

English Writing

Course Code: ENW315114

The 2016 marking team would like to reinforce the value of reading and acting on the advice of this annual document. This Assessment Report comprises the synthesis of a range of external markers' comments that articulate the positives and negatives of candidate folios for each year, with a view to improving future submissions. For teachers and candidates of English Writing it is a vital resource in addressing the course requirements and in preparing the final folios for external assessment.

Overall, the joy of writing and writing classes was evident in the folios this year. The students showed their enthusiasm for classes and many spoke of the "family of writers". There was diversity of style and subject in this year's folios. This range reflects the unique attributes of English Writing as a subject. As well as the wide scope English Writing elicits in subject matter and themes, it is always interesting to see how diversely students approach content. A story about world poverty, for example, might be told as an intimate first person memoir, or as fiction, from any point of view, or as an informative work of journalism or as an opinion column.

It is good to see that even when working with very personal material, most students understand that audience is an essential consideration in this subject. This means that students are learning to allow their writing to take on a life of its own with a degree of separation from themselves and that they are applying the tools and techniques learnt from exceptional authors in order to make this happen.

Numerous students responded to current events and issues in the world. It was refreshing to read this engagement with current affairs and to see the variety of genres and stylistic approaches. Subjects included social injustice and inequality; world poverty; the Stolen Generation; world history; disability, to name a few.

There will always be candidates who ignore the wise advice of their teachers at their peril. This pertains to lack of editing, unresponsiveness to feedback and 'leaving things to the last minute'. Such situations are beyond teachers' professional control. Within teacher control, however, is the need for skilled one-to-one feedback that is timely, specific and actionable. Teachers must walk alongside their budding writers and 'intrude' on their fledgling ideas, helping to test their validity and shape their drafts.

Without a TASC accredited Level 2 writing course alternative, it is vital that candidates carefully consider whether they are capable of submitting a folio of writing at pre-tertiary standard. Although, on the whole, the standard of writing was higher than last year, there was still a significant minority of very weak folios which pointed to the necessity of early feedback and counselling of candidates who may not be able to achieve against the standards.

Criterion I

It is important to note that range of writing styles/forms/genres is only internally assessed as part of this criterion. It is not a requirement of external assessment for Criterion I.

The Contents Page

The Contents Page is a requisite introduction to the Writing Folio and it is essential that this is accurately and thoroughly completed as it forms an integral part of the assessment of Criterion I. A few candidates did not submit the Contents Page and were penalised on this criterion.

There should only be four entries completed on the Contents Page: 1- Reflective Statement, (candidates may choose to provide an alternative title); 2- Title of Piece One; 3- Title of Piece Two; 4- Title of Piece Three. If a candidate chooses to submit a collection of two or more texts as one piece, it must appear as one entry on the Contents Page. A minority of candidates this year had five individual entries on the Contents Page. The Writing Project must be identified on the Contents Page and within the folio itself. A minority of candidates inappropriately referred to their texts as 'Minor Piece One' or 'Supporting Piece One'.

The order of pieces on the Contents Page must reflect the order of pieces in the folio itself.

1 Titles

Titles of all pieces are necessary and should be presented in italics both on the Contents Page and within the folio itself. Many students are still not italicising titles. The titles of collections of poetry must be given in italics with each poem's title in normal font but with single inverted commas. Candidates are reminded that markers are engaged by titles that cleverly allude to purpose.

2 Genre and form

Teachers and candidates are again reminded to carefully consider and identify both the form AND genre of each of their texts on the Contents Page. Identifying the genre and form of each piece should be a task the writer does during the writing process as each genre and form draws together a specific set of conventions that the writer purposefully employs to develop their ideas and to meet the audience's expectations. Despite all of the advice and examples given in Guidelines and Assessment Reports for the past four years, a significant minority of folios showed little or no awareness of the significance of determining the genre and form of their pieces on the Contents Page. As detailed in previous Folio Guidelines, genre pertains to a style or category of literature, whilst form pertains to the structure (appearance or external shape) of the text. There was an array of confused, vague or invented genres and forms, which had no clear connection with the discussion in the Reflective Statement. The terms 'Short Story' or 'Fiction' do not suffice whereas 'Dystopian/Short Story' is informative. Similarly, 'Poetry' is inadequate whereas 'Romance/Sonnet' and 'Fantasy/Free verse' are appropriate. Whilst exceptional writing often transcends a specific genre and permits a combination of categories, a minority of students were not specific enough in their definition. For example, 'superhero/fiction/drama/black comedy', was confusing for the marker to say the least.

