Retrospective 2002
(Part 3 of 5)

Note: The PDF version of this document has been split into sections for easier download. This file is Part 3 of 5.
Writing Task

The Writing Task section includes: a commentary on the stimulus material; a brief written description of the marking model; the criteria and standards schema followed by two histograms showing the distribution (from 1 to 36) of the coded (uncalibrated) marks for each of the five substantive criteria (central idea; vocabulary; responsiveness; grammar, spelling and punctuation; structuring and sequencing), and selected candidate scripts.

Commentary

The Writing Task

The directions on the WT testpaper set a task that is simple but profound: candidates must devise an idea and then organise, draft and present it as a piece of coherent prose. To provide a spur for writing, and to establish the criteria of responsiveness, the testpaper presents stimulus material that invites or provokes responses to a central concept or notion, this year space.

The 2002 testpaper

The majority of WT candidates will wish to write about ideas relevant to young adults. Within that cohort of age and experience, however, flourishes the same diversity of interests and viewpoints found throughout society. To appeal widely, the 2002 WT testpaper introduces connotations of ‘space’ ranging from the architectural to the astronomical. Each of the ten pieces on the testpaper pairs a text with an image. In some pieces the image is dominant while in others the text is more extended. The pieces, numbered as they appear on the diagram on the cover of the test response booklet, are:

1. Iroquois
2. Room at the top
3. Imaginative writer
4. Adams/Escher
5. Warped space
6. First room
7. Queensland design
8. Ugly ... lovely
9. Howard Carter
10. Folding car

Each piece is framed within tubular forms that echo the ‘wormhole’ of time/space introduced by piece five (Warped space). The stimulus material moves from the left to the right of the paper, from a point where space is constricted, through a period of incubation, and then out into a boundless
expanse. There are other sub-groupings of ideas: urban and rural space, social space (both private and public), imaginary and symbolic space, the inner space of the mind and the outer space of the universe.

1. **Iroquois**

Australian Aboriginal culture features elsewhere in the QCS Test, and so this piece invites candidates to contemplate another indigenous culture. It shows the interior of a pre-Columbian village longhouse and describes, in the voice of an elder, how each of the confederated Iroquois tribes in the New York area was conceived of as one of the families within a symbolic Great Longhouse spanning the places and pathways of their territory.

Only 4 per cent of the candidates responded to this material, although these tended to be better than average. It was sometimes used in conjunction with piece eight (Ugly … lovely), as in the script that imagines an overpopulated future when people have to live together in ways modelled by the Longhouse dwellers. Some responses discuss political matters relating to indigenous people while others tell stories set in this Iroquois world.

2. **Room at the top**

Piece two combines the phrase — ‘There’s room at the top …’ — with a photograph of a climber atop a steeple-like peak. Read literally, it refers to the open spaces encountered outdoors but metaphorically it evokes freedom ‘at the top’ of a profession, of the social ladder, of a school class and so on. There is, if one wishes to see it, a contradiction between the small space upon which the climber stands and the statement that there is ‘room at the top’.

This material was used by about 10 per cent of candidates. Fame, success and celebrity appear frequently as desirable goals, not only in responses to this piece but throughout the sampled scripts. Those with a special interest in outdoor activities also took their cue here. There are many accounts of mountain climbing (invariably with blood-soaked outcomes!). At least two candidates believed the climber was operating a portable barbeque and at least one guessed correctly that he stands in front of an ironing board.

3. **Imaginative writer**

Piece three features an image of a woman who sits over a notebook and looks towards the window of her room. There is no suggestion that she does so with a longing to escape to the bright world outside the room. She looks outwards but sees inwards to her own thought-world. The caption draws attention to the contrast between the expansiveness of the imaginative mind and the confined space writers often inhabit.

The reference to literary achievement is a cue for candidates with interests in literature, literary criticism and creativity. Most teenagers, however, are familiar with and interested in their own private spaces for personal reflection. This material encourages responses in this introspective mode that related to imagination and the ‘space’ of the mind.

