

# Examining the examiners: The state of senior secondary English examinations in Australia

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper investigates the language of examination reports for senior secondary English courses in New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia. A combination of Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is used to examine the types of knowledge and knower that are valued in examinations; and how language is used to describe successful and less successful writing, and the candidates who produce these texts. The analysis suggests that subject English values an elite code (at least, in examination settings), in which both an 'insightful' approach to texts and skilled writing justifying analysis is valued; and that students who are unable to take up these discursive practices are imagined as lazy and callow. The paper concludes with implications for teachers and examiners, arguing that teachers must make students aware of the 'dual-sided' nature of subject English, and that examiners should be cognisant of potential bias in their view of responses and their writers.*

### **Introduction**

Senior Secondary schooling in Australia relies heavily on externally set and moderated exit examinations, with only one state of six (Queensland) not using an externally set examination (Australasian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities [ACARA], 2016). Not only do these high stakes examinations determine (in part) students' admission into university, they are also cause for elevated levels of psychological distress, sleep deprivation, depression, and anxiety in both Australian and international contexts (Putwain, 2011; Robinson, Alexander & Gradisar, 2009). Of a multiplicity of subjects offered to students across the country, subject English has attained a position of prestige and importance above all others, for largely historical and political reasons (Brock, 1996; Christie, 1999; Eagleton, 1985; Patterson, 2000). This means that regardless of a student's location or aspiration, they are likely to sit an English exit examination.

Examinations, and the academic discourses embedded within them, tend to favour middle class views and ways of thinking (Street, 1985). This becomes an issue when considered in terms of social

mobility and access; Australian schools are sites for the reproduction of social inequality and the recruitment of an elite class from socially privileged families (Gronn, 2000; Western, 2000). With English examinations occupying such an important place in examinations and students' academic trajectories, research into differences between successful and less successful responses is vital in order to disrupt these cycles of inequality. Previous research has investigated teacher opinions of subject English (Jogie, 2015; Manuel, 2002; Potts, 1999); examinations and student responses (Christie, 2016; Christie & Dreyfus, 2007; Christie & Macken-Horarik, 2007, 2011; Macken-Horarik, 2006); and examiner comments themselves (Patterson, 2008; Rosser, 2002). Research focusing on student writing seems to generate two key criteria for successful writing in subject English: (1) a clear rhetorical structure, allowing the writer to demonstrate expert knowledge (e.g., Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Christie & Dreyfus, 2007; Macken-Horarik, 2006); and (2) the adoption of a set of particular sensibilities that position the writer as one who is appreciative of literature and able to draw symbolic abstractions about life from

it (e.g., Christie, 2016; Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Christie & Macken-Horarik, 2007, 2011).

In order to assess how students navigate these requirements, or, more specifically, how their attempts are evaluated by examiners, it is useful to consider what types of knowledge and knowers are valued.

Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) is a theoretical framework for describing how different types of knowledge and thinking are valued in different disciplines (Maton, 2016). Despite being a relatively new approach to examining disciplines, it is becoming more commonly used to examine subject English, both in Australia and in international settings (Christie, 2016; Jackson, 2016). As Figure 1 shows, LCT draws on the work of Bernstein and Bourdieu to provide a sociological view of knowledge and knowers.

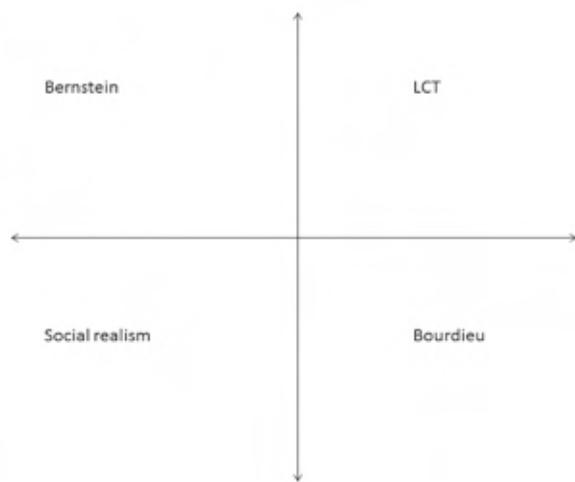


Figure 1

The research into successful student writing in subject English tends to identify two key aspects: (1) a knowledge of rhetorical structure and how language features are mobilised by authors, and (2) an ability to engage with abstractions about the human condition. The LCT framework introduced above allows for the systematic description of both of these discursive practices: (1) as a *knowledge code*, and the second, (2) as a *knower code*. The research has often focused on the importance of either a knowledge code or a knower code in achieving success in senior English. Christie and Derewianka (2008), as well as Christie and Macken-Horarik (2011), are notable exceptions, suggesting that successful writers are able to conflate both codes in order to produce successful responses. Despite their thorough and revealing analysis, the authors only considered a select number of successful responses, without the benefit of examiner comments. This paper builds on their work by investigating what it is examiners are looking for, and how these criteria are

realised or failed to be realised in student writing. By couching the analysis in LCT terms, this paper specifies the type of knowledge that is valued in senior English. I argue that it is neither a knowledge code, nor a knower code (in contrast to Christie, 2016); instead English values an *élite code*.

