



Course report 2024

Higher Drama

This report provides information on candidates' performance. Teachers, lecturers and assessors may find it useful when preparing candidates for future assessment. The report is intended to be constructive and informative, and to promote better understanding. You should read the report with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

We compiled the statistics in this report before we completed the 2024 appeals process.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2023: 2,557

Number of resulted entries in 2024: 2,678

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	817	Percentage	30.5	Cumulative percentage	30.5	Minimum mark required	70
B	Number of candidates	782	Percentage	29.2	Cumulative percentage	59.7	Minimum mark required	60
C	Number of candidates	619	Percentage	23.1	Cumulative percentage	82.8	Minimum mark required	50
D	Number of candidates	317	Percentage	11.8	Cumulative percentage	94.7	Minimum mark required	40
No award	Number of candidates	143	Percentage	5.3	Cumulative percentage	100	Minimum mark required	N/A

We have not applied rounding to these statistics.

You can read the general commentary on grade boundaries in the appendix.

In this report:

- ◆ 'most' means greater than 70%
- ◆ 'many' means 50% to 69%
- ◆ 'some' means 25% to 49%
- ◆ 'a few' means less than 25%

You can find statistical reports on the [statistics and information](#) page of our website.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Question paper

The choice of questions in section 1 provided opportunities for candidates to analyse their chosen text from a range of focused areas, such as:

- ◆ moments of conflict
- ◆ moments that are essential to the plot
- ◆ aspects of a character's personality
- ◆ moments when a character communicates the genre
- ◆ changes in time and/or location
- ◆ themes and/or issues

The questions were sufficiently challenging to enable candidates to demonstrate knowledge of their selected text and knowledge of the theoretical skill of either a director, actor or designer.

The compulsory question in section 2 required candidates to consider a key relationship between two characters in their selected text and how they would, as a director, consider using movement skills and stage positioning. It also asked them to consider, as an actor, how they would use their voice skills.

Section 3 required candidates to analyse either the style of a performance or the key moments of a performance. Candidates responded on live performances as well as recordings of live performances.

Feedback from the marking team and teachers and lecturers suggested that the question paper was fair and accessible. This component performed as expected and overall has improved.

Performance

Feedback from visiting assessors highlighted that almost all candidates were well prepared for this assessment and performed from a wide variety of plays, both classic and contemporary.

This component performed as expected.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper

Overall, there has been an improvement in the structure that candidates are using for both the extended responses in section 1 — theatre production: text in context and in section 3 — performance analysis. This allowed markers to easily identify where marks could be given for each response.

Section 1, question 2: Candidates who identified moments that were essential to the plot in their text performed well when supporting it with appropriate textual references. Many candidates successfully described the ways in which, as a director, they would highlight these essential plot moments to an audience through effective directing of their actors.

Section 1, question 3: This was the second most popular question in this section and in the paper overall. Candidates who identified five aspects of a character's personality in their text performed well when supporting it with appropriate textual references. Many candidates successfully described the ways in which, as an actor, they would communicate these aspects of personality to an audience through effective acting concepts, describing in detail, with the correct terminology, the voice and movement they would use.

Section 1, question 4: Candidates who identified moments where a character communicated the genre in their text performed well when supporting them with appropriate textual references. Many candidates successfully described the ways in which, as an actor, they would communicate the genre to an audience through effective acting concepts, describing in detail, with the correct terminology, the voice and movement they would use.

Section 2, question 7(a): Candidates found this question accessible and were able to correctly identify and describe a key relationship.

Section 2, question 7(c): Candidates found this question accessible and were able to access marks by describing voice skills they would use and by using correct terminology when doing so.

Section 3, question 9: Question 9 was the most popular question. Candidates who had accessed appropriate, quality performances were able to write detailed analysis and expressed their appreciation for the performance seen. Some candidates showed evidence of good practice in reading reviews and watching interviews with directors and actors, which helped to support their overall analysis. They were also able to use correct terminology when describing performance concepts in detail.

Performance

Most candidates enjoyed the opportunity to present their work to an audience and the visiting assessor.

Acting

As in the past, this was the most popular choice of specialism. The most successful candidates were fully prepared and cast in suitably challenging roles. They created credible characters and there were some outstanding performances.

