorred. In stark contrast, Fanny Kemble's letter to her sister opened students' eyes to a world of transcendent joy and wonder at the marvellous experience of early train travel, as she describes her first journey on Stephenson's Rocket.

The source material was accessible to students of all ability levels, although there were some occasional misinterpretations as is inevitable with a very large, mixed cohort.

## Overall performance

The overall performance of students on this paper was as expected, with attainment on each question very close to, but slightly lower than, performance in 2019, which was the last summer series where students were unaffected by the disruptions of the pandemic response. Performance was very similar to that demonstrated in June 2022, when the first series post-pandemic took place, which might indicate that there is still some impact felt by students in their experience of education, which will not come as a surprise to many teachers.

## Areas where students struggled

The most noticeable dip in performance was on Question 3, which may have had more to do with the relative challenge of the extract in comparison to both 2019 and 2022. Further discussion of this can be found in the Question 3 section below.

## Assessment objectives

AO	Common student errors
AO1 Identify and interpret explicit and implicit information and ideas. Select and synthesise evidence from different texts.	Lack of focus for the inferences made
AO2 Explain, comment on and analyse how writers use language and structure to achieve effects and influence readers, using relevant subject terminology to support their views.	Offering generalised rather than specific comments on the effect of language features
AO3 Compare writers' ideas and perspectives, as well as how these are conveyed, across two or more texts	Comparing different aspects in texts which were not 'like for like'
AO5 Communicate clearly, effectively and imaginatively, selecting and adapting tone, style and register for different forms, purposes and audiences. Organise information and ideas, using structural and grammatical features to support coherence and cohesion of texts.	Ideas within paragraphs were not always developed or connected
AO6 Students must use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation. (This requirement must constitute 20% of the marks for each specification as a whole)	Punctuation insufficiently varied or precise

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## Question 1

Just over 70% of students were awarded full marks on this question. There was a combination of explicit information and implicit ideas in the designated section of text in Source A, which was based on Fleming's attitudes towards his train journey. There were also some examples of more challenging vocabulary to ensure that comprehension was assessed and distinctions made at the top of the ability level.

### Common strengths in responses

The students who scored full marks were able to identify the information accurately, made effective inferences regarding the narrator's experience and were able to track the information in the eight statements chronologically through the given extract. They were able to interpret the writer's list of the train's features as something he disliked rather than liked and to appreciate that he was describing an existence which was dull and repetitive rather than full of activity. This test of reading comprehension successfully discriminated between students.

### Common misunderstandings

The most frequently selected 'incorrect' choices were those where students misunderstood the writer's implicit dislike of the food he was served on the train and his implied sense of boredom in having little to occupy his time. Statements E and G were the incorrect statements most commonly selected as true. It is likely that words such as 'rancid' were unfamiliar to some students and that the concept of 'black bread' was not something some students associated with unpleasantness, but these are the tests of reading and understanding which are being assessed in this question. Equally, the reference to a 'monk's existence' might not have held negative associations for some students and others may have found it difficult to deduce the meaning of the phrase 'blank of action', but again, this is the basis of the assessment of AO1 skills required for this question.

Students should be encouraged to read through all the statements before selecting any as true and then read the short passage again. The statements are in chronological order and should be read through and matched against the text extract in order before selecting any of them. The lines indicated are very short and should therefore not take much time to re-read. After the four statements have been selected as 'true', they should be read again to check that they are correct.

There were still a surprising number of students who failed to complete the answer booklet carefully. The most effective way to secure the four marks is to colour in the lozenge to identify the four true statements correctly. There were significant numbers of students who failed to follow the instructions which resulted in their answers being less than clear.

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## Question 2

The question focused on the two trains and the differences between them. Students were asked to select relevant details from each text related to the trains, interpret this information and infer meaning from these ideas. In addition, they were expected to synthesise the ideas and information, interpreting the differences (and any similarities) between the trains.

The focus for Question 2 is designed to avoid overlap with the focus for Question 4. However, many students were tempted into writing about the writers' feelings about the trains rather than the design, the length, the facilities, the performance or the number of carriages of each train. It is understandable that students might lose some focus in their response, as in a first-person text, the trains are presented through the lens of the writer's own perspective, but some students lost focus entirely on the trains and simply described how the writers felt about their **journey**, not the **train**. According to the mark scheme, where students have not inferred meaning or synthesised details appropriate to the focus of the task, their mark is capped at Level 2. Students needed to focus their inferences and differences on the trains in order to achieve Level 3 or above.

