

# Queensland Core Skills Test **Retrospective**

# 2007

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The 2007 Queensland Core Skills Test Retrospective

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# Writing Task (WT)

The Writing Task complements the other subtests by testing students' abilities to produce about 600 words of continuous English prose in response to written and visual stimulus material on a testpaper. Each piece of stimulus material evokes a different aspect of a single concept. Students are free to respond to as many pieces as they wish in their response and may respond in any form or style other than poetry.

This section describes the Writing Task testpaper and comments on the writing that students produced in response to it. The comments are based on an analysis of a statistically significant sample of students' scripts. The criteria and standards guide used by markers to grade scripts is included, along with graphs showing the distribution of grades awarded in each of the five substantive criteria. Finally, a selection of scripts has been included to exemplify successful writing as defined by the task criteria.

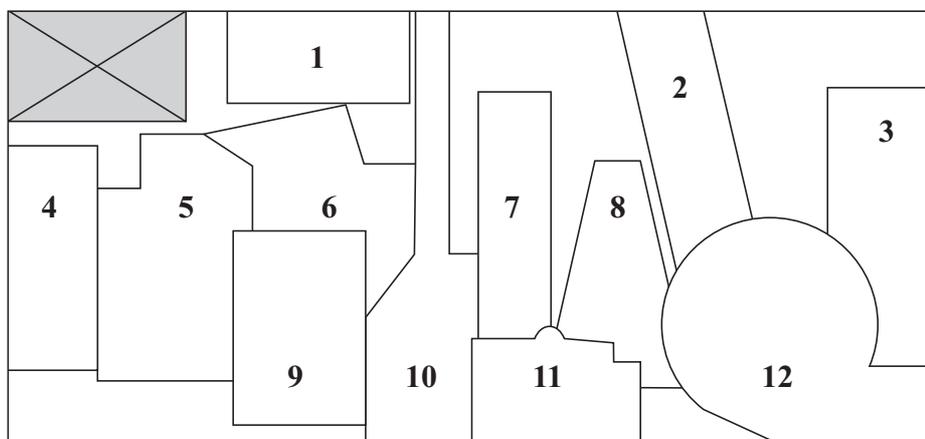
## Commentary

The topic of the testpaper was *Essence*. The concept of essence prompted students to consider what is at the heart of many aspects of their lives and of the world around them. The stimulus items covered diverse areas and allowed students to explore ideas and issues from the everyday to the more esoteric. At first glance, many students may have perceived an overtly scientific flavour to the testpaper: the glass equipment from the science laboratory (including the condenser in the foreground) was a unifying motif suggesting the ways essences are distilled to their purest levels in the laboratory. However, visual images of self, family, the environment and the world in general, as well as the accompanying written texts, provided a much broader framework for exploring the theme.

Essence might be revealed through an exploration of the inherent qualities of people, places, things and ideas. There was also a clear invitation to students to explore imaginary worlds suggested by some of the visual images and some of the written texts. In contrast, some of the images and texts belonged to the very concrete world of scientific endeavour.

The testpaper included 12 separate pieces of stimulus material relating to *Essence*. This is shown diagrammatically below.

### Diagram of the testpaper



Each of the 12 graphics was accompanied by a written text. The graphic and written text were linked by a representation or connotation or by provision of a context that would generate interest and a response (e.g. the birth certificate represented the process of naming; the monowheel connoted the exotic and the bizarre; the family photo with the words of Marcel Proust in piece 12 provided a context for a story).

The stimulus piece most frequently chosen for response was 3 (Frog and tadpole). Twenty-nine per cent of students in the sample group responded to this piece on its own. Fifty-two per cent of students in the sample group responded to it in combination with one or two other pieces. It was commonly associated with piece 6 (Birth certificate) and piece 8 (Einstein).

## Description of stimulus pieces

### 1. *Bono cartoon*

The written text of this stimulus piece suggests that it is the art of the cartoonist to distil the essence of the day's events, which may be of political, human, environmental or social interest, and present that essence simply and effectively enough for readers to get a laugh and to become more aware of the events. The cartoon represents the rock star, Bono, who has used his celebrity status to play a key role in influencing national leaders to act on important international humanitarian concerns.

Only four per cent of students in the sample group chose this stimulus piece. Their responses ranged from a narrative on the life of a cartoonist, to a discussion of ethical choices posed by cartooning, to expositions on the techniques of cartooning. Some described the current group of Australian political figures and how to go about cartooning them. These scripts achieved well, largely because they responded to the concept of essence effectively. The text extract in the stimulus piece provided a guide to the essence of cartooning, which students used in their writing. It was likely that the high level of responsiveness resulted from the piece being chosen by students who had an interest in cartooning or drawing. This enabled them to write about things that they knew and develop ideas that interested them. One particularly interesting script analysed the popularity of *The Simpsons* and accounted for its long lasting success.

## **2. Cate Blanchett**

Three still photos of Cate Blanchett in different film roles provide a connection to the movie maker's statement. The quotation argues that, regardless of the role, an actor has an essence of being which is their own and that this can be captured on film. This provided the opportunity for a response that agreed or disagreed with the statement. Students were able to respond to the questions, "Is an actor only ever just acting?" and "Is film always no more than make-believe rather than also being able to 'capture' souls?"

