

GCSE DRAMA

42401/Written paper Report on the Examination

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General Comments

In the sixth year of this written examination, it is very pleasing to report a largely enthusiastic and motivated cohort of students, who have been inspired and motivated by their teachers, and had the opportunity to engage with work which excites and inspires them. As in previous series, the overwhelming majority of students responded as performers across all sections of the paper, and were able to discuss a range of devised and scripted work, covering a diverse range of styles and genres. Students who responded as designers or technicians were able to see how their work represented a discrete skill, and also its contribution in enhancing the overall effect of a piece of practical work.

Across the paper, the complete range of achievement was seen. At the higher end, students were able to write very clearly, and able to sustain explanation, analysis and evaluation which focused specifically on the demands of the question, and made insightful and relevant connections to work that they had seen or taken part in. At the lower end, students often gave a narrative account of their rehearsal or preparation, or indeed, the plot of the piece that they were watching or taking part in. Work at this level was usually descriptive and often lacked a sustained focus on the particular demands of the question.

It was pleasing to see that centres had evidently taken on board the information about the changes to the 'number of examples' that students would be expected to write about. It was also evident that centres had spent a great deal of time preparing students for the paper, and had used past papers and mark schemes as revision material. Theoretically, this is good practice, but this also saw a significant number of students attempting to 'shoe-horn' a pre-prepared response which would have looked at home on the 2014 paper, into a question on this year's paper. More able students were able to demonstrate original and intelligent thinking, and make useful connections between theory and practice, rehearsal and performance. Crucially, the more able students were able to use their own experiences of practical work to address the demands of the questions. Less able students often wrote short or (what appeared to be) incomplete responses which did not connect to the particular demands of the questions.

A significant number of examiners encountered centres who had prepared students to write about their experiences of playing the same character, in the same scene, using the same specific practical skills, and reaching the same conclusions. This is not recommended as good practice, and more often than not, proved to be a limiting factor for students who were unable to develop their own independent thinking within the framework of the exam.

In contrast, it was very pleasing to encounter centres 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, regardless of their chosen practical skill.

Section A

Examiners reported that most students were very well prepared for this section. The majority of students selected one practical skill, and answered on the same skill for all four questions in this section. A small number of students wrote about different practical skills on different questions, which is, of course, self-limiting. 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. This was most pronounced in responses to 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. Once again 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 impacts on their ability to write full answers in the other sections. It was not uncommon to see students write responses to each question in Section A which lasted for two-and-a-half pages, and write the same amount (or less) for a question in Section B or Section C.

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.

Most students performed very well on this question. It is evident that centres have practised and adopted a systematic approach to the question which accurately produces succinct and focused answers which clearly identify the work which will be discussed in this section of the paper. Examiners noted that it was pleasing to see that an increased number of students had listed their performance space as well as (crucially) its configuration, as explicitly stated in the question. The type of work that students write about often enables their success, given the scope that they have within their practical work. One centre wrote about a devised piece about World War One which included performers, designers, technicians, direct address, physical theatre, masks and ensemble elements. The very best responses to this question achieved full marks and did so in approximately half a page of writing of less. Every stated element was included, and the description completed what the piece was about.

There are still common errors seen, sometimes replicated wholesale by all students within a centre. There could be a confusion between a style and a genre, for example. Examiners marked positively and would accept an 'implied' sense of style if there was enough worthy of credit. It should be pointed out, however, that in terms of style, it isn't enough to say that the work itself is 'stylised'; by virtue of its existence as a piece of theatrical performance, all work is inherently stylised, and a student needs to identify the specific style to gain credit. Similarly, it isn't enough to say that the genre of the piece is a 'drama'; this is the title of the overall qualification, and all work performed will be a drama of some sort.

Occasionally, students had undertaken additional production roles alongside acting but had attempted to write about multiple skills (acting and costume, for example) which proved self-limiting.