About 10 per cent of candidates responded to this piece. Many of them realised that writers are not alone in living a life of imagination. One essay, inspired also by the starfield pictured in piece five (Warped space), told of a woman who watched the same star as her husband while they were
separated by war. Those candidates who took the cue to discuss art and its production often described the work of filmmakers.

Another approach was to write in the voice of an author who overcomes writer’s block by recording random thoughts until a shape and theme emerges. More frequently, this approach led to scripts containing fantasies of fame and fortune as a bestseller is born.

4. **Adams/Escher**

Piece four contains an adapted passage from Douglas Adams’s *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* describing a spatial paradox. It is paired with a print by M. C. Escher, who inspired this part of Adams’ novel.

Only about 3 per cent of candidates responded to this piece. A minority of the candidates knew the *Hitchhiker’s Guide* and approved of Adams’s humorous approach to the popularisation of philosophy and science.

Some saw the twisted house as similar to real situations. One script, informed by ideas from cultural theory, describes a breakdown in fixed boundaries between spaces and purposes caused by postmodern social change. Another recalls the crazy arrangement of his family’s house, which is much too small for its inhabitants and their belongings.

5. **Warped space**

Piece five consists of a narrative fragment suggesting a science-fiction tale about passing through a wormhole in space. This is illustrated by a graphical representation of the warping of the space/time fabric that occurs, in theoretical models, at a point of gravitational catastrophe. Scientifically minded candidates are cued to write expository prose on matters of quantum dimensions. Positioned close to the end of the wormhole is piece six (*First room*) with its strong image of birth. This strengthens the cue to write about emerging into a place of expansive horizons.

Candidates familiar with the book and the film of Arthur C. Clarke’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* recognised its elements in both pieces five and six. The monoliths that Clarke imagines being deposited within our solar system are called ‘sentinels’ in the original (1951) short story that preceded the novel, as are the entities placed as observers of the wormhole in piece five.

Among the 12 per cent of candidates who responded to this piece some submitted expositions of space science, usually of a high standard. Space fiction was, however, much more common. Some tales suffer from a lack of responsiveness, being set in ‘outer-space’ but failing to say something about space or to make use of specific elements of the stimulus material.

6. **First Room**

Piece six, an image of an unborn child, is captioned ‘First room’ and invites speculation on the room-like qualities of the womb or the womb-like properties of the spaces in which people feel secure or in transition. (The image is the ‘starchild’ that appears at the close of the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* where it represents the apotheosis of humanity into a new state of being.)

About 10 per cent of the sampled scripts responded to this piece. A popular choice was to narrate the experience of being born from the viewpoint of the foetus. One essay compared the birth of an
individual to the birth of the human spirit. A few candidates wrote on abortion or on theological matters, choices that tended to reduce their responsiveness to the theme of space.

7. **Queensland design**

Piece seven shows a section of a veranda that might come from any ‘Queenslander’ home, whether modest or expensive. Its floorboards are streaked by sunlight. The accompanying text cues candidates to write about future directions for such traditional elements of Queensland style. The material is aimed at those with views about architecture or who enjoy speculating about the shape (and the space) of ‘things to come’. While design-conscious people are targeted, almost all candidates would have experience of the state’s characteristic building styles.

About 8 per cent of candidates responded to this piece. Even the weaker scripts often present good descriptions of ‘Queenslander’ interiors. Many relate buildings to lifestyle and argue for architecture to be in tune with a sub-tropical climate. Despite the presence of Queenslander houses in urban as well as rural areas, candidates invariably saw them as embodying country values when they used this piece in association with piece eight.

8. **Ugly ... lovely**

Piece eight juxtaposes images of a crowded city and an empty plain. Its caption, ‘You find this ugly, I find it lovely’ is the refrain of the Kenneth Slessor poem, *William Street*, in which a bohemian affirms his preference for the seamy but vibrant inner city over respectable suburbia. In this material, however, a different contrast is suggested: namely, the perennial debate about the superiority of the city or of the bush. The image of the city is cropped in such a way as to denote crowded space and to exclude representations of other features of city life. Similarly, the country landscape is represented as spacious to the point of emptiness, with no emphasis on any specific rural activities. The grassy field is cut by a track, which may be read as the path to a ‘sea change’ escape from the city or else to an ‘urban drift’ escape from the country.

