

Classical Studies

2014 Chief Assessor’s Report

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## Overview

Chief Assessors’ reports give an overview of how students performed in their school and external assessments in relation to the learning requirements, assessment design criteria, and performance standards set out in the relevant subject outline. They provide information and advice regarding the assessment types, the application of the performance standards in school and external assessments, the quality of student performance, and any relevant statistical information.

## School Assessment

Assessment Type 1: Folio

Knowledge and understanding in particular were great strengths across the folio samples. When tasks were designed in ways to support students in making links to the wider social, religious, cultural, and economic contexts of the classical world, then students were able to demonstrate their factual knowledge and reflect on the bigger picture of the people and society at the time. These aspects were presented well across the folio pieces. It was a delight for the moderators to acknowledge the obvious enjoyment and enthusiasm of students for the subject.

The following discussion concerns how students provided evidence of their learning in relation to each of the assessment design criteria.

Knowledge and Understanding

Knowledge and understanding was generally clearly in evidence. Pleasingly, most students demonstrated a solid understanding of the texts, individuals, groups, and institutions studied throughout the year. Please note that, even though the categories of texts, individuals, groups, and so on are listed in the subject outline, not all have to be studied and reported on in student answers. Specific feature KU1 of the assessment design criteria refers to ‘understanding of *selected* texts’ (emphasis added). Accurate factual knowledge was widely shown, but the critical understanding and discerning selection and application of that knowledge tended to be missing or underdeveloped in many pieces.

Reflection on the diversity of attitudes, beliefs, and values is easier in some topics than others, and there tends to be a lack of this recognition in the literature section. Encouraging students to reflect on multiple readings and therefore on the values represented in the text should help. In less successful folios, the Greek society topic was also not well handled. For example, discussion of women often ignored the impact of the status group, or students were able to discuss the obvious differences between Sparta and Athens but not the more subtle ones.

Research and Analysis

Although many folio pieces were well researched, moderators commented with some concern on the overall decline in quality sources used. Internet sources in particular were often generic and non-academic in nature. Teacher guidance in locating and using appropriate digital sources would help, as would task design that explicitly encourages the use of both primary and secondary sources, especially for Section B topics. Whenever appropriate, students should be encouraged to consult the original primary sources, rather than relying on extracts of these sources in other secondary sources.

While the critical analysis and synthesis of, and reflection on, research proved to be challenging for many students, it was a concern to moderators that some teachers incorporated it into task design only once, or, in some cases, not at all. The folio is the appropriate assessment type to promote these skills. Teachers need to more carefully consider the wording of tasks in order to encourage analysis, and to consider the explicit scaffolding and development of the skills needed for students to critically analyse, synthesise, and reflect.

The recognition and application of relevant terms, concepts, and skills was far more competently handled, in the main. It is obvious that teachers are effectively introducing the topic-specific terminology to their students, and language for the Greek epic topic was used with particular competence. Technical terms were missing in some tasks that were awarded high grades. Students need to be able to use the terms from the subject outline deftly and precisely to confidently achieve the A grade range.

The samples presented highlighted clear attempts at the definition and development of a point of view. It was encouraging to see some students being able to move beyond plot or recount to formulate a point of view where the task supported them to do so. Again, the importance of task design is particularly evident for this specific feature. The development of a point of view for some Section A (Literature) tasks would have been enhanced by the greater use of, and commentary on, quotations as evidence.

Communication

Across all folio pieces, communication of informed argument was generally solid, with students displaying evidence of argument at varyingly levels of sophistication and consistent attempts at using examples to support ideas. Many of the history responses, however, did not make sufficient use of in-text references, especially primary sources like Herodotus, to support their contentions.

The integration and acknowledgment of source material was generally well handled in the folio tasks which required this. The smooth integration of quotations is improving in all responses, with the more sophisticated responses demonstrating this to a high degree. There remains some confusion over which method of acknowledgment of sources to use. Either footnoting or an author-date in-text system like the Harvard one is acceptable, but it is important that students adopt and use one system consistently and accurately.

There were many creative and clever folio tasks that provided students with the opportunity to engage with the spirit of the subject outline and demonstrate a variety of communication skills and range of forms. Where the task design did not allow this (for instance, by stipulations of essay format for most or all folio pieces), students were limited in the evidence they could produce. Some creative tasks did not as easily allow for evidence of research and analysis, so the task design needed to take that into consideration.