Examiners also encountered students who would spend four or five paragraphs describing intricacies of plot or the variety of lighting gels or the specifics of the graphic equaliser used on the sound desk. Such responses are ultimately self-limiting, with students restricting their own writing time for other questions. Examiners are familiar with the work of Stanislavski, Brecht and Artaud, and it is disappointing to see a significant number of students give a biographical account of these practitioners and a lengthy explanation of their working methods.

Question 2

This question asked students to explain how they prepared for their piece of practical work, with reference to the rehearsal process.

This question was felt, by examiners, to have not been answered especially well. Where students had engaged with the demands of the question, they explained their research and development of character in the early stages of rehearsal. Students are evidently making excellent use of the wealth of online material available to aid their research, specifically in footage on YouTube. One student wrote about their research into 1970s interior design colour schemes for their design work on *Abigail's Party*, whilst a great number of students would research a particular regional accent by listening to phonetic tutorials found online. The best responses gave a clear indication of how rehearsal techniques were used clearly and effectively, and what the students hoped the overall effect would be when realised in performance.

An overwhelming number of examiners reported that students often failed to engage with the focus of the question, looking at the preparation of their own personal skills in rehearsal. Instead, students would give a largely narrative account of the rehearsal techniques used, without saying what they learned by doing this, or how they then used this to help them in their preparation. Whilst YouTube is an undoubtedly excellent resource, it was disappointing to see a great number of students write an account of a professional actor's portrayal of the role that they were undertaking, without any distinction as to how they might approach their own characterisation. Hot-seating remains a popular and valid rehearsal technique. However, the majority of students who discussed this technique were unable to explain how this helped them to prepare for their piece of practical work.

In this question, for all practical skills, the emergence of a centre-wide pre-prepared response proved to be a limiting factor. All students in one centre wrote about *Too Much Punch For Judy* and all referenced the same car workshop, and the same Essex accent workshop, with each student writing about the same conclusions. There were also a large number of students who wrote about their work as though it was being performed for an audience, rather than discussing the preparation of the piece in rehearsal.

Question 3

This question asked students to analyse how their practical skills improved during the rehearsal process.

Examiners reported that this question was generally well answered. The best responses here saw students consider the areas for development within their own practical skill and give clear evidence of improvement, with analysis underpinning this. These students made clear links between the techniques they applied and the skills they improved, with effective analysis thereof. Examiners reported that students did focus on the word 'improve' in the question, and were able to write about the particular aspect of their skill that needed improving. They would then go on to analyse how they improved in relation to their skill. The best responses here established a 'benchmark' for their skills and demonstrated improvement from this point. For example, one centre wrote about a performance of Cinderella for primary age children, and successfully included details of the first performance to an audience, the problems faced and how practical skills improved following this.

Weaker students would often discuss a particular difficulty but lack specific detail or analysis of how this was improved. Standing in front of a mirror, watching themselves on video or observations of other performers were commonly included, but too often students would not analyse how these approaches helped them to improve. It is important to note that all students should be writing about their practical *skills*. Discussion of generalised challenges, such as line-learning or friendship clashes with other group members were self-limiting, as were students who

listed rehearsal techniques but did not specifically say how they helped to improve their skills. A significant number of centres had asked students to develop a backstory for their characters. Whilst this is, of course, a valid exploratory strategy, more often than not, it saw students writing paragraphs of hypothetical realisations about their own role (whether it be devised or scripted) without adding anything to the improvement of their own practical skills.

Question 4

This question asked students to evaluate the success of their contribution to the final performance, with reference to the achievement of their aims.

