

Using the Examiners' Reports from GCSE 2019 to improve future performance

This article summarises and analyses key points from the 2019 Examiners' Reports to help improve student performance at GCSE.

The Examiners' Reports produced by the Awarding Bodies (ABs) for each of the GCSE papers highlight the strengths and weaknesses markers observed and suggest ways teachers can improve the future performance of their students. Teachers can also compare the performance of their cohort with the entire cohort for that specification (e.g. via Results Plus for Edexcel, OCR Hub, e-AQA); this information, together with the Examiners' Reports, enables teachers to assess whether the issues highlighted in the reports apply to their students. In addition, the ABs make available on their websites samples of students' work with commentary (see 'References and further reading' at the end of this article for links).

Overview

The reports contain a wealth of detail, which we would encourage teachers to read for themselves. All reports in 2019 reflected this comment from 2018:

The examination appeared to be appropriate for the ability range of students and achieved widespread differentiation ... through a broad spectrum of multiple choice questions, source material stimulus questions and extended writing tasks to assess descriptive, explanatory and higher order evaluative skills. (AQA, 2018)

However, although in 2019 AQA commented that '... it was pleasing to see that centres and students had used some of the feedback from the last series in order to develop their examination skills in readiness for this year', a number of areas for improvement emerged across all specifications:

- appropriate use of geographical terms
- understanding and responding appropriately to command words
- literary skills, in extended writing responses, including spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPaG)
- use of mathematical skills
- responses to fieldwork-based questions.

Generally, candidates also needed to be guided by the mark allocation; some produced overlong answers for short tariff questions and spent too little time on the higher tariff questions.

Geographical terminology and command words

ABs are using more demanding terminology, and students struggled with this – not just the geographical vocabulary, but also the overall readability of the examination papers and pre-release material. Some ABs tried to ensure that students were not unduly disadvantaged by not knowing a term, but the level varied significantly: 'It is important that terms such as 'distribution' are taught in a way which will allow candidates to use their understanding to 'un-pick' the questions' (Edexcel A, 2019).

What is very clear is that some students struggled to understand and respond to the command words and phrases in the higher tariff questions, e.g. 'to what extent', 'assess' and 'evaluate' – the commonest weaknesses in 2018. In 2019, however, students were better prepared; this '... was particularly evident in some of the 8-mark questions where candidates were better able to address the command words (e.g. "assess"). However, the greater emphasis on application and interpretation is still proving a challenge for some candidates' (Edexcel A, 2019).

Centres should spend time reviewing the specimen and live papers to ensure that they are familiar with key vocabulary which is being used in the questions – both in terms of key geographical terms (e.g. river discharge and biodiversity) and words which provide the "slant" to the question (e.g. characteristics, distribution or frequency) (Edexcel A, 2019).



Figure 1: Schools used the feedback from 2018 to develop students' skills for the 2019 exams. **Photo:** © Geographical Association.

Best practice in preparing for linear exams suggests interleaving exam practice throughout the teaching of the GCSE; this will reinforce a greater understanding of command words such as “justify”, or ... “to what extent” (OCR B, 2019).

Extended writing

Higher tariff questions (6–9 marks) often have additional marks allocated (up to a maximum of three) for spelling, grammar and punctuation. For example Question 1 (The Challenge of Natural Hazards) was worth 12 out of 33 marks on Paper 1 ‘Living with the physical environment’ (AQA, 2018). Higher tariff questions associated with the commands ‘assess’ or ‘evaluate’ are seen as more challenging and therefore an opportunity to distinguish between candidates.