A minority of students inaccurately referred to 'Emulation of an Author' as a genre/form. Candidates are warned against including a dependant authorship piece (Module B work requirement) as this year there were a number that were too close in style and form to the original author and were seen as plagiarism.

3 Word Counts

The word count expectations for the English Writing Folios are explicit and broad in range. The entire folio must be between 5000-8000 words of which the Reflective Statement must be between 750-1000 words and the Writing Project between 2500-4000 words. Candidates were penalised on Criterion 1 for exceeding or failing to meet these word counts. The word counts must be stated on the Contents Page. The 2016 Folio Guidelines do not specify whether quotations are included in the word count, so for this year, students who have chosen to exclude them from their word counts, have not been penalised. This point of confusion will be addressed in the 2017 Folio Guidelines.

Script and poetry word counts were still problematic this year. Poems may adopt the poetry to prose equivalent formula, especially for lengthy poetic forms. It was pleasing to see some students demonstrating an understanding of the flexibility of word counts in relation to poetry. For example one exceptional candidate chose to use a line count for piece one and a word count for the poetry in the Writing Project which is perfectly acceptable. Those candidates who chose to adopt the poetry to prose equivalent formula for a short poem, purely as a means to meet the word count, were easily identifiable. With regard to drama, a minority of candidates are still confused regarding the inclusion of stage directions in the word count and the exemption of characters' names.

Rigorous editing is a necessary skill in writing. It is therefore important to remember that, in signing the TASC Academic Integrity form, both teachers and candidates are stating that the word counts are accurate.

Referencing

A significant minority of candidates showed no awareness of the need to reference consistently or to include alphabetically organised reference lists. The 2016 Folio Guidelines state, "You must acknowledge all your sources of information, images, ideas or words that are not your own. See the TASC Guide to Academic

Integrity” www.tasc.tas.gov.au/1468. However the 2016 Folio Guidelines also state, ‘If a writer’s style and voice alone have influenced work in the folio it may be enough to acknowledge and discuss this in the Reflective Statement’. Due to this point of confusion, markers have had to be lenient with regard to referencing in the Reflective Statement, however the 2017 Folio Guidelines will provide further clarity on referencing. There was a significant minority of students who used images and ideas of others in journalistic pieces and did not acknowledge them. These students were penalised on Criterion 1 as the 2016 Folio Guidelines specifically state:

In expository and journalistic pieces all other people’s images, ideas or words...must be fully referenced using an accepted method of citation such as the Harvard method, end-noting or footnoting, and the inclusion of a Reference List. A bibliography is not sufficient.

A minority of students chose to include the full referencing of sources on a second plain copy of a journalistic piece, presenting another copy to meet the presentation requirements of the genre. This is perfectly acceptable but not a compulsory requirement.

Conventions of Direct Speech

Only a minority of candidates observed the conventions for direct speech and indented dialogue. This was the case in folios assessed at all standards. It is a careless oversight that impacts the reading experience due to the interruption of sequencing and pacing. Clearly this issue is not being addressed by teachers and students as it is specifically mentioned in past assessment reports. The 2015 Assessment report states that, if candidates deliberately choose an unconventional method of formatting dialogue, such as the absence of speech marks or italics, this must be noted and the reason for the choice explained in the Reflective Statement.

The requirements for direct speech will be clarified in the 2017 Folio Guidelines.

Formatting of Folio

A significant minority of candidates did not adhere to the presentation conventions detailed in the 2016 Folio Guidelines, failing to employ manuscript formatting requirements (1.5-2.0 line spacing) and appropriate paragraph formatting. The 2016 Folio Guidelines state that ‘paragraph breaks must be indicated by EITHER a line space OR indentation of 1cm’. A minority of candidates this year chose to incorporate both a line space and an indentation to indicate new paragraphs and were penalised on criterion 1. Some students chose not to separate their folio pieces into separate documents and failed to include their TASC number on the top right hand corner of every page. In some cases the text was not justified. There is no excuse for these errors.

Syntax

A characteristic of many folios this year was the accuracy of Standard Australian English and generally clear syntax. It was pleasing for markers to read folios that contained sentences that moved seamlessly from one word to another, achieving clarity of image and shaping mood through precision of words and their careful ordering. Weaker folios contained sentence fragments, incorrect word order and lack of agreement. In both prose and verse, a minority of candidates confused complexity with obscure and inaccurate word selection, relied too heavily on adjectives and created jarring and confusing sentences. The confusion of the verbs ‘to lie’ and ‘to lay’ and the misuse of words such as ‘who’, ‘that’ and ‘which’, also detracted from the markers’ reading experiences.