There was plenty of relevant material to draw on regarding the trains. In Source A, the train was the Trans-Siberian Express, a train renowned for its luxury and high-class facilities whilst travelling on long-distance journeys. It had different carriages for different purposes and provided hospitality on wheels to all its many passengers. On the other hand, the train in Source B was a prototype, an early incarnation of the train which was primitive in its facilities and provided a relatively limited level of performance.

The mean mark on this question was 3.5 this summer. This means that the average student was able to make some attempt to infer and identify some differences, indicating achievement at the top of Level 2. Just 3% of students were awarded marks in the highest level, which serves as a reminder of the challenges inherent in this task and the work still required to set students on the right path.

### Common strengths in responses

The best responses were those where students focused very clearly on the trains themselves and ignored the presence of the writer. Typical of these responses was that the train was the subject rather than the object of the sentence, maintaining a clear focus on the train, not the journey or how the writer felt about it. These students were often able to identify and interpret ideas about the train in Source A such as its suitability for longer distance travel and the luxurious facilities which were offered to the many passengers housed in the five sleeping carriages. In Source B, they were able to interpret ideas about the early design of the train and the novelty of its innovation for the very much smaller number of select passengers.

To achieve Level 3, students were able to make comparisons between the two trains, contrasting the elegant provision of food and accommodation of the train in Source A with the basic facilities of Source B, or the requirements of a week-long stay on the long-distance express in Source A with the different requirements of a day's excursion on the newly invented train in Source B. These like-for-like comparisons were judged to be clear and therefore in L3 because the same aspects of the trains in each text were being synthesised: the facilities and the purpose of the train in the two examples above.

To achieve the highest level, students need firstly to be clear in their interpretations and then to provide additional detail about their ideas and extend their understanding to include concepts such as the relative technological advancements of the two trains or the commercialisation of train travel and its impact on the level of comfort demanded by passengers.

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## Common misunderstandings

The weaker responses were often characterised by a poor focus on the task. Many students were distracted by the writers' experiences of their journey and failed to focus sufficiently on the trains in the source texts. Inferences relating to the writers' experiences on the trains or their feelings about the trains were rewarded therefore as 'attempts' (Level 2). Writers' perspectives are central to the focus of the Q4 task, and no reference to these can be rewarded at L3 or L4 in Q2 because the Assessment Objectives are very different. To achieve Level 3 or higher, students must address the correct focus.

Students are advised to read the task carefully and ensure they have understood the correct focus. Many students overlooked easily accessible information about the trains, such as the size of them, which could have been the foundation for inferential understanding. Using the focus of the question as the subject of each sentence is one means of ensuring the focus is maintained. Once a detail has been selected, such as the train having a dining car, the student needs to develop their response from what this tells us explicitly – that you could eat on the train – to what you can interpret about the train – such as that eating meals meant you could stay on the train longer and travel further. It is the development and explanation of these relatively simple points which will lift students from Level 2 to Level 3.

A concrete focus for the task in Q2 has been used before: the surfboards in 2018, the boats in 2019, as well as the camping sites in 2022. Students need to prepare for this type of task by reading a diverse range of non-fiction texts which incorporate a focus on concrete issues. On reading these two extracts, students needed to ask themselves: why does the train in Source A have a name and have the word 'luxury' in its title? Who might that appeal to and what does it tell us about the level of tourist interest in train travel? How far has technology advanced since Source B was written for trains to be not just modes of transport but hotels on wheels? Rehearsing questions such as these should support students in the challenge of synthesising and interpreting information and ideas from future unseen sources.

## Question 3

The task in Question 3 was to identify interesting uses of language and comment on the effects they create in relation to the focus of the question, which was the train crash.

There were a number of appropriate language examples to choose from, with the crash itself described with onomatopoeia in words such as 'jarring' and 'crash'; the effect of the impact on the writer's luggage described metaphorically as a 'cannonade'; his compartment described as 'tilted drunkenly' and the train itself described with more adverbs 'sprawled foolishly' and personified as looking 'defiant and naughty'. However, it is fair to say that some students struggled to select some of these more appropriate choices and were caught up in some unwise and unproductive selections of language.

There was a slight fall in the mean mark for this question compared to previous years. This may reflect the relative difficulty some students experienced in explaining clearly how the language features used in the extract were deployed. It might also reflect the fact that this twentieth century text was in fact written nearly 100 years ago and the writer has therefore perhaps used some language which is less familiar to students.