In extended writing marks are awarded not for the number of factually accurate points made but for the way the argument is developed and concluded. Examiners’ reports include the following suggestions for improving extended answers:

- ‘An often-overlooked area is the need to try to make on-going evaluation or assessment supported with evidence (AO3)’ (AQA, 2019).
- ‘... candidates need to be more aware of the need to achieve balance in their responses and discuss both points of view, even if they have strong feelings for one particular side’ (Eduqas B, 2018).
- When explaining why one factor is more important than another, students should ‘... practise different long-answer structures focused on this, rather than writing in detail about one factor with no links to another’ (OCR B, 2019).
- ‘Inaccurate case study selection almost always limits candidate answers to Level 1’ (Edexcel A, 2019).
- ‘The use of paragraphs is one element which contributes to this mark [SPaG] and should be encouraged, as it helps to structure candidates’ responses’ (Edexcel A, 2019).
- ‘A focus on literacy skills in teaching is important to support candidates in writing responses which are appropriately linked to the question. This applies to all questions but is particularly important in 6 and 8 markers where providing elaborated and sophisticated responses will gain access to the higher bands’ (Eduqas A, 2019).
- ‘Where candidates had developed a better understanding of command words, particularly in extended writing questions, their responses scored highly. Evidence of centres promoting effective writing skills through scaffolding and writing frames was evident, in high-scoring responses ideas were thoroughly developed and all aspects of the questions were addressed’ (OCR B, 2019).
- A conclusion is essential, and should identify the most important factor. If they are asked to ‘evaluate’, students should draw together

the evidence they have discussed: ‘... while not requiring a final concluding paragraph, the command word “assess” does require judgements to be made’ (Edexcel A, 2019).

- ‘In terms of SPaG, most of the responses tended to be of an intermediate performance level. These were largely determined by the lack of paragraphs, limited sentence construction, key words spelt incorrectly and the lack of appropriate specialist geographical terminology used throughout the answers’ (Edexcel A, 2018); poor performance in this important area continues to be an issue.

Extended writing questions often require candidates to draw on their own knowledge and understanding and apply this constructively to the question. To add to the challenge and complexity, candidates must sometimes analyse a resource to answer the question. Where a photographic stimulus is provided, students should aim to draw detailed inferences from the evidence in the photo.

Fieldwork

A common theme in examiners’ reports about fieldwork questions is the need for candidates to be specific about the fieldwork they undertook, to understand all stages in the fieldwork enquiry process and employ the terminology associated with each stage. Overall, however, examiners’ reports on fieldwork questions in 2019 tended to focus on errors and areas for improvement, rather than evidence of candidates’ strengths.

Areas for improvement

‘Fieldwork has improved since last year ... [but] of very significant concern ... [is] a small minority who had clearly not been on fieldwork’ (OCR A, 2019). In a similar vein, some candidates needed to show clearly they were familiar with the environment in which they had carried out their fieldwork (Edexcel B, 2019); and to make specific references to their own fieldwork studies (Edexcel A, 2019), rather than offering generic answers which could relate to any fieldwork in any location (OCR B, 2019).

Candidates should identify the title of their fieldwork, and make specific links to the title in their response, rather than offering generic points which could apply to any context (AQA, 2019); teachers should ensure candidates are clear about why they are carrying out specific fieldwork tasks: ‘Make sure that you know what you did and why you did it’ (Edexcel B, 2019).

Candidates should be able to identify the different elements of the enquiry process in both a familiar and an unfamiliar context; teachers should use the model of the enquiry process to help candidates develop a deeper understanding of a geographical enquiry (Edexcel A, 2019).

Candidates should be clear about their question or hypothesis (‘too many offered neither’ (Edexcel B, 2019); be able to articulate how these had helped to focus their investigation, and apply them to their fieldwork practice, such as fieldwork collection methods:

This question proved the most difficult for candidates, resulting in almost half of the cohort achieving zero marks ... Candidates who scored three marks made reference to the Bradshaw Model and clearly explained how they had used their question or hypothesis to focus their fieldwork collection methods (Edexcel A, 2019).

Candidates were not familiar with a range of challenging techniques in the specification (Eduqas B, 2018), including GIS, which ‘did not seem to be widely understood’ (OCR B, 2019); even, in some cases, with more basic skills such as annotation of photographs and map skills (OCR A, 2019).