Six per cent of students in the sample group chose this stimulus piece. Some described the plots of films, both imagined and real. One student reviewed an imaginary film while others took actual films such as *Lord of the Rings* and examined the essence of their success. Particular actors were analysed in several of their film roles, for example Sir Ian McKellen (Gandalf in *Lord of the Rings*) and Johnny Depp. Some students examined the qualities they brought to the screen and analysed whether they were always the same regardless of the role they were playing. Their discussions were effectively linked to essence, using the challenge of the question posed in the extract.

## **3. Frog and tadpole**

This image presents as an example of the idea that "Change is the essence of life".

The written text expresses a positive approach to change. It suggests that change involves risk, but that the risk can be worthwhile. This can be considered in an allegorical way or in a biological way, with an emphasis on the process of metamorphosis. The open-ended nature of the quotation required effective planning of the response to ensure continuity and the development of a central idea. Responses developed from students' personal reflections and philosophies on life tended to suffer from repetition or from a confused sequencing of ideas. In many cases, providing examples of experiences would have prevented the descent into repetition. This piece was chosen by 52 per cent of the sampled students and the responses were noticeably weaker in responsiveness and central idea than responses to other stimulus items. The resolution of the central idea was generally managed ineffectively in responses where personal reflection about life-changing events in an individual's experience was important. For the reader, the problem in these was that little evidence was given to support generalisations.

A significant proportion of the sample group used the image of the tadpole and frog as their stimulus. In general, when this was done, both the central idea and the responsiveness of the responses were more effectively developed. Several students explained the stages of growth of a frog. It was clear from these examples that the students were writing from personal knowledge. Few students dealt with the idea of a metamorphosis or used a scientific approach in any way, preferring instead to tell a story. The more effective responses were from students who wrote biographies of well-known public identities (Cathy Freeman, Martin Luther King, Lleyton Hewitt, etc.) and so were able to draw examples of their own home-spun philosophies of life from the lives of these people. One student wrote a narrative about his own life that presented the difficulty of choosing between a future in sport or a future on the stage. Some other effective responses told of the experience of migration to Australia and developed interesting connections with the concept of essence. Some students wrote about struggles with dyslexia, pregnancy or abortion. They were able to develop the philosophical discussions that arose from the stimulus with examples from their own experience.

#### **4. *Wallpaper cat***

This piece appealed to cat lovers and owners. It provides an opportunity to write more deeply about appearance and the conflict with the truth or the essence of things. The cat could represent any free spirit camouflaged by its surroundings and not confined by those expectations. The wallpaper provides an opportunity to include the matter of design and appearance. Seven per cent of the students sampled chose this stimulus and they generally wrote well. Some simply described cats and their behaviours. Others considered cats as a species: where they live, how they live and why they make good companions. Some complex themes were developed on the topics of designer babies and plastic surgery as being corruptions of the essence of human life. Some scripts discussed speciation in animals and genetic modification as interfering with the essence of life.

#### **5. *Literary classics***

The three books illustrated in this piece represent literature in a broader sense. The written text invites an exploration of the essence of good literature. This is a topical matter in schools and is the subject of many recent commentaries in the media and academia. The balance of emotion and intellect could be used as the point of debate. More simply, an exposition on what makes a book good literature or worth reading could make a worthwhile response.

The matter for debate in this stimulus piece was clear and students responded well. A small group, six per cent of students in the sample, responded to this piece. Some excellent writing was presented in their responses. The students appeared to have read widely themselves and were able to show this in their discussions. The interweaving of thought arising from their ideas about literature, emotion and intellect, combined with the theme of essence and supported by specific examples from their own reading, invariably produced writing that was responsive, structured, deliberate and focused.

#### **6. *Birth certificate***

This stimulus piece provides an opportunity for students to write about themselves and, in particular, about their names. A name registered as a legal identity gave students the opportunity to reflect on themselves, their family history, adoption, marriage or tradition. As a consequence, many linked this piece (chosen by 19 per cent of the sample group) with piece 3 (Frog and tadpole) or piece 8 (Einstein).

The responses that approached the topic by developing the idea that “My name is my essence”, tended to be weak in structure and sequencing and in central idea, as the initial idea was often not sustained. Planning is essential for an open-ended topic such as this one to ensure that the central idea has sufficient material for development. Some of the effective responses considered the derivation of the students’ own names and linked them to characters from the past (Joan of Arc, Martin Luther King Jnr, etc.). This allowed those individuals’ histories to be invoked. Other successful developments of the idea involved expositions on identity fraud and how police investigate and recommend protection from this crime. These responses explored the feeling of loss of identity and control in an individual’s life that corresponds to theft of the essence of existence. Brand loyalty in advertising and the role of advertising in manipulating the essence of a product were also analysed and linked to the surrendering of our own essence to loyalty to an image of a product. Stories of adoption allowed students to explore their own histories and answer the question, “Who am I really?”

## **7. Perfume**

This stimulus piece provides a direct link to the theme of essence. Perfumes could be identified with celebrities and fashion or could be considered as the result of a scientific process. The graphic provides colour, shape and process to support the written text.

Of the sample of students who responded to this stimulus item, 10 per cent produced expositions on scent being the essence of attraction between the sexes. The theme of blending was used figuratively in some scripts as a way of describing processes in our society, with some students pointing out that our success in blending race, gender, religion and language was the essence of a peaceful world. In one script, a new fuel discovery resulting from the blending of many elements leads to the new essence of motor sport. In general, students who produced these responses had a clear central idea and maintained a creditable attempt at being responsive through their attention to detail.

