



General Certificate of Secondary Education

**Media Studies 3571**

**Report on the Examination**

*2007 examination – June series*

- Full Course

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## **General**

### ***Introduction***

There has been another significant increase in the number of candidates entered for this qualification again this year. The total number now stands at 45,000. It is pleasing to see that the popularity of GCSE Media Studies continues to increase in this way, with many centres seeing an opportunity to broaden the perspectives of their students by offering this engaging specification which allows them to explore so many issues that are close to their own cultural and social interests. The open nature of the specification encourages centres to set their own agenda within a clearly defined conceptual and production framework. This provides ample opportunities for teachers to deliver a course that matches with the needs and interests of their candidates.

Unfortunately not all centres that offer the specification are ideally equipped to do so and this can cause some problems in the delivery of the specification. Although allied in some ways to GCSE English Language, GCSE Media Studies seeks to assess skills that are often very different from those taught as part of English Language. Consequently teachers who are seeking to co-teach the two specifications do need to be quite clear about what is required in the delivery of GCSE Media Studies. Very rarely will opportunities present themselves for the overlapping of the two specifications and teachers need to be aware that it is not a simple job to deliver the GCSE Media Studies specification by modifying work set for English Language.

On the other hand it has become clear that the Media Studies specification can in itself generate some interesting opportunities for developing work within the English curriculum. Media products are often an idea stimulus for generating responses appropriate to the GCSE English Language specifications and it is this area of overlap that should provide potential for making meaningful links between the two disciplines.

### **Coursework (3571/C)**

#### ***Administration***

Centres are reminded of the importance of submitting mark sheets and samples of candidates' coursework to meet with the deadlines set by AQA. Delays in submitting either marks or folders not only causes considerable problems for moderators, and AQA staff working themselves to tight deadlines, but also potentially jeopardises candidates getting their results on time. Unless centres have a formal agreement from AQA to submit coursework late, they are expected to do so no later than 5<sup>th</sup> May.

Teachers are also reminded of the need to take great care in the addition of their marks in candidates' folders and the transcription of these from Candidate Record Forms to Centre Mark Sheets. Moderators have reported a number of errors in both of these. Where these errors are spotted, they are corrected, but as moderators only see a sample of folders from most centres, it is clear that errors are likely to be going unchecked.

Teachers are also reminded of the need to annotate students' work properly. Moderators report that this year annotation has been variable between centres. Teachers need to go beyond ticks and a one line summative comment and demonstrate clearly how marks have been awarded. Most centres do, however, offer perceptive comments and, as always, there were the centres where detailed formative and summative feedback was the norm. This is greatly appreciated by moderators and can have an important impact on a moderator's ability to uphold a centre's marks.

Word limits indicated in the specification for both Section A and Section B were generally less problematic this year, but more able candidates are still permitted or even encouraged to write far too much. Many centres are making a concerted effort to address the issue through assignment design. However, the fact that teachers don't flag it up in their feedback to their students is very worrying – it's almost an implicit acknowledgement that no action is, or will be, ever taken against them. The virtues of concision and precision in writing should be manifest to candidates. Teachers should also be aware that continuous prose is not the only way to approach analysis or evaluation. Diagrams, charts or even the annotation of texts are valuable means of getting students to respond concisely.

Teachers are also asked to include with their samples the assignment briefs which candidates have been set. Not only is this good practice, it helps the moderation process significantly by letting the moderator know precisely what candidates have been asked to do.

### **Section A**

The question of 'Assignment Design' is crucial to the nature of the work that many centres, particularly those combining English and Media Studies, are submitting. Despite the 'template' suggested in the 2005 Report on the Examination and encouraged at the Standardisation Meetings, there are still assignments that don't address the Key Concepts adequately enough. This often leads to serious deficiencies in the way in which AO2, Analysis and Interpretation, is covered. Unless an assignment requires candidates to engage with professionally produced media products, it is unlikely that they will be able to produce responses that will permit them to reach the upper levels of the performance criteria. Some centres are still producing production led assignments which did not allow candidates to engage with AO2.

Many centres are, however, producing tightly focused work which integrates AO3 effectively. The best centres construct assignments which help lower level candidates access evaluative/analytical skills by producing a framework to guide their responses. There was less of a sense this year that centres see AO3, Production Skills, as a 'bolt on' rather than as an opportunity for candidates to evidence their theoretical understanding through practical application of media production skills. Film genre work remains very popular as of course does advertising. Still the neglected area is radio which, when tackled seems to rely on the format of the controlled test topic.

There are still a number of centres producing hand drawn magazines and newspapers which are not fit for purpose, the majority seem to be engaging with the appropriate technologies.