It is delightful to see so many students gaining a clear understanding of their achievement in performance, and their enthusiasm and cause for celebration was palpable. This question was answered reasonably well on the whole, and the strongest responses demonstrated a clear evaluation of the work in performance, with direct reference to both the target audience and the student's intended aims. Sometimes, these could appear fairly basic, but examiners mark positively and are looking to see that students are identifying with the demands of the question. The best responses identified two moments from the performance and offered an evaluation of their success, with direct reference to the intended aim or effect. It is evident that audiences are vocal, succinct and demonstrably enthusiastic in their response to live performance work in centres. Examiners reported an overwhelming number of students who had referenced quotes and endorsements from audience members, sometimes called out during the performance itself. Audiences in the majority of centres have evidently been moved to tears, roars of laughter, gasps of surprise, shocked or awed silence, or a spontaneous standing ovation. Students frequently used such responsive gestures within their own evaluative judgement.

Weaker students responding to this question would too often enter into lengthy discussion about what they could/should/might have done, had things gone differently. Examiners will give credit for moments of perceived 'failure' within an overall evaluative judgement, but too often, weaker students would hypothesise about repeating the performance. A common mistake in weaker responses was a failure to communicate any aims, either for the student or the audience, and this was ultimately self-limiting.

Design students often struggled in this question in comparison to their responses elsewhere in this section. Examiners reported a disconnect between the design element itself and the design element, as realised in the final performance.

Less able students identified more superficial aims (to stay in role, to remember lines, to press the lighting pre-set button on cue) and, therefore, it was more difficult for them to demonstrate their success. Weaker performance students would often make generalisations, such as stating that they delivered the entire piece in a "low pitch and loud volume," for example, which lacked specific detail, and limited the scope for evaluation.

Section B Comments

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 centres steer students towards a range of interesting and exciting text choices which evidently motivated the students and enabled to engage with the text and develop an understanding of their practical skill through practical experience. The overwhelming majority of students responded to Questions 5 and 6, and these optional questions proved the most popular on the paper overall. It was pleasing

to see students who had engaged with the demands of the particular questions, and also used the opportunity to write about three examples as a way of documenting their skills development in rehearsal or a demonstration of their skills and achievement in performance.

However, it was very disappointing to see centres where every student had written about the exact same role in the exact same scene in the same play, coming to the exact same realisations. Aside from issues or feasibility and practicality, it is not good practice to funnel all student responses towards one common point, and this was often reflected in the quality of the written response.

Once again, 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 Mark Wheeller and John Godber all proved popular with centres. More recent plays such as *The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time* and *DNA* and National Theatre Connections texts also grew in popularity. Whilst it is understandable that centres 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. The best cohort responses seen were instances where centres had selected a small range of different texts to suit the ability and skills sets of their students. There are also centres who undertake thematically challenging texts with their students, which may have adult or graphic content. 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 subtleties of the text.

Question 5

This question asked performance students to explain how they developed their acting skills to create a character(s), with reference to research and rehearsal.

Examiners reported that this question was not particularly well answered, and some students did significantly less well here than in their responses on Question 6.

The best students focused on a particular extract from the play, and the exploration of their character within the confines of this extract. Stronger students discussed the application and development of skills through the use of exploratory strategies, workshops, live productions seen, YouTube, role reversal and the close reading of the text. Often, stronger students would exemplify a 'before' and 'after' which helped to demonstrate the development of the acting skills. One centre used *The Crucible* to discuss an enormous range of acting skills, and saw students writing individual and distinctive responses to the challenges inherent in the characters they encountered. Elsewhere, strong students would discuss three examples with one being voice, another being gesture, and a third being physicality, all within the same (self-defined) extract. The strongest responses also revealed a detailed and thorough knowledge of the text and its characters.