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## Common strengths in responses

In the Level 3 and Level 4 responses seen by examiners, students offered clear explanations of how language examples created effects. One popular choice was the carriage which 'tilted drunkenly', where students linked the use of the adverb 'drunkenly' to the sensation of being out of control and disordered; commenting how this may have created a sense of concussion or intoxication that suggested the disorientation and upheaval of the crash. Another successful choice was the use of the verb 'cannonaded' to describe the suitcase falling as being like a cannon ball shot down or fired from above as if like a missile or weapon of war.

The very best responses were able to extend their understanding of the language effects across the passage as a whole and explore the link between the images of warfare and the sense that this attack was premeditated. Students at Level 4 successfully linked the cannonading suitcase with the 'defiant' train developing a linguistic trail from a 'naughty' and petulant train behaving like a toddler to explain that the writer's use of personification suggested a deliberate vendetta against the passengers. Comments such as these were awarded as detailed and/or perceptive, as they demonstrated an accumulation of language effects and a perceptive understanding of the use of language.

## Common misunderstandings

Some students appeared to have some difficulty in understanding the language used and found it difficult to select an appropriate range of examples. Some of the language features in the extract which students identified were related to personification and exaggeration and many found it difficult, having chosen them, to comment in any more depth or to explain how they worked to describe the crash. Many students chose 'the end of the world' as an example of exaggeration or hyperbole but then struggled to explain how that worked to describe the crash. They tended to zoom in on words like 'end' and try to comment on the connotations or effect, with only some success. Equally, selecting the phrase 'I was annoyed' left students with very little to comment on except to infer that this showed he was angry. It would be possible to write about the word annoyed as being commonly used to describe missing the bus rather than being involved in a train crash, and therefore the effect was the opposite of hyperbole, but few students took that approach.

There was also much evidence of students offering self-evident comment on phrases such as 'fearful force' and 'frightful jarring', which suggested that this showed the writer was scared or frightened. This use of synonyms is barely sufficient to move into Level 2 and certainly needs further explanation to move into Level 3. Inevitably, the word to focus on is 'jarring' as it creates an effect of something sudden and shocking; a jolting movement or a vibrating noise. These could be explored more fruitfully than comments on the word 'frightful'.

Another area where students struggled to comment on effect was where they chose to write about sentences. Many students selected the series of short sentences as an example of language use, and then found they had little or nothing to say about the reasons why the writer might have used them. Unless students are very confident about the effect – as here, where the writer deliberately chooses brief, factual, unembellished simple sentence forms to emphasise the pragmatic approach he is taking to the potential trauma of the crash, which creates a sense of British stiff upper lip and a stoic tone, or similar comment – then students are well-advised to avoid writing about sentences.

The tendency amongst some students to focus on the effect on the reader has continued. The reader is not left petrified by the description of the crash, nor was that Fleming's intention. It continues to be an unhelpful addition to any paragraph, which students appear to be trained to write in response to the task on language. Students should instead focus on exploring the connotations of words and asking themselves, why might the writer have used this word and not



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another? Why use 'tilted drunkenly' and not 'tilted perilously' or 'tilted crazily'? Each of these adverbs has a different set of connotations and it is these which the examiner is rewarding.

## Question 4

The task in Question 4 was to compare the writers' feelings and perspectives on their experiences of travelling by train, allowing students to consider the text extracts as a whole. The task required students to engage with Fleming and Kemble's individual points of view and the methods they use to convey their perspectives, as well as to compare the differences and similarities between their points of view across the two extracts. There was certainly no shortage of points of contrast between the two, with students at all levels able to access the comparative nature of this task.

Most students found that Question 4 enabled them to write more freely and to show their understanding of both ideas and methods. This freedom was evident in the length of many students' responses, which were often three or four sides long. There was a reassuringly full and comprehensive response to the question from many students, with few examples of misunderstanding of either text. A few students were unclear whether the writer in Source A was content to be on the train or getting off, and some found it difficult to keep up with his rapidly shifting views; and others were unsure if the train in Source B was pulled literally by a horse rather than just metaphorically.

The number of students achieving marks in Level 3 and Level 4 was higher in this series than in both Questions 2 and 3, suggesting students are responding well to the open-ended, synoptic nature of this task. It was noted that there were many detailed, engaged and reflective responses from higher ability students.

