

GENERAL PAPER

Paper 8806/01

Essay

General comments

Candidates were generally very well prepared for the examination. Most scripts were well planned, structured and developed to an appropriate length. The best were of very high quality indeed, combining excellent command of English with perceptive and compelling arguments. Even where the command of English was not so secure, arguments were usually well sustained. Very few essays displayed a complete failure to appreciate the demands of the Paper.

There was almost always recognition that the topics under discussion require a degree of evaluation, as prompted by the phrases such as 'To what extent...?', 'How far...?' and even the simple request to 'Discuss'. While with weaker candidates this might be handled rather awkwardly at times in the transition from one side of an argument to the other, it is increasingly rare not to find any evidence whatsoever of a one-sided approach.

As always, candidates varied in the quality of their examples and illustration, the more mundane scripts still relying on the standard references to the ubiquitous Maslow and his hierarchy of needs, Thomas Edison (whatever the context), Einstein and Bill Gates. In a social context, the National Kidney Foundation was very popular in a range of discussion points. The very good candidates, of course, used the Paper as a vehicle to display their wide and often impressive knowledge to justify their arguments. By contrast there were scripts which failed to gain a higher score because they were devoid of specific, appropriate examples.

The recommended number of words on the paper is between 500 and 800. Examiners do not count these and it is not suggested that candidates should either. If a script, unusually, falls short of the lower limit, it is generally self-defeating since there is likely to be much content within to justify a good mark. When a script is fluent, original, thoughtful and engaging, with wide apposite reference, the length is not a factor as the Examiner is carried along with the flow of the discussion. However, there are scripts which are excessively long because they tend to labour arguments and even repeat themselves. The virtue of conciseness cannot be overstated.

Tense and subject/verb agreements continued to cause the greatest English problem in less successful scripts, and the use of the definite and indefinite article is still a problem for some candidates. It was often omitted in such cases as 'The UN/The USA' this session. (By way of aside here, Examiners noted continued reference by candidates to 'Africa' as a country, rather than a continent.) The construction remains common whereby a sentence begins with 'Although...' and then has the connective 'but...' later on.

The quality of the spelling was generally good, but special care should be taken with key words in the question, such as 'environment', 'research' and 'advertisements'. Other common errors this year were misspellings of 'degradation', 'technology', 'opportunities', 'necessities', 'available' and 'occurrences'. Sometimes there was a sense that expressions and phrases and particular vocabulary had been 'learned' and then offloaded mainly in order to impress. The term 'globalised world that we live in' seems to find its way into a considerable number of scripts, whatever the topic and many of us remain 'myopic' until we achieve 'a paradigm shift' in 'mindset' since many issues contain the inevitable 'double-edged sword'.

It is important to return to the overarching positive qualities of many of the scripts, where real interest in and engagement with the topics shone through. Such scripts are a pleasure to read and Centres are to be commended for the hard work that goes into assisting candidates to achieve such a standard.

Comments on specific questions

Question 1 'The view of the majority is always right.' Do you agree?

Virtually all of those who answered this picked up on the key word 'always', which led to balanced answers. Many of the scripts relied upon standard scenarios, such as Hitler and the Holocaust or support for wars which later proved to be very questionable in nature. A political stance, with an emphasis on democracy, was quite common, with some candidates arguing that the 'majority' may not be sufficiently well educated or informed to make valid judgments. Others referred to the herd instinct or social and cultural mores which could shape people's perceptions. Many candidates dealt with different views about gay rights issues.

Question 2 Can a belief in the supernatural be sustained in the modern world?

This was far less popular question, but virtually all the candidates identified the implied, potential conflict between the scientific, empirical and rational approach of modern day study and the continued interest in unexplained phenomena. For most candidates, the latter was restricted to religion, although there was some reference to traditional folklore and a marked interest in the Loch Ness monster. Few candidates offered a detailed definition of what exactly constituted the 'supernatural', however. In some cases, the candidates used the question to argue that religious attitudes were counter-productive to scientific or ethical 'progress', but these bordered on irrelevance at times if care was not taken to keep to the parameters of the question. Most answers based on religion firmly supported its role in the modern world, arguing that it provides a basis for moral values and offered comfort in times of crisis, such as the tsunami. Some witty responses regarded the supernatural as a crucial feature of the cinema industry and of modern literary texts.