Weaker responses were characterised by generalised detail of rehearsal techniques and research, and often spent a page of writing either recounting the plot or repeating the information required in Question 1. This is unlikely to gain any credit. Some weaker students showed an understanding of the text and character, but lacked a clear explanation of their own skills in preparation and development. Weaker students did not make specific reference to the text, often focusing on general aspects of the character, without links to their own performance skills to inhabit the role. Examiners were disappointed to encounter a significant number of centres where every student wrote about the same character in the same scene in the same way. For example, the use of *Blood Brothers* or *Blue Remembered Hills* are very common here, though there was an increased trend in weaker students doubling up on the research they had undertaken in Section A as well as

observing younger siblings at play. More often than not, this research and observation was not fed back into character development. Examiners mark positively and mark each student's script on its individual merits, but when entire centres are replicating (sometimes verbatim) the same character/moments, this is disappointing in terms of the range of teaching that students might have experienced, and is not in keeping with the breadth and depth the specification requires.

Question 6

This question asked performance students to evaluate how successfully they used their physical and vocal skills to communicate their character(s) in performance.

The majority of students answered this question well, focusing on their personal success and referring to three moments in performance. The best responses were carefully and thoughtfully crafted and gave detailed evaluations of both physical and vocal skills (often in combination, and to great effect) at specific moments in the play. One student wrote very movingly about their portrayal of Piggy in *Lord Of The Flies* and demonstrated both physical and vocal skills, without any spoken dialogue, to portray the character's anguish and distress. The best responses often linked to Question 5, and developed the ideas for characterisation from rehearsal into moments in performance, and used audience response as justification for success. One centre wrote about the successful creation of comedy in performances of *Teechers*, using both physical and vocal skills for exemplification. Students' enthusiasm was often palpable in the strongest responses here, and there was often a focus on the intended effect of their skills in relation to an audience in a live performance. Examiners reported equal levels of success by students who had written about three skills as their examples, or using three 'moments' as their examples.

Weaker students often offered a simplistic version of Question 4 here, and did not engage with the specific demands of this question, lacking the focus on the creation of character. Similarly, weaker students would describe their practical skills, and sometimes in great detail, but without the evaluation of the success of these skills in performance. A number of students failed to make reference to both physical and vocal skills, which was ultimately self-limiting. Weaker students often recounted the plot or gave generalised comments which could have applied to any character in any play. With reference to the audience, and in terms of stated effectiveness, the weaker responses would give a generalised account of audience reaction ("the audience laughed") but without a real discussion of what had made them laugh. Examiners also reported a number of students who evaluated the success of each member of their group, as well as the associated design elements used within their piece.

Question 7

This question asked technical or design students to explain how they developed their design or technical skill in the rehearsal process, with reference to research and rehearsal.

Relatively few students approached this section. The best responses here saw design and technical students who were meticulous in their approach and showed a commitment to their own practical skill, and an understanding of how their involvement enhanced the work of actors. One outstanding costume student, for example, discussed useful and purposeful research into *Little Women*, and charted the development of her skills including measuring actors, pattern cutting, sewing, and adapting existing costumes. This student made a point of discussing conversations with the actors and the director, demonstrating a comprehensive understanding of how their skill developed in relation to the piece. Stronger students showed a clear command of appropriate technical vocabulary in relation to their chosen design or technical skill.

Weaker responses here often saw a confusion over the demands of the question itself, and saw students writing (well) about a combination of two design elements, typically sound and lighting. In these instances, examiners would identify the design skill which was worthy of the most credit, and mark accordingly, referencing this design skill within Question 8 also. A combined design skill approach is however, ultimately self-limiting. Centres should be reminded that the same level of detail is required of students of all practical disciplines. Accordingly, weaker students would list the type of lights available, for example, but with no reference as to why they had chosen these particular lights, or how the rehearsal process had shaped the development of their chosen skill.

Question 8

This question asked technical or design students to evaluate how successfully they realised their skill in the final performance.

This question was generally less well answered than Question 7, however, successful students were able to evaluate how their design or technical skill contributed to the piece, and showed a clear understanding of the effect they were attempting to create. The best students here discussed their own skills, but also contextualised them within the framework of a performance. Again, it was pleasing to encounter a real sense of the students' success as they celebrated their achievement. One student was able to discuss how their use of lighting helped to establish mood, location and atmosphere in a particular scene from *The Crucible*. Some design students were able to sustain a focus on both the operation of technical equipment during a live performance, as well as an evaluation of the realisation of their skill.