## **8. Einstein**

The figure of Einstein was identified correctly by only a few of the sample students, and few chose to respond to the figure or to the items of chemical glassware depicted.

However, nearly 20 per cent of stimulus selections included this piece because of the text which was commonly linked to piece 3 (Frog and tadpole). In many cases though, this did not result in effective responses in terms of central idea or structure and sequencing. The idea of change dominated but expositions on the human mind or the writer's mind generally produced vague statements, repetitiveness and confused logic. Generally, students did not deal effectively with such broad ideas. Responsiveness and central idea were noticeably weaker in the scripts of the students who chose this piece.

Students from the sample who wrote effectively in response to this piece chose topics that developed an experience or knowledge from their own lives. Examples included the challenges of euthanasia or the struggle of a close relative with dementia or a narrative that dealt with the decision to turn off life support for a grandparent. A piece of scientific writing considered genetically modified foods as the product of scientific thought and showed our lives could be improved by applying the essence of our minds to a problem. A personal narrative described the death and funeral of an uncle who had also been a professor of philosophy.

## **9. Monowheel**

The graphic shows a wheeled vehicle reduced to its essence — the wheel itself. Students who are attracted to the exotic may have found this image appealing. The written text evokes images of the bizarre. The combination of this piece with other pieces provided students in the sample group with opportunities to connect and interweave imaginative ideas.

Approximately five per cent of students in the sample group chose to respond to this stimulus item. Responses were effective in developing a central idea but tended to be weak in responsiveness. Few students chose this item by itself but rather, used it in combination with several other pieces, such as piece 4 (Wallpaper cat), which allowed for an extra dimension to the examples provided in the writing.

## **10. Indigenous dancers**

This stimulus piece provides opportunities to respond to aspects of Indigenous culture. It is also possible to connect the two aspects to the world of alchemy and legend. The smoke rising in the flask above the dancers hints at the creation of a new form. Only five per cent of the sample selected this stimulus piece for response. However, expositions on the loss of our natural environment were effectively handled and probably drew on classroom studies in various subjects. Students included the element of Indigenous respect for the land in these environmental expositions, contrasting this with the preoccupations of the modern world.

## **11. Monkey**

The monkey in the beaker is suggestive of the treatment meted out to laboratory animals and of cruelty to animals in general. It raises questions about the essence of humanity. This stimulus piece elicited expository responses on cruelty to animals and human indifference. Twelve per cent of the students sampled wrote on this theme. One student was critical of circuses and another argued for the acceptance of the similarities amongst all animals. Two interesting responses were expository articles discussing world poverty and slavery as examples of human indifference. Another student linked the Holocaust, atomic weapons and political tyranny to an indifference to human life that illustrated “the essence of inhumanity”.

## **12. Wedding photo**

This photo from the generation of the students’ grandparents provides comparisons in style, expressions and attitudes with the students’ own lives. While the accompanying written text is complex, it is also rich in ideas for the careful reader. It allows many students to give voice to their feelings and to their memories of older relatives or people they have known. This may be the reason why the 12 per cent of the sampled students who wrote on this stimulus generally did so effectively. Many told stories, in particular, of their grandmothers, who were important influences on them. In some cases, these reflections were stimulated by thoughts of their grandmothers’ belongings. A number of students wrote about their childhood on Aboriginal missions and the debt they felt they owed to their grandmothers. These relationships were important to their identity and the essence of who they were now.

## **Student performance**

The word “essence” may not be an everyday word for year 12 students. However, careful reading of the visual images and the accompanying texts on the testpaper revealed many nuances in the concept and students were able to respond to these.

To be awarded a high grade, students must perform well in aspects of writing that are defined by the criteria and standards guide. An effective script must have a unifying central idea; its vocabulary or word choices must fit the intended meanings; it must show responsiveness to the testpaper in terms of both the stimulus piece(s) and the concept; its mechanical aspects (grammar, punctuation and spelling) must be correct and effective in conveying meaning; the structure and sequencing of its component parts must be planned and deliberate. Markers also take note of whether a script has conformed to the length prescription. The ability to write to a specific length is part of the skill of organising and writing prose.

In general, students' weakest results were in responsiveness and central idea respectively. Their better results were in vocabulary and in grammar, punctuation and spelling. This remained true irrespective of the stimulus piece(s) chosen.

## Central idea

When evaluating the central idea, markers ask, "What is this script about?" The criteria to apply are clarity, deliberateness and well-focused development. Some students confused central idea with responsiveness. Central idea is an important criterion, as the analysis of the sample scripts showed students who achieved well overall achieved well in central idea. Students who performed poorly generally had poorer results in central idea also.

Planning is important to achieve the development of the central idea. Students' stories and expositions on the stimulus pieces 1, 4, 5, 10, 11, 12 maintained the central idea more than those on pieces 3, 6 and 8. A possible explanation may be that in the former pieces the stimulus text contained more clues to build ideas upon and that these topics were therefore more specific. In choosing a broad idea such as piece 3 (Frog and tadpole), "Change is the essence of life", or piece 8 (Einstein), "The energy of the mind is the essence of life", many students seemed to lose their way in terms of central idea.