It is pleasing to see storyboarding much improved this year, with evidence of technical detail: shot descriptors, timings, transitions etc. For framesheets most centres now used either the CT proforma or their own version rather than allowing candidates to concoct their own hand-drawn efforts. This increased 'professionalism' had a positive effect on presentation.

Given the anecdotal evidence of the enthusiasm with which the 14 to 16 age group are embracing social networking it was interesting to note that assignments did include internet based material such as web pages and YouTube postings but these were surprisingly few and far between. Perhaps it is early days for such a significant technological and cultural phenomenon to filter through, but teachers need to be aware of the potential and significance of the change that is taking place. The dividing line between producer and consumer is becoming increasingly blurred as audiences, often young people, not only interact directly with the media but also generate their own content capable of being accessed by global audiences. For some cultural theorists we are witnessing the beginnings of important new forms of literacy and it would be a shame to miss the opportunities these are presenting.

### **Section B**

A number of centres unfortunately seem to have little cognisance that the weighting of AO3 for Section B indicates that the artefact should be three times more substantial than the one produced for a Section A assignment and that the section is worth 25% of the total mark for the qualification. It seems that one issue here might be time pressure. It is important that centres ensure that sufficient time is given over to Section B practical production work. For many centres the impression is given that the production is merely an additional assignment. Such an approach can seriously disadvantage candidates by providing insufficient time to prepare adequately for the production work.

A huge range of production work was produced in Section B which is, of course, one of the great strengths of this qualification. Magazines are still the most popular media format. It was nice to see more examples of candidates meeting the needs of an audience other than simply producing magazines where the prime audience was patently themselves. Girls producing 'Lads mags' was a good example of a production targeted at an audience that required some degree of research to be undertaken. It is clear that the message delivered in previous reports and through standardising meetings about the need for candidates to use own images is getting through although a considerable percentage of centres still rely heavily on cut and paste images. Where original images were present in candidates' productions they were often strikingly effective. Centres which allow candidates to rely exclusively on found images should reconsider this strategy if they wish them to reach the higher mark bands.

The trend towards more video work continued this year, and a general improvement in quality was evident. It is clear that access to digital camcorders and non-linear editing software is beginning to manifest itself more widely and that centres are more confident in their use of the kit. However, basic technical flaws still manifest themselves in much of the work submitted.

Lack of any camera support, for example, is still prevalent on many moving image artefacts and the lack of use of manual focus led to many an amateurish end product. Overuse of pan, tilt and zoom only added the potential for the visual torture. Lighting was also an issue, with little thought given to prevailing conditions.

In general, there was more evidence of planning, with pre-production materials, production diaries etc. present in many candidates' folders. Some good examples of audience testing were present from several centres. Some centres clearly placed great emphasis on candidates having to establish the need for their product in the marketplace.

Supporting Accounts continue to be an aspect of the qualification that frequently let down candidates, even high achieving ones. There is a clear need for these to be developed. Many centres need to invest more time teaching candidates the vocabulary to evaluate their work effectively in order that supporting accounts are not produced in a style that is far too descriptive. A good supporting account allows the candidate to make key links between production and theory. This requires a thorough understanding of the conceptual framework that supports the qualification and the ability to apply this understanding to the specifics of the practical production in which they have engaged. Good centres often provide candidates with a structure, often in the form of a writing framework in which to produce the supporting account. This also has the advantage of helping candidates to respond within prescribed word limits. Such an approach is to be commended.

Finally centres are reminded of the coursework advisor network which exists to provide support and information to centres in need of guidance with coursework. Details of your local coursework adviser can be obtained from the AQA Media Studies department.

## **Foundation Tier (3571/F)**

### ***General***

Candidates seemed engaged and generally enjoyed the paper. The tasks were accessible for the candidates. There were a disturbing number of candidates who would perhaps have been better entered for the Higher Tier. This may have been as a result of the increased number of new centres entering this year.

There were examples where candidates had obviously not understood the tasks and it therefore needs to be reiterated that teachers are responsible for reading through the paper with the candidates to ensure they know what they are expected to do. The close reading of the stimulus page and the wording of the tasks is essential. Many candidates failed to reach the higher grade boundaries because they had misunderstood tasks or had not read them thoroughly.

The centres where candidates had been prepared through a solid conceptual approach did better than those who had not. It must be remembered that this is a media paper and the media concepts are paramount.

