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2026 exams

AQA GCSE

# English Language Paper 1

EXAM SKILLS  
PACK

- Four fiction text extracts
- Exam practice questions
- Reading and writing activities

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# Teacher introduction

This GCSE pack is designed to help students prepare and revise for AQA GCSE English Language **Paper 1: Explorations in creative reading and writing**, which assesses students' skills in reading and writing fiction texts.

The pack focuses on the following assessment objectives:

<b>A01</b>	Identify and interpret explicit and implicit information and ideas.
<b>A02</b>	Explain, comment on and analyse how writers use language and structure to achieve effects and influence readers, using relevant subject terminology to support their views.
<b>A04</b>	Evaluate texts critically and support this with appropriate textual references.
<b>A05</b>	Communicate clearly, effectively and imaginatively, selecting and adapting tone, style and register for different forms, purposes and audiences. Organise information and ideas, using structural and grammatical features to support coherence and cohesion of texts.
<b>A06</b>	Candidates must use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.

This pack is structured so that the reading section is followed by the writing section.

In the reading section, there are four texts. Each of the texts is accompanied by activities which target a specific skill, and 'answers' where applicable. There is a practice paper with suggested answers for each text.

In the writing section, the two broad key areas of skill are treated in turn, with accompanying 'answers'. There are four sets of practice exam questions which follow these activities, with some suggestions of the content of students' responses.

The structure of the pack is designed to be flexible; each unit can be completed in any order and each can be used stand-alone as complete units. It has been designed so that the student can work on the activities and assess their work independently.

The text extracts in the reading section are taken from the following texts and target the reading skills as follows:

	Text	Skill
Source 1	<i>Jamrach's Menagerie</i> by Carol Birch (2011)	AO1: Identify and interpret explicit and implicit information and ideas.
Source 2	'The Singing Lesson' by Katherine Mansfield (1920)	AO2: Explain, comment on and analyse how writers use <b>language</b> and structure to achieve effects and influence readers, using relevant subject terminology to support their views.
Source 3	<i>The Lodger</i> by Marie Belloc Lowndes (1913)	AO2: Explain, comment on and analyse how writers use language and <b>structure</b> to achieve effects and influence readers, using relevant subject terminology to support their views.
Source 4	<i>The Hampdenshire Wonder</i> by J.D. Beresford (1911)	AO4: Evaluate texts critically and support this with appropriate textual references.

The images selected for the practice exam papers in the writing section loosely match the themes of each of the four texts, so these would work well together as practice exam papers for your students.

Our thanks go to our contributor Lyndsey Chand who has written this pack.

*Disclaimer: The suggested approaches and sample questions in this exam skills pack have been written to complement the teaching of the specification. AQA have not endorsed the sample questions or approved the content.*

# Section A: Reading

In this part of the paper, you will work through a series of questions based on a given text extract from the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century.

- AQA advise you to spend about 15 minutes reading through the extract and all the questions in this part of the exam.
- AQA advise you to spend about 45 minutes answering the questions in the reading section.
- In this part of the paper you will answer **four** questions.

## What are the assessment objectives?

In the reading section of the exam, there are three assessment objectives:

**A01** assesses your ability to ‘identify and interpret explicit and implicit information and ideas’.

This sounds scary, but really it is just testing your ability to understand what you are reading.

**A02** assesses your ability to ‘explain, comment on and analyse how writers use language and structure to achieve effects and influence readers, using relevant subject terminology to support [your] views.’

This means that you need to be able to explore how the writer uses words and structure to have an effect on the reader. You also need to be able to use terminology to help you explain your ideas.

**A04** assesses whether you can ‘evaluate texts critically and support this with appropriate textual references.’

You evaluate things all the time in real life. When your friend asks if you like their new trainers, you evaluate them and give your opinion. You might even give reasons, like ‘I love the colour’ or ‘They were too expensive.’

## What is included in this reading section?

In this section of the pack, there are four text extracts. Each extract is accompanied by a series of activities to practise a specific skill, as well as some pre-reading tasks and extension activities so that you can become skilled at reading and responding to the types of extract you will face in the exam. After each text and its activities, there is a set of practice exam questions.

The texts and associated skills are organised as follows:

	Text	Skill
Source 1	<i>Jamrach's Menagerie</i> by Carol Birch (2011)	AO1: Identify and interpret explicit and implicit information and ideas.
Source 2	'The Singing Lesson' by Katherine Mansfield (1920)	AO2: Explain, comment on and analyse how writers use <b>language</b> and structure to achieve effects and influence readers, using relevant subject terminology to support their views.
Source 3	<i>The Lodger</i> by Marie Belloc Lowndes (1913)	AO2: Explain, comment on and analyse how writers use language and <b>structure</b> to achieve effects and influence readers, using relevant subject terminology to support their views.
Source 4	<i>The Hampdenshire Wonder</i> by J.D. Beresford (1911)	AO4: Evaluate texts critically and support this with appropriate textual references.

# Practise the exam skills

## Spotlight on A01 (first bullet point)



For question 1, you need to show your ability to retrieve (pick out) information from a text to answer four multiple choice questions, each worth 1 mark to add up to a total of 4 marks. You don't need to analyse here – just find the information you've been asked for to help you answer the 4 multiple choice questions correctly. You will use the extract taken from *Jamrach's Menagerie* in this section. The activities here will help you to develop your comprehension of unseen text extracts.