Directing

Candidates who were enthusiastic about their chosen play, and knew the whole play, were able to engage their actors with their enthusiasm and knowledge. This, coupled with having a clear directorial vision or concept, allowed them to perform well when they gave concise direction using correct theatre terminology. These candidates were also aware of their timings and ensured that they allowed sufficient time for a complete run through.

Design

Candidates performed well when they had created an imaginative design concept for the whole play, and this was coherent in both their set design and additional production role. Their success was also due to their designs and justifications being rooted in textual clues. These candidates produced ground plans and elevations for every change of scene or act. The elevations gave an impression of the set from the audience's point of view and suggested colour, texture and height that was viable for their chosen venue. Successful candidates also presented full and detailed paperwork for their additional production role and demonstrated knowledge and creativity in the application of their skills. There has been an increase in the use of technology in final presentations.

Preparation for performance

Candidates were very well prepared for this section. Candidates performed well when they had clearly researched their plays and this research was used to inform their roles. Many achieved high marks while adhering to the 500-word guidance.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper

Section 1, question 1: This question was a popular choice however, unfortunately candidates did not read the whole question properly. This meant that whilst some candidates were accessing marks for the first part of the question, they assumed that the second part of the question was about using directing concepts. This was in fact incorrect, and candidates were asked about rehearsal techniques. Where the candidates did read the question properly, they often didn't provide the level of detail required for the second part. Often, they listed rehearsal techniques and did not explain these or offer why they would have been useful to explore the moments of conflict.

Section 1, questions 5 and 6: These were the least popular choice of questions in this section. The candidates that attempted these questions, accessed marks in the first part of

the question when supporting their answers with appropriate textual references. Some candidates, however, were unable to successfully describe the ways in which, as a designer, they would use their design skills. Their answers often lacked in terminology and were too vague.

Section 2, question 7(b): Some candidates did not use correct stage terminology and were vague in their direction. In describing character's proxemics, candidates lacked detail explaining where they were on the stage in relation to one another.

Section 3, questions 8 and 9: Whilst there has most definitely been an improvement in this section, many candidates are still providing a narrative response to what they have seen, rather than an analysis of the production. They also often lacked theatre terminology or gave a general overview of a scene, rather than breaking down what the director, actor or designer actually did and what they were trying to achieve. Many candidates did not manage their time well overall. Candidates need to practice timed responses and, in some cases, candidates did not start their performance analysis response in section 3.

Performance

Acting

Some candidates performed poorly when their extracts were too short to demonstrate a full range of skills. Equally, some candidates presented extracts that were too long, making it more of a challenge to fully sustain the character. Candidates also performed poorly when centres had asked all candidates to perform from the same text, as this did not play to individual strengths, and often scenes were repeated and with the same blocking.

Candidates also performed poorly when they had a text that was not challenging enough for Higher and so these candidates were sometimes given roles that did not have enough to perform or roles that were not complex enough. Sometimes candidates were performing multiple roles, and this did not allow them to fully sustain a character.

Directing

Some candidates did not perform well as they did not have a clear directorial concept and they spent time telling their cast the plot rather than their vision. Some candidates used little to no terminology when directing their actors and allowed the actors to use their instincts rather than following clear direction.

Design

Some candidates did not design the set and their additional production role for the whole play. They presented only some scenes or extracts that had been acted out. This meant that they did not perform well, as they were missing many aspects of the design process. An example of this is only designing a few key costumes instead of all costumes required for the whole play, including costume changes.

Some candidates did not present a clear and imaginative design concept or fully support their ideas with textual references. Some candidates did not design for a chosen venue. Some candidates had also prepared incorrectly in that they designed a set for one play and their other production area, for a different text completely.

Preparation for performance

Some candidates well exceeded the 500-word guidance. This is unnecessary, as they can gain full marks without going over the word count. A review that significantly exceeds this recommended length becomes self-penalising as it is not considered to be concise and therefore cannot access the top range of marks (9 to 10).

Some acting candidates spent a great deal of time communicating the rehearsal techniques they used, and this was unnecessary. Some candidates are not detailing the research that they carried out and most importantly how this helped them to inform their role.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper

Section 1

When candidates have a sound knowledge of the whole play, along with an understanding of the social, historical, and theatrical context of the play, and have learned a range of quotations and/or stage directions, they have a strong basis for success in this section of the question paper. Essay-writing skills should be an integral part of teaching and learning, as this helps candidates to answer the question asked, and not the question they wish they were asked.