This analysis is complemented with a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) view of the language of examiner reports. In particular, attention is given to the language used to describe successful and unsuccessful responses, as well as the hypothetical candidates that are suggested by the examiners' comments. Successful responses are typically described as thorough and reflective, and by extension their writers are measured and discerning. In contrast, unsuccessful responses are described as haphazard and pedestrian, their writers being either lazy or ignorant of the examination requirements. The discourse of the examiners suggests that not only are candidates' work being judged, but so too are the personal dispositions of the candidates themselves.

### Legitimation Code Theory

LCT uses a number of different dimensions to make its description of knowledge more specific; for this paper recourse is made to one of these dimensions in particular: *specialisation codes*. Each code is distinguished by how it positions the relationship between knowledge and objects of study, *epistemic relations* (ER), and between knowledge and the knower, *social relations* (SR) (Maton, 2016). Each relationship may be strongly (+) or weakly (-) emphasised, producing four discrete codes (Maton, 2016; see Figure 2):

- *knowledge codes* (ER+, SR-), where possession of specialised knowledge, principles or procedures concerning specific objects of study is emphasised as the basis of achievement, and the attributes of actors are downplayed [for example, a scientist may be highly regarded because of his expert knowledge of physics, rather than his insightful view into the human condition];
- *knower codes* (ER-, SR+), where specialised knowledge and objects are downplayed and the attributes of actors are emphasised as measures of achievement, whether viewed as born (e.g. 'natural talent'), cultivated (e.g. 'taste') or social (e.g. feminist standpoint theory) [for example, a poet may be valued for their unique, artistic view of the world];
- *élite codes* (ER+, SR+), where legitimacy is based on both possessing specialist knowledge and being the right kind of knower [this, I argue, is the ideal English candidate]; and
- *relativist codes* (ER-, SR-), where legitimacy is

determined by neither specialist knowledge nor knower attributes – ‘anything goes’. (Maton, 2016, p. 13; italics and parentheses in original; square brackets are my additions)

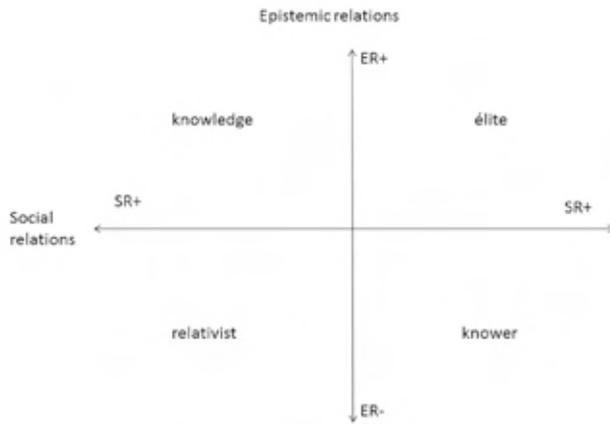


Figure 2

As I noted briefly above, Christie (2016) has argued that subject English values a knower code; that is, in order to be successful, candidates have to be ‘the right kind of person’, or SR+. While this is indeed an important aspect to success, as Christie convincingly argues, I believe it only describes one side of the coin. Rather than just the knower, English examinations (at least in Australia) appear to also value a particular knowledge of the subject itself, ER+, leaving ER+, SR+, and élite code. This suggestion is in line with earlier work (Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Christie & Macken-Horarik, 2011), and, I argue, a more accurate

characterisation of what is valued in English.

**Systemic Functional Linguistics**

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a system for describing language usage, in particular how users of language deploy various grammatical features in order to create meaning (Matthiessen, Teruya & Lam, 2010). The compatibility of SFL and Bernstein’s Code Theory has been noted by researchers from both perspectives (Bernstein, 1996; Hasan, 1999), and LCT, which draws heavily on Code Theory and Bernstein’s work, continues this relationship (Maton, Martin & Matruglio, 2016). Whilst LCT provides the language necessary to describe knowledge and knowers, SFL provides the (meta)language to describe how the examiners’ reports use language to build these descriptions. Since these are externally set and marked examinations, the marker does not know the student who has produced the text, and must therefore make judgements about a writer’s capabilities based solely on their examination script. Examining the language used to differentiate high and low scoring responses allows for the recognition and systematic description of discursive patterns that are used to distinguish between the imagined writers of different examination responses.