Weaker responses often saw a more generalised discussion of success. For example, weaker lighting or sound students would focus their response on cueing their lights on time, rather than evaluating the success of their lighting within a particular moment. Weaker make-up students would only describe the effect of their work in general terms, and evaluate their success in relation to the make-up staying on the actors' face in performance. Examiners reported that some students didn't appreciate that this question was an evaluation of the success of the skill identified in Question 7 and instead discussed how successfully various skills were realised within the piece. A number of weaker responses only focused on a narrative of the action on stage in their account, without evaluative detail.

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 centres went down this route.

Although fewer students respond in Section C (in comparison to Section B), it was pleasing to see a clear understanding and knowledge of the chosen play and it is commendable that so many centres (depending on location and resources available, of course) are taking students to see a wide range of different productions, covering different styles and genres. The majority of centres opted for professional productions, and it was commonly seen that students had more scope to write about a broader range of production values where this was the case. A small number of centres had seen work via NT Live or Digital Theatre Plus. It is a stated requirement of the specification that students study a scripted play and also that they study the play practically, typically both before and after the live performance visit. Quite simply, there was a direct correlation between the high achievement of students who had both seen the live performance and studied the play themselves, and were able to use their knowledge and understanding of the piece as they analysed and evaluated what they had seen. There is no stated requirement in the specification for students to have read the entire playtext during their practical study, though some centres evidently see this as a logical extension of this section.

Favourite productions included *The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time, 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. Some acting students, however, struggled to relate what they had seen to their practical study of pieces of musical theatre, where some centres simply acknowledged that they had not, in fact, studied the piece in connection with the theatre visit.

It is worth highlighting that students are encouraged to define their own 'extract' within the live production, as opposed to the questions demanding a 'scene.' An extract might, therefore, be the entirety of one act of a play. Alternatively, it may be a composite of several scenes. Because examiners have to anticipate a range of responses to a potentially limitless range of live performances, it is hoped that students find it helpful to define their extract on their terms.

Some students struggled in this section to make the distinction between actor and character. Too many students wrote about 'Mickey' in *Blood Brothers* as though 'he' was using his physical and vocal skills in performance. There were also examples of centres 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 explain why the acting was successful, with reference to actors using their physical and vocal skills.

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 physical and vocal skills had contributed to the success of the acting. Many students approached this question with confidence and an admiration for what they had seen in performance, and examiners reported a range of strong responses. The strongest students were able to describe, using purposeful detail, what the actor/s did in performance. It was evidently clear to examiners where students had studied the plays they were discussing, as they made purposeful references to their practical study, and this study also illuminated their understanding of the acting seen in performance. For example, students who had seen *The 39 Steps* had taken part in workshops on direct address and received pronunciation. Similarly, students watching *The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time* had researched autism and its visible characteristics in sufferers. The best answers here discussed skills applied and an explanation of why they were successful, as used by the actor(s) in performance.

Weaker answers often repeated the information from Question 1, needlessly, or recounted the plot of the piece. Whilst students should be mindful that examiners have not necessarily seen the production they are discussing, it is superfluous to recount its plot and creative team in exhaustive detail. The weakest responses here seemed to be pre-prepared. All of the students in one centre wrote about *Ghost Stories*, and in each of the three separate moments identified, offered a brief

summation of the actor's physical, vocal, gesture, posture, response and characterisation skills, and always in that order. This was especially limiting for weaker students who struggled to think independently and beyond this framework, they would use moments where actors didn't speak or were seated, and struggle to write much. Another well prepared centre provided some excellent detailed responses on Ivo Van Hove's Barbican production of *Antigone*, but they all focused on the same moments, Juliette Binoche's 'long strides,' and all referenced her 'courageous, proud, determined demeanour.' Whilst this level of detail is clear, it is striking that students have arrived at the same verbatim description of an actor's poise on stage. The least successful answers were superficially descriptive rather than explanatory.