This was the most frequently chosen stimulus piece (used in about 30 per cent of scripts). Candidates who knew how to discuss urban planning put their knowledge to good use by explaining, for example, the infrastructure problems of growing populations in eastern Queensland. Most commonly, the scripts contrasted urban and rural living. Candidates told stories of relocating to or from the country or else mounted an argument in favour of one of the options.

Only about 10 per cent of scripts responding to this material mount a defence of urban life or show rural life as having problems such as under-servicing or the environmental impact of primary industries. About 60 per cent present the city in a bad light, often to an intemperate degree. Country people appear as rugged individualists while city dwellers are shown as robotic ciphers. Many scripts deplore ‘modern technological civilisation’ and imagine dystopic and apocalyptic futures. They frequently assume that Australia’s population is exploding and that nature will be replaced by planet-spanning cities. Scripts of this kind typically stray from the theme of space by piling up stereotypes of the city as polluted, crime-ridden and so on.

Because piece eight includes an image of a modernist skyline associated with big cities such as New York, some scripts mention the attack on the trade centre buildings. One evaluates the various proposals for building upon the ‘space’ formerly occupied by the towers.
9. **Howard Carter**

The words of Howard Carter, the archaeologist who excavated Tutankhamen’s tomb, are printed over an image illustrating his open-eyed awe at the sight of the treasures within. Asked by his financial backer, Lord Carnarvon, if he could see anything in the tomb, Carter replied: ‘Yes, wonderful things.’ An image of a doorway into a dark space with unknown contents is a cue to candidates to fill the unknown space with their own imaginative creations.

This piece was used by 9 per cent of candidates. Typical responses were in the form of adventure stories in which tomb raiders kill each other for the treasure or become locked in a labyrinth. Aspiring Egyptologists recognised the source of the text and at least one wrote about the ‘curse’ that Carter’s party supposedly suffered. Others who recognised an Egyptian reference in this piece combined it with the wormhole from piece five to produce variations on the television series *Stargate SG1*, in which Egyptian relics open wormholes to other planets. These were not the only scripts that struggled to invent supernatural phenomenon to answer the mystery.

As was the case with the formal language of piece one (*Iroquois*), the mention of nobility (‘Lord’) was enough to spur candidates to tell stories of medieval lords and ladies. The popularity of fantasy fiction (including role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*), invariably with feudal settings, perhaps explains this tendency.

10. **Folding car**

Cars are undoubtedly relevant to the concerns of young adults, and many are specifically attracted to technical aspects of cars. This material is comprised of a ‘before and after’ picture of a novelty car capable of folding to fit a parking space, and a text extolling its virtues. It invites responses about this particular car or, by extension, about any innovations in automobile design and construction or about the trend to miniaturisation of appliances.

This piece attracted 10 per cent of responses. Its accessibility meant that even some of the weakest writers were able to produce creditable responses, usually in the form of ‘infomercials’ or motor magazine articles. The problem for which the car is a (questionable!) solution is that of traffic congestion and so many scripts used this piece in conjunction with piece 8.

**Performance**

Candidates this year performed similarly to those of last year in all aspects. More careful planning and revision could have improved many scripts, because it is in this stage that the writer can focus on the script as a whole. Each constituent aspect of writing, as defined by the marking scheme, must be handled well to produce a good script.