As its name suggests, Systemic Functional Linguistics is concerned with *systems* in language. The analysis here focuses on the system of APPRAISAL. APPRAISAL resources allow language users to describe their feelings and attitudes towards aspects of the world (Martin & Rose, 2007). The analysis draw in particular two

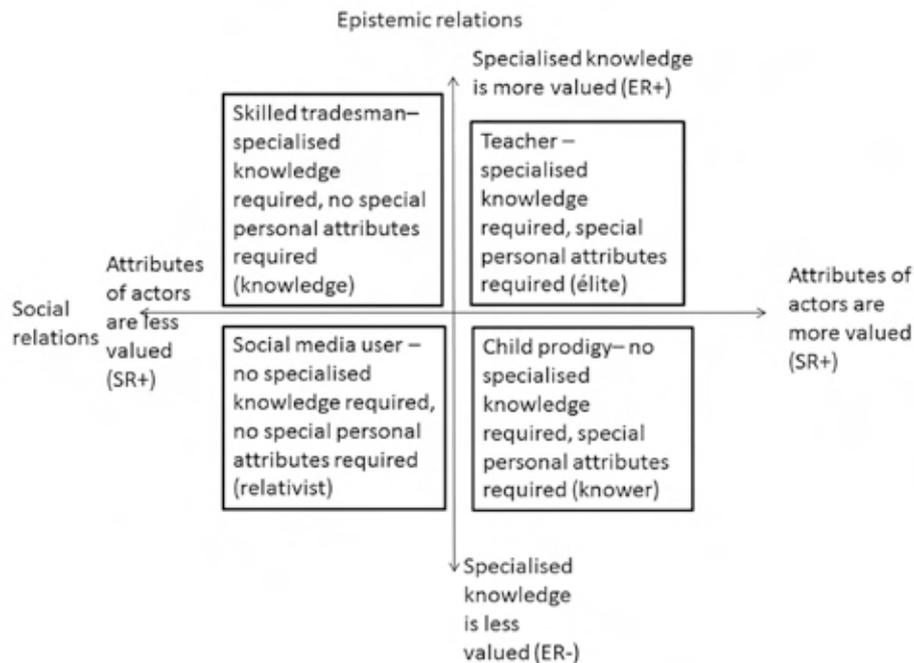


Figure 3

elements of this system: *appreciation* and *judgement*. Appreciation refers to the evaluation of objects (like examination responses); the analysis presented below draws on Martin and White's (2005) categories:

- Reaction
  - Impact – ‘did it grab me?’
  - Quality – ‘did I like it?’
- Composition
  - Balance – ‘did it hang together?’
  - Complexity – ‘was it hard to follow?’
- Valuation – ‘was it worthwhile?’  
(adapted from p. 56)

Attention is given to these resources because it is through appreciation that the examiners are able to describe how they view different responses, either positively or negatively.

However, the language of the examination report suggests that it was not only the *writing* of candidates appraised, but also the candidates themselves. For this reason, the text was also examined from a *judgement* perspective, which refers to the appraisal of social actors (Martin & White, 2005), in this case, the writers of the examination responses. As with appreciation, I have drawn on Martin and White's (2005) categories:

- Social Esteem
  - Normality – ‘how special?’
  - Capacity – ‘how capable?’
  - Tenacity – ‘how dependable?’
- Social Sanction
  - Veracity [truth] – ‘how honest?’
  - Propriety [ethics] – ‘how far beyond reproach?’  
(adapted from p. 53)

Appreciation and judgements can be marked explicitly through attitudinal lexis, labelled as an *inscribed* evaluation; or implicitly through ideational meaning, that is, an *invoked* evaluation. For example, ‘It’s a really funny movie’ clearly expresses the speaker’s positive appreciation through the lexical item ‘funny’; ‘I went and saw the movie three times!’ does not use any explicit markers of attitude, but the idea that the speaker enjoyed and valued the film is clearly *invoked*.

### Methodology

The analysis presented here documents the language of the 2015 examiner reports of equivalent secondary English exit examinations in Victoria, New South Wales (NSW), and South Australia. Each of these states employs externally set exit examinations for secondary students, with comparable content and examination structures (ACARA, 2016; Board of Studies, Teaching

& Educational Standards NSW [BOSTES], 2015; SACE, 2015b; VCAA, 2015b), allowing for effective and meaningful comparisons to be drawn between the three states.

