

EXAMINER TIPS for IGCSE English as a First Language 0500

These tips contain useful advice and highlight some common mistakes made by students. They are collected under exam question sub-headings to help you focus on what is expected for each question on each paper.

Reading and Writing (Papers 1 and 2)

Paper 1 question 1

- Skim read the passage for gist before you look at the question. Then scan the passage to find the answer to each of the questions in turn.
- Be aware that the questions are graded in an increasing level of difficulty.
- The answers to the questions, except for the last summary question, will be found in chronological order in the text.
- Responding precisely to the wording of the question is very important in this part of the exam.
- Notice how many marks there are for each question. This will help you to understand the length of the answer and the number of points required. Obviously the question with 6 marks is expecting more than the question with only 1 mark.
- There is no need to repeat the whole of the question before beginning of your answer. 'He means that...' or 'It is because...' are enough to provide a grammatical introduction to your sentence.
- Where you are asked to give a word or words you do not need to answer with a full sentence.
- When you are asked to find words they are separate not consecutive words unless you are told otherwise. Do not give several words if asked only for one, even if you think there are other correct answers.
- Notice which questions specifically ask you to use your own words and do not then repeat in your answer any of the words contained in the phrase to be explained.
- Notice exactly which part of the passage is to be summarised in the final question and do not include information from other parts of the text.
- Your summary must be in a paragraph of continuous writing, not as a list.

Paper 1 question 2

- Use the bullet points to help you structure your piece of writing.
- You are expected to develop the ideas contained in the passage, and add original details of your own, but your response should remain based on the passage and not stray too far from it. This is not a creative writing exercise.
- Remember that the quality and accuracy of your writing is being judged in this part of the paper, and Writing carries the same number of marks as Reading (10 each).
- You will be rewarded for showing a wide range of vocabulary and an ability to sequence and punctuate your sentences, and the use of an appropriate register for the task.
- Make sure your style and structure suit the genre of the written response you have been asked to produce. For instance, a magazine article differs in style and structure from a news report.

Paper 2 question 1

- The passage will be literary and/or contain description of a person or place or both. You will have to be sensitive to atmosphere and show appreciation of the feelings of the characters in your response.
- This question is rewarded not only for identification of relevant material in the passage but also inference, development of the ideas and use of supporting detail. There are therefore four types of content required to show advanced comprehension for a top mark out of 15 for Reading.
- For full marks out of 5 for Writing you need to demonstrate structure, sequence, and 'a wide range of original and appropriate language'.
- It will help you enormously to highlight the material you are going to use in the text, and then write a quick plan in order to organise it into a logical structure before you start writing your response. This will enable you to avoid repetition and to make sure you are fully answering the question.
- Use everything which is relevant, not just some of the material. On the other hand, there may be some parts which you should ignore because they are not covered by the question.
- Do not drift away from the text; everything you write must be 'tethered' to the passage i.e. have a direct connection with it and be supported by references to it.
- Before you start writing, decide how formal the task is and adopt an appropriate tone. No question in an exam assessing your ability to use educated English will expect you to use slang or jargon or non-sentences, so expect to have to write in a reasonably formal style whoever your audience is and whatever the task. Even a letter to a relative will be someone distant or older, such as an uncle whom you haven't met recently, and a report to your fellow students will be official or for publication in the school magazine. It is essential to remember who your audience is and to address them directly as 'you'.
- Though you can use short quotations from the passage within your response, you should not copy big chunks of text and you should use your own words when not actually giving details.
- If the question has several parts you can either integrate the two, e.g. advantages and disadvantages, or deal with them separately. You can decide on your own structure for your answer, but what matters is that there should be a structure of some kind, and one which the reader can discern.
- It is time-wasting and does not achieve anything to try to design your answer in the layout which you think might be appropriate in real life, e.g. dividing a newspaper report into columns and adding drawings and extraneous advertising material. This cannot be rewarded and can distract you from the real task of providing appropriate and accurate content for your response.
- What is important is that your answer should be divided into paragraphs, as all continuous prose should be.
- If you are given bullet points to remind you what should be included, use them to check you have covered what is required, and they can also help you to structure your answer. The material from the passage should be put into the appropriate section and not repeated.
- Do not add extra sections, for instance where you are given which questions to ask in an interview, stick to those questions only. It makes the response too fragmented or less focused if you add more.