### **Task 1**

This was generally answered well by those candidates who had made the effort to complete their own research and preparation and less well by those who just compared two publications. Some candidates tried to answer the task generically without offering any publication titles despite the wording of the task. The most usually named publications were *Smash Hits*, although often without reference to its print demise, and *NME*. Unfortunately for both, the historical knowledge was often erroneous. There is no need to give a potted history within the Controlled Test paper but there is a need to be aware of the need for rigour within the examination. There was detailed knowledge evident in the most able at this level but often the appeal and reasons for success were paid scant attention. There was little of the expected comments about expectations and gratification.

### **Task 2**

This was a task that asked **what** candidates would put in their magazine, having considered genre and audience. Candidates were not expected to offer rationale, that was needed in Task 4, but where it was offered it was rewarded (often within Task 4 if that task was badly answered). Most candidates followed the prompts offered and answered in a solid if sometimes pedantic manner. The contents offered were solid but with little evidence of 'launch', 'new', original or appealing to an identified audience.

The request to consider advertisers was often misunderstood. Candidates were expected to be able to consider the institutional aspect of the magazine industry especially as magazines are so often covered in the coursework section of the specification. Any candidates who had established a definite audience for the magazine was able to answer this task fairly well and offered suggestions for mobile phone adverts, after shave, deodorant and fashion accessories. Those who had not considered the audience so well were offering suggestions for cars and other items outside the normal expectations of the target audience. These issues should have been covered in the candidates' preparation period leading up to the opening of the paper.

Structure and organisation also proved problematic with candidates forgetting that they were supposed to be considering how an **entire magazine** would be put together. A simple comment like 'gig guides would always go on the back page so readers would always know where it was' was the kind of thing expected, not the list of 'page 1 would be... page 2 would be.....'.

There was a noticeable gender split with the kinds of magazines suggested with boys going for the Heavy Rock, Hip Hop and Heavy Metal and the girls tending to go for the Indie and Dance. There were disappointingly few really original offerings like Gospel. There was a tendency to be self-indulgent without the necessary thought and consideration going in, proving there had been an actual study of the media. The best responses showed evidence of real planning and preparation with a firm idea of audience and their expectations and desires, the worst were superficial lists of the kinds of things that other magazines include, such as fashion pages and make-up tips and horoscopes, without any idea of why.

### **Task 3**

There were some outstanding magazine covers offered showing understanding of the codes and conventions needed. However, 'launch edition' seemed to have been ignored by many. Despite the time young people seem to spend on the Internet, there were very few web-pages and these were not generally answered well. It seemed little thought or preparation had been made of the electronic versions of magazines. This may have been due to restrictions in schools and local education authorities limiting the sites that could be visited.

The use of A3 paper proved difficult for some candidates. They are advised to always draw a frame in which to work using ratios that reflect their study of existing texts. The message that artistic ability is not needed to create good design ideas seems to be getting through and more and more candidates were confident enough to 'represent' images rather than trying to draw images beyond their ability. Titles with added tag lines were usually far more imaginative and appealing than those with just a title. Cover lines rarely indicated how they were to stand out i.e. different fonts, colours or sizes. There was evidence that this task had not been practised. Centres should be reminded to encourage their candidates to practise the design tasks as much as the written tasks.

### **Task 4**

This was designed as the differentiating task. Candidates were expected to explain the appeal and potential success of their **magazine**. Many concentrated purely on the front cover. Responses were often vague with little reference to the target audience. Many students offered annotation on Task 3 as a response to Task 4, but of course these only offered suggestions and labels for the front cover not reasons for the success of the magazine. Sometimes responses to this task were found in Task 2 and if this was relevant it was rewarded. The best responses offered clear understanding of how their magazine would attract and appeal to their target audience and why they thought their magazine would be a success. The worst responses just repeated what they had said in Task 2.

In conclusion, centres need to be reminded that they need to prepare candidates for the Controlled Test using a solid conceptual framework; they need to encourage candidates to complete individual research and practise autonomy in their responses. Teachers need to read through the paper with their students when it is released to ensure that all candidates understand what it is they are expected to do.

## **Higher Tier (3571/H)**

### ***General***

This year's topic proved extremely popular with candidates, giving rise to a good number of inspired, knowledgeable and carefully executed scripts. In keeping with the paper's pre-release format, there was plentiful evidence that responses were informed by thorough research and detailed preparation. In some of the most comprehensive scripts, it was almost chastening to note quite how much work candidates were able to produce in the three-hour time slot allowed them; and not infrequently this was quantity matched by quality, with consistently relevant and well-targeted ideas permeating their responses.

The structure of the paper was such that many candidates achieved a seamless and convincing flow through the tasks – an enquiry into the history and development of the music press led naturally to a presentation of their own ideas for the market, ideas which were then exemplified and illustrated in design work, before being evaluated and rationalised in the final section.