## Vocabulary

Vocabulary is the use of words that are appropriate to their location and create an effect in the response. Plain words can achieve a controlled and discriminating effect. Often, students who achieved well did so using plain words and without "overwriting". A surfeit of adjectives, adverbs and complex nouns does not guarantee clear meaning or an effective response to the criterion.

It is more appropriate to choose simple words for effect than to use complex vocabulary in an unwieldy manner and interfere with the meaning that is being conveyed through the central idea or responsiveness.

## Responsiveness

This criterion refers to responsiveness to the concept and to the stimulus pieces on the testpaper on the day. The written and visual materials provide for the diversity of interest and viewpoints of students from a range of backgrounds throughout the state. For this testpaper, the concept requiring a response is *Essence*, which is the important quality of a thing. A script that is effective in responsiveness would "do something" with the stimulus materials. Glancing references to the testpaper result in lower grades for this criterion.

Students who performed well overall tended to perform strongly in responsiveness. Most students seemed aware of the requirement to respond to both the stimulus and the concept. Nevertheless, in many scripts about piece 3 (Frog and tadpole), change was the dominant concept. *Essence* may have been mentioned in the final sentence but was not woven into the script logically or intricately. This could have been done more carefully by providing evidence or examples of how change was the essence of the topic. Similar problems were evident with piece 8 (Einstein). Evidence for "the energy of the mind is the essence of life" was not presented and the concept became simply "the

mind". Simply repeating the word "essence" (in some cases, even as many as 26 times) also does not necessarily achieve responsiveness.

Some scripts developed very individual approaches to being responsive; for example, one student wrote a scientific explanation on the distillation of perfume in piece 7 (Perfume) by answering an examination paper in chemistry. The answers were linked to develop the central idea and to respond to the concept.

## **Grammar, punctuation and spelling**

This can be considered the micro-level of organisation, the inside of sentences and words. It represents a hierarchy, with grammar judged to be the most crucial to meaning. Punctuation and then spelling follow in importance. There is no substitute for practising and maintaining vigilance in using language. As well as having a knowledge of correct usage, students need to develop effective strategies for revising and editing their writing.

One key weakness in some student scripts was the tendency to write in long and rambling sentences. This can be corrected by a more careful use of the full stop. Sentence fragments (where no verb is used) also present difficulties to the reader. In these cases, the full stop has been used too often. In general, it is true that shorter sentences are easier to understand. This technique may reduce flexibility and variety of sentence structure but the first priority is to be understood, so students need to be able to revise their work and apply full stops wisely.

Another part of the process of creating sentences is ensuring that participles are not left "dangling". To neglect this can severely jeopardise meaning making and can create humour where none is intended.

## **Structure and sequencing**

This is the macro-level of order in writing. Ideas are sequenced by logic or time or space to achieve a planned effect. Even when a clear central idea is present, the arrangement or development of the content may still be disorganised and meaning not clearly conveyed unless the arrangement of ideas is carefully sequenced.

This criterion often separates effective writing from weaker writing. The structure of paragraphs is related to the sequencing of ideas and the linkages between them.

Students must organise their ideas into a logical structure so that their ideas progress in a coherent way through the response. For example, a narrative should have a believable and logical sequence so that the reader can follow the storyline. An expository response should have a clear thesis statement followed by evidence. The requirements of various genres help students to organise their ideas. A focus on planning should assist them to improve in this criterion.

## **Length**

Students are required to write approximately 600 words of continuous English prose and must write in the range of 500 to 750 words to avoid a penalty. The majority of students in the sample group were able to write within these limits.

## **Prose forms**

Each year, the testpaper gives students writing suggestions such as an argument, a literary exposition, the text of a speech, a persuasive text, a feature article, a procedural text, an interview, a scientific report, a personal reflection or a monologue. The list is intended to stimulate, not prescribe. Any form, except poetry, can be used. It is recommended that students write in a style with which they are comfortable to demonstrate how well they can write.

In 2007, narrative and expository forms each represented roughly 30 per cent of the scripts sampled. Personal reflections, articles, speeches and arguments each accounted for roughly 10 per cent. Diaries, letters and play scripts made up less than three per cent each. Some students combined genres in their responses.