Punctuation

Punctuation was used accurately and for effect in considered folios this year. In weaker folios apostrophe for ownership (both singular and plural), commas and semi-colons were either absent or incorrectly used. In such cases, the writer breaks his/her connection with the reader.

Editing and crafting

Editing and proofreading are paramount to a successful folio. There are still too many candidates including needless errors such as changing/misspelling character names within a text. Reliance on autocorrect to do the proofreading for the writer was also of great concern for markers. This problem led to Americanised spelling and similarly spelt but completely different words such as ‘physiology’ instead of ‘psychology’.

1. '... writing is an extraordinary labour, a slow crafting of sentences that takes an inordinate amount of time; you just have to hew away at it' (Richard Flanagan).
2. 'The most useful thing you can do is look at each line (of a poem) not as its author, but as its first time reader' (Kristen Lang).
3. 'There is no great writing, only great rewriting' (Justice Brandeis).

Criterion 2

Flair in the application of language was a feature of the best folios. There was considered choice of verbs, an absence of qualifiers, experimentation with word choice as befitted the context and the image rather than scouring a thesaurus for 'big words'. Simile, metaphor, symbols and motif were used with precision and timing to assist the reader make meaning rather than for decorative effect. The best candidates were able to use words as art with an absence of artifice. Correspondingly they could close the gap between what they wanted to say and what they did say.

The housekeeper's hawk-eyes tracked me as keenly as meat on a string. What I remember most were her fingernails, folktale fingernails, made for cauldrons and the locking of cages. She was rod-shaped to a point of being unwomanly. If her hair had been pulled an inch tighter I feared her very skin would peel away; underneath would lie a glistening, beetle-black skull (candidate example).

Unfortunately, a significant number of candidates presented texts that were lacking in rich and varied diction. Stylistic features and imagery should seem natural and appropriate to the story, not a distraction from the overall effect. Profanities are appropriate if controlled, respectfully used and integral to the impact of the narrative. Adding them regularly and gratuitously for impact can detract rather than enhance.

Candidates are strongly advised to consider the authenticity of their chosen register. It is jarring when a family in Paris is from Alabama but sounds like contemporary white Australians or when the American spelling, 'mom' is used inappropriately. Students have been warned against employing contrived American settings that they have little to no knowledge of as this detracts significantly from the authenticity of their writing. Banality, cliché and 'dead' words and phrases from popular T.V. shows, film, and computer games characterised the least successful manipulations and applications of language. This course does not involve writing in these forms so they provide ineffectual and dangerous models for the emerging writer searching for interesting, unusual and powerful uses of writing devices, convincing examples of register and diction, and a wide palate of words. A rich reading experience is the only way to increase the complexity of one's word choices. Markers observed the overuse of the same words in weaker folios which was indicative of students' limited vocabularies. The overuse of superlatives such as 'enormous', 'huge' etc., also detracted from the markers' experience.

'If we don't have the words, the complexity of our thoughts will shrink to the words we do have' (Jeanette Winterson).

Criterion 3

The most effective folios contained thoughtful, orthodox use of form and genre or manipulated these literary conventions in imaginative and engaging ways to achieve purpose. The least successful folios contained vague descriptions of form and genre on the Contents Page which resulted in confusing compositional aims and conventions. Students are advised to identify the genre and form of every piece they compose throughout the year in order to fully understand their implications for the writing process.

A minority of candidates included dramatic monologues with no drama conventions and sometimes even with another voice/character making an appearance! Electronic forms of writing, particularly blogs, were more common this year, however their compositional features were often not defined.

Structure at the line/sentence level as well as the entire piece is crucial to stepping a reader through its development. Ingenuity or at least thoughtfulness in how the writing was organised characterised the best folios. There was mindfulness of the reader. There was backstory through dialogue, interior thoughts of characters, use of flashbacks and manipulation of tense. It was pleasing to see evidence of clever poetry where candidates had

used appropriate conventions for their chosen and identified forms. Such folios showed considerable attention to the line, the stanza and the progression of imagery. It is important for candidates to remember that free verse still employs patterning and structural devices. Markers observed that the inclusion of free verse poetry was often a trap for weaker candidates or a crutch for lazy writers who did not demonstrate sound understanding of poetic techniques appropriate to genre and form.

Weaker folios were often chronological with little sense of sequencing and pacing. Some candidates' sentences and lines of poetry were convoluted and clogged with adjectives making for weak micro-structure and artifice. This from a candidate's poem: 'Soothing dim obscurity in disparity to existence', for example. As opposed to one student's insight: 'Fewer words can deliver a more powerful impact when the diction is considered carefully.'