Assessment Type 2: Essays

The essay questions allowed a point of view to be developed, but some teachers gave students a choice of only one or two questions to respond to. Students usually benefit from having more options available.

When students are completing their essays, teachers need to ensure that the conditions stipulated in the subject outline are followed, particularly time allowance and test conditions. Practice in essay writing before the test is acceptable, but the final essay questions for each topic must remain unseen and completed in the 60‑minute time allowance. There was a mixture of written and typed answers; both are equally valid.

The following discussion concerns how students provided evidence of their learning in relation to each of the assessment design criteria.

Knowledge and Understanding

Knowledge of the various topics studied was clearly evident in the essays, with application of factual knowledge well handled. Unfortunately a clear understanding of this knowledge tended to be weaker. Students need to use evidence to show and reflect on an in-depth understanding of the texts and events. They also need to use more appropriate examples to address the nuances of the set task to show critical understanding and discerning selection.

Research and Analysis

The importance of task design is particularly evident in this performance standard. Consequently, teachers tend to address these performance standards in the folio rather than in the essays, particularly specific features RA1 and RA2. However, RA3 and RA4 can be applied in this assessment type more easily. Teachers should encourage their students to use the specific topic language and skills within their essays and indeed expect its correct usage in the higher grade bands. Most students were trying to construct an argument, but some of these arguments were poorly defined. Students need to ensure that they are clear about the argument they have chosen to present; necessitating careful planning before writing. The literature essays could be made stronger by making more specific references to the texts, rather than recounting chunks of narrative. Moderators commented that they would like to see direct quotations being used, particularly in reference to the literature topics.

Communication

While the overall standard of literacy is not as strong in this assessment type, teachers still need to be discerning and apply the performance standards when marking. Acknowledgment through referencing is more difficult in this assessment type and full details are not expected, but many students did well in naming the main sources of evidence, both primary and secondary, in their written work. The more capable responses were written in a clear and thoughtful manner, using appropriate examples.

## External Assessment

Assessment Type 3: Special Study

There was an interesting range of discussions and the choice of subjects showed students’ enthusiasm for their chosen topics. Expression was generally sound, and most students had some command of historiography, as well as some understanding of life in classical times. As always, all submissions had some knowledge and showed an ability to construct an argument, select appropriate supporting evidence, and source that evidence. Students have gained from this activity and have written sound special studies.

Some special studies definitely showed the positive influence of the Research Project in their careful use of valid sites for obtaining information. However in some cases the students set their work out like a Research Project folio, spending time discussing what they were aiming for and how they were going to find the information. This meant that they sacrificed words that should have been used to present their actual findings in an essay form.

Most students were appropriately observant of the word-limit. Teachers should remind students that additional words are not read by markers. This often meant that conclusions could not contribute to the definition and development of a point of view.

As ever, many students were very interested in significant women and men. Alexander, Socrates, Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, and Nero were favourites, with the questions addressed usually being about their distinctive qualities, their main achievements, or their significant relationships.

The roles of women (particularly Athenian women) and slaves were popular topics. One thoughtful investigation looked at the seemingly contradictory nature presented by the roles of women in literature, the *Odysse*y being the main source here, though the plays too have many examples of strong and valued women. Religion and military history were also tackled in a good number of studies, with specific battles and military practices discussed with some enthusiasm and knowledge. There were a small but solid number of studies exploring aspects of material culture and medicine.

Comparisons continued to be frequently attempted, including an original comparison between *The Wolf of Wall Street* and Aristophanes’ *Plutus,* an interesting comparison of *Antigone* and *Romeo and Juliet*, and the ever-popular comparisons of movie versions of historical events with historical interpretations. Comparisons between the gladiatorial games and modern sports were quite successfully handled.

A few markers commented that some studies would have benefited from more boundaries being set; rather than just Greece or Rome, it would have been more manageable, on occasions, to focus on Athens or Sparta, or the Republic or Imperial Rome.

A small number of topics did not reference at least 50% of their discussion in the Greco-Roman classical world. Teachers and students are strongly reminded that this referencing is a fundamental aspect of the special study which cannot be ignored. All the knowledge and understanding performance standards explicitly reference the classical world.