The Higher School Certificate, Victorian Certificate of Education, and South Australian Certificate of Education (HSC, VCE, and SACE; the exit examinations of NSW, Victoria, and South Australia respectively) contain a number of different sections in their English examinations, each tasking the student with producing a different type of response. Under consideration in this paper are roughly equivalent sections from each examination, those that require the student to produce some kind of extended and sustained critical response to one or more texts. Different sections are weighted equally, encouraging students to divide their time equally. This means that students are expected to spend between 40–60 minutes answering one question (Board of Studies, Teaching & Educational Standards NSW [BOSTES], 2015; SACE Board of South Australia [SACE], 2015b; Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority [VCAA], 2015b); inviting able candidates to produce considerably lengthy responses where they create and sustain a line of argumentation. The length of these relatively open-ended responses means that these sections often feature detailed commentary in examiners’ reports, compared to, for example, a short answer question requiring a one or two-line response. The relative similarity of these sections across states, and the detail contained in the examiners’ reports, readily lends this section of the examinations to analysis.

As suggested above, the examiners’ reports were analysed through two separate (although mutually supportive) theoretical approaches. Particular focus was given to those sections which described the style and approach of successful responses and contrasted them with less successful ones. These sections were examined first through an LCT lens in order to see if aspects of knowledge were emphasised (ER+) or de-emphasised (ER–), and if the personal attributes of the actors were valued (SR+ or SR–). Anson (2016) has argued subject English sees explicit knowledge of the English language and communication strategies as an important and discrete knowledge; drawing on this analysis, examiners’ comments were marked as ER+ when they drew attention to students’ ability or failure to demonstrate this knowledge. Comments that commended students for their ability to reflect on complex abstractions relating to the human experience (Christie, 2016), and/or their personal engagement with the text (Christie, 1999; Christie & Derewianka, 2008), were considered SR+, following Maton’s (2016) categories. Specialised

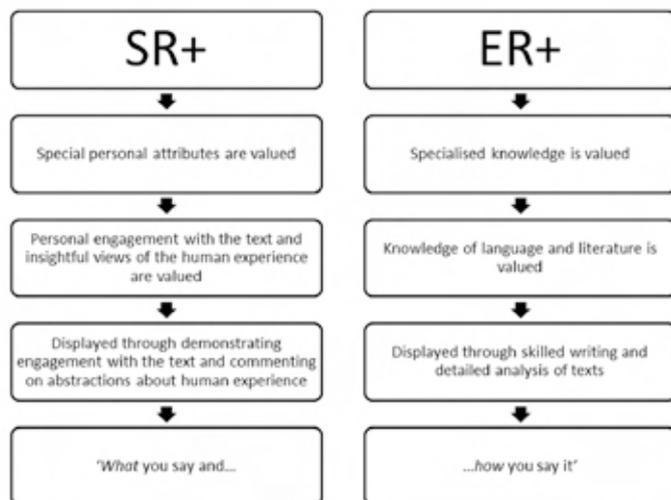


Figure 4

knowledge tended to be represented through the organisation and skill of the writer, as well as an ability to comment on authors mobilise various language features in their own texts to achieve specific effects, whilst personal attributes were seen through the originality and insightfulness of a writer's interpretation (see figure 4). SFL analysis was conducted by reviewing the examination reports from an APPRAISAL perspective, focusing in particular on appreciation and judgement. Both inscribed and invoked evaluations are included in the analysis in order to widen its scope and allow for a more comprehensive overview of what is valued by examiners. The *target* (i.e., the object/ thing being appraised) is also included in order to highlight patterns of examiner comments, in particular, shifts between evaluations of the writing to the writers themselves. Only judgement is included in HSC analyses, as the formatting of the report means that feedback is specifically about candidates' strengths and weaknesses, rather than their writing. By examining the differences in the approaches of high and low scoring responses, it is possible to begin to describe which types of knowledge and knowers are privileged over others.

### A Janus-faced subject

The idea that success in school depends on hard work and the right attitude is an admirable one. In a country where discourses of meritocracy have penetrated political rhetoric and are firmly established in the minds of Australian youths (Cooper, 2000), the belief that institutional success depends on a 'can-do' attitude, rather than access to socially privileged dispositions and cultural capital, is understandable. Christie (2016), however, has argued persuasively that subject English values an SR+ code, that is, that it emphasises the importance of the writer's personal judgement and

aesthetic appraisal of texts (as opposed to detached analysis, as might be valued in a science subject). This tendency can be traced back (at least in NSW) to as early as 1965; Rosser (2002), in his analysis of previous HSC papers, concluded 'As a generality, we can say that a good workmanlike analysis of the text is not enough to attain a high grade' (p. 103).