Specific challenges

A second theme relates to the challenges experienced by candidates in particular aspects of fieldwork, such as:

- unfamiliarity with the most appropriate fieldwork methods, and knowing the difference between some key methods, including data collection vs. presentation (Eduqas B, 2019); quantitative vs. qualitative methods; understanding sampling methods and distinguishing between the reliability and the accuracy of conclusions (Edexcel A 2018, 2019); ‘Candidates found this question challenging, often confusing stratified sampling with systematic sampling, resulting in over half of the cohort achieving zero marks’ (Edexcel A, 2019).

Many examiners also highlighted the need to prepare candidates to respond to particular command words in fieldwork questions, especially those with higher tariffs. This included ensuring students were able to:

- go beyond description into explanation; for example, by adding details and linkages, using the language of cause and effect; or by developing their point to give a reason, or extending this further in a chain, to achieve three marks (Edexcel A, 2019)
- evaluate their fieldwork through all parts of the enquiry process; linking different strands of the fieldwork process for analysis and evaluation in the final question:
Useful practice for this type of question might be to offer a number of questions and, rather than ask candidates to complete them, ask them to identify what the question requires and construct a simple plan in order to address the identified demands. In this way candidates will not get side-tracked into spending too much time on one element of the question and consequently fail to address the whole question (AQA, 2019).
- to gain marks for AO3, assess the extent to which their conclusions had answered their enquiry questions and the relative success of the conclusions drawn (Edexcel A, 2019). ‘Some candidates, when asked for “justification”, included in their description of method “this allowed us to see/we could find out”; but very few developed their response beyond this point, so few gained full marks’ (OCR B, 2019).

Mathematical skills

A common theme across ABs was the frequency of errors in basic mathematics and statistics skills, and they all recommended revising the skills listed in the specification:

- ‘Schools and students should remember that 10 % of the marks come from mathematical skills and therefore they should be able to perform these accurately’ (AQA, 2019).
- ‘There will always be a few questions that require candidates to perform a calculation (AO4). Therefore, it is essential that candidates have a calculator with them’ (Edexcel A, 2018). This point was reiterated by many ABs in 2019; however, ‘Candidates ... should be reminded of the importance of showing their working in order to attain the maximum marks’ (Eduqas A, 2019).
- ‘Centres must develop the accuracy of a candidate’s writing in relation to describing data. Vocabulary linked to numeracy is an important factor in writing accurately about statistics or interpreting graphs ... Best practice might involve greater collaboration with the mathematics department or contributing to whole school initiatives looking at numeracy across the curriculum’ (OCR B, 2019).

Students need to have a critical appreciation of the appropriate use of the various techniques so that they can evaluate the usefulness of various cartographic and mapping techniques.

Importance of curriculum design

Inevitably much of this analysis of the examiners’ reports has focused on the terminal examinations: how to prepare students for the exam, and developing coping strategies for them. However, the reports do contain pointers for how you plan and teach the curriculum: ‘... when describing resources such as maps and graphs, candidates should make use of the information provided. Accurate reference to data, scale, compass directions will gain credit’ (Eduqas A, 2019); ‘Rehearsing how to respond to statistical data, different types of graph and a range of maps at different scales is important prior to taking the exam (AQA, 2018, repeated in 2019); ‘Teachers should practise using a variety of different graphs with candidates throughout the geography course’ (Edexcel B, 2019).

However, practising for the exam should not take the place of designing a coherent GCSE geography curriculum. The curriculum should be planned at a strategic level to enable students to know geographical material, think like a geographer, study like a geographer and apply what they have learnt. In this curriculum experience, using geographical data is embedded and progressed in each unit of work, rather than rehearsed for the exam.

Conclusions

Student performance at GCSE is not just about knowledge; it is about the students’ ability to apply a wide range of skills to the questions in

front of them. Recommendations for doing this successfully are laid out in the Examiners' Reports of the ABs. In the 2019 GCSE examinations it was evident that many centres had used the feedback from 2018 when preparing their students. Examples include:

- using the mark allocation to advise students how long to spend on a question and the depth of response it requires
- building experience of different question styles and answers into their lessons
- familiarising students with command words and key terminology, particularly the less familiar ones
- giving students opportunities to practise writing extended answers. These need to address the question, be structured in paragraphs, develop the key points, and reach a conclusion. It is not enough just to include lots of factual knowledge
- ensuring students fully understand all stages of the fieldwork enquiry process and can evaluate each stage. They need to understand a wide range of fieldwork methods and be able to apply fieldwork methodology to new contexts
- ensuring lessons include opportunities for students to undertake mathematical calculations and practise graphical, statistical and cartographic techniques. | **TG**

References and further reading

All websites last accessed 18/11/2019.