Question 3 'The arts cannot change the world, but they can make it more beautiful.' Discuss this view with reference to one of the following: painting, sculpture or music.

This was one of the least popular questions on the Paper. In the relatively few answers to it, music was the most popular option, although some excellent and knowledgeable scripts emerged from the realm of painting. The challenge was to consider both aspects of the question: the beauty of an art form and its capacity to change the world. Beauty was seen in paintings that enraptured the viewer, with apt examples given in most scripts, and the ability of music to rouse passions, such as rock music, or even classical works was provided as evidence of the second element of the question. A work of art, like Picasso's *Guernica*, provided a base for some powerful argument. Most candidates who attempted this demonstrated particular knowledge or interest in the subject, usually to very good effect.

Question 4 How far should a state have a right to monitor the actions of people within its borders?

This was far more popular, with many answers tending to focus on Singapore. This was acceptable, but a broader illustrative perspective characterised the highest scoring answers. The idea of 'monitoring' was made synonymous with 'control' in quite a number of scripts, which is not necessarily true. Answers tended to be focused on the right of the state to prevent terrorism, immorality and racism and some good responses countered this with a discussion of the individual's right to privacy. In terms of security, it was generally felt that the overarching concern for the safety of its citizens, in the wake of events such as the London bombings or the threat to the MRT system, did justify closer supervision of individual behaviour by the state. Some candidates placed more emphasis on the 'monitoring' of social issues: education, the population, care of the elderly. Whilst this was not necessarily irrelevant, it could blur the distinction between a basic governmental responsibility to improve these aspects of social policy and the right to adopt a 'watching brief' with a possible view to intervention.

Question 5 'Mass production inevitably means a loss of craftsmanship and quality.' Is this true in your society?

This was of the two questions on the Paper that elicited fewest responses. Three concepts needed to be discussed for a successful answer: the nature of mass production; the definition of craftsmanship and an evaluation of how this has suffered, or otherwise; the implications for quality in what is produced. Some candidates argued that craftsmanship was more to do with retaining cultural heritage, and the appearance of handicrafts at festivals was a valid and interesting topic. However, there were so few responses to this question that it is not possible to make detailed comments which are widely applicable.

Question 6 How important is a sense of history in shaping the future of Singapore's society?

In order to gain a good mark what needed to be avoided here was a simple regurgitation of Singapore's history and it was pleasing that very few did that. However, a considerable number of scripts tended to list historical events and the lessons that were gleaned from them at that time, without keeping in mind the *future* of Singapore. Common examples were race riots and their implications for continued tolerance of ethnic difference; the Japanese occupation and its impact on future security (although some interesting comments were made here about the need to 'forgive' such events in order to live harmoniously); the break from Malaysia and the need to develop an independent spirit. The threat of disease also made an appearance.

Question 7 Should poorer countries develop their tourist industry when the basic needs of their own people are not being met?

Breadth of illustration was seldom very wide in answers to this question. Indeed, this was something of a problem for candidates who tended to focus on Singapore and the development of its tourist industry since the relationship with 'poorer countries' and their attempts to meet the 'basic needs' of their population was not readily apparent. Candidates usually defined 'basic needs' although some phrases such as 'integrated resorts' were not explained at all.

Responses provided some of the clearest examples of the problems that some candidates have when attempting to balance ideas in a manner that does not become contradictory. On a positive note, the arguments were put that tourism can provide jobs, income, added economic growth, infrastructure and investment. The profile of the country could be raised and even encourage aid. On the other hand, it was argued that governments could not afford to initiate a tourist industry; the populace was not sufficiently educated and would only procure low-skilled and low-paid jobs; the main Centres of population would benefit, not the rural areas and corruption could swallow up any investment or aid. Some Examiners noted an element of naivety in some answers about enterprises of MNCs which ignored the profit motive underlying them. All of these points could be made relevant and form the basis for a thoughtful answer (with relevant illustration), but a considerable number struggled to achieve a developed level of cogent argument in spite of the material at their disposal. Perhaps those linking words and phrases ('Whilst...', 'Despite the fact that...', 'On the other hand...') could have come in useful here.

