

EXAMINATIONS HINTS FOR NOVEMBER O-LEVEL ENGLISH EXAMS

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The teaching of O-Level English is not as easy and ‘ordinary’ as the level seems to suggest; more so the preparation of candidates for examination. This has necessitated the production of this article. Its major thrust is to aid candidates of English Papers I & II, commonly coded 1122/1 and 1122/2 respectively. Those who have been implementing the guidelines here proposed will find this article not only vindicating but also consolidating their approaches. However, those whose approaches have not been in sync may be edified to discover their shortcomings in time good enough to re-align their approaches to the best of their advantage.

Let us begin by looking at Paper I where candidates are expected to write two essays, one free-choice composition and one situational (guided and controlled) composition. Both essays require that candidates guard against gross errors. These errors are usually grammatical in nature. This category include poor subject-verb agreement e.g. They goes to town everyday; serious tense errors e.g. The driver has drove the car carelessly; errors of sentence construction and, in some cases, use of ridiculous idiom e.g. Her brother kicked a bucket ten years ago.

Besides the grammatical category, there is also the structural category. Here candidates should avoid misuse or confusion of elementary vocabulary such as *they, there, their*. They must guard against misuse of pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions and articles. Closely related to this category of errors is the commonest group of errors, mis-spelling of vocabulary and poor punctuation which leads to either distortion of meaning or of sentence boundaries; and not least among these errors is the repetition of vocabulary or of ideas and poor paragraphing.

A composition which is free from all these errors is deemed to be a good or even average essay but not necessarily outstanding. As for Section A excellency is achieved through a demonstration of originality, fluency, highly meritable paragraphing skills and, most importantly, excellent linguistic ability. The latter refers to use of a wide variety of apt vocabulary and variation of both sentence structures and lengths. For purposes of illustration see the varying degrees of linguistic complexity in the following three candidates’ representation of the same situation:

A. Upon receiving the news of her friend’s death, she bowed her head and cried.

- B. *On hearing the news of her beloved, she slumped to the ground; shaken, and sobbed spasmodically.*
- C. *Tremendously shaken by the news of her friend's untimely death, she slumped onto the devouring sofa, buried her face in her cupped hands and rocked hysterically, tears cascading down her face copiously.*

Now, of these candidates which one impresses you most? I hope I am not asking you a rhetorical question. In case practice has not accustomed the reader to the habit of interpretation, let me say the best by O-level standards is candidate C. I should, however, hasten to add that for Section A, excellency is manifested differently depending on the type of composition. The candidates above have obviously attempted either narrative or descriptive composition. In the narrative essay merits of structure, descriptive vividness, characterization, suspense and pace are paramount. Descriptive essays are merited more on the basis of atmosphere, observation and sensitivity to detail. On the other hand discursive essays present "complex, cogent argument with force and economy".

From the above illustrations it is clear that candidates should not only aim to avoid the aforesaid gross errors: they must also adorn their compositions with meritable vocabulary, i.e. both the use of unusual vocabulary and the unusual use of ordinary vocabulary as in metaphors. They should also vary their sentence lengths and sentence structures, and punctuate their work properly. In short avoidance of errors can be turned into merits.

These merits should also be deployed in the situational composition of Section B although, of course, not with the same degree of intensity and prevalence. Guided and controlled essays can be in the form of pictures, statistics, diagrams, charts or short notes arranged sequentially or haphazardly, in some cases. The form is of little significance given that the end product is one, a prose essay. What is important, therefore, is to decipher the story and build on to it. Outstanding candidates should develop the pegs provided into a good story.

Credit is given on the basis of amplification, logical arrangement and the paraphrasing displayed. Amplification refers to the expansion of the pegs given through paraphrasing and creative addition of the candidate's own material to make the essay realistic and convincing. Logicality is achieved through use of effective discourse markers. These include chronological support words such as *now, then, firstly, secondly, meanwhile, afterwards*, etc; cause and effect signpost words such as *because, since, consequently, however, nevertheless, nonetheless, notwithstanding, contrary, to* etc; and concluding signpost words such as *in short, in sum, as we have seen* etc.