### Common strengths in responses

Students in Level 3 were able to clearly identify Source A's perspective as that of a dissatisfied and ungrateful passenger, who was unappreciative of the facilities and conditions on board the train, and to compare this with the radiant enchantment of the writer in Source B, who could barely contain her appreciation of the wonders of steam technology. Students were judged to be in Level 3 where they were able to substantiate this understanding with examples from the text, such as Fleming's distaste for the food he was served and Kemble's detailed description of the train's functioning parts. It is the fullness of the response and the relevant examples used to support the assertion which lifts the understanding from an attempt (Level 2) to clear (Level 3).

The very best responses in Level 4 were able to set their answer within a conceptual framework, choosing to see the two perspectives as contrasting in terms of their joy and delight or misery and contempt, for example, and often tracking the structural changes in their points of view as the extracts progressed. Higher ability students were able to make comparisons about the writers' appreciation for technology, for example, which had become all too familiar and ordinary in Source A and was therefore a reason for ingratitude and contempt, whereas in Source B, the innovation and novelty of her very first ride on a steam train gave rise to an almost surreal or supernatural description of the event in a vain attempt to convey the indescribable.

Comments on methods at Level 4 were those such as the link in Source A between the writer's repetition of the word 'world' in the phrase 'little world' at the start of the extract to suggest the increasingly confined limitations of his perception of life on the train contrasted with the 'refreshingly spectacular world' he ventures out into, which suggested a universe suddenly grown much wider and more beautiful as a result of the destruction of the train. Some students extended this further to write about how this portrayed technology as an obstacle to our relationship with

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nature. Others commented on the childlike use of language in both sources which was used with very different effect – in Source B to show her delight and the newness of the experience, whereas in Source A it simply highlighted the petulant exaggeration of a man behaving like a toddler and pretending his legs had been broken. Yet others wrote about the use of synaesthesia in Kemble’s description of drinking the air, in her attempt to describe something beyond the experience of her readers.

## Common misunderstandings

Weaker responses tended to show some understanding of the two perspectives but lacked the clarity of explanation to secure a Level 3 mark. Their comparisons were more likely to be mismatched, comparing one aspect of one source with a different aspect of the other, such as the writer’s dislike of the isolation on the train in Source A with the writer having only a bench to sit on in Source B. Comparisons must compare the same aspect in both texts to be rewarded in Level 3. There were many examples where this was the case so the message is clearly being heard and understood.

Some students working at a lower level compared the writers’ perspectives as being ‘positive’ and ‘negative’. This is essentially saying no more than one is good and the other is bad or one likes it and the other one doesn’t. Unless there is further detail provided to indicate what, why or how the writers feel as they do, the comment is judged to be generalised and therefore Level 1. Indeed, the breadth of a student’s vocabulary is something which impacts significantly on their ability to succeed in response to all the questions in Section A, but in Question 4 in particular, where students are writing at greater length. Describing the writer in Source A as bored and the writer in Source B as enjoying herself is a good starting point, but students should be encouraged to explore a wider range of words to describe perspectives. To describe the writers as cynical, sceptical, melodramatic, sneering, contemptuous and isolated, or enthralled, enchanted, entranced, transcendent, euphoric even, would provide greater clarity of their perspectives due to the more precise nature of these words.

There were fewer students who failed to incorporate some mention of methods in their answers to Question 4, which is a very reassuring trend and one which is hoped will continue. In some cases, indeed, examiners felt that methods had become so dominant that they eclipsed or perhaps even distracted the student from writing about the writers’ perspectives. There is clearly a happy medium between the two. However, the most positive aspects of Question 4 were that the vast majority of students appeared to access the question and the texts successfully to achieve a mark at a level appropriate to their ability.

## Question 5

The task in Question 5 challenged students to consider the importance of cars in our lives and how public transport could or should contribute to plans for transport in our communities in the future.

The question was very well received by students, with an impressive degree of knowledge and experience demonstrated by students in response to the topic. Although few of the students will have had much experience of driving, it is fair to assume that the majority will have experience of being driven in a car and of travelling by public transport. There were clear differences between those living in large conurbations such as London, where students were able to write about the inter-connectedness of transport infrastructure and talked with confidence about the pricing and

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usage of Oyster cards, and those living in rural areas where there is only one bus serving the village each day and cars are an absolute necessity to get anywhere to do anything.

Crucially, however, students had much to say about the topic and they write best when they know what they are writing about and have an opinion about it. Some supported the conventional line in arguing that we should be reducing the use of cars, as indicated by the statement in the task, and increasing the availability and accessibility of public transport, whereas others argued passionately that we would be foolish to throw away the developments in technology which have resulted in cars, an amazing invention many students were clearly very eager to get their hands on in the coming months. Students were free to agree or disagree with the statement, and as usual, there was evidence of diverse opinions on the subject. Students responded well to the form of a speech with some fine examples of rhetorical flourishes and a clear sense of audience in many of the writing responses. It seems to galvanise some livelier writing, with many students incorporating a sense of immediacy in their writing as they engaged with a hypothetical live audience and purpose.

