

English Language GA 3: Written examination

GENERAL COMMENTS

It was satisfying to find that although this was only the second examination conducted in English Language, most students demonstrated a sound grasp of the course content and understood what was required of them in each of the three sections of the examination. This was particularly admirable in light of the fact that the numbers of students (and therefore new schools and teachers) undertaking the subject, had increased to over 700, more than threefold since the first year in 2000.

The examination paper was designed so that knowledge required in one question leads on to further understandings in following questions. This 'scaffolding' (a 'what, how and why' progression) moves students from identification to analysis and interpretation. The marks given to questions illustrate this progression. During the reading time students should pay attention to the way the questions progress.

Section 1 required short answers to questions about specific language features of two comparable texts, in this case, written texts. Section 2 required lengthier analysis of the discourse features of a text in a different mode to that used in Section 1, with a radio sports commentary providing the oral interaction. Section 3 required an essay that synthesised students' knowledge of language in society and language in use. Overall, students continued to show greater confidence with discussions of broad sociolinguistic trends than with the application of metalinguistic tools to the analysis of texts. However, there was a heartening increase in the number of responses which demonstrated a clear understanding of language structure at the morphological, syntactic and discourse levels and of how these language features functioned in particular social contexts. The more successful students were those who applied a detailed and accurate knowledge of the terminology of linguistics to an evaluation of how texts function in social interaction. The less successful students demonstrated little knowledge of the metalanguage covered in the course and could offer only intuitive and non-linguistically grounded analyses of texts and limited expositions of language in society.

Advice to teachers

Teachers should advise students to:

- take note of the mark allocation for each question as a guide to appropriate length of answers
- use the reading time to read the examination paper carefully and think about how the materials in Sections 1 and 2 could be used in the essay of Section 3
- have a sound knowledge of the language description components of the study guide, have regular practice in identifying lexical, syntactic and discourse structures in practice texts and understand how these features contribute to the meanings of the texts
- be familiar with a range of oral language transcription conventions and be able to use these to locate examples they are discussing in language analysis tasks
- have plenty of practice in close textual analysis and the use of discourse analytical tools rather than general intuitive commentary
- develop essay writing skills across the course, and ways of integrating knowledge gained from all coursework into coherent essays
- practise responding to a range of essay topics requiring both expository and argumentative modes
- organise their classroom notes and research findings so that they build up a body of knowledge to draw on in response to unseen essay topics.

Many students begin English Language at Units 3 and 4. It is useful for teachers and students to be aware of the content and outcomes of Units 1 and 2. Unit 1 (Outcome 3) in particular provides the building blocks for Unit 4. There are many resources available for Units 1 and 2 which provide useful background and stepping-stones for Units 3 and 4.

SPECIFIC INFORMATION

Section 1

Questions 1–6 were short-answer questions, most closely related to Outcomes 1 and 3 in Unit 4 and required students to demonstrate an understanding of:

- distinctive features of written English texts
- structures and features of different text-types, in this case, a personal email and a formal letter of complaint
- relationships between words and meaning
- discourse features of written texts and their role.

Question 1 (Average mark 2.03/Available marks 3)

This question required students to identify three purposes of the email text, which could be characterised as: to recount an event (informational) to make plans (transactional) and to continue a relationship (interpersonal). Different wordings were acceptable, as long as three distinctive purposes were identified. Teachers are encouraged to advise students to attend to the mark allocations as a guide to length of responses. Students who wrote lengthier responses, in which they demonstrated extensive knowledge of language structure, were not able to gain more than three marks and may have lost valuable time.

Question 2 (3.98/6)

This question required students to indicate that the relationship is essentially a familiar and informal one (2 marks). For the remaining 4 marks students needed to discuss a number of the **lexical** features through which this relationship was reflected and constructed, including: the use of informal (abbreviated and lower case) terms of address and ending; ellipsis; colloquial language (or ‘teenspeak’); emoticons and visual means of representing feeling (e.g. capitals, exclamation marks) and abbreviations (e.g. BTW). Students could discuss one or two of these features in depth, or the full range briefly, but the better students demonstrated their understanding of ‘**lexical features**’ with reference to specific examples from the text. The response below is exemplary.