Question 8 'The pen is mightier than the sword.' Can written language really be so powerful?

Together with **Question 5**, this was the least popular topic on the Paper. Nevertheless, as is often the case, certain candidates who took up the challenge of a more abstract issue managed to produce some excellent responses, with a cogently argued stance supported by apt and often forceful illustration. Such candidates were usually, by virtue of their individual approach, very able, and their answers were a pleasure to read.

Question 9 'Advertisements are often entertaining, but they rarely affect consumer choice.' Is this your experience?

As one Examiner noted: 'At best the responses to this question were entertaining in themselves, showing an insight into the consumer market and citing apt examples to considerable effect.' The challenge was to weave an answer that combined the different elements of the question: entertainment value, effect on consumers, and the personal experience of the candidate. With regard to the question tag, this did not necessarily mean that the evidence had to be based on the writer's own purchases or experience of advertisements, but could rely on her/his broader perceptions of the industry as a whole. The best scripts certainly revealed evidence of the latter.

If one of the elements tended to be ignored, or undeveloped, it was the concept of advertisements being 'entertaining'. Examples were often lacking, or it was assumed that the Examiner knew why the specific illustration met that criterion. Often it was assumed that an advertisement was entertaining just because it was endorsed by a celebrity. It is incumbent upon the candidate to clarify such claims. Candidates often argued that certain advertisements, such as those disseminating public information, were not entertaining, but could still be effective in influencing consumer choice. Additionally, it was argued that consumers are more sophisticated these days and use other benchmarks when purchasing their goods: quality, cost, need, purchasing power, for example. They are not simply seduced by the 'packaging' of the advertising industry.

Where some candidates tended to fail to gain credit was by using the question to display all that they knew about the advertising industry without really tailoring their knowledge and ideas to the specific question. This underlines a vital principle when approaching this Paper. Candidates must not go into the examination determined to answer a question on a given topic irrespective of the 'slant' required for a successful answer.

In so doing, the response will usually become irrelevant. Little credit can be given for the unshaped regurgitation of material, no matter how knowledgeable the candidate.

Question 10 Is it possible to protect the environment when many countries require increasing amounts of energy to progress?

The last point in relation to **Question 9** is very relevant here, too. The least successful responses to this, the overwhelmingly most popular question on the paper, merely provided an essay on 'green issues' and the general threat of global warming, pollution and so on – often throwing in depletion of the ozone layer for good measure.

The best responses acknowledged the tension between the pursuit of progress and greater affluence in the light of the ensuing environmental damage that such a process could generate. Specific examples were given and the most subtle answers explored the dual requirements faced by such societies. China and India were used most commonly to illustrate this dilemma.

Most candidates were clearly very well informed about the environmental dangers faced by the Earth and could explain them with considerable clarity, although there was occasional confusion with global warming, pollution, the greenhouse effect and the depletion of the ozone layer being viewed as virtually synonymous. The challenge came in evaluating how far these challenges, exacerbated by the surge in demand for energy by developing countries, could be counteracted. A general discussion which simply dwelt on the problem without the focus on the latter idea, was not given high marks since it did not focus closely enough upon the specific demands of the question.

In spite of the extent of the potential environmental disaster awaiting human beings, candidates were generally optimistic about their capacity to reduce and counter the threat. Green technology, with examples; improved machinery; broader environmental education and awareness; greater willingness to co-operate internationally (with Montreal and Kyoto being widely quoted): these were the most popular reasons given for the stance. Often, too, candidates stressed the need for political will if the damage were to be lessened.

Question 11 Should research into expensive medical treatments be allowed when only a few can afford them?

This challenging topic proved to be quite popular, although there were some candidates who used the 'medical slant' to answer their own 'prescribed' question, perhaps on the medical ethics of cloning or stem cell research. There was some discrimination between worthwhile research into common diseases that affect millions and that which benefits the small minority. Issues such as cosmetic surgery tended to appear in this category.