Question 10

This question asked students to evaluate the acting they saw, with reference to the style of the performance they had seen.

The best responses saw students evaluating what the actor(s) did and how this achieved a particular style. Examiners mark positively, so the creation of comedy, for example, was allowed with reference to the style of a piece. One centre discussed a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and it was clear that the students had expectations prior to the piece in relation to their study of the play itself. Stronger responses saw students writing with evident pleasure about the effect of the performance they had seen, with hyperbole particularly evident. Students who had studied texts in class and possible staging/interpretations had a vocabulary and an understanding that allowed discussion of effects at a higher level, and were awarded accordingly. One centre, having seen *Miss Saigon*, gave solid responses and were able to discuss the musical theatre style in terms of the acting they had seen.

Whilst some students were able to offer a clear evaluation of the acting they had seen, and referenced this in three specific moments, weaker students made no reference to the acting style or the style of the production, even in general terms. Some students watching *The 39 Steps*, for example, did not have an understanding of its style, and assumed that its lack of 'proper scenery and props' was due to a limited production budget. A centre who had seen *War Horse* saw students making brief references to the style of naturalism but struggled to link the acting to this. Instead, they made very vague and generalised comments about how the stage action might take place in real life. It was reported by all examiners that where students had not studied the play before or after the live production, it had a direct impact on their understanding and their overall achievement in this question. Some weaker students were able to communicate a sense of their own and the audience's response, but often without the detail of acting skills to support their evaluation.

Question 11

This question asked students to explain why their chosen design or technical skill was particularly successful, focusing on how their chosen skill enhanced 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. The current National Theatre production of *The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time* was enormously popular, no doubt because it offers a wide range of design and technical skills, all fully integrated into the narrative of the performance. One centre were able to write about this production and discuss how lighting/sound concepts were referencing the author's intentions, and how this impacted on an audience in performance. Stronger students were able to

include sufficient detail in order for the examiner to visualise the area of technical/design seen. They were then able to relate this to a moment of theatre and discuss how this had impacted on them. More able students often used annotated diagrams to exemplify their responses, and these were credited by examiners accordingly.

Weaker students focused on more than one design or technical skill and sometimes spent part of the answer discussing these skills in combination with the acting in the production. Examiners felt that this was closer to the requirements of this question on the 2014 paper. Weaker responses saw a lack of technical detail and clarity. For example, a reasonable response on *War Horse* offered detail on the construction of the puppets (aluminium, bamboo, mesh, colour), but in highly generalised terms, and failed to reference a specific extract of any kind. Again, weaker students were often at a disadvantage discussing the play when they had evidently not studied it in advance (or after) and were trying to communicate a piece that they did not have a comprehensive understanding of.

Question 12

This question asked students to evaluate the success of their chosen design or technical skill they saw, with reference to the style of production seen.

Stronger students were able to evaluate how the chosen skill enhanced the style of the production, specifically engaging with the demands of the question. One centre's responses on *The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time* demonstrated a study of the play in advance, as well as an understanding of how the design and technical skills helped to convey the workings of the main character's mind and break from naturalism. Examiners, as always, mark positively, and where some students didn't go into specific detail about the style of a production seen, credit was given for the acknowledgement of, and reference to, naturalism and non-naturalism, accordingly.

Again, as with the weaker responses to Question 10, weaker students did not write about the style of the production at all, or how their chosen design or technical skill might have enhanced this style. Examiners reported weaker responses which recounted the plot of the production seen without evaluating the effect of what was happening on stage, or how their chosen skill had contributed to this. Again, there was a direct correlation between weaker responses and students who had not studied the play in relation to the live performance. Weaker students would also fail to define a particular extract, meaning that their response lacked a specific focus and would often stray from the demands of the question.

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