The manner of the e-mail texts is informal, yet the lexical choices of the writer suggest an intimate relationship exists between ‘Em’ and ‘Soph’. The shortened form, ‘Em’, of ‘Emily’ is the address used by the writer to open the discourse. The colloquial greeting ‘Hi’, indicates the informal style of the piece, whilst this affectionate term of address signals an established relationship. The writer refers to her ‘mum’, attributing this person with no other formal title. Hence it can again be observed that the writer, and her extended family, are well known to the audience. Colloquial forms, such as ‘booze’ and ‘lotsa luv’, and the littering of ‘teenspeak’ jargon across the text, ‘bomb’, ‘ballistic’, ‘old boy’, ‘carving’ and the expression ‘hanging out’, are emblematic of an intimate relationship which can share and understand on equal status these esoteric language features. The employment of ‘emoticons’, represents emotions and expressions through computer symbols, also demonstrates the close relationship of the participants. References to other figures, ‘Jen’ and ‘Scott’, reveal that the participants are connected through a social network, this is also observed in the fact that the participants are discussing their ‘plans’. The closing utterance, ‘lotsa luv’, represents finally the intimate and affectionate nature of the relationship.

Some students may also have made reference to features of punctuation, syntax and discourse. These cannot be credited here as lexical features. During reading time, students should have noted that other language features besides the lexical can be discussed in Question 6.

Question 3 (4.34/10)

This question required students to identify the five occasions in which the verb ‘go’ appears in its various forms (‘She like goes ballistic’, ‘Then she goes “how come ...”’, ‘So I’m going to write a letter ...’, ‘Mum said she’d go in and bat for me’, ‘jen’s gunna go tonight’) and to elaborate on the syntactic and/or semantic characteristics of the verb in these different forms. Tense and the role of auxiliaries and ellipsis, could be discussed as key syntactic features, while non-standard forms could be discussed as key semantic features, as evidenced in the response below.

The verb form ‘to go’ is observed through its many and varied uses in this text as a flexible and widely applied linguistic and morphological unit. In the characteristic manner of teenage speakers, ‘to go’ is employed to aid in the reporting of speech. This is evidenced in both, ‘she like goes ballistic’ and ‘then she goes’. In this syntactic context, the verb is used to replace alternatives, such as the infinite ‘to say’. The semiotic impact of this usage is to demonstrate the fashionable currency of teenage language, and thus it is appropriate in the context of an informal e-mail to a friend. Hence this language upholds Grice’s maxim of ‘manner’ ‘To go’ is used in its standard semiotic form, the future participle ‘I’m going’ thus the syntax of this form is also standard. The employment of the verb in the reported speech, ‘Mum said she’d go in’, features to express an action of entering, which is a standard semiotic and syntactic use. The verb in the clause ‘gunna go’ demonstrates the semiotic future infinitive, ‘to go’, wherein ‘gunna’ is an assimilation of the auxiliaries ‘going to’.

Students could focus on **either** the syntactic or semantic characteristics of all five uses or on **both** the syntactic and semantic characteristics of a smaller range. Given the generally poor response to this question (with a small, but significant group of students being unable to recognise a verb in its various forms) teachers are advised to stress the importance of the language description component of the study design as an examinable body of knowledge.

Question 4 (2.08/3)

This question parallels Question 1 and required students to identify three purposes of the formal letter of complaint, which could be characterised as: to recount an event (informational); to complain (transactional); to request/demand action (interpersonal).

Question 5 (3.34/6)

This question parallels Question 2 and required students to identify the relationship as essentially a distant and formal one (2 marks). For the remaining 4 marks, students needed to discuss a number of the **lexical** features through which this relationship was reflected and constructed, including the use of: formal terms of address and signing off; complete words used in their standard, correctly spelt form; technical language (e.g. 'garment', 'satisfactory resolution'); and precision in the use of prepositional phrases which locate time and place (e.g. 'yesterday morning', 'when I returned home'). Students could discuss one or two of these features in depth, or the full range briefly, but the better students demonstrated their understanding of '**lexical features**' with reference to specific examples from the text, as illustrated in the response below.

The relationship between the writer and the audience of text two is clearly formal, and unknown. This can be concluded due to the formality of the openings and closings (e.g. Dear Madam/Sir, Yours faithfully Sophie Mourakis) the absence of slang and colloquialisms from the piece, the presence of formal/complex language (eg, satisfactory, resolution, customer service, garment, shop assistant) and correct grammar with no non standard forms for eg, in terms of sub conjugation (eg, I am extremely disappointed, I explained).

Some students may also have made reference to features of punctuation, syntax and discourse. These cannot be credited here as lexical features. During reading time, students should have noted that other language features besides the lexical can be discussed in Question 6.

