

GCSE

DRAMA

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Report on the Examination

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Introduction

In the fifth year of this examination, it is extremely pleasing to report a large cohort of enthusiastic and well-prepared students, who have been given access to an impressive range of material during their GCSE Drama course. Once again, an overwhelming majority of students have responded as performers, and their account of work in schools and colleges shows their understanding of a range of texts and styles. Students who responded as a designer or technician have also shown a mature and creative approach to their chosen skill, and how this impacts upon a piece of performance work.

Across the paper, the complete range of achievement was seen. More able students were able to write very clearly, and address the specific demands of the question, showing a purposeful and detailed connection to the practical work that they had taken part in or seen. Less able students would often drift into a narrative account of the plot of a piece of performance work, or describe their own skills in very generalised terms, without fully connecting to the demands of the question.

It was clear that schools and colleges had spent a lot of time preparing their students for the paper, and had used past papers as revision material. Whilst this is, in principle, good practice, it was disheartening to see a significant number of students attempting to answer questions on this year's paper with (what looked like a) pre-prepared response which would have been better suited to the 2013 paper. More able students were able to think independently and adapt their prepared work to fit the demands of a particular question. However, students of a lower ability often struggled in this respect, and wrote confused or muddled responses where they appeared to completely misunderstand the question. Examiners reported schools and colleges where the entire cohort had been coached to write about the same character in the same extract of the same play, in the same format, and using the same essay structure. This approach rarely helped students, and often disadvantaged them.

It was very pleasing to encounter schools and colleges who had explored a range of scripted and devised pieces which empowered students to select an appropriate piece from their own repertoire of practical work. Where every student in a school or college wrote about their experience of playing Christopher in the opening scene of *The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time*, or playing Oggy Moxon in the same extract of *Teachers*, the responses often all 'bunched together' around a mid-point in the mark range.

Section A

Most students were very well prepared for this section. Examiners reported that the majority of students selected one practical skill, and answered on the same skill for all four questions in this section. The majority of students responded from a personal and individual perspective. There were, however, a minority of students who drifted into discussion of group work, and what the group had achieved, especially in Question 3. As with all questions on this paper, examiners marked positively and credited students who had addressed the demands of the question, even when their focus was not on their individual skill. It was alarming to see a significant number of students write an over-long response for Question 1, giving much more information than was asked for, and then run out of time and write much shorter (and less successful) responses in Section B or Section C. Students must be aware that Section A carries half of the total marks for this paper, but that they should not spend too long writing answers which do not gain them full marks, and impacts on their ability to write full answers in the other sections.

Question 1

This question asked students to choose a piece of practical work and describe what the piece was about, with a list of statements required alongside the description.

The majority of students answered this question very well, and they had evidently been well prepared by their schools and colleges. This question remains a constant of this examination, and there is a clear understanding of what students need to write to gain a top band mark. The majority of students answered as performers, writing about a range of scripted, devised and Theatre in Education work. Some students writing succinctly were able to gain full marks for this question in a relatively short paragraph which addressed all the requirements in the stated question. Schools and colleges who have practised and who adopted a systematic approach to the question have students who produce succinct, focused answers which clearly identify the work which will be discussed throughout this section of the paper. There were accounts of ambitious and exciting work which had evidently engaged the students; their enthusiasm was infectious and they wrote well.

A common error was for students to identify the geographical location of their performance (“We performed in our drama studio.”) rather than describing the performance space with an understanding of its configuration (“We performed in our drama studio, with an end-on stage.”) Examiners credited students who had described working in a ‘proscenium arch’ or ‘in-the-round’ staging (for example), as the configuration of the performance space for the performers and their audience was implicitly clear. Some students confused style and genre, and some simply stated that they had performed in a ‘drama’ which could not be credited. Responses were not penalised if there was no reference to technical or design skills, as long as this was not applicable to their piece of work. A significant number of students wrote a needlessly long essay (sometimes taking up two sides of the answer booklet) which gave a detailed account of the plot, or an explanation of Bertolt Brecht’s methods and ideas. Whilst students are not penalised for this approach, it was disappointing to see a great number of those who produced such responses then run out of time later in the paper. In their devising work, some schools and colleges had created unusual combinations of style and genre (a graphic horror version of Winnie The Pooh, using Artaudian ideas, aimed at primary school children, for example) which resulted in students struggling to write clearly about their work. The response from this question should be the same for technical or design students, and there was no disparity between their responses and those of performers.

Question 2

This question asked students to explain what specific skills they applied to their piece of practical work.