**Responsiveness**

Responsiveness is the extent to which a script conveys the theme-concept of the testpaper (*space*) by developing and transforming some part of the stimulus material on the testpaper. A number of candidates responded to a piece of stimulus but failed to relate it to space. Piece six (*First room*), for example, inspired writing about pregnancy but this topic in itself has nothing to do with space. A less common error is the reverse of the first: some scripts discuss the function of space but make no reference to any stimulus material.
Candidates in 2002 were less inclined to waste words (and annoy markers) by transcribing the texts of the stimulus material. The text of piece nine (Howard Carter) was most frequently copied, but usually it immediately introduces the candidate’s own words. When the shorter pieces of text are quoted they are better integrated into the writing.

**Grammar, spelling and punctuation**

Grammar, spelling and punctuation are marked hierarchically, so that grammar is more important than spelling, which is more important than punctuation. For good grades, a script must use these basics of writing in such a way as to be accurate but also to make the script as a whole more effective in its communicative purpose.

Errors of tense and of revision were most noticeable. Many scripts in the form of stories begin in the present tense but jump into past tense. Careless redrafting and revision was evident in scripts containing errors that were not chronic throughout, but merely overlooked.

**Central idea**

Central idea is marked according to how well a script remains focused on (but also develops) its own unique message over the length of the script.

Many of the weaker argumentative scripts fail to find their true central idea. In response to piece eight, for example, such candidates *widened* the topic of urban and rural perceptions to make assertions about ‘technological civilisation’ where they should have *narrowed* it to some feature of the original stimulus.

**Structure and sequencing**

It is possible for a script to have a unifying central idea, and yet to be disorganised in its presentation. The content of a joke, for instance, is not changed if its punch line is told first, but its effectiveness is destroyed. Candidates in 2002 showed an improvement in this aspect but there is scope for better use of established conventions for structuring prose.

**Vocabulary**

Precise and well-chosen words arrest attention and boost the power of writing. The exact word for an idea can often replace a less effective phrase. Simplicity and a lack of pretension are hallmarks of good writing, but this does not override the value of precision of expression. Markers can only give grades for achievement in vocabulary if candidates put their vocabularies on show.

Candidates tended to use words that were ‘near enough’ to the meaning without striving to make discriminating and effective word choices. This was less the case, however, with the scripts responding to piece 10 (*Folding car*). These candidates often had a genuine interest in cars and tended to use the specialist vocabularies associated with motoring magazines and car ‘culture.’

**Length**

The ability to write to a word limit is part of the skill of organising and composing prose. It means, for example, that candidates must select a central idea and a form or style of writing that will fit comfortably into the allowed length.
**Form or style**

The testpaper gives candidates a list of writing suggestions: ‘argument, literary criticism, speech, book review …’ and so on. The list is intended to stimulate, not prescribe. Fiction, for example, is not mentioned, but 40 per cent of the sampled scripts are written in this form. Another 40 per cent use the more academic genres of exposition and argument (including persuasive argument). Personal reflections account for about 10 per cent and media articles, speeches, and letters for the remainder.

Candidates who wrote fiction usually showed a love for storytelling. Too many stories, however, rush towards the death of all concerned or end abruptly with the narrator waking from a dream. Such immature strategies are not ‘wrong’ in themselves but often indicate loose planning.

Amateur yarn-spinners often retell stories from books, television or films. When a WT script uses the content of some other text it runs the risk of being unfocused and unresponsive to the testpaper. Candidates are best advised to ‘brainstorm’ ideas from a range of sources and to compose an essay specifically aimed at the material on the testpaper.

**Criteria and standards schema for marking**

The criteria and standards schema is reproduced overleaf. It features an undivided set of five substantive criteria (central idea; vocabulary; responsiveness to the testpaper; grammar, spelling, punctuation; structure and sequencing) plus length.

Each script receives a minimum of three markings. Each marker provides four criteria-based, holistic grades or three holistic grades plus a judgment of length. Different mixes of the six criteria are, therefore, marked during each of the three readings.