Question 6 (5.87/12)

This question allowed students to demonstrate their knowledge of the key structural differences between the spoken and written modes and how these are evidenced in language choices **other than the lexical**. Students could draw on their knowledge of features such as: sentence type (simple/complex and declarative, exclamative and interrogative sentences); the elision or inclusion of personal pronouns; the use of the present and past tense to create dramatic effect or to locate events in a very specific point in time; punctuation, used in either standard codified ways or as suggestive of the prosody of speech; visual representation of paralinguistics as in emoticons, exclamation marks. Marks were gained both for identifying such features in each text **and** for explaining how each of these language features are indicative of the more spoken or written-like quality of the texts, as illustrated in the response below.

Both text 1 and 2 are constructed in the conventional letter format of paragraphs. Whilst both are in the written mode, the e-mail text is informal and its close resemblance of spoken language is derived from its inherent nature of fast, efficient and transient communication through immediate computer-to-computer feedback. The nature of e-mail language then, is clearly similar to the immediacy of spoken language. Non-standard grammatical forms such as the lack of punctuation in the final paragraph which contains four semantic clauses indistinguished by no commas — and the omission of pronouns, 'bought', 'had' instead of 'I bought' and 'I had'; contractions such as 'Don't' and 'Jen's', the use of exclamatory sentences, 'The woman was sooo RUDE'; deictic language, 'you know', reported speech, 'well it wasn't I say'; fillers, 'well'; the proportion of simple sentences, 'so I take it back', and monosyllabic lexical items, 'I', 'like', 'what', 'had'; all of these syntactical, grammatical and lexical features one consonant with the manner and form of spoken language. The letter of text 2 demonstrated the characteristic features of the letter mode. Syntactically, it features mainly compound, '... to return the garment and to exchange it for another', and complex sentence structures, such as the second sentence of paragraph three, featuring the subordinating clause, 'claiming ... garment'. The language is field specific, not spontaneous but evidently planned; it follows a chronological sequence using the past aspect of verb forms — 'I bought', 'I returned', 'I had travelled' and 'she refused'. The lexical choices of the writer are formal, reflecting the formal manner of the piece, 'garment', 'resolution' and 'straightforward'. These polysyllabic words and the abstract noun 'resolution', also reflect the formality and professional, serious tone of the writer and formality of the written mode.

It was not enough for students to simply write about the differences between the spoken and written modes in the abstract, as many did. They needed to locate specific examples from either/both of the texts. Responses which indicated that one text is more 'grammatically correct' than another, missed the important point that different forms of language can be used appropriately in different modes.

Section 2

Questions 7, 8 and 9 related to Outcomes 2 and 3 in Unit 3 and Outcomes 1 and 2 in Unit 4 and required close analysis of the features of spoken interaction.

Question 7 (3.05/6)

This question required students to list **and specifically locate** six prosodic features in intonation units 38–55, from the following: use of forte and crescendo to signal growing excitement; the lengthening of vowel sounds to create emphasis; the regular intake of breath (40–44) to create a particular kind of pace; the repetition of key lexical items to create a rhetorical effect (42–44); the use of more than one primary accent in intonation unit 51 to separate and emphasise the words; absence of overlapping of turns of the three commentators, suggesting clarity of their roles; the orderly turn taking between the three commentators at the conclusion of the race, and the longer pauses between turns; the regular rising pitch direction of Speaker A's utterances during the race followed by terminal pitch direction at the conclusion of the race; primary accents reinforce the semantic impact of Ian Thorpe's achievements. The response below is exemplary in its identification and location in the transcript of some of these features, and in its interpretation of their significance in the speech event.

All three speakers – A, B and M – make interjections within the intonation units 38–55. This sequence represents a key stage in the commentary – the winner, swimmer Ian Thorpe, has won the race. Reflecting commentator A's immense and uncontained excitement at this stage are a series of desperate inhalations of breath (H); fast pace indicating this excitement in unit 38; accented speech conveyed emphasis of important lexical items, 'a^nother', '^Ian Thorpe' and '^first'; lengthening of vowels also to accentuate the impact and meaning of significant utterances, 'go=ld' and 'ful=fils'; and in an effective series of deliberately repetitive utterances the commentator animates his language in a sequence of inhalation, accents, and vowel lengthening of clauses between units 42 and 44. A reaches a climax and then his pitch crescendo's in unit 50. Speaker M allows a 3 seconds of silence for the audience to absorb the atmosphere of the stadium in unit 55, as does B in unit 52

The less successful responses simply paraphrased or listed sections of the transcript, using the prosodic features as described in the explanation of transcript conventions. They did not interpret the examples, and did not use the intonation unit numbers to locate and explain specific examples. Teachers are strongly encouraged to provide students with practice in analysing oral and written texts in which lines, turns or other speech conventions are numbered and to offer explicit guidance in applying the relevant discourse analytic tools to the interpretation of these texts.