Examiners reported that responses to this question were the weakest of the four questions in Section A. Students were asked to write about their specific skills and how they applied them to their own piece of work. Students who performed successfully wrote about their skills in terms of voice, movement and facial expression; they would explain the aspects of these skills that they had utilised in their practical work. Technical and design students generally answered this question better than their performer peers, and were able to clearly identify and explain the skills that they had brought to their work. The best responses showed an understanding of what this skill brought to the piece, and how this connected to what the students hoped to achieve.

A significant number of students wrote about group work and rehearsal techniques rather than focusing on their individual skills. Weaker students would write about line-learning or attending

additional rehearsals, rather than what they actually contributed to the piece itself. It was disappointing to see students identify that they used ‘vocal skills’ in their piece, but then not go on to explain which vocal skills they used. Occasionally there was a clear disconnect between the student’s description in Question 1 and what they wrote about in this question, which created confusion, and led to students writing responses which lacked clarity and focus. Weaker design and technical students would often write lists of the equipment or materials that they had used, without an explanation of their specific skill. Too many responses covered rehearsal only and ignored the specific skills which contributed to the piece.

Question 3

This question asked students to analyse how they used the rehearsal process to improve their own practical skills.

Examiners reported that this was a well-answered question. The best answers here outlined an issue the student was facing, the process by which they improved, and how that improvement took shape. The overwhelming majority of performance students wrote in detail about hot-seating. It is not enough to discuss hot-seating improving the piece in a generic fashion, students need to explain what precisely it was about hot-seating which helped them in the rehearsal process, and the impact of that improvement. Students were frank and honest about their work in rehearsals, and would sometimes be quite brutal in their analysis of their own perceived weaknesses! Students who were able to sustain a focus on the improvement of their practical skills scored well on this question. Technical and design students answered this question well, and would often link their skill to an aspect of the work of performance students, and analyse their improvements in connection to this.

Weaker students would often provide a list of rehearsal techniques without any associated analysis. Examiners also reported a minority of students who focused entirely on personal disagreements and friendship squabbles during rehearsals; whilst these responses demonstrate analysis, they do not meet the demands of the question. A great number of students wrote about watching filmed versions of their scripted pieces (*Blue Remembered Hills*, *Abigail’s Party* and Nicholas Hytner’s filmed version of *The Crucible* proving extremely popular) or extracts of other performers on YouTube. Although this constitutes valid research and preparation, a disappointing majority of students who undertook this task failed to then write about how their research had informed their own performance. Technical and design students would sometimes give descriptions of what they did in rehearsal without any analysis of how they improved their own skills along the way.

Question 4

This question asked students to evaluate their personal success in demonstrating their skills in performance.

Examiners reported that although students were enthusiastic about their practical work, there was often a lack of focus on evaluation or their individual skill in performance. The question asked students to focus on “**at least one** moment from the final performance,” and where students had made pertinent references to specific moments/sequences on stage, their enthusiasm was palpable and they scored well. As with Question 3, students were sometimes disarmingly frank in their evaluation of their own ‘success,’ and examiners did credit those students who had also evaluated moments where they felt they had been less successful. Students demonstrated an informed awareness of their audience through their evaluation of the use of direct address,

audience response and feedback. Students also used audience reaction, feedback and comments after their performance; these moments often helped in their evaluation of personal success, and validated their own judgement. Technical and design students did well on this question, often with a clear third-person perspective on the overall effect of the moment in performance. The best technical and design students wrote about moments where their own skill had been deployed in synchronicity with the acting, and described the overall effect.

Weaker students gave an enthusiastic account of the performance without any real evaluative detail or focus on a specific moment in performance. Similarly, a proportion of students drifted into discussion about group success, or gave an account of the plot of the piece. Whilst audience reaction is useful, some students relied on this almost entirely in their response, failing to offer an evaluation of how they were successful on a personal level. It was disappointing to see a number of schools and colleges who had prepared their students with stock responses to this question, which saw entire cohorts write the same audience feedback comment in support of their success. A minority of students also wrote entirely about rehearsal and preparation here, without any reference to the final performance, as required by the question. Weaker technical and design students would state that they were successful in terms of what had happened in performance, but not offer a clear evaluation of how or why they were successful.

Section B

This optional section is designed so that students can study a scripted play and write about the experiences of their practical exploration of the play. It was very pleasing to see schools and colleges which had embraced this approach and allowed students to explore their chosen texts through practical work, enabling them to understand their chosen skill. The best responses in this section saw students writing with clarity and focus about specific extracts of their chosen play, and showing a thorough understanding of their own contribution. Questions 5 and 6 were the most popular optional questions on the paper. This section allows teachers to select the texts that their students study and the majority of students wrote about a suitable play, appropriate to their level of study and understanding. It was disappointing to see schools and colleges where every student wrote about the same small section of the play, and, on occasion, the same role. This was ultimately restricting for all but the most able students, and students did not always appear to have studied the whole play. Where misinformation is given to students as a cohort, it can have a detrimental effect on their achievement. For example, one school wrote about Patrick Marber's play *Dealer's Choice* (1995), and then wrote at length about Harold Pinter's use of form and style when he supposedly (Pinter) wrote it in the 1970s.