Having said this we can conclude by saying the development of these grammatical, structural and syntactic skills is only possible through making reading a habit. Remember that marking of both essays is done by IMPRESSION. As such although there is not much emphasis on content, especially in Section A, there is need to give your essays high interest value.

Good stories normally contain some elements of surprise, suspense and mystery.

We have seen that Paper I tests purely linguistic ability at the expense of content. Paper II is the one which caters for this. It is the one which caters for this. It caters for interpretive skills, summary skills and appropriate register skills. Reading and comprehension of what is read are essential elements of the paper and these require a great deal of discipline, concentration, speed and accuracy.

The approach to reading a comprehension passage for exam purposes is different from that of ordinary study. In class teachers usually apply the SQ3R method for reading for mastery. This entails surveying the passage(s) asking questions about what you have read (Q), re-reading, ® reciting ® and revising ®, but in the examination situation the candidate does not have such time for indulgence because of the constraints of time. It is therefore advised that candidates begin by reading the passage fast but closely ®, then reading through the questions follows (A), and it is simultaneously accompanied by close re-reading of designated sections of the passage in search of clues to the answers. This is the RQA method. Remember every answer must have a clue from the passage. Points to remember include:

- there is no compulsive need of complete sentences but the answers should definitely be complete i.e. cover all aspects of the questions.
- Where you are not asked to use your own words, make use of passage words.
- Where you are asked to use your own words, explain all the key words in the question.
- Where you are asked to quote a word or phrase, do as asked.

This is as far as comprehension questions are concerned. Vocabulary questions require inferential skills. It is important first to grasp the context in which the word or expression is used. This refers to the semantic environment where the expression is. Grasping the tone of this context helps the candidate guess intellectually the contextual meaning of the expression. I need to stress that the meaning you give must be consistent with what it replaces. Consistency means that the part of speech of the replaced word or expression and the tense (if it is a verb) should not be altered.

As for the summary, the most important skills is interpretation. The candidates should identify the key focus or foci of the question. The focus is what the candidate uses to identify the relevant parts of the designated section of the passage. If, for instance, you are looking for 'causes' and 'effects', vet every line by literally asking, Are you a cause or effect? If the line answers 'Yes', underline it; if it says 'No', ignore it very quickly and ask the next line until you get to the end of the designated section of the passage. You have no time to jot down the 'affirmative' points which should be not less than fifteen. Proceed to write your

first draft using the points you have underlined. Do not trouble yourself with trying to use your own words as there is no punishment for using passage words. However, avoid the following:

- flowery language
- unnecessary explanatory detail
- examples
- similes

After drafting the first write-up, edit it. This means check for spelling, punctuation, omission, grammar and length. If the length exceeds the recommended by more than ten words, revisit the longer sentences and prune them structurally without destroying the essence. After the corrections, make a fair copy of the rough draft into the final copy. Remember to revise to check for omission. You are through with your summary.

The section on use of appropriate register is the bonus of the whole assessment. So easy, but not necessarily on a fool's silver platter. Remember as fortune favours the brave, a bumper harvest of marks avails itself to the conscientious. In this section skills of empathy are indispensable. Candidates normally rush to answer questions they have premeditated. You require patience to read and understand the situation, put yourself into the situation imaginatively, consider yourself culturally in relation to the status and role of your other interlocutor and then read and understand what the question demands. Then answer appropriately.

Questions on register usually ask for reaction/response, feelings, attitudes and reasons. The rubric is that answers for a(i) and a(ii) should normally be antonymous but not necessarily opposites. Part of the rubric is also that candidates should use direct opposites such as *impolite*, NEVER *not polite* where you are in doubt about different possibilities, present all of them in series but they should not exceed seven. Simple! Very simple.