

UNIT 2 (Examiner's Report)

The idea of a guide gave the candidates some room for manoeuvre as they could write something that was close to a leaflet or the sort of travel guide that appears in books, newspapers and magazines. The writing had to inform and persuade.

It was clear that candidates knew a lot about talent shows. In some scripts, this actually had serious consequences as the candidates got so carried away with writing about every detail of every talent show that they left too little time for the tourist guide. The temptation to write at inordinate length about Simon Cowell and all his works proved irresistible to some and it was sometimes at the expense of the guide where, ironically, they probably needed more time. Time is not such a pressing issue in this unit and it makes sense for the candidates to take a minute or two to plan their writing before plunging into the tasks. Better responses consistently showed evidence of planning. The organisation of ideas requires some planning and there is no need to rush into these tasks. More thought and planning might have improved the outcomes significantly.

The rubric made it very clear that they should think about purpose, audience and format but care must also be taken with sentence construction, spelling and punctuation. The candidates should remember that one third of the available credit is allocated to this part of the assessment objective.

This task required a formal letter to a newspaper and it was sensible for candidates to argue on one or other side of the argument to maintain a sense of direction and clarity. Those who tried to explore both sides of the argument, or express 'mixed views' often slipped into confusion and contradiction. However, some of the most able candidates knew how to handle alternative opinions without sacrificing cohesion and overall coherence.

The candidates seemed to enjoy this task and many of them wrote at length and with some life. The topic obviously engaged the interest of most candidates and these 'talent' shows are clearly, and deeply, embedded into modern culture. The fascination of teenagers with the quest for celebrity status seems almost boundless and most candidates had detailed knowledge of these shows, and no shortage of opinions about them. I am also now an expert on the subject. I know the names of the winners going back several years and I have very strong opinions based entirely on second-hand knowledge!

Weaker answers simply described the workings of talent shows or merely repeated the points made in the question. Some tried to handle both sides of the argument but just got themselves into a tangle of contradictory views. Some responses discussed the issues comprehensively but with no real sense of cohesion or direction. A minority of candidates also misjudged the audience for this letter and wrote to Simon Cowell or the producers of the talent shows. It is perhaps also worth mentioning that implausible surveys and exaggerated percentages do not help an argument at all. Indeed unconvincing statistics usually achieve the opposite of the intended effect.

I think some work is needed on the conventions of letters to newspapers. Many of the openings were clumsy and naive and too many candidates started to demand that the editor write an article or join a crusade against these talent shows. They often finished by suggesting that they were waiting for a reply. There is probably no better way to ensure that a letter is not published than to start telling a newspaper editor what to do. Some attention also needs to be paid to the layout of letters. It is an important skill to be able to set out a letter properly. Careless errors in layout are often symptomatic of a casual attitude to accuracy.

Q.2 Although there were good responses to this task, in general I was disappointed by the outcomes. The candidates had to think and make some decisions for themselves and not everyone thought carefully or chose wisely.

First, they had to choose a town or city which would be attractive to tourists. However, many candidates made poor choices and tried to attract tourists to the most unlikely destinations. It is true that not everyone lives in a tourist 'hotspot' but no-one lives very far away from somewhere that might attract visitors and most places can be sold in one way or another. Most cities, and a lot of towns, sell themselves quite effectively as places for weekend or short breaks. At times the choices made by the candidates seemed perverse. For example, those who lived in the suburbs of cities such as London, Bristol and Cardiff chose to write about their small, residential area and made life very difficult for themselves. A moment's thought could have made a significant difference to a lot of the answers.

The second problem was how to sell their chosen destination to a potential tourist. The key to this task was a clear understanding of the purpose of the writing. This was a guide intended to attract tourists and the content and style had to reflect that purpose. Many candidates found difficulty in getting beyond the limits of their own expectations, so local shops, cinemas, fast food outlets or fish and chip shops figured large in their guides. This misjudging of the intended audience extended, sometimes, to references to which was the best school in the area or where the best houses could be found. Some even extolled the virtues of local gym membership schemes, libraries or even being able to pay monthly for unlimited cinema access – all of which emphasised their uncertainties regarding audience.

There was often a lot of vague enthusiasm for places but a depressing lack of knowledge about what might attract a visitor and a real shortage of specific attractions. For example, Brighton was mentioned without a mention of its Pavilion, Bristol without the suspension bridge or Cambridge without the glories of its university.

Extravagant claims about 'endless opportunities' for a fun-filled holiday were usually not delivered with any conviction, if at all. However, some candidates defined their audience quite carefully and that often helped. Some thought about the exact nature of a resort's appeal would have helped a lot of candidates to avoid unconvincing assertions and stay in a recognisable reality. The key was to think about the details that set a place apart and made it distinctive. Some partly saved their pieces by making a genuine attempt to be upbeat and it was sad when they did not seem to have much to be enthusiastic about. I suppose the best advice I can offer to the candidates is that they think their way in to these tasks. Too many clearly do rush at it without any thought at all. Often candidates lost great opportunities in listing all manner of 'attractions' but not thinking about their audience or separating the genuinely attractive from the commonplace.

The issue of technical accuracy is still a cause for concern. It really is not uncommon to see scripts, even on this tier, which are littered with technical errors. Many of the errors are very basic and cannot be ignored or dismissed merely as 'slips'. Most candidates would be well advised to remember that technical accuracy contributes one third of the marks in writing.

The best responses are always a pleasure to read and they display sophistication, maturity and technical control but too many of the candidates undermine their efforts with a lack of attention to content, organisation and technical accuracy.