Paper 2 question 2

- The second half of this question will be more demanding than the first. You need to give equal attention to each part and provide at least half a page for each.
- You should aim for 5 relevant quotations in each part of the question. Give the quotation, in quotation marks, explain its meaning, and then explain its effect on the passage. You cannot get higher than 3 marks if you only identify quotations, or higher than 6 marks if you discuss only meanings.
- For 10 out of 10 you should give a full range of explained effects and link them into an overview which shows understanding of what the writer was trying to achieve in the passage as a whole.
- Do not select a quotation which you do not understand as you will not be able to explain either its meaning or its effect.
- When explaining a quotation do not repeat the words used in it. Do not repeat quotations; you cannot get credit more than once.
- Generalised and 'gushing' comments such as 'The writer makes me feel as though I am there' and 'The passage is cleverly written' gain no marks and give the impression that you are failing to find things to say.
- There is no need to use technical terms, and they are no substitute for explaining an effect in your own words; if you do use technical terms, such as onomatopoeia, make sure they are actually correctly used.
- Select brief quotations only, of between one and four words. Do not lift whole chunks of text, or clump quotations together, or list them. Each one must be focused on specific use of language and explained separately.
- Introduce your choices of language with phrases such as 'gives the impression of', 'suggests that', 'makes me think that.' Do not say over and over again 'This has the effect that...'
- Once you have arrived at an overview, do not contradict yourself, e.g. do not say that one quotation makes a character seem physically old and another one makes her seem physically young. This is not likely therefore you need to look at the passage again. However, there are no 'right answers' to this (or any other) part of the exam and you can score highly by engaging with the text and thinking about the way language is being used, whether or not your comments are what the examiner is expecting.
- Things to look for are: use of the five senses; use of contrast; use of colour; use of noise; links between subject and environment; surprising, or unusual words; words which create sound effects; unusual or dramatic punctuation; imagery (similes and metaphors)

Paper 2 question 3

- Though this question is called Summary it is not a summary in the sense of being a general description of a situation but instead it is a focused list of the specific ideas or details contained in the passage, after anything irrelevant to the two questions has been removed.
- Find all the points you can for each part of the question; do not stop when you get to 15 as these may not be the same ones the examiner has on their list. The only way to be sure of getting all 15 Reading marks is to use everything relevant.
- To get all 5 Writing marks you need to show evidence of clear and concise summary style throughout, precise focus and the use of your own words.

- Do not attempt to synthesise the two passages as this is not required, is not rewarded; it makes your task more difficult to attempt to do so as they may not be directly comparable. Treat the passages separately and focus on the exact wording of the question.
- Do not give your summary in the wrong form as this is penalised i.e. do not offer bullet points or a list, or write in the first person, or comment on the content of the passages, or present a narrative, or use quotation.
- The lengths of the summaries of each passage should be roughly equal.
- Though you must use your own words whenever possible, you do not have to find synonyms for technical objects e.g. solar heaters.
- Both halves of the question are equally important and should be done in the same way and given the same length of about half a page.
- Summaries much longer than half a page are no longer summaries and will be penalised in the Writing mark.
- To be concise enough for summary style and to get in all the points you should use complex sentences containing two or three points in each.
- Do not repeat points, or express them vaguely; (these will be given an R (repetition) or PNM (point not made) respectively in the margin, and discounted.
- There is no need to introduce or conclude a summary, and doing so wastes time and words. Start by using the wording of part of the question e.g. 'The features of the desert were...'

Writing and Composition (Paper 3)