The examiners' reports under consideration here repeated this trend, sometimes using very similar language and expressions. Below are some examples of language which demonstrate that SR+ is valued in examinations (*italics* are used to mark examples of language explicitly signalling the importance of a student's ability to explore the human experience, and to provide 'personal' interpretations of the text, rather than just textual knowledge):

#### Victorian Certificate of Education

- A *personal engagement* with the texts and ideas is neither formulaic nor predictable
- Responses that were *thoughtful*
- Students should be encouraged to have confidence in *their own reading* and demonstrate a *personal understanding* of their text
- The highest-scoring pieces were those that were *thoughtful* and *fresh* (VCAA, 2015a, pp. 1–2, emphasis added)

#### South Australian Certificate of Education

- This question required students to *interrogate the necessity of change ... for example a change in moral outlook*
- It was acceptable for students to *interpret* 'dreams' in a variety of ways
- The more successful responses involved an understanding of *the nuances of fear and of delight*
- Students might have explored *the nature of poverty; or a lack of hope; or a lack of compassion; or a lack of opportunity* (SACE, 2015a, pp. 8, 10, 11, emphasis added)

#### NSW Higher School Certificate

- Making *more insightful links between texts*
- Demonstrating *individual engagement* with the question
- Engaging *personally* with the play through the crafting of a *sustained voice*
- *Personally engaging* with an interpretation of the film (BOSTES, 2016, 'Paper 1: Section III,' para. 2, 'Standard, Module A', para 2., 'Question 5', para 3., 'Question 6', para 2. emphasis added)

Together, the extracts above support the trends noticed by Christie (2016) and Rosser (2002): that

subject English can be categorised as SR+. This does not necessarily mean that specialised knowledge is downplayed (i.e., ER–; see below for my departure from Christie’s 2016 analysis), as it might be realised as detailed knowledge of texts and their features, but rather that specialised knowledge is not the only thing that is being assessed. The VCE and HSC tend to value students who are able to produce ‘insightful’ lines of argument and demonstrate their ‘personal’ engagement with the text, or are able to feign their engagement (Patterson, 2008). The SACE foregrounds the importance of being able to consider abstract concepts about the human experience, being able to comment on morals, emotions and dreams. Therefore, success in English is not just about *what* you know, but also *who* you are, because students must have the right ‘feel for the game’ if they are to produce truly insightful and personal responses. What counts as insightful and personal is problematic because of its subjective nature, but historically subject English in Australia has been dominated by Anglo-centric middle-class discourses and dispositions (Anson, 2016; Brock, 1996; Patterson, 2000; Rosser, 2000), which means that those students without the cultural capital necessary to espouse the required subject positions, or feign compliance, are typically disadvantaged by subject English and its examinations (Patterson, 2008; Rosser, 2002). The 2015 examiners’ reports suggest that this trend is alive and well today.

I argue, however, that this is not the whole story. Whilst English does indeed value certain personal dispositions, creating an SR+ code, it also values a specific kind of knowledge which must be mobilised in order to guarantee a high-scoring response. This knowledge is one which includes a strong command of English language skills, a clear and purposeful organisational strategy, and a sophisticated view of how authors of texts use language to achieve certain effects in their writing. Some examples of the importance of this knowledge are given below, with *italics* used to mark language which foregrounds the importance of certain types of *knowledge* (specifically a knowledge of how language features are mobilised by authors to achieve specific effects, and a knowledge of effective rhetorical organisation), rather than certain types of *knower*, which was seen above:

#### **Victorian Certificate of Education**

- An understanding of the *knowledge and skills* required in the study
- *Careful management of the response structure*
- Develop *language awareness*, to *articulate ideas* and to develop *communication skills*

- They were required to [consider]... the *structures, features and conventions* used by authors
- The *full range of key knowledge and skills*
- To be supported *by detailed analysis and specific reference* to the selected text
- By *establishing the parameters of their essay* this way
- The student moves *beyond the surface* of the topic to arrive at a *position on the effect of the poetry*
- These *basic skills* must be continually reinforced, including building *more sophisticated vocabulary, continuing to improve grammar and placing more focus on sentence structure* (VCAA, 2015a, pp. 1, 2, 3, 4, emphasis added)

#### **South Australian Certificate of Education**

- Those students who *demonstrated an analytical understanding* of the text types being explored and *fluently employed appropriate metalanguage* in their responses fared best
- Students fared best when they *provided clear textual evidence* to justify their points rather than making unsupported statements
- Students produced more successful responses when they *displayed an understanding* of how authors create and use characterisation
- In less successful answers, students described change and recounted the subsequent cost, *reducing the argument* to plot and character summaries (SACE, 2015a, pp. 6, 7, 8, emphasis added)