Examiners reported a reliance on popular texts seen in previous series. *Blue Remembered Hills*, *Blood Brothers*, *The Crucible*, *The 39 Steps* and the plays of John Godber all proved popular with schools and colleges. More recent plays such as *DNA* and other National Theatre Connection plays have grown in popularity. Whilst it is understandable that schools and colleges want to rely on 'tried and tested' plays, examiners felt that some students struggled with the nuances of them, and might have been better served by more contemporary work. There are also schools and colleges who undertake challenging texts with their students. Examiners have no agenda when marking students' work, but it was felt that the subject matter or content of some texts was too mature for students at GCSE, and that this was shown by their limited understanding of the text. *Abigail's Party*, for example, was a popular text with schools and colleges, but almost always approached as a broad, sitcom-style comedy, with students failing to understand the complexity of its social nuances and how this affects the relationships between characters.

Question 5

This question asked performance students to explain how they developed their acting skills in rehearsal to create a style of performance appropriate to their studied play.

Examiners reported that this question was not particularly well answered. This question centred on the style of performance which was appropriate for the selected play. Many students were confident in the identification of their acting skills but either failed to identify the crux of the question or misinterpreted it and wrote about genre. Some students implicitly referenced style due to their thorough knowledge and understanding of the text and the playwright's intentions. The best students identified the appropriate style at the start of their answer, along with the title of the play and their selected role. They then methodically selected a range of skills which were required to achieve the style and purposefully explained rehearsal and preparation methods which supported the development process. Where students did understand the focus of the question in terms of the play's style, they were able to write with clarity and purpose about how their acting skills (usually vocal, physical and facial expressions) had helped to create this style. These were usually methodical responses where the student worked systematically and logically through the extract in question.

Disappointingly, weaker students did not focus on a particular extract, and tried to cover the play as a whole; this was rarely a successful approach, and students struggled to explain their ideas clearly. Similarly, there were a number of responses where students offered an account of the plot or a biography of the playwright. These did not address the demands of the question. A significant minority of responses clearly identified a style of performance at the start of the answer, but then failed to connect the rest of their response to this nominated style. Examiners have no agenda when marking these responses; if a student described a naturalistic approach to *The Resistible Rise Of Arturo Ui*, or a non-naturalistic approach to *Blood Brothers*, these were credited accordingly, using the full range of marks available. It is worth noting that a significant number of students wrote the same amount for Question 5 as they did for questions in Section A. Whilst examiners are making a judgement on quality (and not quantity), it is worth remembering that Question 5 is worth 20 marks (double the marks available to any Section A question), and students rarely achieved the clarity of a top band mark with a relatively short response. A significant number of schools and colleges had also prepared students to give all of the information expected in Question 01 here; this was needless repetition, and gained students no credit.

Question 6

This question asked performance students to analyse their success in applying their physical and vocal skills effectively in performance.

The majority of students answered this question well, focusing on their personal success and referring to a specific moment in performance. Generally, students wrote about a different extract to the one they had identified in Question 5, and wrote with enthusiasm for their work and were keen to give an account of their success. Some responses focused on group success, or didn't give any specific detail of acting, or discussed rehearsal, but these were few and far between. Stronger students' answers clearly identified moments of success and used these to illustrate how well they had applied their own vocal and physical skill. There was a clear understanding of the expectations of the audience when interpreting the script, ensuring that moments of pathos, tension or comedy (for example) were performed appropriately in order to realise them for the audience. Constructive criticism and audience feedback was quoted to underpin useful analysis of

a particular moment of success in their performance. There were typically two types of successful response to this question. The first approach saw students identify a moment, and then analyse its success in terms of their application of physical and vocal skill. The second approach saw students analyse the success of their application of physical and vocal skills separately, and link each of these to specific moments from the performance to support their analysis.

Weaker students focused on what they hypothetically ‘would’ have done to achieve success in their performance, and lost focus on the analysis of their actual success. There were also students who repeated information from Question 5, describing the plot, or repeating explanation of rehearsal techniques and strategies. These students were in the minority, and examiners were pleased to report a strong response to this question.