Candidates should have a clear structure for their responses. They should be encouraged to scaffold their responses to address the first part of the question with relevant quotations and/or stage directions. It is good practice for candidates to address the second part of the question at this point, so that they can link it to the first part of the response. It is useful if candidates underline key words in the question they are attempting and then use these words throughout their response to demonstrate that they are clearly answering the question asked.

Teachers and lecturers should continue to ensure candidates understand drama literacy and how to use it, coupled with the correct terminology associated with the roles of a director, an actor or a designer.

Popular texts for sections 1 and 2 of the question paper in 2024 were *The Crucible*, *Antigone* (various translations), *Lovers*, *A Taste of Honey*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and *Men Should Weep*. In addition, some candidates responded on *Angels in America*, *Medea*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, *An Inspector Calls*, and *The Grain in the Blood*. A full list of recommended texts can be found in the [Higher Drama Course Specification](#), appendix 3.

Section 2

To access the full range of marks in this section, candidates need to have a good understanding of drama terminology and be able to use the appropriate adjective. Candidates do well when they have a clear understanding of the roles of actor, director and designer. There is established vocabulary associated with these roles and teachers and lecturers should teach this in conjunction with the candidate's selected text. The Higher Drama lexicon can be found in the [Higher Drama Course Specification](#), appendix 2.

Section 3

When candidates have the opportunity to experience appropriate, quality professional productions, it can provide a basis for a successful performance analysis. This can be through theatre visits, live streaming, free school broadcasts or recordings of live performances. When candidates have a sound drama vocabulary, in all aspects of theatre production, and can use this effectively in their analysis, they have a strong basis for success in this section.

Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to extend their knowledge of a theatre production by researching theatre reviews and interviews with actors and directors, to develop an understanding of the theatre-making process.

It is good practice for candidates to state the name of the production and when and where they saw it at the beginning of their response. As the four production areas are consistent within the two questions, this should enable candidates to engage with the whole production and write about several moments, instead of using the same moment. This will ensure candidates can access the full range of marks within the section.

In section 3, popular performances this year were Tally's Blood, Moorcroft, Mina's Reckoning, 2:22, Frankenstein, Yerma, Julie, Medea, A Streetcar Named Desire, Small Island, Jekyll and Hyde, and The Ocean at the End of the Lane.

Candidates should practise timed essays to prepare them for the question paper. The suggested timings for the question paper are:

Section 1: 1 hour

Section 2: 30 minutes

Section 3: 1 hour

Performance

Teachers and lecturers should use the textual clues, for acting, design and directing, to support candidates' understanding of the play or plays that they are using for their performance.

When centres introduce a wide variety of plays that are appropriate for Higher level, they give candidates an opportunity to meaningfully engage with the work. Candidates respond with enthusiasm and give successful performances.

Acting

Successful candidates perform extracts from plays that interest them, suit their talents and are of the appropriate challenge for Higher level. They know and understand the whole text and are cast in roles that give them enough to do. Candidates should be well-rehearsed in both roles and completely confident in their lines, so they can explore the nuances and subtext of their extract. Extras who are not being assessed should, as far as possible, be well-rehearsed so that they establish believable interaction and complex relationships with the candidate or candidates being assessed.

Teachers and lecturers should ensure that candidates perform the character as the playwright originally intended, to ensure the application of the marking criteria will be both fair and consistent.

Candidates have the option to choose roles that are the same as, or different from, the gender they identify with. It is important to note, however, that the textual clues that make up the character they want to play (age, personality etc) must be adhered to. The gender and names of the characters within the play must not be changed, as this will affect the context

and viewing of the play, and what the playwright intended. Teachers and lecturers should support candidates in casting the most appropriate role for their performance assessment.

Some centres are still using the same text for all actors in at least one of their roles. This results in repetition of the same scene, often with the same blocking. This can mean that candidates are not in a role that suits their aptitude and talent. Some extracts are too short and do not give the candidate the opportunity to demonstrate a full range of skills. Some extracts are too long, making it difficult for the candidate to sustain the character. Ensemble pieces, with more than four characters, can mean that candidates do not have enough individual input to access the marks.