#### **NSW Higher School Certificate**

- *Synthesising a response* to the question with *elements from the rubric*
- *Knowledge* of the prescribed text
- Linking the prescribed and related texts through *the analysis* of ideas/ perspectives/ *techniques/ themes*
- *Understanding and effectively using* the module to address their text pairing
- *Directly answering* the question asked and *applying detailed, well supported knowledge* for that purpose
- Writing *effectively in language appropriate* for purpose
- *Controlling expression* throughout the response
- *Analysing* rather than just describing texts
- *Integrating textual form and purpose* rather than limiting the comparison of texts to a preoccupation with thematic concerns (BOSTES, 2016, ‘Paper 1: Section III,’ para. 2, ‘Standard, Module A’, para 2., ‘Advanced, Module A, para. 2, 3, emphasis added)

Table 1. Victorian Certificate of Education

		Positive	Negative
A P P R E C I A T I O N	Reaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Both <u>the quality and quantity of work</u> produced under the timed conditions of the examination were quite sound, and, at times, <b>impressive</b></li> </ul>	
	Composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Detailed <u>analysis</u> and <u>specific reference</u></b></li> <li><u>High-scoring responses</u> <i>did not rely entirely</i> on the most obvious scenes/ moments</li> <li><u>This [high scoring] response</u> <b>carefully</b> considered the topic and its implication</li> <li><b>Clear <u>introductions</u>, <u>appropriate paragraphing</u></b></li> <li><b>Careful <u>reading and consideration</u></b> of the first topic for <i>All About Eve</i> [title italicised in original]</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Predictable and superficial <u>discussions</u></b></li> <li><b>Simple <u>plot summaries</u></b></li> <li>Too often <i>a key point was taken from the topic and a response produced, omitting a significant idea</i> that had a major bearing on the topic itself</li> </ul>
	Valuation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Discerning <u>selection of scenes</u></b> to support and explore ideas</li> <li><b>Responses</b> that were <b>thoughtful</b></li> <li><b>Recognised <u>the conceptual ideas and implications of the topic explored</u> precisely</b></li> <li><b>The <u>highest-scoring responses</u></b> were those that were <b>thoughtful and fresh</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>[<u>some less successful responses</u> were characterised by] <i>relying exclusively</i> on commercially produced material</li> </ul>
J U D G E M E N T	Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>The [successful] student</b> <i>provides themselves with opportunities to think</i> in a <b>sophisticated and conceptualised</b> way</li> <li><i>Be able to support their <u>interpretations</u></i> with <b>insightful evidence</b></li> <li><b>The [successful] student</b> <b>perceptively</b> notes the way an image as unreal as squid-like men can convey a truth as powerful as the horror of war</li> <li><b>The ability to embed quotations</b> <b>appropriately</b></li> <li><b>This [successful student]</b> <b>carefully</b> considered the topic and its implications as the essay began and <i>unfolded</i></li> <li><b>The same [successful student]</b> <b>examines</b> the text <b>closely</b> and <b>considers in detail</b></li> <li><b>The student</b> <i>moves beyond the surface of the topic to arrive at a position</i> on the effect of the poetry, <i>contending</i> that ...</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A dependence on <b>formulaic, prepared responses</b></li> <li><i>It is still a problem</i> that too many <b>students</b> <i>want to respond to their own question rather than grappling with the ideas of the topic as it is presented</i></li> <li>Too often <b>students</b> <i>launch</i> into a response if it looks familiar to another topic they have explored in class</li> <li>On other occasions, <b>students</b> <i>ignored</i> a key term that may have played an important in understanding the topic's implication</li> </ul>

From the above, it is clear that is not just about *what* you say (SR+), but also *how* you say it (ER+); an insightful and original analysis of a text is valued, but a candidate's marks will be affected if they cannot express their ideas stylishly and effectively. These ideas should also be supported with detailed analysis and textual evidence, rather than just relying solely on 'feelings' (which is the kind of writing that would be valued in a ER-,SR+ subject). Subject English therefore is targeted towards establishing an élite code (ER+,SR+): it not just the views of the candidates that are assessed, but also the knowledge and skills acquired in subject English, and the reports' discussions of high-scoring responses tends to praise the rhetorical moves that allow for a cohesive

organisation, and a demonstration of the candidates' knowledge of English language features. Overall, it is this *combination* of two elements – a personal, 'cultivated' view of the texts, and ability to justify this view with clear analysis and effective writing – that is important for success in English examinations.

### *The right candidate and its imposters*

If subject English examinations value a certain kind of knower (SR+, candidates with the 'right feeling' for the texts they read), and certain kind of knowledge (ER+, candidates who can apply their knowledge to argue effectively), it is possible to generate hypothetical candidates who satisfy, or fail to satisfy, these criteria.