Trade-offs regarding a script’s strengths and weaknesses are made to grade the script as a whole. In making these trade-offs, each marker gives greater weight to the criteria on which they are focusing.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CENTRAL IDEA</th>
<th>VOCABULARY</th>
<th>RESPONSIVENESS</th>
<th>GRAMMAR, SPELLING &amp; PUNCTUATION</th>
<th>STRUCTURING &amp; SEQUENCING</th>
<th>LENGTH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The writing demonstrates a deliberate and well-focused development of a central idea (explicit or implicit).</td>
<td>The writing demonstrates a use of words exactly fitted to their location and effect in the response (the right words in the right places).</td>
<td>The writing shows sensitivities to nuances of written and visual texts in the stimulus material.</td>
<td>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, dangling participles, antecedent agreement, pronoun choice, tense etc.; correct spelling; correct punctuation.</td>
<td>The writing demonstrates a planned structuring of extended written text and deliberate sequencing of ideas and images for effect.</td>
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<td><strong>1</strong></td>
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<td>Fluent (transition, flow, continuity, linkages) flexible (variation of arrangements of words in phrases, sentences, paragraphs) logical or deliberate weaving of thought (whichever is applicable).</td>
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<td><strong>2</strong></td>
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<td>Weaknesses in structuring and sequencing evident</td>
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<td>Weaknesses in structuring and sequencing evident</td>
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<td>Incoherent</td>
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Distribution of coded (uncalibrated) marks when greater weight is given to a particular criterion

Central idea

Grammar, spelling, punctuation

Vocabulary

Responsiveness

Structure and sequencing
Selected candidate responses
The collection comprises the scripts of candidate responses from the 2002 Writing Task subtest.

These complete scripts appear in their original handwritten form. Some contain errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar and, in some cases, factual inaccuracies, but the QSA has published them as they were written for the sake of authenticity.

The Authority is not expressing a preference for any particular form of writing through its selection of examples, nor are the sentiments expressed in these examples necessarily endorsed by the QSA.

The examples that follow met the standards for successful writing as defined by the criteria and standards schema used in the marking of the Writing Task.

Each script was holistically marked three times by three different markers working independently. Therefore, a successful piece of writing may be less than perfect on any single aspect.

Before publication the QSA attempted to establish, but cannot guarantee, the originality of candidates’ scripts.

It is probably worth noting that the selected scripts have some added features in common, other than having all been rated highly by markers. The scripts have an immediacy that is the evident result of a direct response to the stimulus material. In being open to what the stimulus material offers, candidates have been able to sustain the reader’s interest throughout and have been rewarded accordingly.
The Blank Canvas

There is no sight that tortures an artist more than that of a blank canvas. Keran leaned against the wall of his small apartment, thoughtfully chewing his pencil and staring at the white space in front of him. From the street below he heard tires screech and cars honk their horns. The noise of the city had repeatedly broken his concentration and he struggled to envision the white canvas as something more. He closed his eyes, breathed out, and mentally created his artwork.

He had only seen the subject the day before, but his memory was already changing. Driving home from the airport he had attempted to escape the peak hour traffic and travelled home along a further route around the city. That was when he saw it. The freshly mown lawn seemed to glow under the sunset, leading a glimmering trail to the front door. The garden that circled the house was filled with flowers and plants of all colours.

The building itself was a wonder to behold, and the fact that it was single level was what amazed Keran. There was no need to squash together or be confined and compacted. It had every room spread out over the land, like the house itself was bathing in the sun. Keran
knew that you could live in that house and completely forget that a bustling metropolis was only ten minutes away. Keran could hear the neighbours screaming at each other, and a television blared in the room above. Across the road a car alarm went off, and he could feel the vision of the dream house slip away. He tried to think about the five gum trees that lined the side fence like soldiers standing guard. He could no longer create the details in his mind of the wooden verandah, the gray boulders beside the driveway or the innocent expression on the golden retriever that lay on it's back in the garden and stared at the sky.

Keran felt the blank space plead with him, waiting for his move. He raised his pencil to the board and touched it lightly. He felt nothing. He had nowhere to go. A garbage truck entered his street and in frustration Keran picked up the canvas and thrust it into the window frame as an attempt to reduce the amount of noise that intruded into his home.