Question 8 (3.91/8)

This question required students to describe features of the interaction under each of the four headings (topic management, information flow, prosody and cooperative principles) in a very general sense or to take one heading only and deal with the associated features in depth. The question was a difficult one, in that students needed to select appropriate segments from the whole interaction and to illustrate how specific features of these segments contribute to the description of the race in a 'vivid and efficient' manner.

If students chose to focus on Topic Management, they could examine how each of the three speakers covers distinctive aspects of the race (A has prime responsibility for describing the racing positions of each competitor and making broader comments. B makes more broadly evaluative comments. M's role is more limited as a guest commentator who offers broad comments when invited as in line four) and how the absence of overlap signals clear turn-taking roles, until the slight overlap at end of race call (64–65). If students chose to focus on Information flow, they could examine how Old or Given information occurs typically at beginning of sentences/clauses and New information occurs at end, thus aiding in the clear and coherent communication required where the listeners are not present at the event described

If students chose to focus on Prosody, they could examine how stress on key words draws listeners' attention to specific events, how change in volume signals excitement, how absence of longer pauses in reporting of the actual race signals pace of the commentary, how length of pauses at end of race reporting signals a more reflective pace, and what intake of breath signals, most notably in Speaker A.

If students chose to focus on Cooperative principles, they could examine Grice's principles, examining how the information provided is accurate (quality/truth), economic (quantity), orderly (manner) and necessary (relevance) and how these contribute to the vivid and efficient description of a race.

Question 9 (2.55/6)

This question required students to examine the broader sociolinguistic functions of Speaker A's utterances. The better responses pointed to his broader role in constructing: the atmosphere of the event, painting a word picture for the listeners; his own passionate attitude towards the sport of swimming ('I'm numb'); Ian Thorpe as a national

hero; a shared sense of excitement and national identity with the listening audience. Students needed to identify at least two of these features in light of specific discourse choices, as illustrated in the response below.

Perhaps the most obvious thing being constructed by speaker A is a sense of hype and excitement. This in turn leads him to evoke 'national sentiment' with some of his discourse choices appealing to the nation (audience) sense of 'belonging' and he creates a true climax in the finish. In many ways, he is appealing to our group membership, collectively, as Australians. Lines 38 to 45 give us a quick history to get us more involved. The quick speech, coupled with rising pitch, intonation and breathing increases the excitement. Line 63 is perhaps the biggest pitch at national pride and sentiment. As a whole, it helps construct a sense of belonging for listeners nationwide; belonging to something special, exciting. Being a part of something big, and being proud of this part.

Section 3

Questions 10 or 11 required a single essay response, which could potentially draw on all outcomes in Unit 3, and Outcome 1 of Unit 4. The essay allowed students to demonstrate their understanding of their coursework, which many did comprehensively. However, as with last year's examination, students still tried to fit their pre-existing knowledge into a question of their own, rather than addressing the question as given. Very few students doing Question 11 addressed the key phrase 'both contribute to and eliminate', and structured essays around the more general topic of language and discrimination, as covered in their coursework. Likewise, very few students doing Question 10 addressed the key terms 'pessimists' and 'valuable distinctions in meaning', tending instead to structure their essays around descriptions of how 'unappetising vogue words' and 'slang' have crept into the English language. The response below is one exception, which unpacks what is meant by 'pessimism'. (Unfortunately, it doesn't really explain why the writer, along with Burchfield, is excited by language change.)

With expansions in such areas as computer technology and medical research it has become inevitable that new lexical items and 'rogue words' are finding their way into our language. As modern lifestyles change, so too will the language, that we use in our society. Some people, 'pessimists' are 'gloomy' about the introduction of new lexical items and semantic shifts in lexical items, but other linguistic experts such as Burchfield, are 'excited' by the prospect of our language growing and continuing to expand.