**Table 2. South Australian Certificate of Education**

		Positive	Negative
A P P R E C I A T I O N	Composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>More successful responses</u> involved a careful deconstruction of the question and <i>the creation of a line of reasoning in response to it</i></li> <li>• <u>These references to the text</u> were more useful when <b>fluently</b> embedded into the line of reasoning</li> </ul>	
J U D G E M E N T		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Those students</u> who demonstrated an <b>analytical</b> understanding of the text types being explored and <b>fluently</b> employed <b>appropriate</b> metalanguage in their responses fared best</li> <li>• <u>Students</u> fared best when they provided <b>clear</b> textual evidence <i>to justify their points</i></li> <li>• Many <u>students</u> <i>were able to apply their understanding, construct <b>coherent</b> arguments, address the questions, and justify their point of views with a broad range of references to the texts</i></li> <li>• <u>Students</u> fare best when <i>they organise their line of reasoning</i> around the comparison</li> <li>• <u>Those students</u> who <i>displayed an awareness of all features of the question</i> fared best</li> <li>• <u>Students</u> fared best when they provided <b>clear</b> textual evidence <i>to justify their points</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [<u>students</u> are less successful when they] <b>simply</b> discuss texts sequentially <i>with a token ‘comparatively’ or ‘similarly’</i> at the point of juncture between the texts</li> <li>• It was not sufficient for <u>students</u> to <b>simply</b> respond to one or more of the dot points listed in the question</li> <li>• [<u>unsuccessful students</u> were] making <b>unsupported</b> statements</li> </ul>

The language of the examiners’ reports suggests that this may be the case. A remarkable pattern of language was found across the reports from different states, with each report tending to position successful candidates as discerning and motivated, and less successful writers are lazy and unrefined. Below are some examples, drawing on Martin and White’s APPRAISAL framework (2005); **inscribed judgements are bolded**, *invoked judgements are italicised*, and the target of judgements are underlined:

Examining the reports from both an appreciation and judgement perspective, as well as the shifting target of the evaluations, reveals that not only are the examinations being assessed, but also their imagined writers. Overall, the trend suggested by the LCT analysis is congruent with the language describing the difference between high and low scoring responses. High scoring responses are typically *thoughtful, careful, judicious, and discerning* (SR+), as well as *effective, appropriate, and clear* (ER+); low scoring responses are, by contrast, *simple, formulaic, and unsupported*.

As Tables 1, 2, and 3 show, appreciation: composition, and judgement: capacity are highly valued; both of these categories are realised through ER+, as students display their knowledge through skilled and controlled writing. This distinction between high and low scoring responses is easily justified; in many subjects and disciplines, academic writing that is thoughtful, careful, and effective is typically more highly regarded than simple or unsupported writing.

However, it is important to note that the language used to describe different types of responses often suggests something about how the examiners might see the candidates themselves. The higher scoring candidates appear more willing ‘to go the distance’, working hard to justify the position they take in their writing, but, importantly, doing so carefully. It is interesting to note the VCE’s chief examiner’s use of the term ‘unfolded’ (VCAA, 2015a, p. 3) to describe the development of a successful essay, a word imbued with meanings of deliberate and graceful execution. By contrast, less successful candidates ‘launch’ into their response

Table 3. NSW Higher School Certificate

		Positive	Negative
J U D G E M E N T	Capacity	<p><u>Candidates</u> showed strength in these areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Judicious</b> selection of <u>related text</u></li> <li>• Developing and sustaining <u>a thesis</u> that was <b>well-supported</b> through <b>purposeful</b> structure and textual analysis</li> <li>• Writing <b>effectively</b> in <u>language</u> <b>appropriate</b> for purpose</li> <li>• <b>Effectively</b> using the module to address their text pairing</li> <li>• <b>Directly</b> answering the question asked an applying <b>detailed, well-supported</b> knowledge for that purpose</li> <li>• Discuss[ing] them [the texts] in a <b>concise</b> and <b>focused</b> manner</li> <li>• Others offered <b>more detailed analysis</b> and formulated their own <b>informed</b> personal <u>viewpoint</u></li> <li>• <i>Synthesising a response to the question</i> with elements from the rubric</li> <li>• <i>Exploring a change or transformation</i> that occurred as a result of Discovery</li> </ul>	<p><u>Candidates</u> need to improve in these areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Analysing</b> rather than <b>just describing</b> texts</li> <li>• Referencing texts <b>appropriately</b> instead of <i>relying on unwieldy</i> acronyms</li> <li>• Using metalanguage <b>inappropriately</b> which too often served to cloud rather than clarify meaning</li> <li>• Addressing the question asked rather than <i>relying on pre-learned general concepts</i></li> <li>• <i>Limiting the comparison of texts</i> to a preoccupation with thematic concerns</li> <li>• Integrating <u>the discussion</u> <b>more successfully</b> by making <b>more insightful</b> links between texts</li> <li>• Avoiding <b>broad, sweeping statements</b> about <u>context</u></li> <li>• Developing a <b>full and deep</b> awareness of the values presented in the text</li> <li>• Including cultural and social analysis, and <i>recognising that the concerns raised in the texts are still concerns in the current context</i></li> <li>• <i>Controlling expression</i> throughout the response</li> </ul>