# Criteria and standards schema for marking

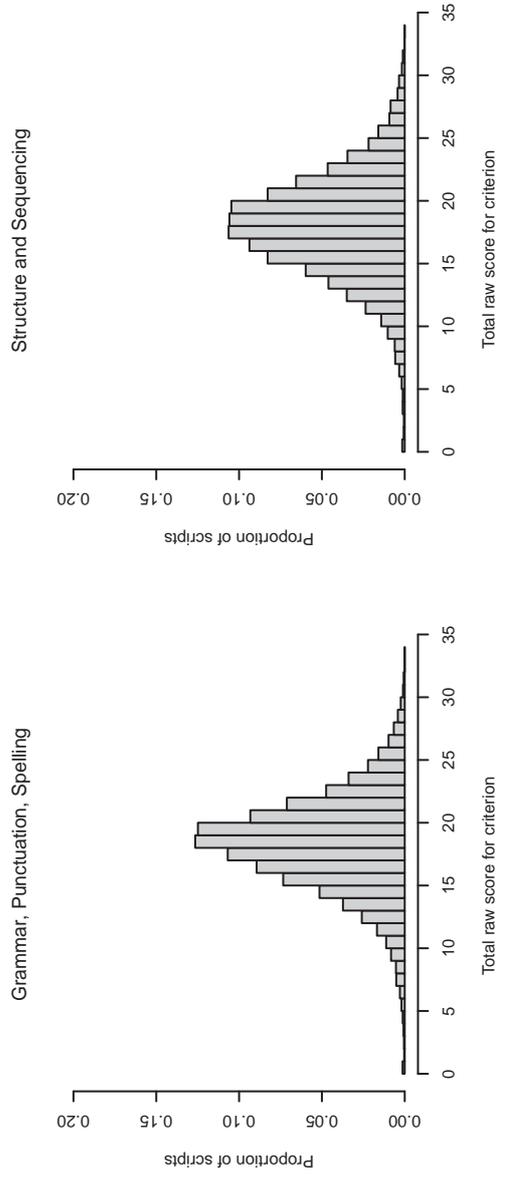
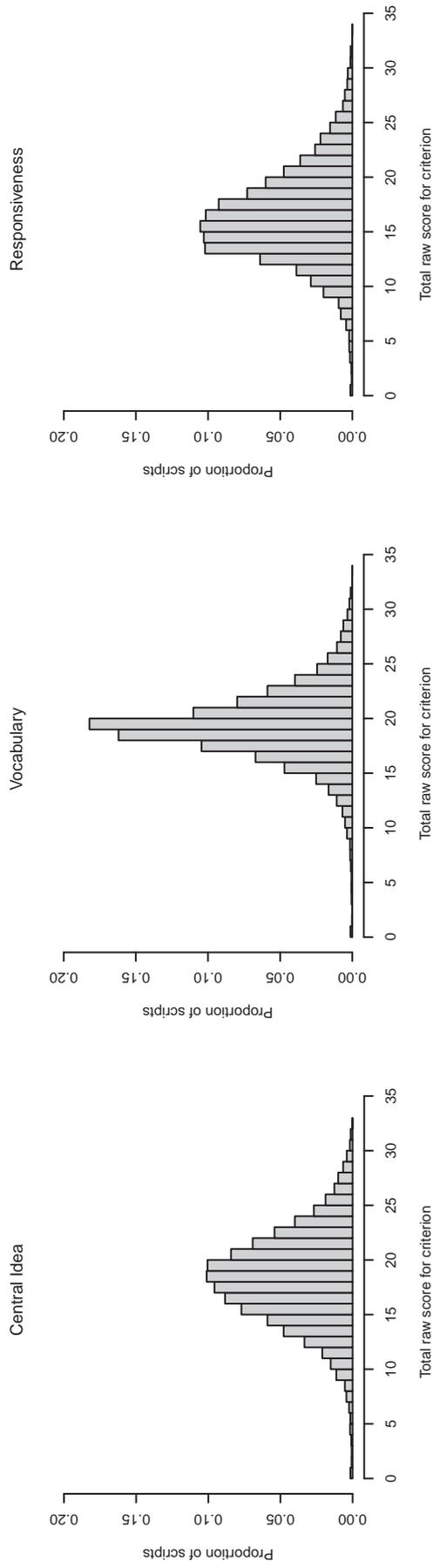
## Grading a script

- Read the script as a whole.
- Think about the worth of the script holistically.
- Make a judgment about the contribution made by each criterion you are considering (Ci, V, R, GPS, SS) to the holistic worth of the script.
- Assign a grade and a qualifier to record each judgment.
- Make a decision about the length of the script and record it (when required).

## Writing Task Criteria and Standards: Marking Guide

Contribution to the holistic grade made by...							Decision about ...
CENTRAL IDEA	VOCABULARY	RESPONSIVENESS	GRAMMAR, PUNCTUATION, SPELLING	STRUCTURING & SEQUENCING	LENGTH		
For a 1 + the writing demonstrates the clear, deliberate and well-focused development of a central idea (explicit or implicit).	For a 1 + the writing demonstrates a use of words exactly fitted to their location and effect in the response (the right words in the right places).	For a 1 + the writing shows sensitivities to nuances of the concept and stimulus material on the testpaper.	For a 1 + the writing consistently demonstrates a command of the principal conventions of the written language, as evidenced by mastery of rules related to subject/verb agreement, participle use, antecedent agreement, pronoun choice, tense etc.; correct punctuation; correct spelling.	For a 1 + the writing demonstrates a planned structuring of extended written text and deliberate sequencing of ideas and images for effect.	about right 500–750 words		
identifiable for intended audience; direction and resolution revealed	controlled (imaginative, discriminating)	strong (immediate or subtle) and sustained connectedness to the concept and stimulus material on the testpaper	precise and effective use of the conventions	<b>fluent</b> (transition, flow, continuity, linkages) <b>flexible</b> (variation in arrangement of ideas in phrases, sentences, paragraphs) <b>logical</b> and/or <b>intricate</b> weaving of thought	<b>too long</b> 750–1000 words		
identifiable idea; uneven development	appropriate	a creditable connection to the concept and stimulus material	lapses in usage intrude but do not detract from meaning	weaknesses in structuring and sequencing evident	<b>too short</b> 400–500 words		
identifiable idea, poorly developed; or not readily identifiable but some development evident	inappropriate to the extent that it interferes with meaning at times	a creditable connection to either the concept or stimulus material; or a weak connection to the concept and stimulus material	lapses in usage obtrude and detract from meaning	weaknesses in structuring and sequencing detract	<b>far too long</b> > 1000 words		
not identifiable	limited	no relationship between writing and the concept or stimulus material	inept	incoherent	<b>far too short</b> < 400 words		

## Distribution of raw grades in each criterion



## Selected student responses

The following responses to the 2007 Writing Task subtest were selected from those scripts that met the standards for successful writing as defined by the criteria and standards for marking the Writing Task.