Although there were some outstanding examples of journalism where candidates had identified form and genre and applied the appropriate conventions, far too many students are using vague or invented forms which have no clear connection with the discussion in the Reflective Statement. Generalised forms such as 'online journalistic piece', 'opinion piece/blog', 'political rant/political journalism' and 'journalistic piece', gave markers no idea of the conventions to expect.

A minority of students chose to include a chapter or several chapters of a novel as a piece in their folio. Candidates can be successful in choosing to do this as long as the narrative arc is outlined in the Reflective Statement and the ending of the piece provides an effective point of conclusion that leaves the reader wanting to turn the page.

On the whole, structuring of pieces and consistent appropriate application of tense still needs focus. Control of pace in candidates' writing varied a great deal and lack of control was particularly evident in pieces that adopted a conversational tone. Tense shifts confuse the reader if they are not appropriate to purpose. Some candidates were in and out of present and past tense within the one sentence or paragraph.

'Remember to change gears; to alter pace and tone in order to engage readers, particularly in a sustained text such as the Writing Project.'

Criterion 4

The best writing folios explored and provided insight into the human condition. There was richness in the idea and therefore intellectual engagement from the reader. Most importantly the reader's emotions were active. In other words there was both mind and heart in the reader's response. These candidates cited a wide range of authorial exemplars in their Reflective Statements and consequently demonstrated a deep understanding of the effects of specified techniques and structural approaches in their pieces.

Not surprisingly, the folio pieces of those candidates who did not refer to the influence of written texts in their statements, were often bland, contained few specifically targeted scenes to 'show', and maintained a pedestrian pace through tedious chronological telling. Unless students are prepared to read as writers, to go beyond 'comfort zones' with their reading experience, then their own writing will be mundane. Teachers need to actively guide students with their reading beyond the minimum of 3 texts to be read independently, as specified in the course outline. Rich writing is a reflection of rich reading. In many ways the course is better understood as English Reading and Writing.

'Write, Rewrite. When not rewriting, read. I know of no shortcuts' (Stephen King).

Historical pieces need to be grounded through specific setting details. West Virginia, 'just down from Hobart', and Alabama are vague settings and when combined with no specific concrete setting details leave the reader floating in no-man's land. And once again, beware the American setting that does not rise above popular myth or popular T.V and media representations.

In the most successful folios candidates artfully created and maintained a narrative voice or voices appropriate to the fictional or non-fictional context. This was true of a range of third person and first person narrative perspectives and within a myriad of character voices. In the latter, direct speech was convincing. Originality in

voice, assisted by rich experience with literature, enabled some students to construct mature, insightful and complex voice and plot development.

In poetry there was a divide between the competent and engaging voice and that which was puerile, that presided over chopped up prose. In the best folios, voice possessed vulnerability or wit or tenderness or humanity or warmth or verve. Carefully evoked tone enabled reader and writer to co-construct a fictional reality, and at the same time enabled the reader to form an emotional bond with the narrative, eliciting reaction to characters or the persona trusted with relaying events or capturing 'the moment'. In contrast, some candidates were ambiguous and therefore unsuccessful in the conception of tone: For example: "The tone of the story is really undefined. It can be whatever the reader wants it to be . . ." Such statements were clearly unsuccessful in engaging the reader.

There was evidence of over dramatisation in weaker folios especially in the depiction of recurring themes of abuse, suicide, mental illness and death. Some students seemed to be under the false impression that they had to unify their folios through one of these aforementioned themes. With regard to tears, overwrought demonstrations of crying, as in the phrases, 'A tidal wave of tears', 'A tsunami of tears' and 'A cascade of tears', makes for lack of emotional impact. The emotion needs to come from the subtext.

The least successful folios relied on adolescent experience, video games, T.V., juvenile texts, you tube clips, and populist authors to develop incredulous, irritating and nauseous character and narrative voices. Plots were ill conceived and incredulous. They simply lacked artistic substance. Students need to think about the world and the way people live in it, if they hope to say anything worthwhile in their writing. Many stories were about predictable teenage existence and parents who weren't fair and were out to ruin everyone's fun that lead inevitably to conflict and stress. Being able to think beyond the everyday challenges of being a student/teenager brought some interesting perspectives on life.

Personal experience can, however, be invaluable in bringing the killer details to your stories and articles. If you have knowledge and expertise in certain areas, it is clever to access that for your writing, but ensure that what you have to say will have some meaning or relevance for others. Interesting observations of fellow travellers on a morning bus run and the reactions of various people to the winter floods made for entertaining reading in some pieces, when the narrator was able to look beyond what was going on in their own head. Key relationships with grandparents and other important mentors also formed the basis of some satisfying pieces.