AQA (2018) *GCSE Geography Paper 1: Living with the physical environment, Report on the Examination*. Available at <https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/sample-papers-and-mark-schemes/2018/june/AQA-80351-WRE-JUN18.PDF>

DfE (2014) *Geography GCSE subject content, Appendix, p. 10*. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/301253/GCSE_geography.pdf

Examiners' reports and exemplar material for GCSE geography (9-1) are available as follows:

AQA: <https://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/geography/gcse/geography-8035/assessment-resources>

Edexcel A: <https://qualifications.pearson.com/en/qualifications/edexcel-gcse/geography-a-2016.coursematerials.html#filterQuery=Pearson-UK:Category%2FTeaching-and-learning-materials>

Edexcel B: <https://qualifications.pearson.com/en/qualifications/edexcel-gcse/geography-b-2016.coursematerials.html#filterQuery=category:Pearson-UK:Category%2FTeaching-and-learning-materials>

Eduqas A: <https://www.eduqas.co.uk/qualifications/geography/gcse-a/>

Eduqas B: <https://www.eduqas.co.uk/qualifications/geography/gcse-b/>

OCR A: <https://ocr.org.uk/qualifications/gcse/geography-a-geographical-themes-j383-from-2016/assessment/>

OCR B: <https://ocr.org.uk/qualifications/gcse/geography-b-geography-for-enquiring-minds-j384-from-2016/assessment/>

Student GCSE geography: preparing for examination questions on fieldwork

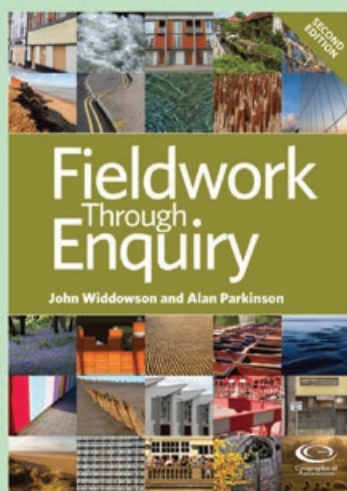
A series of five 40-minute webinars running in March 2020. See www.geography.org.uk for more information and booking details.

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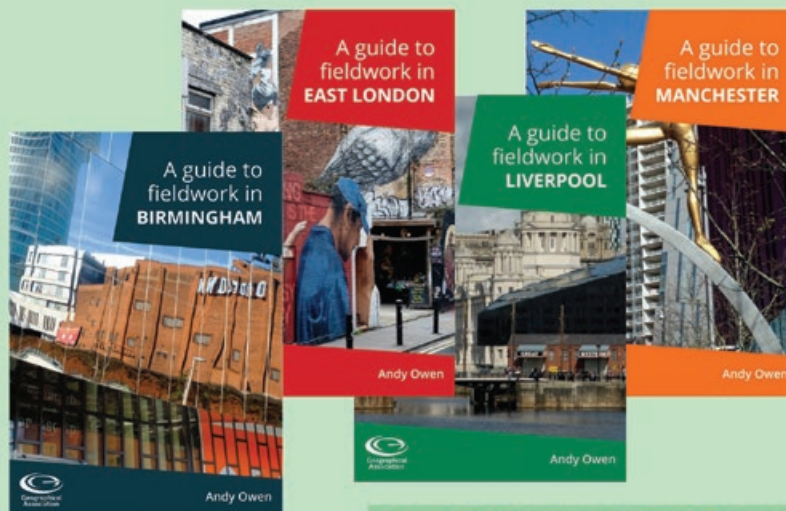


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