These complete scripts appear in their original handwritten form. They may contain errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling as well as factual inaccuracies but they have been published as they were written for the sake of authenticity.

The QSA has not expressed a preference for any particular form of writing by its selection of these examples, nor are the sentiments expressed in them necessarily endorsed by the QSA. Before publication the QSA attempted to establish, but cannot guarantee, the originality of the writing in these scripts.

### Response 1

This responds to stimulus piece 7 (Perfume). It comments on the penchant of female celebrities to become perfume designers and reveals that *The Curse of the Perfume* destroys the lives of these foolish people as a punishment for refusing to be content with what they have already achieved. The script takes the form of a feature article for a magazine or newspaper and includes an interview with a celebrity who explains the curse and how to avoid it. The script provides an example of simple vocabulary used with discrimination and the writer has used the features of the genre effectively, providing a succinct introduction, a question answered by the celebrity and a concluding word of advice to others of her kind.

### Response 2

*I think, therefore I am ... I think* is strongly responsive to the overall concept of *Essence* and to stimulus piece 8 (Einstein). The writer draws on the philosophy of Descartes. This central idea is developed effectively, first by dismissing the suggestion that our essence could be our bodies because the body is used to perform the actions decided by the mind, and then by pointing out that minds can suffer any number of injuries and even be “lost”, yet people so afflicted will still be themselves. The writer concludes that we will probably continue the search, and hope for an answer to the question of our essence forever but may have to leave it to the philosophers.

### Response 3

*Cogito Ergo Sum* clearly responds to stimulus piece 8 (Einstein) and focuses on the same philosophical statement as Response 2. The writer gives a carefully sequenced account of a stage performance by a young woman, made up and dressed in white, who presents a dramatic monologue in which she reflects on the essence of her existence. At each stage of her discussion, she unconsciously wipes off more and more of her stark white make-up, becoming more and more animated as she does so and finally becoming fully alive when she reaches her conclusion. The central idea is well developed, the generic features of the dramatic monologue and the recount are well handled, and the responsiveness is strong and well sustained.

#### **Response 4**

Stimulus piece 6 (Birth certificate) provides the starting point for *Our Names and Our Essences*, a very personal discussion about the importance of our names. The thesis is that our names should, and inexplicably do, reflect our essence, despite the irony that our parents do not even know us when they select them. Although no firm reason for this is offered, the writer states and uses a range of evidence to develop the central idea effectively, and provides a well-crafted and engaging exposition.

## Response 1

### The Curse of the Perfume

They're rich. They're famous. They have their own brand of perfume. Our young female celebrities are getting too big for their boots and unknowingly becoming victims of the 'Curse of the Perfume,' writes Bree Thomas.

Why is it, as humans in the 21st century, we can never be content with what we've already got? If you're a mother you want to be a grandmother, if you get accepted to Griffith you want to go to Bond, and if you're a celebrity you want to be a perfume designer.

In recent years, a new trend has formed amongst our female celebrities - designing perfume. Which is reasonable enough, I suppose, considering they have fulfilled their childhood dreams of becoming a famous singer or actress. So why not create a perfume?

Well, apart from the fact that they're all just carbon copies of each other with identical essences of fruitloops and lollipops, one reason not to, according to singing sensation, Jessica Simpson, is for fear of the 'Curse of the Perfume.'

In an interview with Dolly magazine last week, Miss Simpson was queried as to whether she'd be jumping on the perfume bandwagon anytime soon. She responded with "Definitely not! There's no way I'm going to be a victim of the Curse of the Perfume."

So what is this curse you may ask? Well, according to Miss Simpson, it's quite obvious - just look at the lives of a

number of celebs before and after their perfumes hit the shelves. Take Britney Spears, for example - she was a successful artist with a long list of number one hits under her belt and adoring fans all over the globe. She brought out her first scent and immediately went into a downward spiral; flashing photographers her privates, attacking paparazzi with an umbrella, shaving her head mid-nervous breakdown, and being sent to court for claims of child abuse.

Then there's Kylie Minogue - successful, happy, in a long-term relationship - her perfume is released and she's diagnosed with cancer, after which her boyfriend leaves her for another woman.

Or what about Jennifer Lopez - one minute she's a world-famous latino sex symbol, the next she hasn't starred in a successful film or released a hit in years.

The list of 'cursed' celebs goes on and on, but it doesn't seem to be deterring the young ladies from following in the footsteps of the preceding washed out 'it' girl.

"Not me though," declared Miss Simpson. "The essence of the curse is the fact that these girls already have so much going for them, and yet they still feel the need to do something more to increase their fame or make more money. It's like the curse is trying to teach them a lesson for being ungrateful... And I've decided to learn that lesson from others' experiences rather than my own. I'm already successful and happy, there's nothing to improve upon."