Teachers and lecturers must ensure that they provide an appropriate audience for the performance acting pieces. They should avoid introducing and explaining each piece to the audience and be mindful that this is the official SQA performance assessment. Candidates must introduce themselves and the role they are playing.

Directing

Successful directors know and understand the whole text. They understand the characters' motivation and relationships, and the themes and issues the text explores. They have a clear directorial concept. Successful directors are good communicators, good managers, good leaders, and they inspire their actors. They have good timekeeping skills and pace the rehearsal, keeping a good balance between explaining and exploring their concept and directing their actors in terms of voice, movement and use of space. They must use drama terminology as far as possible, such as the areas of the stage, as well as for voice and movement.

It is not advisable to have directors directing actors who are performing the same scene for their own assessment. This is because the actor will have developed their own acting concepts and the director will not have enough to do, or the actors can end up directing the extract instead.

Design

Successful design candidates not only know and understand the whole text, but they also design for the whole text. Set designs should include ground plans and elevations for every change of scene or location and these must be viable in their chosen venue. Designs should be detailed, and candidates should understand how they could translate into practice. Designs for the additional production role should be for the whole text and demonstrate skill appropriate to Higher level.

Candidates must produce detailed cue sheets and/or labelled designs related to the text. Textual references from the play should be used to support design decisions. It is good practice for candidates to rehearse their presentation. The presentation should last approximately 20 minutes, including time for candidates to demonstrate their additional production role.

At Higher level, it is not advisable for designers to design for one of the acting pieces being assessed. It could restrict the candidate's creativity and originality.

For design and directing candidates, centres must ensure that it is only the visiting assessor and candidate who are present during the assessment: the teacher, or any other individual, should not be present. Any recording equipment must be set up and started before the assessment commences.

Preparation for performance

It is good practice for candidates to word process these and they should state their word count. This allows the candidate to be more succinct and adhere to the 500-word guidance. Candidates should concentrate on describing the results of their research and the ways that this helped to inform their role.

Centres must provide the visiting assessors with a private, quiet space away from the candidates to mark the preparation for performances, this must not be a space such as a staffroom where others are coming and going. This slows down the process.

Centres should ensure they have completed all mark sheets before the visiting assessor arrives, and this includes filling in the back with the character roles. It is good practice to provide your visiting assessor with a running order for the day.

Appendix: general commentary on grade boundaries

SQA's main aim when setting grade boundaries is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

For most National Courses, SQA aims to set examinations and other external assessments and create marking instructions that allow:

- ◆ a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional grade C boundary)
- ◆ a well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional grade A boundary)

It is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject, at every level. Therefore, SQA holds a grade boundary meeting for each course to bring together all the information available (statistical and qualitative) and to make final decisions on grade boundaries based on this information. Members of SQA's Executive Management Team normally chair these meetings.

Principal assessors utilise their subject expertise to evaluate the performance of the assessment and propose suitable grade boundaries based on the full range of evidence. SQA can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the discussion at these meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more, or less, difficult than usual.

- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more difficult than usual.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been less difficult than usual.
- ◆ Where levels of difficulty are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

Every year, we evaluate the performance of our assessments in a fair way, while ensuring standards are maintained so that our qualifications remain credible. To do this, we measure evidence of candidates' knowledge and skills against the national standard.

During the pandemic, we modified National Qualifications course assessments, for example we removed elements of coursework. We kept these modifications in place until the 2022–23 session. The education community agreed that retaining the modifications for longer than this could have a detrimental impact on learning and progression to the next stage of education, employment or training. After discussions with candidates, teachers, lecturers, parents, carers and others, we returned to full course assessment for the 2023–24 session.

SQA's approach to awarding was announced in [March 2024](#) and explained that any impact on candidates completing coursework for the first time, as part of their SQA assessments, would be considered in our grading decisions and incorporated into our well-established

grading processes. This provides fairness and safeguards for candidates and helps to provide assurances across the wider education community as we return to established awarding.

Our approach to awarding is broadly aligned to other nations of the UK that have returned to normal grading arrangements.

For full details of the approach, please refer to the [National Qualifications 2024 Awarding — Methodology Report](#).