While the majority of candidates were entered for the correct tier, there is still evidence that centres make errors in overestimating the capacity of a small proportion of their students. These few would be better served by entry at Foundation level; it must be hugely disappointing for those who fail to achieve a grade.

On an administrative note, centres are reminded once again that they should not include blank sheets, on which candidates have attempted no work, with their completed scripts. Processing these is wasteful of examiners' time. Similarly, in our increasingly eco-aware age, centres are encouraged to use 8, rather than 12, page answer booklets, issuing supplementary sheets where necessary. Very few candidates' required twelve pages, in addition to the design sheets, to complete their answers and those centres that opted for the larger booklets wasted a tremendous amount of paper. Finally, centres are reminded that scripts must be submitted in candidate number order.

### ***Task 1***

The first task on the paper asked candidates to consider what elements conspire to produce a successful music publication. The question was framed so as to prompt them not only towards an historical overview of some successful titles, but towards a consideration of the era-specific conditions that helped account for this success and for its wider significance as a reflection of or, perhaps, catalyst for changing social circumstances.

While many candidates were skilled at handling the first aspect of the question, providing accurate and well-researched timelines of the development of key titles, they were generally less adept at addressing the more demanding dimension of social and cultural context. The best responses recognised the peculiar history of the music press, especially in the post-WW2 period, with its rapid metamorphosis from industry newsheets to an accompaniment to lifestyle and self-identity decisions.

The 1950s advent of the *New Musical Express*, first, as a commentary on and, subsequently, as an arbiter of the burgeoning and constantly evolving commercial music 'scene' (and the role of the newly invented "teenager" as both a producer and consumer of 'popular' music within this context) was mentioned as an historical fact by many candidates, but explored as an important demographic and ideological shift by relatively few. Similarly, *Sniffin' Glue* was commonly identified as an exemplar of the mid-70s punk DIY ethic, and its relatively ephemeral lifespan noted, but less candidates went on to discuss the political and ethical decisions that characterised Mark Perry's determination, first, to publish independently and, then, to eschew mainstream incorporation. *Smash Hits* was another much-discussed title, with most candidates correctly associating it with a post-punk shift to a more nakedly "pop" appeal; however, many missed the opportunity to discuss the significance of its move away from 'serious' music towards pop idol trivia as a precursor to our contemporary focus on the most inconsequential aspects of celebrity lifestyle.

Those candidates who did situate the music press' development within a social and cultural milieu often produced sophisticated, engaged and insightful critiques of the relationship between publication and audience, and of the different gratifications that characterise this relationship; critiques they were able to sustain when they came to design their own suggestions for the market. For those other candidates, whose appreciation of the music press remained rather superficial and functioned at the generic level of magazines *per se*, the peculiar richness of music's potential appeal often remained a mystery, so that their creative ideas sometimes lacked vibrancy and animation.

Finally, with Task 1, there remains evidence that a small number of centres are still coaching their candidates after the release of the paper. As noted last year, quite apart from this being bad practice and contrary to the rubric of the Controlled Test, it also typically hinders students who, intent on reproducing their teacher's notes, fail to undertake research; fail to discover for themselves those odd, idiosyncratic snippets of information that bring their appreciation of the topic to life; fail to lose themselves in the excitement of independent enquiry; and, consequently, generally succeed in producing only uniform and inert responses. These few centres are advised, once again, to trust in the appetite and initiative of their candidates, and allow them to utilise the pre-release format in spirit in which it is intended.

## **Task 2**

Having established their understanding of the history and development of the music press, and the manner in which titles appeal to their audiences, students were well-placed to consider how they might add to the market; and Task 2 saw a good proportion of imaginative, apt and credible suggestions for new publications. Candidates were asked to present the key information [title, target audience, genre of music] and initial content for their own titles here; it was not necessary for them to explain exhaustively the reasons behind their choices, as the rationale for their approach was invited in Task 4. Not all candidates found this an easy division to make so that, in Task 2, a good few provided lengthy commentaries on the materials they presented, which would have been better reserved for the later task.

The best responses stuck to objective specifications and demonstrated a high level of detail in outlining the contents of their magazines, ensuring that these were matched consistently to the needs of their mooted audience. In this respect, candidates who had chosen to target a clearly identifiable demographic were in a better position to adduce features that would plausibly appeal to their readers' interests than those who had not. Some of the best responses saw candidates selecting musical genres one suspects lay outside of their own personal preference but which bespoke, rather, careful and intelligent research, played out to convincing effect in nicely judged and often carefully constructed products. Jazz, blues, musicals, regional and world, classical and new age music all formed the basis of responses that were clearly the result of purposeful investigation, and which led in turn to authentic and innovative proposals, often with a fresh youthful spin.