Most students were able to present at least some successful argument, with the mean mark for AO5 at the top of Level 2 (11.5). The mean marks for Technical Accuracy (AO6) are also high in Level 2 (8 marks), which reflects a similar performance on Paper 1, suggesting a very consistent pattern of achievement. Almost half of students were awarded marks in Level 3 and Level 4 for writing which confirms the experience of examiners who report seeing many fine examples of clearly expressed arguments.

There was a proliferation of certain phrases and scaffolding in some responses to this question which suggest that some centres are providing increasingly prescriptive approaches to the writing task. Examiners reported the ubiquity of the phrase: 'Picture this...' or 'Imagine this...' which seems to feature in a large number of students' responses. Other sentence starters, such as 'It is an incontrovertible truth that...' , were common, as was the inclusion of a pre-prepared quotation from someone illustrious, such as Gandhi or Greta Thunberg, which were more or less successfully shoe-horned into the students' responses. It is almost always the case, however, that students are most successful when they write spontaneously about a topic where they have some knowledge and experience, and where they feel some interest, and that was largely the case.

There was evidence, however, of a small number of what can only be described as wholly pre-prepared responses. This is where students have seemingly been given a template for a generic written argument (typically about the ills of society as a whole) which they have rehearsed in preparation for the exam and then applied to whatever topic they are given by filling in the gaps with the words 'cars' or 'public transport', for example. These responses failed to include any ideas specific to the topic set out in the task and so could not be awarded marks in the higher bands.

There continues to be a deterioration in the quality of handwriting. A significant number of students would have been better served by using a keyboard to write their responses to ensure that the quality of their work can be read, understood, appreciated and rewarded in full.

## Strongest responses

The best responses were those where the student presented a coherent response to the statement which took one perspective on transport and cars and followed it through to the end, commonly via a diatribe on climate change and the impact on the environment. It was reassuring to read so many engaged and thoughtful responses, with students often adopting a lively tone in their personal anecdotes and an appropriate style to match their live audience, often seeking to address the council members directly in their speech.

The highest performing students were able to take a conceptualised approach and set the issue of transport within an ethical, environmental, social or economic framework. This lens allowed them to

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develop their perspective on the theme of transport, to provide more detailed and thoughtful responses which were more likely to convince or even compel. Students developed an original voice, some taking a moderate view, appreciating the complexity of the arguments and indicating some nuance in the prevailing climate ideology which did not necessarily mean the end of all personal means of transport; others took a more bureaucratic approach and engaged with the minutiae of local government policy and practice.

Technically, a very similar picture emerged as has been seen before: these students used a wide variety of punctuation to support more complex grammatical structures and to shape sentences created specifically for effect. Technical skills were deployed deliberately to create effects and to enhance the content of their arguments.

## Weakest responses

There were weaker responses which failed to meet the criteria for Level 2, often characterised by brevity or a lack of focus. These responses tended to be very simple in their approach and offered a limited variety of ideas about cars or public transport. They tended to be more informal and failed to address the concerns of a live audience. They often lacked any structural features, such as paragraphs or discourse markers, to organise their ideas about cars or trains.

Typical of responses in Level 2 was the confusion in the development of ideas, with fairly random attempts made by some students to organise their points about transport into any sort of order. The connecting of a series of clearly expressed ideas is central to achievement at Level 3 and students need to be able to shape their individual points into a cohesive whole in order to warrant marks in Level 3. Control of a series of linked paragraphs is a crucial skill and one which students working at Level 2 need to practise in preparation for the written task. Within those paragraphs too, students working at this level should be encouraged to introduce their idea in a topic sentence and then develop that idea with further detail, in an expansion from either the general to the specific or from the specific to the general, in order to improve the connectedness of their writing.

Weaker responses demonstrated a lack of variety in the sentence structures attempted, and a subsequent absence of a range of punctuation. Lack of control of agreement was frequently evident in these responses as students struggled to maintain secure syntax. The absence of demarcation and other punctuation was a particular feature seen in the response of those students who typed their work. What is certain is that many students working at Level 1 and Level 2 demonstrated an erratic approach to their technical skills, which needs to be addressed.

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