The following discussion concerns how students provided evidence of their learning in relation to each of the assessment design criteria.

Knowledge and Understanding

Nearly all papers showed some sound knowledge of the classical world, particularly of individuals and specific events, for example, Thermopylae or Caesar’s Gallic War triumphs. Many discussions of the roles of individuals indicated that the students understood the context of the era in which they lived. Religious practices also provided an interesting challenge and students collected a lot of information about divinities and worship. Artefacts were less addressed, although the Parthenon did feature, as did other classical sculpture. Spartan military institutions continue to be a source of interest and students usually gathered sufficient and accurate information. Literary texts were less investigated this year, though quotations were often used as source material.

Social history was a popular topic, but a number of students did not demonstrate a sufficient understanding of complexity, hierarchy, and diversity. For instance, essays on women were popular, but students rarely considered the impact of status group, time period, age, wealth, and other factors on the lives of the women they discussed. Either students need to limit their parameters appropriately in their question, or they do need to consider these factors in their response.

Another area that was not so well understood was the degree to which modern-day institutions were ‘influenced’ by the Greeks or Romans. Certainly, similarities can be seen, but it was risky and rarely convincing to argue that contemporary features are directly attributable to the classical civilisations. For example, democracy has come to Australia largely via British political traditions, and not directly from Ancient Greece.

The selection and application of information distinguished the extent to which students understood their area of study, and whether their question was solid. The more able students were able to select the most relevant information, but a characteristic of responses in the C grade band was the extensive foray into narratives and anecdotal evidence that did not directly address the question. For example, in comparisons between Hitler and Julius Caesar, there was little point in comparing where they were born or the intimate details of their early lives, especially when the larger issues of their adult lives were then dealt with inadequately. In some of the less successful essays, sweeping generalisations were made. This was evident particularly in essays that were dealing with women, both Greek and Roman.

More sophisticated papers made a genuine attempt to reflect on the wider implications of their research. These students not only identified links to what was going on in the wider community or between groups, or commented on the attitudes of factions or gender groups, but they were able to comment on complex ripples of cause and effect.

It seems that, for a number of students, all Romans or Greeks felt and thought and acted in the same ways. The diversity caused by class was frequently overlooked, although gender was usually recognised as an obvious differentiator. Within gender, however, differences in class, especially for men, were often not noted. The differences *between* cultures were well established, however differences *within* cultures were less well recognised. The differences between the values of now and then were also hard for some students to recognise and accept.

Research and Analysis

Most students demonstrated the ability to conduct effective research, and sources were increasingly digital in origin rather than being print-based. The quality of the special study was often reflective of the quality of a student’s sources and the ways they were handled. A number of students found periodical articles, monographs, and other specialist academic material. The more specific the topic, the better the sources tended to be, and vice versa.

However, many students are using very general sources, some of which are not at Year 12 standard. ‘*Horrible Histories’*, general encyclopedias (whether in print or online), and *Reader’s Digest* are probably not the best places for up-to-date and in‑depth information in this subject. A number of markers commented favourably on the decreased use of Wikipedia. While it can be a useful research tool, especially at the start, students should corroborate the information found with other sources and reference these by preference.

Students could distinguish between primary and secondary sources. All students had a selection of secondary sources, and most had at least one primary source, although this was often sourced from another secondary source rather than the primary source itself. Some students used literary sources well. The Roman poets, Juvenal in particular, were quoted to demonstrate attitudes and cultural change. The epics of Homer were both a useful source for a number of writers. Ancient historians, Suetonius most frequently, but also Tacitus in relation to the Roman emperors, were also used well. However, few noted when the historians were writing in relation to their subjects, which meant their words were usually uncritically accepted as contemporaneous, reliable, and valid. The better students did suggest that such sources should be used with caution.

The ability to critically analyse information rather than just accept it and present it on face value separated the A grade studies from the rest, and a thoughtfully designed question assisted significantly with the analysis. The best writers were able to use sources with careful discrimination, and were also able to comment incisively on disparities, and to suggest reasons for them. They were able to comment on silences in the literature, on the roles of women, for example, and on possible bias. They also could point to the partial nature of some primary sources in particular.