Question 7

This question asked technical or design students to explain how they developed their ideas and applied their skills to the extract of the studied play.

Relatively few students approached this section. Nonetheless, examiners encountered students who wrote with enthusiasm about their chosen skill; all of the skills listed in the specification were credited. Some interesting responses explained how mood and atmosphere were established. Other students successfully explained how costume was designed to inform the portrayal of a character. Weaker students tended to write about health and safety aspects in far too much detail and missed the opportunity to promote their own successful ideas. Stronger students managed to really engage with their designs and showcase how their ideas developed and were applied to the extract. Sketches were often included and proved very useful to illustrate a design idea. The strongest responses showed an excellent understanding of the play through close reading of the script and meaningful research and experimentation during the early stages of rehearsal.

A small number of students tried to write about multiple design or technical skills in their responses. Where this occurred, examiners credited the single design or technical area which was worthy of the most credit within the student’s response. The less successful responses were rather vague and tended to talk about either their teacher’s or their group’s ideas for realising the play in production. Some students showed a muddled understanding of how research might be used to inform and realise their own ideas.

Question 8

This question asked technical or design students to analyse their personal success in demonstrating their skills in a specific moment from the performance of the play.

Successful students were able to analyse their design or technical skill’s contribution to the piece, and showed a clear understanding of the effect they were creating. Where students had purposefully engaged with the rehearsal and production process, as well as linking their skill to detailed study of the play in question, they were often able to analyse their success and qualify this by citing specific examples from the performance. Stronger students were able to analyse their success in relation to what they hoped to achieve and how this might impact on the audience. Where lighting design was concerned, students were often able to talk about subtle shifts in mood and tone, and how this might affect the overall performance.

Weaker students would sometimes fail to focus on their nominated design or technical skill, and instead give an appreciative account of the performance. In these responses it was often the case

that description was a substitute for analysis, and students struggled to access the higher mark bands. A small number of students drifted into generalised discussion of group work in performance, as did a number of students who repeated their explanation of moments from Question 7, without any further analysis of their success in achieving these moments.

Section C

This optional section is designed so that students can study a scripted play and then see a live performance of the play. Students can write about the same play for Section A and Section C, although only a minority of schools and colleges went down this route. Where this did occur, it was very often the case that students wrote about exactly the same moments in both sections and failed to differentiate their knowledge to fit the demands of the particular question.

Although fewer students answer questions in Section C (in comparison to Section B), it was pleasing to see clear understanding and knowledge of the chosen plays, and this was reflected in student responses. It was obvious students had been well prepared by teachers in advance of the live performance, and that there was substantial work done after the performance to consolidate the knowledge gained. Weaker students struggled to link the work that they had seen to their own practical study of the play, and would instead give an enthusiastic appreciation of the live performance they watched. The majority of schools and colleges opted for professional productions of accessible and quality theatre. A small number of schools and colleges took students to see NT Live performances, amateur dramatic work, and occasionally the performances of another examination level group within the school. Quite simply, there was a direct correlation between the student's enjoyment and understanding, and the clarity and focus of their writing.

Favourite productions included *Blood Brothers*, *War Horse*, *The Woman In Black* and *The 39 Steps*. Productions of popular musical theatre such as *Matilda* or *Billy Elliot – The Musical* were often helpful to students writing about a design or technical skill, often due to the clear visibility of these skills throughout the performance. Other productions that proved popular were Propeller's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Resistible Rise Of Arturo Ui*. It was encouraging to see schools and colleges who had taken students to see a range of material, covering different styles and genres.

Where students struggled in this section was in the distinction between actor and character. Too many students wrote about 'Richard Hannay' in *The 39 Steps* as though 'he' was using his physical and vocal skills in performance. There were also examples of schools and colleges where every student wrote about the same character in the same moment from the performance. On such occasions, whilst the more able students were able to write with clarity and purpose, less able students struggled to fit their own understanding of what they had seen with what they were writing about. Students should be encouraged to develop an individual response to the performance seen.

Question 9

This question asked students to describe the ways in which actors applied their physical and vocal skills in a selected scene or section of the play.

The majority of students who answered in Section C answered Questions 9 and 10. This question was well answered by students who were able to pinpoint a useful section of the play and give a clear description of how acting skills had contributed to this. Although there is still a tendency for students to discuss the production seen (with limited evidence of this being a taught text) the best answers discussed interpretations based on reading in class and the delivery of text in performance. The best answers spoke in detail about skills applied, and brought to life moments of tension, humour and pathos. Most students understood the style of the production seen and were able to write about this in relation to the acting in the production. Stronger students described the context of the scene clearly, as well as the actor's performance. Weaker students tended to describe the action of the scene with limited reference to the actor's skills. Some students discussed more than one actor with great success. Examiners had no agenda when considering the number of actors described; it was possible to gain full marks through a very clear description of the skills of *one* actor.

