



AFA

Creative Writing

WRITE-3 Responsive Writing

Report on the Examination

CWI9

May 2019



General Overview

The examiner found that the AFA Component 3 examination produced engaging writing, which was both stimulating and interesting to read. All credit should go to the candidates, who, across the mark range, produced polished, technically fluent, well structured, imaginative writing within the time constraints of the examination. At the very top of the mark range, candidates produced ambitious and inventive work. Candidates also are to be congratulated on many sensitive, highly reflective commentaries on the intersection between the stimulus text and their creative piece.

Section A:

Choice of Form:

The majority of students chose to write in the short story form. Script was next in terms of popularity, both for theatre and screen; followed by poetry; with prose non-fiction being the least popular choice.

Assignment Choice:

Assignment 1, concerning a situation where a character lives with conflict, proved to be the most popular choice for candidates. It elicited work which explored conflict in a variety of ways, from a new wife's worry about her husband's previous wife's cooking, to murder.

Assignment 4, in which a character makes a journey, was equally popular with Assignment 1 among candidates. This led to effective writing, such as an autobiographical piece of travel writing which used a walk through the Welsh countryside as a means of exploring personal history, and a short story about a 90-year-old former-engineer travelling to India with his daughter's ashes.

Assignment 2, involving a character with strong feelings about their environment, was next in terms of popularity. This encouraged some interesting writing, from a narrative focused on the provenance of food, containing an interesting twist in the tale; to a piece of discursive non-fiction arguing in favour of sustainable tourism.

Assignment 3, on the role of social media in a character's life, was next in terms of popularity. Interestingly, this assignment saw the highest average marks gained per candidate for AO1 and AO2. Social media clearly was a fruitful area for candidates to explore, and led to many interesting and inventive narratives. These responses had the sharpest, most successful focus, revealing powerful and ambitious writing. Narratives portrayed teenagers so absorbed in the lure of social media that they become disconnected from those around them, or protagonists who risk their relationships for their fantasy on-line life, as well as a protagonist who is the victim of a stalker.

Finally, the least popular choice was Question 5, concerning a crisis that permanently changes a relationship. However, this did lead to one particularly vivid piece of writing which adeptly



used the vignette of a wife painting and repainting a wall in magnolia as a metaphor for the emptiness of her life after the death of a beloved child.

The range and diversity of writing is testament to the success of the AFA Creative Writing course, as candidates felt confident enough to take risks and to produce arresting writing, in examination conditions, the best of which revealed flair, a high level of technical control and enthusiasm.

The best of the prose writing benefited from a tight, narrow focus. Candidates who were tempted to range too loosely around the topic, and who wrote much more than the recommended 750 word count, tended to penalise themselves as the writing was less cohesive and powerful. Candidates should bear in mind that prose is often more successful if less is written with more control.

Poetry was the only form which did not result in any candidates gaining a Band 5 for AO1 and AO2. More poetry would indeed be welcome from candidates. However, it is important that candidates can justify to themselves why they are choosing poetry as a form and the ways that it suits their subject matter. The examiner found that some of the poetry produced read more like prose fiction, which therefore raises the question as to whether the choice of form was the most appropriate. To gain Band 5 with poetry, candidates need to reflect on the features they wish to drive their poem, such as sound, lay-out, repetition, the use of extended metaphor, sensual imagery, juxtaposition or metre. Candidates should be reminded that rhymes which are too neat can detract from the rich possibilities of the form.

Some effective scripts were produced, the best of which were inventive. Candidates are reminded of the importance of imagining what they wish their audience or viewers to see and hear on stage or on film. The less secure scripts tended to neglect the visual and sound direction. It must be stressed that although the action must be driven by dialogue, brief, concise directions should be integrated throughout the script. Candidates should also be reminded of the importance of characterisation. At times the use of shock tactics detracted from convincing development of character. Candidates should be reminded of the subtlety needed to write about certain types of characters, such as those in the grip of insanity.

Section B

Heads of the Colored People by Nafissa Thompson-Spires proved the most popular stimulus text. This is perhaps reflected in the fact that those who chose this collection gained the highest average mark for AO4. This was followed by *The History Boys* by Alan Bennett in terms of popularity with candidates. *Walking Away* by Simon Armitage was the third most popular



text choice, followed by candidates who chose to reference both *The Heads of the Colored People* and *The History Boys*. Finally, *Bantam* by Jackie Kay was the least popular choice with candidates. Interestingly, those who chose to reference *Walking Away* gained a little lower average mark for AO4 than that achieved by candidates on the other texts. This perhaps highlights the necessity for students to analyse and reflect critically and specifically on the techniques used in prose non-fiction.

The examiner found that candidates were marginally more successful when writing in response to AO3 than when responding to AO4. The best commentaries offered an integrated, cohesive reflection on the language techniques, form, structure, aims and ideas utilised in both the stimulus and creative texts. Candidates should bear in mind that merely repeating the words ‘language, form and structure’ does not constitute a critical commentary of these aspects.

The examiner found that there was, in places, a rather vague understanding of ‘form’ as a term, as evidenced by one reference to Simon Armitage’s *Walking Away* as a novel. It is worth reminding candidates that form encompasses many different sub-sets and genres. Candidates should bear in mind the importance of being as specific as possible in consideration of form. Candidates should also understand that an exploration of the range of sub-genres for fiction, drama and non-fiction is as important as those considered in poetry. The examiner found some evidence of candidates ‘shoe-horning’ a stimulus text in terms of relevance to their creative writing. In future, it may be of use for candidates to keep a reflective journal of their chosen text in preparation for the examination. Candidates should be aware that exploring what they have not utilised from the stimulus text uses up valuable time which could be used in discussion of what they have gained from it.

Although there were some successful commentaries based on more than one stimulus text, it is worth noting that there is a danger, especially for candidates operating below Band 5, that the reflection becomes a little too superficial and that it is therefore difficult to produce a ‘richly developed’ analysis of the links between the stimulus and creative text. Therefore, it is perhaps wiser for candidates to focus on one of the stimulus texts in order to achieve a ‘professional, critical reflection’. The examiner found some rather vague statements, such as “I wanted to use this form’s potential to create richly developed...characters...” Such statements would be much improved with specific reference to the stimulus and an explanation of how and why the technique influenced their work.

The candidates should be congratulated, however, on their engaging and lively commentaries and the exciting writing produced within examination conditions. The examiner enjoyed reading each entry in this first cohort of the AFA Creative Writing specification.