With that in mind, it appears that Jessica Simpson is one

major of the few female stars whose fame has not created any dramas. True, she has had recent struggles with her weight and a failed marriage to boy-band member, Nick Lache, but Miss Simpson has managed to come out on top with her career still in full bloom.

It's a right shame, though, that not all celebrities of similar status happen to share her view. If they did, and worked with their own natural talents, then maybe these girls, who, technically, should have so much more ahead of them, wouldn't have met the unfortunate fate that they did.

Like Miss Simpson said, the curse focuses on those who display ungratefulness - that's its essence. So ladies, let the perfume designers sell perfume - you stick to the singing and acting.

## Response 2

I think, therefore I am... I think

'Cogito ergo sum', or, 'I think, therefore I am'; that timeless quote of philosopher René Descartes, still resonates with minds today, even if its current incarnation has lost <sup>some of</sup> Descartes' original intended meaning. But enough for a simple phrase that seems to reveal some insightful truth about the universe; what does it actually mean?

The nature of life, indeed, the very essence of being, has been contemplated and conjectured upon by philosophers and luminary thinkers for centuries. From Socrates' and Plato's 'Shadows of the Cave', to Nick Bostrom's modern 'Simulation Argument', the investigation into the essence of life has propagated throughout time, ideas and understanding becoming more complex with each theory. This propensity of humans to question themselves seems innate (essential, even), but we are yet to arrive at clear answers, <sup>despite</sup> for all our intellectual posturing and philosophical questioning. Is it our minds that makes us who we are, as Descartes said? ~~Or~~ Or our bodies, as the materialists say? Perhaps it is both, perhaps neither, and trying to find out may seem pointless, but at least we might feel a little Zen-like enlightenment along the way.

Central to these questions of identity and 'human-ness', is the notion of essence. Our essence, you could say

is what sets us apart from the 'animals' (a misnomer - nonhuman animals). When we speak of essence, the first thing to come to our minds is usually not the human body. Essence seems to suggest a mysterious undefinability, a metaphysical concept, not the mundane corporeality of our squishy tissues and organs. But this reveals only ignorance of our own misunderstanding. The brain, specifically, is undeniably the seat of our consciousness, it is not consciousness itself, and our understanding of it is extremely limited beyond neurochemistry and anatomy. Is it not possible that a perceptive phenomenon like consciousness can arise out of a sufficiently complex structure of matter like the brain? With our current knowledge, we cannot know. Yet it does not seem unlikely, and the argument that the essence of life lies in the body is still a strong one.

There are a few problems, however, with placing the stock of our individuality in our material bodies. It is a fact that over the course of our lives, every cell in our bodies, indeed, every molecule, is recycled and replaced. Where then does our essence go? At what point in the physical replacement of our bodies' components are we no longer ourselves? A person can lose much of what makes them up in this world and still realistically be 'themselves'. From these doubts on the materialist view of human essence, there lies one other obvious alternative: the 'mind'.

'Ah,' you might say, 'this is making sense now,' and that is because this is the answer that seems to appeal to

us the most. Yes, it makes the most intuitive sense, it is obvious to many people that we have a (meta)existence outside the corporeal body; popularly ~~well~~ referred to as the 'soul'. It is in our souls that we do our thinking, make our decisions, feel our emotions. These are essential things that physics and chemistry cannot explain. There is a reason, perhaps evolutionary, perhaps epistemological, that we tend to think this way. We think independently of our bodies, but perform our actions through them. This is what Descartes was ~~getting at~~ <sup>expanding</sup> with his wisdom, that he could think, he could cognitively, intelligently think, and this is what made him, him. Unfortunately, humans are not that smart, and such a simple explanation still does not satisfy some of the most pressing questions.

If someone is sent insane - they have effectively 'lost their mind', but they are still essentially themselves. This stays true for all manner of afflictions of the mind; amnesia, hallucinatory drugs, lobotomies. These all blur our perceptions. For a final chin-scratcher - if our essence is our mind and not the body - then where is the mind?

We may seem doomed to ask questions <sup>about our essence</sup> for eternity, but sometimes questions need not answers to be useful or insightful. Through careful consideration and argument, we may yet find there are a whole lot of answers just around the corner - or more likely, another whole lot of impenetrable questions. Best leave it to the philosophers then.

### Response 3

#### Cogito Ergo Sum

(The stage is darkened; only very general impressions of form can be taken. A human figure can only just be distinguished from her surroundings. She speaks:)

Cogito ergo sum.

(As she pronounces those words, the lights are slowly raised. Throughout the next lines, the scene becomes clearer. All is white and sterile, comprised of clean, Euclidean shapes. A behemoth of a sphere balances on a tiny wedge, casting a multitude of shadows onto a large cube. Across the stage, <sup>thin and narrow</sup> cones stand in a sort of artificial copse. The speaker is revealed to be a black-haired young woman, dressed in white and so covered with white make-up that she appears to be an animated mannequin. Her blue eyes provide the only colour on the stage. Initially, she paces, seemingly lost in a reverie.)

I think, therefore I am.

I think, therefore I am: self-aware, questioning, human. My thoughts are the essence of my existence—no, they are essential to my existence. No, they make my existence a life.

(She pauses, brushing her hands absently against her hips as she tries to rearrange her thoughts. Her fingers and palms come away clean. She does not seem to notice that her hands now seem warm and alive. They gesticulate sharply, contrasting with her contemplative, tranquil speech.)