Weaker students tended to drift towards an enthusiastic appraisal of their chosen actor throughout the entire production, rather than focusing on a specific scene or section. This often led to a generalised response, which lacked the clarity and detail to gain a higher mark. Some schools and colleges had clearly prepared their students to start their response with a summary of the play's plot, as well as its social/political context. Whilst students are not penalised for this, it often resulted in them wasting time, and producing a relatively short answer which spent too long giving a pre-learned preamble, rather than directly addressing the demands of the question. As with questions in Section B, a significant number of students wrote answers which were as long as (or shorter than) their responses to questions in Section A. This was effectively self-penalising. Some weaker students wrote a narrative account of the character's journey through the play, rather than giving a description of the actor's performance.

Question 10

This question asked students to analyse why the acting in a specific scene or section was so effective.

This was, again, well answered by most students. Here, students spoke with evident pleasure at the effect of performances, their use of hyperbole was particularly striking. Students who had discussed texts in class and possible staging/ interpretations had a vocabulary and understanding which allowed for discussion of acting at a high level, and they were awarded accordingly. The question asked that students refer to the same scene or section as Question 9, although they were not penalised if they strayed beyond this. The students who responded particularly well to this question had clearly either read or researched the play, or had taken part in a workshop, because they had an excellent understanding of the text, and were able to underpin the analysis of the effectiveness of the acting with close reference to the text of the play. Stronger students would write about the acting in terms of vocal skills, physical skills, and how the actor has used these skills effectively in performance. The best responses saw students describing a moment clearly, and then offering an analysis of the effectiveness of the acting in this moment. Quotations from the play often helped to pinpoint a specific moment, and allowed students to relate their response to their own understanding, gained through study of the play.

Weaker students failed to discuss the effectiveness of the acting in performance, and would give an enthusiastic but generalised account of what they had liked in a particular performance. Selecting a suitable moment from the performance was important (particularly for less able students), and where schools and colleges had adopted an approach of teaching the close study of one moment to the entire cohort, it disadvantaged weaker students who struggle to integrate their own understanding of the play. It is worth noting that the student must have a working knowledge of the play before they go and see the production itself. It was clear which schools and colleges had adopted this approach, and it was usually prosperous for students who had done so.

Question 11

This question asked students to explain what their chosen design or technical skill had contributed to a specific scene or section of the production.

Questions 11 and 12 were answered by a minority of students during this series. Stronger students, who had the requisite terminology to discuss design or technical skills in detail were at a distinct advantage. Examiners encountered students who had a real breadth of understanding of the artistic potential of the union of design features, text and acting. Sketches and designs were often helpful in illustrating a student's point. A school that focused on *Twelfth Night*, for example, used well-labelled costume sketches to make pertinent comments and explain how the costume had helped to create comedy within the production. This was a clear example of a challenging text being made accessible to a wide ability range, due to the focus of post-production class study.

Weaker students tended to not give enough detail about the design or technical skills but, instead, would describe something they saw without the reasons behind the choices or why they related to the action on stage. Some students were able to discuss the effect of a design or technical skill, but did not show an awareness or understanding that this had been created by a designer/technician. Some students attempted to write about several skills. This was problematic, and examiners credited one skill only; the skill where the student had gained the highest mark in their explanation of it. As with Questions 9 and 10, some students had been encouraged to write (as a cohort) about the same scene or section. As discussed previously, this was often more challenging for less able students.

Question 12

This question asked students to evaluate the success of their chosen design or technical skill in combination with other production areas.

The majority of students who answered this question wrote well, and wrote about their chosen skill in combination with acting. There were some very enthusiastic responses to this question, resulting in well-informed and clear evaluations of the success of the selected design or technical skill combined with other production areas. Students were able to recognise how features such as lighting, sound and acting in combination can be used to create a memorable moment in a performance. Stronger students were able to focus clearly on evaluating the success of their skill, and could underpin their evaluation with specific moments from the scene or section.

Weaker students often lacked the technical knowledge or specific vocabulary to clearly articulate their evaluation. A minority of students tried to address every technical or design skill encountered in the live performance, which led to a brief and unfocused response, with the student not covering any skill in enough detail. It is worth noting that examiners mark student responses as though they

are unfamiliar with the play or production. This is done so as not to unfairly advantage students where the examiner *has* seen that particular production. Students should be encouraged to write responses that are clear enough so that someone unfamiliar with the particular production could visualise it.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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