Less good responses tended to focus on a too-wide and, finally, unarticulated spread of musical types on the basis of "this is what I like" or "this is what I know best", without then going on to envisage or formulate a more compelling model of potential audience than an extrapolation of personal preference. In these instances, the contents often began to stray away from a musical focus into other areas of, typically, young people's culture – clothes, drugs, gangs and guns, football, skateboarding and 'celebrity' all made regular appearances in a way that was contrary to the brief and which diluted the appeal of the candidates' work to an audience in search of a *music* publication. This was disappointing, and centres are reminded to encourage candidates to use the Controlled Test's pre-release format as an opportunity perhaps to step outside or, at least, to examine the basis of their own settled partialities.

### **Task 3**

In this task, candidates were asked to provide a design for the launch edition of either the magazine or on-line format of their publication. The former option proved overwhelmingly more popular, perhaps because Task 2 had led candidates to consider the print medium, and perhaps because it seems understandably less problematic to reproduce the features of a static text on paper than it does a dynamic one. In any case, with whichever medium they chose to work, candidates managed this task well, and the quality of design was impressive both in the degree to which it engaged with the codes and conventions of existing practice (thereby acknowledging audience expectations) and the way in which it utilised the cover or home page as a key signifier (that is, as an advertisement for and a promise concerning the publication as a whole).

Generally, there seem to have been significant strides made in design work in many centres, with candidates appearing more confident in organising their responses in a way that mirrors and builds on recognisable commercial traditions. Magazine front covers were often strong and bold, with a clear appreciation of design integrity, exemplified by the way in which individual elements (masthead, anchoring image, coverlines, boxed text to heighten ease of decoding, retail information, selling line, name-checks) were arranged so as to complement, rather than compete with, one another. Many candidates appeared to have given serious thought to a range of design and editorial decisions – with cover artists cleverly selected to match audience; striking colour schemes working to achieve a variety of different ends (“classiness”, “fun”, “psychedelic trippiness”, “rawness”), well-matched to the ambience of the publication; coverlines skilfully composed, with inclusive appeal, semantic density and plays on language; and original typefaces which showed an appreciation of the tension between denoting ‘character’ and ensuring legibility.

Similarly, those candidates who chose to attempt website design often proved adept at reproducing and capitalising on the combination of aesthetic appeal, strength of content and in-built functionality which e-presence can enable. The various affordances of the internet, especially in its broadband format, were exploited to good effect – downloads, hyper-linking and interactive potential in the form of blogs, comments and voting facilities all featured heavily, demonstrating a good understanding of the way in which the music press is evolving to incorporate the ‘democratising’ effects of the world wide web.

Short, one or two word annotations were welcome here, not least because, as labels, they sometimes made clear design work that was legitimately schematic rather than artistic in its goal. However, as discussed below, there was no call for lengthy explanations, and occasionally, by over filling the page with the reasons for their designs, candidates risked detracting from its overall effect.

#### **Task 4**

The intention of Task 4 was precisely to provide candidates with an opportunity to draw together their earlier ideas and provide a rationale for the thinking behind them. This proved a tricky task for some candidates who had provided extensive commentaries at Tasks 2 and 3 and who left themselves little to say in this final response. Others seemed simply to have run out of time, on occasions because, very clearly, they had spent too long on their design work and had not budgeted sufficient time to do justice to Task 4.

Successful answers did not simply reiterate information from the rest of the paper. Rather, they constructed a compelling and informed argument for why their mooted publication would have a future and *live beyond the moment of its launch*. This was a significant step up from those candidates who merely returned to the decisions they had made at Task 2 or, even more common and less satisfactory, did nothing more than explain their design decisions at Task 3. Task 4 was the place for both these approaches but also for something more – it was an opportunity for candidates to provide a synoptic perspective on their response, starting out with the intentions clarified in the brief, building in what they had learned about development of the music press over time, contextualising their original ideas through a characterisation of the current

conditions of production and consumption, justifying the decisions they had made in earlier tasks and, finally, sketching a possible future in which their new publication would continue to be commercially viable.

Those candidates who did best here adopted a genuinely persuasive tone and really ‘sold’ their ideas. Not least, they constructed a convincing model of their current audience and provided reasons for having confidence in their publication’s ability to gratify them now and, no less importantly, over time – either through its adapting itself to their changing needs or because their chosen genre (jazz, musicals, classical) was sufficiently stable to imagine a more or less dependable constituency of interest as other music fads come and go.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.