Because, you see, if I could not think, I could not know who, or what, I was. I would not even be able to comprehend my existence. Without the capacity to question the cosmos, I would not even know it was there. Without the energy of my mind, without the reception of reality bequeathed by reason, I could not be alive. I could only be

(Pausing a moment to collect her thoughts again, she unconsciously reaches up and brushes dead white lips with living fingers. The paint wipes away easily, leaving behind streaks of living flesh and startlingly pink lips. She smiles wearily and continues, wiping her fingers on her pants. But her words are tinted with emotion now, echoing the movement of her hands.)

Sometimes I think that simply being would be enough. Sometimes I look at myself and wonder: if I did not know who I was, if I ~~was~~ <sup>were</sup> actually incapable of thought, would I be happy? I would certainly worry less. But then I wonder about the nature of happiness. Can I be happy without thinking—without knowing that I am? Can I even be content without a consciousness?

(She laughs now, putting a hand to her brow and shaking her head at her own foolishness. When her hand leaves her face, it takes with it <sup>it</sup> more paint. Her face now looks distinctly odd—normal flesh still marred with stark whiteness.)

No. Never. To be content is to be pleased with your life; there is nothing more that you want. If you cannot think, cannot know—and categorically state—that "my life is ideal," you cannot be content. You cannot know that your life is ideal. You cannot even know that you are alive!

I know that this is circular thinking; whichever way I turn, I can only conclude that cogitation is everything. My mind interprets, infers, and impacts meaning. Without my mind? Nothing. The unexamined life is not only not worth living, it is not even a life.

(She halts, frowning a little as she notices the paint on her hand. She scrapes it away on the edge of the cube, then hoists herself up to sit upon it. Suddenly smiling, she ~~cleans off~~ begins to clear off the rest of the paint as she speaks again.)

~~Cogito~~  
~~legito~~ ergo sum; I think, therefore I am.

Vi - no. That's not right. Latin conjugation... oh, it'll never be right.

But it certainly wouldn't sound right in English. And besides, I can't remember the words for 'essence', or 'essential'. But... who will know? Nobody is listening.

(With relish, she passes a hand across her face, from cheekbone to cheekbone, skimming away the last of the paint. Now fully alive, she smiles and says.)

Vitae cogitatio est; life is thought. And vice versa.

(The light dim again.)

FIN.

## Response 4

### Our Names and Our Essences

It is interesting to think that our names, things that we hold most dear, were not, in most cases, even of our choosing. Names should, one thinks, express our very essence, reflect our character, describe what makes us ourselves. This is what they should do. Really, though, they were chosen by our parents, for some arbitrary reason, before they ~~even~~ knew us, before they understood their child's essence. In a very important way, one could say that our names were not even chosen for us.

Why, then, are we so protective of our names? Whenever they are misused, mispronounced, mishandled, why is it that we resent it so. It is because, we still hold firm the belief that our essences as individuals are reflected in those names; that there is something special in these labels — chosen by our mothers and fathers merely for personal, familial or aesthetic reasons — that describe us perfectly.

I should disclose, now, that I do not like my own name: Tom. It is too short for a start, especially next to my horrible surname which I shall not bore the reader with (suffice to say, my surname is long, exceptionally prone to mispronunciation, and relentlessly Russian). All the great, famous Toms, throughout modern history, have had one syllable surnames: Tom Paine, Tom Wolfe, Tom Cruise, Tom Hanks, et cetera. Yet, I do not.

This obvious remedy for this problem is, of course, to go by the name Thomas; that must be my real name anyway, surely. No, reader, it is not! Such is the second biggest problem with my name, one that I've found to be, in all my travels, unique: people, quite often, lengthen my name to Thomas. Everybody does; just this morning, in fact, a friend I've known for many years did it. The blame rests solely with my parents for giving me, as a proper name, a nickname.

But, I am digressing. Yes, my name is a most unpleasant one to own, and that is a cross I must bear; but does it reflect my essence? Well, let us look first at what the name 'Tom' means. It has, like 'Thomas', Academic origins. Specifically, it means 'twin'. At least on this first level, then, we can safely say that it does not reflect my essence as an individual — I am not a twin.

Let us turn now towards the connotations that my name might imply. 'Tom' strikes one as a strong and masculine name; but, I am quite that most of the women in my class could beat me up if they were that way inclined. 'Tom' also seems, being short and to the point, like a name that you can trust. I am, however, recklessly dishonest; littering my conversations with untruths, misthuths, half-truths and what have you. I am, in short, a liar.

I could go on, but I think that one can concede now that even at a deeper level my name still

does not express my essence at all. Why do I, then, still hate it so when my name is disrespected?

Widening the topic, why do I scorn those who cannot pronounce my surname correctly, even though said surname goes back hundreds of years, its use is based on tradition alone and my possession of it is simply a cosmic accident? Why are we, as a society, near universally protective of names that are not even of our choosing—why do we think, beyond all reason, that they reflect our individual essences superbly?

Reader, I do not have an answer. Perhaps we are conditioned in childhood to respond to our names positively. Maybe we are used to them (provided they are used perfectly) much thought. They are our names, so surely they must reflect our essences: it might be considered axiomatic. It could be that we just do not ask these questions very often. In the end, though, the reasons are unimportant; the way we think of our names does not hurt anyone, no wars have been fought over their mishandling. It is just something to think about.