Paper 3 part 1

- This is a genre transformation question, and you will be required to show awareness of style characteristics, persona, and audience. Put yourself into role, and address your audience directly.
- There will almost certainly be two texts, perhaps in different genres e.g. a letter and a dialogue. The question will require you to assimilate information from both texts so you must not ignore one of them.
- Your answer will not be in the same genre as either of the texts, and should therefore be in a different style from both of them, and all material from the passages must be modified to suit the new genre.
- The recommended structure for the response will be offered in the wording of the question, and should be followed. To quote from the principal examiner's report: 'Candidates should always bear in mind the importance of structure and a sense of audience is an exercise such as this'.
- You will try to use as much of the passages as possible, as it will all be relevant (unlike in paper 2 q.1) but you will have to change the way you express it; for instance a dialogue between friends would become reported speech in another genre, or just an opinion indirectly referred to.
- Do not write as yourself unless you are specifically told to do so.
- There will be at least two factors to focus on, e.g. advantages and disadvantages. You will need to make two lists before you start in order to make sure you have enough material for both sides of the question. Examiners will use A and B, or pros and cons, in the margin to identify points on each side and to assess the balance of the two.
- The third element of this question is evaluation; you will have to decide which of several options is better and present reasons why you have formed this opinion and justify it.
- Make strong transitions between points/paragraphs e.g. 'Yet another reason to support this proposal is...'
- Do not get distracted by peripheral issues; for instance if you are asked how money should be spent, don't discuss the fund-raising methods.
- The opening needs to clearly introduce the situation and purpose of the task, and will be rewarded if it puts the reader in the picture.
- Though you cannot make up things which are not in the passages, you should try to use your own ideas in the way that you extend those of the passages, provided that they are 'based on the reading material'.
- The aim of the response is likely to be persuasive, and paragraphs should be linked appropriately for the structure of a progressive argument.
- Remember to be consistent in your adoption of style and voice, and keep in mind the purpose of the piece of writing. Use rhetorical or other persuasive devices if appropriate to the task.
- Do not be overly casual in what is a formal piece of writing. Even if it is for your peers in a school magazine, written language for publication is less colloquial than spoken language.
- On the other hand it would not be appropriate to adopt a pedantic style containing specialised vocabulary for the task of communicating opinions clearly and persuasively.
- The ending needs to be definite and provide an effective and satisfying conclusion to the piece.

Paper 3 part 2

- Openings to compositions are important as they either engage the reader or they don't, and this affects the examiner's attitude from the beginning.
- It is essential that you choose a question out of the six available which you understand and which suits your writing abilities, as students are rarely equally proficient in all three writing genres.
- The three genres of question are marked differently for Content and Structure; They are marked according to the same mark scheme for Style and Accuracy. The style of expression of the three genres is very different, so you need to be aware of the characteristics of each.
- Whichever type of essay you choose, it should be planned first. If after 5 mins you have only managed to collect a few ideas for your choice of title, switch to another one. The plan should contain between 6 to 10 points or ideas, which can be developed into paragraphs, if the essay is going to be of a suitable content and length. Aim for approx. 8 paragraphs and 400 words
- Generally, maturity of content and expression is required for higher marks i.e. maturity for a 16 yr old.
- This is the only part of the 0500 exam in which you can show off your range of personal vocabulary, so make good use of the opportunity.

Argumentative compositions

- Be clear about the difference between an argumentative and a discursive essay. When asked directly to give your own opinion you should commit yourself to a line of argument. When asked to give a range of possible views then you are being discursive and may or may not choose to say what you personally believe. The latter kind of response is less argumentative and more informative
- A strong argument includes refutation of the other point of view so counter-arguments should be mentioned at the beginning to show that you are not being purely ignorant or prejudiced in your response. It is important to show balance in presenting the argument.
- If you are having difficulty finding enough points to support your stance you should consider arguing the opposite view.
- aim for effective introduction which captures attention and makes the topic and context clear
- You should end on the side you are arguing for, so structure your essay so that you deal with the other side first.
- End strongly to clinch your argument, without repeating yourself; 'To sum up' and 'In conclusion' are lame endings.
- It is generally advisable to argue your own personal viewpoint as it is likely to sound more convincing. It is however, possible, to argue effectively for or against an argument which you have never considered before, provided that you can marshal some evidence from the media, facts, statistics and experience. These are the areas from which you draw your supporting detail and illustration.
- Do not get too passionate about the topic as this will make your essay sound too emotional and subjective, and therefore less persuasive.
- Sometimes there is a single word in the question which alters the emphasis of the argument, for instance the word 'compulsory'. This is why key words in questions should always be underlined.

- It is irritating to the examiner for you to use questions throughout your essay. One rhetorical question at the beginning or end is quite enough.
- Use of the personal pronouns 'I', 'you' and 'we' is a device for making an argument seem more authentic and inclusive.
- Do not start each paragraph with a numerical referent, i.e. firstly, secondly, thirdly and so on, as this is tedious for the reader and an artificial structuring device if the ideas are not in fact sequential. Use other paragraph linking words, the ones which show whether your argument is continuing in the same direction (e.g. 'furthermore', 'in addition') or changing direction (e.g. 'nevertheless', 'on the other hand')
- Three-point structures are elegant and authoritative, e.g. 'involving the students, the teachers and the parent'. More than three of anything becomes a list; fewer lacks persuasive effect.