With the only window in his small apartment covered, Keran was surrounded by darkness. The only illuminated object was the canvas. The blank space appeared to swirl and swell as car headlights passed. Keran's mind seemed to explode. He desperately felt around in the dark till his hands closed around
a pocket knife. He slid the blade out of its holder and without thought, he slid it through the canvas. The ripping noise made him smile, and the light A beam of light broke through the hole and landed on his chest. He continued to tear the canvas. He smiled at the ripping noise and the lights lit up his teeth.

The frame of the blank canvas sat in the open window with the remains of material blowing with the breeze. Keran stood back and studied his masterpiece. The space where the blank canvas had been tormenting him from was now full of colour and light. The canvas showed the image of his world. There was the glow of the neon signs, the desperation of the homeless people on the streets, the message of the youth written in graffiti on the walls of the buildings and the overall presence of people that filled everything around him.

Keran picked up his camera and stood back. He raised it to his eye, set the focus, smiled and pressed the button.
Response No. 2

SPACE AND SELF-ESTEEM

Everywhere in the New World there are native peoples who have fought for the land they hold sacred to be returned to them. Native Americans, Australian Aborigines, Maoris, Aztecs and Incas were all dispossessed of their land by European invaders; but they have met with little sympathy from authorities, which are usually predominantly or entirely made up of members of the ethnic group of the European power that took the land from their ancestors. In Australia, the Mabo decision blazed a trail for Native Title as it formally decided that Australia had Aboriginal inhabitants before it was discovered and settled by the British.

Aborigines were systematically murdered, tortured or imprisoned, and had their land forcibly removed from them. Native Americans were moved to reservations which became symbols for the thoughtless and callous attitudes that the British had for these people. Incas and Aztecs witnessed their statues being melted, their kings held to ransom for literally tons of gold, and their written history burned to ashes.

Today, all native peoples have a higher per capita crime rate than their country’s European-descendant majority. They tend to live in lower socioeconomic situations, have lower rates of education, literacy, health and life expectancy, and much higher unemployment. Who else can be blamed for all this but the European power that overtook them?
In Australia, there has been fierce debate over Native Title. Strangely, most people who oppose it also want Aborigines to stop committing crimes and heighten their own standard of living. They think that there is perhaps some other reason why, other than the historic dispossession of their land, that causes their low standard of life, but the fundamental truth always remains that Aborigines, as a people, have a low self-esteem, caused by lacking a sense of belonging to the land and space they hold sacred. Most opponents of Native Title would not like their own homes taken from them under threat of death, but do not believe that Aborigines feel the same way, and that a sense of belonging to a particular space is absolutely vital to a people’s self-esteem, as individuals and as a society.

Native Title is a step in the direction of repaying all native peoples for the wrongs committed against them—for murdering them, infecting them with smallpox, and destroying their culture and way of life. An apology from representatives of the governments that committed countless atrocities against them would be an even more historic leap.

When native peoples were the only peoples in their particular space with which they identified, they felt that they belonged to the land, not that the land belonged to them. Today, an adoption of Western values of ownership has been
necessary. The language of capitalism says that you must earn your own space, then you may call it your own. Perhaps the Aboriginal translation of this could be that they have earned spaces they may call their own through death, torture and sorrow.

It is their land, their space, and native peoples should not have to earn it or be seen to deserve it. Native peoples have always been and always will be part of the land they hold sacred, and as soon as this is recognised, self-esteem as a people will flourish, self-respect will return, and society will be thankful that authorities understood how vital it is to be able to call a space we hold to be sacred our own.
Response No. 3

So Long, and Thanks for all the Fish

In the last five years, humanity has suffered many losses to its space program. The bacterial life found on Mars, which sent the scientific world into an excited frenzy and gave the world a renewed fascination with the cosmos, turned out to be a scientific mistake. The latest Mars probe was reduced to a charred heap of scrap metal when somebody at NASA confused the metric and decimal measurement systems. However, while “science fact” suffered many such blows, Science Fiction provided, to many, the greatest loss of all. In May 2001, author Douglas Adams died of a heart attack at the relatively early age of 49. With his most famous book, The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, Adams sparked a creative flame in the minds of numerous readers around the world, making the infinite, barren, and mathematically-driven universe a humorous, interesting, and above all, enjoyable place.