Others tended to see the source, whether primary or secondary, as unproblematic evidence and therefore no more discussion was needed. The skill of synthesis was not strong in the C grade band, although a little surprising, given that it is also a key criterion in the Research Project. Refining the ability to compare, contrast, and then comment on research would definitely assist these students in strengthening their synthesis skills.

Students have learned a range of appropriate concepts and vocabulary, and seemed able to use these appropriately and in relevant contexts. Students who had read good-quality sources widely were more able to immerse themselves in the language of their study area and could use specialist terminology with confidence.

The question design was critical for a student to achieve an effective definition and development of a point of view. Problems with some of the essay questions included being too broad in time frame or not encouraging higher-order analysis. In some cases, all a question asked for was a narrative, which made it difficult for the student to achieve a higher standard in the analysis performance standard. Even when students had a carefully drafted question, however, some essays consisted too strongly of narration. This was particularly the case with essay questions which included ‘to what extent’. It is a useful question stem which encourages evaluation in a broader context, but not when it is effectively ignored. In other studies, some writers clung resolutely to a particular point of view, even when the evidence quoted suggested otherwise. Students should be encouraged to understand that their arguments do not override the weight of evidence. It is fine to make qualifications and to show doubt.

Nearly all students structured their responses appropriately, in that they had an introduction which stated a point of view and suggested an approach, and at times a definition, although when the definitions were simply lists of points from a website, it seemed clear that there was some thought lacking. Paragraphing was usually solid, and there was always a conclusion, but this was sometimes a perfunctory restating of the argument. Some students have still not learnt to deal with observations concurrently when doing comparisons. Instead, they presented information on one aspect (e.g. Sparta) in a couple of paragraphs, then another aspect (e.g. Nazi Germany) in two paragraphs and then ended with one paragraph as a summation at the end. This did not allow them to develop their point of view sufficiently.

The best writers used a range of conjunctions to show engagement with their material. ‘Nonetheless’, ‘although’, and ‘despite’ are examples of terms that show the thinking process, demonstrate the ability to compare disparate views, and arrive at a conclusion.

Communication

Most special studies were clear, well structured, and fluent and followed an appropriate academic style. Most students were able to discern appropriate examples. Some displayed an inability to capture the most essential parts, letting their descriptions go on for too long. Some students needed to comment more explicitly on the evidence they were offering, as the connections between the example and the point they were trying to make seemed tenuous. The students who could support their discussion with quality evidence in an integrated and meaningful way were able to substantially develop their points of view.

The majority of students knew that sources had to be acknowledged and that a bibliography be provided. Most essays were thoroughly and accurately referenced, with students generally using one style of referencing consistently. All website sourcing was dated, which is a pleasing improvement on previous years. Some students very skilfully integrated quotations into their argument, and used phrases rather than lengthy statements. These students usually then commented insightfully on the source. Over-quoting is still an issue for some, and some continue to use quotes to introduce common facts or to ‘tell the story’.

Images of non-written sources can provide excellent substantiation, but they need to be positioned as close as practicable to the textual reference, and labelled and referenced correctly. It is important that images are not used as ‘fillers’.

There was definite evidence of careful construction, editing, and proofreading in most of the studies, although further attention to accurate spelling and punctuation was needed for some. All the studies were organised as essays, with an introduction and conclusion of some kind. Unfortunately, some first paragraphs were a bald statement of the topic and lacked the polish expected in an externally assessed investigation. Most had appropriate paragraph structures with a leading topic sentence and often a concluding sentence. Sometimes the latter became rather mechanical, with the last sentence being an almost exact repetition of the first, and students should be guided away from this. Conclusions could similarly be repetitive and, in some cases, rather perfunctory, but in the best examples were strong summaries and provided thought-provoking insights to complete the argument.

## Operational Advice

School assessment tasks are set and marked by teachers. Teachers’ assessment decisions are reviewed by moderators. Teacher grades/marks should be evident on all student school assessment work.

When including multimodal assignments in the moderation samples, teachers should include a transcript in case an audio recording is not well recorded.

For the external assessment, the great majority of batches were appropriately formatted, organised, and submitted. The effort of both students and teachers to achieve this is appreciated. It is very important that student work is de-identified and no comments or grades are included, as this is the externally assessed component. A few batches were missing the external cover sheet. This is available on the SACE website.

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