Descriptive compositions

- It is difficult to write interesting descriptions, so this type of composition should not be attempted unless you have had practice and success at this type of writing. Argument has the interest of other people's views, and narrative has curiosity as a driving force, but description must rely on range of vocabulary and use of imagery to engage reader interest. Unless the reader can see the picture they will not be able to relate to the experience.
- Use exotic and unusual vocabulary, and a variety of sentence structures. All forms of repetition should be avoided.
- Use all five senses to create an environment and atmosphere, as well as details of size, shape and colour. Make colour precise, e.g. 'scarlet', 'azure', 'off-white', 'bluish-grey'.
- Avoid common, overused, vague, short and childish vocabulary, such as 'nice', 'big', 'little', 'a lot of', 'good', and 'bad'.
- Each noun needs one or more adjectives in front of it to give sufficient detail.
- A temporal or spatial framework will give structure and progression to your description e.g. moving towards or through something, such as a street market, or going through a period of time, an hour or a day for instance, and recording the changes.
- Descriptive compositions must not become a narrative, which means character and event should not be dominant.

Narrative compositions

- Decide on a tense and then stick to it; do not jump between present and past. The normal narrative tense is past and those who try to write in the present usually forget to do so after a while, so it is safer to start off in the past.
- Know what your last sentence is going to be before you write your first. A narrative has to build up to a climax and lead towards a conclusion which is planned before it starts or it will end lamely or incomprehensibly, or the pace will be too slow or too fast.
- Don't try to do too much; you can't cover many events and many years in one short composition. Select key moments and skip over the rest, changing the pace according to the intensity of the moment.
- Do not try to include too many characters (three are enough) or to give them all speech.
- For the top grade, complexity of narrative and structure is required e.g. framing the story; flashback or forward time jump; two parallel strands being brought together. However, do not attempt these devices unless you are sure you can manage them.
- Use dialogue by all means (if you can punctuate and set it out correctly) but don't overdo it. You shouldn't turn your story into a play, nor should you dilute the effect of occasional and significant moments of speech by giving the characters trivial things to say throughout.
- If you do use dialogue, find synonyms for 'he said/she said' or it becomes tedious and predictable.
- Even narrative needs description. The characters and places need details to bring them alive and to allow the reader to be able to imagine them.
- Choose first or third person and stick with your choice; and do not switch narrative viewpoint, as this is confusing for the reader
- Do not use a first person narrator if you want to die at the end of your story! It is generally safer to use third person narration as it gives you more flexibility and a wider viewpoint.
- Do not end your story with 'And then I woke up in hospital', or 'It was all a dream'. Try to avoid clichés of any kind, including stereotyped characters and predictable outcomes.
- Use similes, but avoid obvious ones such as 'as red as a rose'. Make comparisons unusual, but still apt, by giving them a moment's thought and making them more specific e.g. 'as red as a matador's cape'.
- Straightforward stories do not get higher than C grade marks; details help create originality and engage reader interest, which is what is needed for a B grade, so use plenty of them.
- Narrative needs tension, but you should not exaggerate; too much gore or too many unlikely events become ridiculous, and fear is more believable when it is mental rather than physical.
- It is better to think of something that actually happened to you, or someone you know, or which you read in a book or saw in a film, than to try to make up something entirely from scratch, as it will sound more convincing if it based on real or fictional experience. You are then, however, free to adapt, embellish and exaggerate the original idea to make it relevant and memorable, rather than just retelling the plot synopsis or giving a factual account.
- Keep a balance in the different parts of the narrative. An over-long introduction reduces the effect of the middle section where things build up to a climax, and you need to leave yourself time to create a memorable ending.
- Stories need a conclusion, where things are either resolved or left unresolved as a cliff-hanger (though on the whole readers prefer to know how a story ended.). You must not give the impression that you stopped writing because you ran out of time, ink or ideas.