Inevitably, the best scripts were knowledgeable in terms of specific diseases and treatments and the issue of research was often well handled, with an awareness of the economic and other forces that could shape its implementation. Keenly focused responses discussed how research could be paid for, examining the role of aid, grants, subsidies and so on. Many also argued that there was frequently a 'trickle down' effect that meant an eventual lowering of costs after an initially high financial input that had to be recouped. Ethical issues were touched upon regarding the disparity between the rich and the poor, but it was generally felt that such research would ultimately benefit human beings as a whole, even though much of its early application was limited.

Question 12 'The word failure should never be used in education.' Discuss.

There is always the possibility that such a question could elicit a series of merely personal accounts of disappointment or disillusionment at some stage in the candidate's educational experience, but it was pleasing that this was rarely the case, and the discursive approach was sustained.

Many answers were firmly on the side of supporting less successful students rather than condemning or labelling them as 'failures'. Quite a lot of scripts made reference to a recent film which challenged the concept of 'failure' and also referred to new developments in the educational system. Some reference was also made to the snobbery that might occur when candidates from different types of educational establishments choose to socialize. 'Education' was also perceived to include aspects other than purely academic pursuits, tests and examinations, and could extend beyond the walls of the institution, being a life-long activity. A fundamental principle that permeated the scripts was the role of the school system in promoting learning through encouragement and help. Occasionally, some candidates argued that the

system itself 'failed' candidates. Clearly, this was not really the intended thrust of the question, but it was not deemed totally irrelevant if the parameters of the question were observed.

GENERAL PAPER

<p>Paper 8806/02 Comprehension</p>
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General comments

This year's paper was based on an article on 'The Gender Revolution'. After describing the almost unvarying nature of gender roles since before the beginnings of recorded human history the article suggests that a revolutionary change in these roles began less than 200 years ago with the industrial revolution, the increasing availability of birth-control, and changes in the nature of the workplace and management styles. At first, these changes had a profoundly unsettling effect and produced serious conflict between the sexes. The writer of the article claims that not only can this conflict be averted by a greater understanding of the differences between men and women which recent research has revealed, but that such understanding is essential to reduce the high divorce rates experienced in many countries and to persuade traditionally male-dominated cultures to recognise the 'different but equal' complementary natures and roles of the sexes.

Gender issues always arouse interest, especially with teenagers, and candidates had plenty to say in the application question (**Question 11**) and were able to follow the main drift of the writer's argument, though, as always, there was wide variation in the responses to the questions on the details of the passage.

In the short-answer questions on this paper, it is very important that candidates understand the mark allocation is not necessarily an indication of the number of 'points' required for a complete answer.

Nearly all candidates completed the paper and many were able to produce clearly and accurately written answers, but in some cases the standard of presentation fell short of being satisfactory.

Comments on specific questions

Question 1

There were four differences indicated in lines 7 -12 of the passage, any three of which secured the marks. The gender revolution is a matter of personal experience – you do not need the media to inform you of it; it is already 'in full flow' – i.e. already happening at a great rate or wholly a reality, not a future possibility; it is not 'necessarily catastrophic' – i.e. it *may* not be disastrous (many candidates omitted the qualification of 'not necessarily'); it is 'within the power of every individual to ameliorate its effects' – i.e. everyone can reduce, modify, make less harmful its effects (the common wrong answer here was 'control'). Most candidates found this a straightforward opening question provided they remembered to express their answers substantially in their own words, but there were some who totally missed the point by describing differences which only applied to some of the 'apocalyptic scenarios' - e.g. the gender revolution will not lead to the extinction of mankind / will not cause wars.

Question 2

The three dots indicated that the list of examples of apocalyptic scenarios could be indefinitely extended; most candidates understood this and were able to select 'the seemingly endless catalogue' as the phrase which explained them.

Question 3

Again, most candidates realised the point of this reference was to emphasise how deeply embedded or innate traditional gender roles are in men and women according to the writer. It may be useful to point out here that the short-answer questions in the paper are not only to test candidates' understanding of its detailed argument, but also to prepare them for the application question (**Question 11**). At the end of the article, the writer points out that the gender revolution is 'probably as radical' as the scientific one - a claim

which this reference may justify. Unfortunately few candidates included this important view among those they discussed in their application questions.