The Hitchhiker’s “trilogy” (consisting, confusingly enough, of five books) began with protagonist Arthur Dent, a timid and mild-mannered Englishman trying to stop his house being demolished in order to make way for a highway bypass. Ironically, Earth is demolished the same day to make way for an interstellar bypass. Dent manages to catch a lift off planet just in time with his friend Ford Prefect, whom he discovers is an alien from the planet Betelgeuse. He is consequently (and unwillingly) propelled into a galaxy of confusion and general quickness. While few would dispute that space is not a highly fascinating area, Adams made it much more interesting to the less scientifically inclined through several methods.

Space, in its infinite proportions, is viewed by many with an almost reverent seriousness. Adams’ greatest service to science was to fill it with a variety of bizarre creatures and concepts, making it much more lighthearted and accessible. Mankind has always longed to discover intelligent life elsewhere in the universe. This ambition is trivialized when the first contact alien species the reader meets is not only unpleasant, but also has a tendency to write awful poetry. For most life forms, interstellar communication is achieved by a special breed of fish in one’s ear. This fish somehow translates incoherent foreign speech into coherent thought. Scientists have often considered how such
communication could be achieved should such a situation arise. By solving the
hypothetical dilemma with such an absurd idea, "the reader is more comfortable
with the problems of the universe."

Few will dispute the notion that the universe can be immensely confusing.
Rather than toning down this factor, Adams opted to increase it. We perceive the
world in three dimensions, some consider time to be the fourth dimension. Adams
introduced a fifth: probability. The spaceship "Heart of Gold" features an infinite
improbability drive, which performs actions based on the level of probability it
is set to. (In one instance, it turns to pursuing missiles into a whole
and a bowl of pheasants.) Later in the series, a more advanced engine is introduced.
It is powered off restaurant bills, which are universally recognized to feature
the most complex and confusing mathematics known to man. However, the strangest
statement of the universe's confusing nature comes from the story of Deep
Thought. This superintelligent computer took seven million years to discover the
answer to "the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything." The answer?
Forty-two. By sending up the universe's complexity, Adams helps the reader take it for granted. Thus, no longer seems so overwhelming; or
rather, the overwhelming becomes more acceptable.

Indeed, Adams' ability to describe the impossible-to-describe is a major
drawcard for his work. In one scene Arthur Dent visits a house that is inside-
out. The standard internal features are on the outside, while the inside
encloses the outside view. The fact that this view includes an entire beach
and ocean is described as having M.C. Escher "frowning and wondering how it
was done." However, Adams' greatest achievement was not to exploit the
inadequacies of space and physics, but those of Earth itself.

At the end of the second novel, Dent discovers that all of humanity is descended
from the passengers of a ship which crash-landed on the planet. This ship contained all
the "ideal" members of a society on another planet, such as jayggers, salesmen, documentary
makers and telephone salesmen. They were tricked into leaving by the rest of the population
to escape a nonexistent cosmic threat. Furthermore, it is revealed that nice
were the most intelligent species on the planet; putting up with all the scientific texts was simply part of their mysterious grand plan. Dolphins were the second-smartest species. Shortly before the Earth's destruction they disappeared, leaving one final message. This message has all but become the author's informal epitaph: “So long, and thanks for all the fish.”

Douglas Adams will mostly be remembered for his unique sense of humour. However, he has also performed a great favour for science. To many, space is no longer confusing or overwhelming. It is a world where everyday household implements are patronizingly cheerful and tentative; a world where torture is favourable next to vegan poetry; a world ruled by an insane hermit who is not aware he controls the known universe, and whose entire meaning can be summarized by the number forty-two. Neil Armstrong may embody heroic space exploration, but Douglas Adams made space entertaining.