General tips for 0500 exam papers

- Do not write rough drafts. You cannot afford the time to write out every answer twice, and it is neither required nor desirable that you should do so; plans are sufficient.
- Take two different coloured highlighters into the exam. You need to annotate all the passages, and it is especially useful to use two colours for the summary and other questions where there are two types of material asked for. But don't go mad with the highlighting! Only single words or short phrases should be highlighted in a text, otherwise you are not precisely identifying your useful phrases and will end up with a ridiculous amount of highlighted text.
- Regulate your time and keep an eye on it: in Paper 2, for instance, question 2 should take half as long as questions 1 and 3, which carry double the marks and require more planning.
- If you run out of time on the last question write notes instead of full sentences. You will lose fewer marks for doing this than for continuing to write in sentences but leaving the answer incomplete. Indicate what points you would have made and you will get some credit for them.
- Suggestions for length are given as a number of pages and are there to help you understand what is expected and what is possible within the time limit. Answers which are shorter or longer will be self-penalising.
- However, the exam is assessing quality rather than quantity. Do not waste time counting words either during or after you have finished your responses. The time would be better spent improving content, expression and accuracy.
- Avoid using 'and', 'but', 'so' and 'then'. These are immature ways of linking ideas and events.
- If you finish the exam early, go back and check your answers again; you may have missed something.
- Do the questions in the order in which they are printed on each exam paper, as there is a reason why they are in that order. In particular you should not read both passages on Paper 2 before answering question 1.
- Have a pen (and a spare) for the exam with which you can write legibly and neatly. It is good policy to get the examiner on your side with a well-presented script. Often untidy writing is associated with poor spelling and punctuation.
- Underline the key words in every question, and then use them to plan around.
- Make your endings strong; they are what the examiner has in their mind when they are deciding on a mark. There is no point in repeating anything you have said earlier.
- If you are weak on sentence structure do not attempt over-long and complicated ones in which you lose grammatical control. On the other hand, you should use complex sentences rather than simple or compound structures throughout the exam, as these are what formal English requires and educated writers produce, and they will give concision, precision, variety and maturity to your style.
- Use commas to separate clauses in a sentence. It is sometimes difficult to follow meaning where they have not been used and should have been. Commas are not, however, a substitute for full-stops, and 'comma-splicing' is penalised heavily in this exam, as it shows an inability to understand what a sentence is and how the building blocks of language work.
- Detail, detail, detail. Every one of your exam answers will benefit from use of supporting detail, either textual, factual or creative.

- Avoid repeating either ideas (which spoil the effect of the first time you used them) or language (which gives the impression that your command of grammar is limited or your vocabulary restricted).
- Copying and lifting of whole phrases should be avoided throughout the exam, except when you have been specifically requested to select quotations (paper 2 q.2). Copying gives no evidence of understanding, rather the reverse.
- Don't guess the spelling of a word you are not sure of if that word exists somewhere on the exam paper. You should, however, try to guess the meaning of a word you don't know if you think it is important to your understanding of a text, and you should not be put off by it being a long word. There are three ways of working out the meaning of a word:
 - i) Is it possible to tell the approximate meaning of the word from its context?
 - ii) Does it remind you of another word you already know? If so it may be related.
 - iii) Can the word be broken down into syllables? If so you may be able to work out the meaning of the different parts.
- Check through your answer, pretending you are the examiner, to make sure that what you have written can be clearly read and understood. It is usually possible to improve your answer even at this stage by adding a few more words for clarification or support, or by correcting errors, or by making a word more legible. Use carats (^) or asterisks (*) to add extra material above the line or at the end of the piece.
- Do not be afraid to make corrections, using a line through the word(s) and making a clear substitution above or with an asterisk below.
- Keep up your concentration to the bitter end. Often students start well and then their writing declines in quality as they get tired. Sentence structure, as well as tidiness of handwriting, tends to deteriorate as time passes. Keep producing mature vocabulary even when you'd rather take the easy option and write on auto-pilot; the last questions carry as many marks as the first.
- Don't ramble; the longer the piece of writing the more likely there are to be mistakes in it and the more time you would have to allow for checking and correcting. Say it once and then move on.
- Checking is crucial for any piece of writing, because slips inevitably occur, particularly when one is writing fast and under time pressure. If the examiner finds the careless mistakes you have left uncorrected, their assessment of your writing ability will inevitably be affected.