Question 4

- (a) About half the candidates recognised that this phrase echoed the earlier statement 'Before the link between sexual activity and fertility was understood...' The others wrongly thought the new understanding was about mutual care of offspring or the dominance of the man in the family.
- (b) This was attempted more successfully: a higher proportion correctly stated that women's status was reduced as they became subservient to men, merely bearers of their children. (Those who wrote about women no longer being seen as the divine source of life were answering a different question about *why* their status was changed.)

Question 5

The paragraph refers to three periods of history in which women were *not* living in a man's world, thereby justifying the use of the word 'almost'. Complete answers needed to recognise all three: when 'She' was seen as the mysterious source of life – the moon goddess; when she was worshipped as Isis, the equal of a male god; and during the time when she was seen as the unapproachable object of romantic love. Quite a number missed the whole significance of the word and quoted various unrelated statements from the paragraph, but the majority did understand the question, though many were content to find just one or two references.

Question 6

Again, candidates who explored the relevant material thoroughly and gave complete answers scored maximum marks, while the majority were content with one or two of the reasons which the paragraph presents as to why women would be more comfortable in the workplace nowadays. These were: contraception allows women to limit their families and frees them to enter to workforce while still caring for smaller families; work no longer relies on physical strength; management styles have radically changed to favour women's strengths and abilities.

Question 7

Almost all candidates recognised that the word 'brothers' suggests the bonding nature of males, but many fewer completed their answers by noting the aggressive significance of 'in-arms'.

Question 8

Many candidates either misunderstood the author's meaning here, or spoiled their answers by merely repeating instead of explaining the terms 'gender education' and 'sex education'. Correct answers needed to explain that the author believed that children should be taught about the relationship between the sexes, their psychological and behavioural differences, their different but equal capacities (there were a number of legitimate ways of interpreting 'gender differences') as well as purely biological or anatomical facts.

Question 9

Many candidates seem to assume that all words chosen for explanation can best be defined in a single word. Of the words selected for explanation this year, 'daunting', 'imperceptibly' and 'mindset' were usually satisfactorily defined by single words but 'conditioned' – as distinct from merely being trained or taught – could best be explained in a short phrase, as could the kind of excitement or interest implied by 'titillating'. Candidates are *not* being asked in this question to ensure that their answers are *all* one word *or all* a short phrase.

Question 10

The summary was a relatively straightforward exercise in terms of understanding, but it did place a high premium on concision of writing if top marks were to be obtained. The three requirements of the rubric corresponded very closely to the three paragraphs to be summarised: the causes of the gender revolution in paragraph 3, how it initially threatened conflict between the sexes in paragraph 4, and what recent research has shown about how the conflict may be addressed in paragraph 5. Very many candidates used words so profligately to cover the opening points that they got no further than paragraph 4. The particular skill which

summary teaches is the ability to select the gist of an argument and to express it as briefly as possible - a skill which is obviously relevant to further studies and the workplace. Too many of these candidates seemed to be unaware of the essential nature of the exercise and began their attempts in a relaxed, verbose style which read like the introduction to an essay, using up over half their word allocation on the few opening points.

Question 11

The distinction made in last year's report between the open essay in paper 1 and the application exercise in paper 2 was evidently heeded by many candidates. There were more references to the article in many of the answers but too often candidates were content to latch onto a couple of the author's ideas and expand on these at length. A good answer to this type of question will probably refer to half a dozen or more of the ideas put forward in the passage and respond to them concisely, with some relevant evaluation, agreeing or disagreeing with supporting illustration.

There were a number of challenging claims inviting evaluation. Is the change in gender relationships as fundamental and important as the 'apocalyptic scenarios' to which the writer compares it? How far are the reasons he suggests for it adequate or applicable to Singapore? How far is conditioning a factor in determining gender roles? Is there still masculine resistance to the idea of gender equality? How far is ignorance of innate gender difference responsible for high divorce rates? Are these 'innate differences' as real as the writer claims? What is the role of education in improving the relationship between the sexes? Can existing male-dominated societies and cultures accept the revolution? Adequate answers tended to select two or three of these issues and wrote at some length about, for example, the increasingly important role of women in commerce and the reasons for divorce, citing work pressures, traditional values, inequality of earnings or simply falling out of love as factors equally or more important than the ignorance of gender differences.