'Pessimists' believe that in recent years, there have been declining standards in English usage within our society. Varieties of Australian English such as teen speak is an example of this. Teenspeak uses non-standard lexical items and syntax, and so does not adhere to the standard variety of Australian English. Lexical items such as 'dude', 'hick' and 'mod' are common to speakers of teen-speak. There are many community attitudes existing towards these varieties of English, and generally it can be seen that negative attitudes exist towards any variety of English that does not conform/adhere to the standard variety. These attitudes derive from peoples social standards or expectations however changing social expectations have led to changing attitudes to non-standard varieties of English. It has become more socially acceptable to deviate from standard English and hence there have been what 'pessimists describe as declining standards!

The changed social expectations is commonly due to the intrusion and influence of the media on our modern lives. What we see on television and film can have a significant impact on the language we use and social standards we abide by, For example, the growing use of Americanisations and teen-speak on our television has led to there wider use in society and the acceptance of the lexical items common to these varieties of English into society, (Americanisations such as 'cool', 'max (as in to-the-max)' and 'diss' in teen-speak have been standardised in to the Australian form of teen-speak).

The impact of media and expansions in areas such as computer technology and medical research has led to a vast array of lexical items been injected into the personal lexis of many Australians. For example, lexical items such as 'cyber-space', 'floppies', 'genome', 'DNA' and 'genetics' have been introduced to us by the media. These lexical items have then filtered through the community where they reach a point where they become standardised and/or codified (or vice versa). Pessimists describe this process as the 'introduction of unappetising rogue words and slang', but really it is a natural process that must occur in order for our language to cope with the changes to modern lifestyles.

Advances in technology and the media's continuing expanding influence on society has also led to 'loss of valuable distinctions in meaning' of lexical items. In other words, some lexical items have been 'recycled' or undergone semantic shifts over the years to cope with the changing lifestyles. For

example, 'mouse' is now used in the field of information technology, and 'sick', 'mad' and 'wicked' are now used by teenagers to refer to something that is really 'cool'.

Pessimists see the changes occurring in our language, be it semantic shifts, the introduction of new lexical items or the declining ability of the community to adhere to and use the standard variety of Australian English as a 'gloomy' process. They hold negative attitudes towards the use of anything in language that does not adhere to the standard variety of English. This is often because they want to see the Australian variety of English, along with all its 'Australianisms' and colloquialisms preserved fully for future generations to enjoy, and so naturally they resent outside influences to our language such as Americanisations through media intrusion as they perceive this to be a loss of culture or national identity on Australia's part if we begin adding lexical items to our variety of English that come from overseas. Pessimists hold the view that we, as Australians have created and shaped our own variety of English and they simply wish for this variety to be preserved.

In conclusion, it can be said that changes to our language are inevitable, and ultimately the best thing for us to do is to embrace these changes as Burchfield intends to do. By holding pessimistic views about a language change, we would only be limiting our language and ourselves. It is in Australia's best interests, language wise, to adapt/change our language as society changes rather than unrealistically grasping at the Australian language of old

Teachers are advised to provide students with practice during the year in identifying key terms in essay questions that point to contentious issues, and to help students structure their essays in ways that develop a clear line of argument. They should help students to demonstrate in their essays more of their knowledge of language by getting them to ask the question of themselves 'How can I relevantly bring my knowledge of morphology, syntax and phonology to this topic?' They can also encourage students to 'mine' the written and oral texts used in Sections 1 and 2 of the examination paper for examples they can use in their essays.

As noted earlier, the examination paper has been structured so that the shorter questions in Sections 1 and 2 help students bring to consciousness their metalinguistic knowledge. Given this scaffolding structure of the examination paper, it is not advisable for students to start with the essay question. Teachers should advise students to apportion their time so that they leave about 45 minutes for the essay, and follow the sequence of the questions as numbered.

Essays in English Language are very different from those required in the text response section in English, where students are given a proposition about a text and asked to discuss it or to take a position in relation to it. In such essays, the content is the text, and the students use their knowledge of the text to support their discussion. In contrast, students in English Language have their entire coursework in Language in Use and Language in Society to draw upon. They must use their socio-linguistic knowledge to address the particular aspect/s of language in society featured in the essay question. Most importantly they need to be able to generalise in relation to a topic, in order to provide a framework for their discussion and for the examples they give. Many responses did not provide a structure for the essay, but simply provided many examples of jargon or language which discriminates.

Teachers need to help students to synthesise and categorise their knowledge, in ways that may prove useful in constructing an essay. Students should use sample essay topics (from past examination papers and other resources) to practise ways of organising and using the knowledge they have.