(p. 3), ‘simply discuss texts with a token ‘comparatively’’ (SACE, 2015a, p. 6), and ‘[rely] on unwieldy acronyms’ (BOSTES, 2016, ‘Paper 1: Section III,’ 2–3). The language of each examiners’ report tends to converge on the same idea: that less successful writers are imposters of their more successful counterparts, trying to slip false markers of academic writing ability, like a ‘token comparatively or similarly’, past the markers. Unsuccessful attempts to take up the discursive practices required of subject English, ER+,SR+ brand the writer as someone without intellectual stamina to meet the question on its own terms: ‘It is still a problem that too many students want to respond to their own question rather than grappling with the ideas of the topic as it is presented’ (VCAA, 2015a, p. 3).

Overall, the language of the examiners’ reports suggests that the trends of earlier English examinations continue; the successful candidate is imagined as someone who is able to write gracefully and ‘with feeling and insight’ (cf. Brock, 1996; Rosser, 2002, for analyses of English examinations from circa 1950–2000). This has implications for students who are unable to access the middle-class discourses which are typically valued in the subject (Brock, 1996; Christie, 2016; Macken-Horarik, 2006; Patterson, 2008; Rosser, 2002), especially considering the high stakes nature of these exit examinations. While it is important to note that these examinations are designed to discriminate between candidates, it seems unfair that struggling writers are

reprimanded for their failed attempts to satisfy the examination’s requirements. Words like ‘want’, ‘rely’, and ‘simply’ position the candidate as someone who not only cannot write and address the question effectively, but also as someone who *chooses* to do so. The suitable English candidate, therefore, must not only be able to write well, but also must relish the opportunity to engage with these texts, which leaves students lacking the cultural capital necessary to do so at a disadvantage.

### *Discussion and conclusion*

Above, I have argued that subject English values an élite code, that is, a student with *both* ‘the right feeling’ and the right knowledge; and that the language of the examiners’ reports praises these candidates, whilst representing less successful candidates as lazy and disorganised. The analysis suggests that the views of English examiners have remained largely unchanged since the 1950s, and that candidates without the cultural capital or personal disposition to appreciate certain texts are disadvantaged by these examinations (Brock, 1996; Macken-Horarik, 2006; Patterson, 2008; Rosser, 2002). The characterisation of English as an élite code is congruent with earlier analyses by Christie and Derewianka (2008), as well as Christie and Macken-Horarik (2011); and helps to reconcile research which has argued that English is either ER+ (Christie & Dreyfus, 2007; Macken-Horarik, 2006) or SR+ (Christie, 2016; Christie & Derewianka, 2008;

Christie & Macken-Horarik, 2007, 2011) by arguing that the subject functions as both a ER+, SR+ code. Such a view also aligns with the one presented in the subject's curriculum documents in NSW (Anson, 2016), which is unsurprising, considering that examinations are designed to assess a student's mastery of the curriculum content.

This paper therefore has implications for senior secondary English teachers working across the country, and for examiners. Teachers should make students aware that the subject values two discrete skills and types of knowledge: the ability to produce insightful and personal views of texts, and the ability to support these views with precise and fluent writing and a demonstration of expert knowledge of how authors achieve specific effects within their texts. Students should also be cognisant of the need to practice fluently embedding quotations and technical language in their writing, the importance of a strong rhetorical organisation, and the dangers of 'feigning' the discursive practices required by extended response writing (e.g. using a 'token comparatively or similarly', rather than genuinely making connections in their writing). Examiners should also be aware of potential bias when assessing student work, as earnest attempts to meet the requirements of the examination can be misread as laziness or unwillingness to engage with the question.

Despite attempts to provide an overview of the Australia's examination practices, the above research only focuses on examination reports from three states. It is possible that other states emphasise different aspects of subject English more or less strongly in their examinations; differences between the structure of the actual courses also makes it difficult to compare each state precisely. It should also be noted that the views presented in the examiners' reports are a summary of the views of many different individuals, and that when these views are condensed into a single document or dot point some nuance is lost. Future research should therefore investigate examiners' feedback from other states and territories; and would benefit from a more ethnographic approach where the views of different examiners are able to be articulated and justified in interview settings. More research is also needed to examine the relationship between the subject's curriculum documents and its examinations, to see if there is a connection (e.g. Anson, 2016, in a NSW context), or disconnect. Investigation into teacher and student perceptions of examinations would also help provide a more comprehensive view of how successful and less successful student writers are able to take up the discursive practices expected in their writing.

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