### Top tips

- **Read the question** and the **text** really, really carefully.
- **Highlight** or underline key words in the question. It sounds silly, but it can help to focus your mind on the question at a time when you are likely to be a bit panicky.
- Make sure you **select your information** from the correct part of the text (draw a box around it if it helps!).
- **Highlight** all the relevant information in the text as you read. Then check the four multiple choice questions to ensure you **choose the correct four points** for your answers to question 1.
- Try to **keep your time** on this question **short**: it's only worth four marks.

## Before you read the extract

All writers think carefully about the words they choose. The following words have been selected from a fictional extract in which the writer describes a creature.



- Using as many of these words as you can, write a short paragraph describing a creature of your choice. It could be a real or imagined creature.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- Swap with a partner and look carefully at how they have used the same words.
  - Which words have they used to describe the eyes and nose?
  - How have they used words linked to colour?
  - Which new words have they introduced?
  - How does their creature compare/contrast to your own?

3. Here are some words from the extract you will read. Match each word to the correct definition:

Word	Definition
mogs	flourished or became beautiful
rainbow-hued	completely
scrawny	covered with fine, soft hair
mythical	rainbow-coloured
utterly	pious or devoutly religious
rippling	like something out of a myth
recall	remember
cobblestones	small round stones used to cover road surfaces
indifference	unattractively thin and bony
godly	slightly wet
downy	lack of interest
moist	cats (especially ones which are not pedigree)
bloomed	moving in a way that resembles a series of small waves

Now read the extract on the following page, and answer the questions which follow.

## Source 1: 21<sup>st</sup>-century fiction

This extract is taken from a novel written in 2011 by Carol Birch about a boy's relationship with a group of exotic animals in London. In this extract, the boy has his first ever encounter with a tiger.

### *Jamrach's Menagerie*

Of course, I'd seen a cat before. You couldn't sleep for them in Bermondsey, creeping about over the roofs and wailing like devils. They lived in packs, spiky, wild-eyed, stalking the wooden walkways and bridges, fighting with the rats. But this cat ...

5 The sun himself came down and walked on earth.

Just as the birds of Bermondsey were small and brown, and those of my new home were large and rainbow-hued, so it seemed the cats of Ratcliffe Highway must be an altogether superior breed to our scrawny south-of-the-river mogs. This cat was the size of a small horse, solid, massively chested, rippling powerfully about the shoulders. He was gold, and the pattern painted so carefully all over him, so utterly perfect, was the blackest black in the world. His paws were the size of footstools, his chest snow white.

10 I'd seen him somewhere, his picture in a poster in London Street, over the river. He was jumping through a ring of fire and his mouth was open. A mythical beast.

15 I have no recall of one foot in front of the other, cobblestones under my feet. He drew me like honey draws a wasp. I had no fear. I came before the godly indifference of his face and looked into his clear yellow eyes. His nose was a slope of downy gold, his nostrils pink and moist as a pup's. He raised his thick, white dotted lips and smiled, and his whiskers bloomed.

20 I became aware of my heart somewhere too high up, beating as if it was a little fist trying to get out.

25 Nothing in the world could have prevented me from lifting my hand and stroking the broad warm nap of his nose. Even now I feel how beautiful that touch was. Nothing had ever been so soft and clean. A ripple ran through his right shoulder as he raised his paw - bigger than my head - and lazily knocked me off my feet. It was like being felled by a cushion. I hit the ground but was not much hurt, only winded, and after that it was a dream. There was, I remember, much screaming and shouting, but from a distance, as if I was sinking underwater. The world turned upside down and went by me in a bright stream, the ground moved under me, my hair hung in my eyes. There was a kind of joy in me, I do know that - and nothing that could go by the name of fear, only a wildness. I was in his jaws. His breath burned the back of my neck. My bare toes trailed, hurting distantly. I could see his feet, tawny orange with white toes, pacing the ground away, gentle as feathers.

35

## Activities on *Jamrach's Menagerie*

Of course, I'd seen a cat before. You couldn't sleep for them in Bermondsey, creeping about over the roofs and wailing like devils. They lived in packs, spiky, wild-eyed, stalking the wooden walkways and bridges, fighting with the rats. But this cat ...

The sun himself came down and walked on earth.

### 4. First, let's practise selecting quotations from a text.

Which word or phrase in the section above makes the cats sound ...

a. dangerous?

.....

b. aggressive?

.....

c. evil or wicked?

.....

d. noisy?

.....

e. sneaky?

.....

Now read the next part of the text, below:

Just as the birds of Bermondsey were small and brown, and those of my new home were large and rainbow-hued, so it seemed the cats of Ratcliffe Highway must be an altogether superior breed to our scrawny south-of-the-river mogs. This cat was the size of a small horse, solid, massively chested, rippling powerfully about the shoulders. He was gold, and the pattern painted so carefully all over him, so utterly perfect, was the blackest black in the world. His paws were the size of footstools, his chest snow white.

I'd seen him somewhere, his picture in a poster in London Street, over the river. He was jumping through a ring of fire and his mouth was open. A mythical beast.

5. Answer the following multiple choice questions on this section of the extract. Each question has three possible answers. You should only tick one answer for each question.

5.1. How are the birds of Bermondsey described?

Small and brown

Rainbow-hued

Gold and white

5.2. Do the cats of Ratcliffe Highway seem:

Superior

Scrawny

Smug

5.3. Is the particular cat (tiger) in this extract described as:

Seemingly sweet

Massively chested

Creatively cunning

5.4. Where has the narrator seen a picture of this tiger?

In a police station

On TV

On a London street