There was a significant minority of candidates who included a dependant authorship piece in their folio. It is not advised to borrow characters or plots from any source; this jeopardises originality and candidates will be penalised on Criterion 4. Students need to be clear about the difference between actively learning about technique from authors or film directors, and simply helping themselves to plot and character which is unacceptable.

There are different ways of considering a writing audience. It is possible to indicate the age range. On the other hand this concept of audience is vague and best avoided: 'someone interested in the theme of tragedy'. Or this: 'This piece would be for adolescence (sic) as the piece involves details that could mess with a young child's mind.' Or the all-encompassing attempt to explain target audience: 'My audience is people of all ages.' These statements do not shed any further information on purpose.

A more sophisticated sense of audience hinges on where the reader is in their understanding of events and character dynamics and emotional state at clearly planned moments of a poem or piece of prose. Clearly this sense of audience is linked to timing and structure: it is like the deliberate placement of little stepping stones to move the reader to the final revelation or revelations along the way. The best candidates knew when and how much to reveal and how much to conceal. A writer must expect the reader to do some intellectual piecing together.

It is crucial that candidates strive for consistency and unity across all pieces within the folio. All pieces contribute to the overall ratings. When there is inconsistency, the overall ratings will be affected and candidates will be marked down on Criterion 4 for a lack of unity.

Criterion 5

Candidates are to be reminded of the importance of the Reflective Statement in the folio as it has its own criterion for assessment. Therefore it should not be treated as an afterthought.

The most effective Reflective Statements were intelligent and thoughtfully constructed and provided clear and detailed discussion of artistic intention including devices and techniques used for specific effect. The statement was unified and perfectly complemented the other three folio pieces.

Weaker students wrote to a 'formula' which appeared to be: an opening paragraph about what they had learned about writing, editing etc. this year; next, some included a paragraph on writers they had read, which was only sometimes connected to the pieces in the folio; this was followed by a summary/explanation of the contents of each piece, sometimes including what they hadn't done/couldn't do, and finally a brief 'conclusion' which often repeated elements of the introduction.

'The Reflective Statement is an exercise in rigorous editing and polishing. Every word counts.'

If candidates choose to spend the first paragraph providing commentary on their year in 'Writers', it must elucidate folio pieces and establish an authentic and original voice that resonates with the other pieces, for it to be a productive use of words. A strong and mature voice engages the reader.

The lengthy introductory paragraphs of a personal nature in weaker statements, while clearly cathartic for students, ate into the reflection word allowance without adding value for assessment in relation to Criterion 5. Students would be well-advised to draft the body paragraphs of their reflections in thorough detail before considering an introduction; it is not easy to cull heartfelt personal material once it is on the page.

Candidates should not apologise for their short-comings; the marker is left with a low expectation of the writing to follow and it is a waste of words. For example: 'I cannot write about myself because I view myself as a boring person, which in turn makes my writing absolutely boring.' It is also best to avoid self-congratulatory comments about the quality of pieces in the folio; let the marker make these decisions because in almost all the cases of the candidates who made these comments, the writing did not reflect this level of confidence. Modesty and restraint are more prudent.

More able candidates articulated techniques and effects employed. This is pleasing. Nevertheless, weaker candidates simply listed these rather than explaining why and how they were used for effect. And it was tedious to read, 'I used a simile' followed by the example. This approach felt a little like reading a 'shopping list'.

It is best to write close to 1000 words to fully brief the marker on the candidate's reading and writing background, and intent with all pieces. It is staggering that some candidates did not mention authors or written texts in their statements. Candidates should take full opportunity to articulate influences on their writing. In all cases those candidates who made no reference to literary authors and texts, submitted unconvincing, shallow and pedestrian-paced folios.

The Writing Project:

2016 saw a diverse range of Writing Projects, many of which impressed the markers in terms of their creativity.

Narratives were the most popular, but other forms included scripts, screen plays, poetry collections, feature articles and a collage of different forms pertaining to a theme or issue. Presenting a collection of texts as a Writing Project is still proving problematic, with weaker candidates failing to demonstrate a strong link between their chosen pieces.

Markers found that so many Writing Projects began well, as there had been a clear focus on early paragraphs, however candidates need to remember to continue the editing process for the entire piece, rather than just focussing on beginnings. Sustained quality writing is what examiners are looking for.

Finally

Markers urge candidates to use the opportunities that this syllabus offers to be active readers and to learn to think, research and write effectively. With the entire year to craft, markers' expectations of folio writing are high.

'If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. There's no way around these two things that I'm aware of, no shortcut' (Stephen King).

'It is possible with lots of hard work, dedication and timely help, to make a good writer out of a merely competent one' (Stephen King).