National Qualifications 2025

X824/75/11

English
Reading for Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation

TUESDAY, 6 MAY

9:00 AM – 10:00 AM

Total marks — 30

Attempt ALL questions.

Write your answers clearly in the answer booklet provided. In the answer booklet you must clearly identify the question number you are attempting.

Use **blue** or **black** ink.

Before leaving the examination room you must give your answer booklet to the Invigilator; if you do not, you may lose all the marks for this paper.

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How Taylor Swift Saved My Writing

In this article the writer reflects on the positive effects of listening to Taylor Swift's music.

Being a writer, being able to create characters and tap into human feelings and ways of processing things often goes hand in hand with feeling worthless. Feeling that I'm not as good as the writers I admire, feeling that I'm not writing enough, feeling that I'm wasting time on the wrong project.

I always have been tough on myself. My parents used to tell me this; my wife still tells me this. I have an idealised version of what I should look like, what I should be able to get done in a day, what my kids and students think of me, how my writing turns out, and often, I am a far cry from this goal self.

Last December I realised I hadn't written anything new since spring. I kept thinking about different characters and scenarios, but every time I sat down to write, I'd get distracted and end up putting nothing down on my taunting blank screen. Every idea felt ridiculous. I felt as though I had said everything already: every character, every name, every feeling, every possible setting and storyline.

I didn't feel like I was getting anywhere; then came Taylor.

My younger daughter, Frankie, had been listening to Taylor Swift nonstop, and she and my older daughter, Gia, wanted tickets to the Eras tour that summer. They promised if they were selected in the Taylor lottery, this could be their Christmas and birthday and Easter and whatever other special occasion gifts. So we'd said yes, and they were victorious, and all was right in the Taylor-loving universe.

I was of course aware of the ubiquitous Taylor, but I didn't know much beyond seeing her on TV or whatever was in the news. But I knew she had become the kind of phenomenon I love to see in our culture: someone who for years has been tested and tried and is reliably good. An Oprah, a Dolly Parton, a Stephen King. You don't have that many hits by accident. You don't build a loyal fan base of millions from being mediocre. And I remember learning how she spoke out politically and admiring her for using her platform and global reach for good. It's often easier to say nothing and be vanilla — it takes guts to let the world know what you believe.

One day that December, I was driving Frankie to school, and she asked if she could play a different Taylor song for me. 'It's the ten-minute version of "All Too Well",' she said calmly.

'A song is ten minutes?' I smiled politely as I kept driving. What if it was awful? A three-minute song I didn't love would come and go, but ten minutes? Frankie didn't blink. 'It won't be long enough,' she said.

She clicked play and I listened.

Songs never grab me the first time, but this one was good . . . I loved the lyrics: 'I'm a crumpled up piece of paper lying here.' I liked how passionately she sang. This was no bubblegum pop. This was about love and pain and being wronged.

I found myself playing it again after I dropped Frankie off. The lyrics were speaking to me, and I wasn't sure why. I am a sucker for objects, and the song talks about a scarf the lover kept. And a photo album. And watching the front door waiting for the loved one to return. The writer in me loves someone who can't get over something. The protagonist of the song walks home alone in the winter and weeps in a bathroom. And the dad in me aches when she sings about her father trying to console his daughter after the breakup.

I listened to it over and over, never tiring of any section. There was her beautiful voice, and the words sounded great, but what struck me most was her honesty and rawness. I believed every single word. It made me love language again. It repeatedly gave me the chills.

Taylor made me want to recapture this. She made me want to write again. I felt something free itself that had been stuck. Isn't that what we do as writers? We answer big questions. In the song she says she remembers it all, and writers are the ones who remember, who try to let everyone

know what it all means. Taylor was giving this back to me. She was taking away the worthlessness I felt; she was telling me we all get through things. I understood why every fan wanted to be at the concert that summer. I understood why in every video the audience is singing along, overcome.

'All Too Well' became our family anthem, and we played it on every car ride. We even started to measure distance with it: the restaurant is two All Too Wells away. I even used it in my Intro to Poetry class, where we watched the 'All Too Well' video and dissected the lyrics.

It was the new year and I finally sat down and started to write again. I picked up an old idea which I had shelved when I thought it wasn't the type of story readers would expect from me. I learned from Frankie that Taylor would never think like that. I asked Frankie why Taylor is so successful, why she's lasted this long and why she's cultivated such a fan-base. Frankie told me that since Taylor's first album came out in 2006, she's produced ten more plus re-recorded versions and has more on the way. Frankie said, 'She's reinvented herself for every one of these albums.'

She's written and performed in so many styles: pop, country, indie and alternative. She's incorporated memoir, fiction, myth and legend into her songs. Though I didn't have a loyal base of Swifties, I had a small handful of fans who were so supportive and might follow my writing to other places. I typed and typed. I tried to take risks.

After a couple of weeks, I had pages again. By the time Gia and Frankie went to the Eras concert that spring I was polishing the first hundred pages of my new book, listening to 'All Too Well' in the background. I'm still not sick of it.

The song has shown me that it's okay to feel things deeply, to care too much. Because of Taylor, and her love for words, I've got back something I didn't think I was worthy of.

Adapted from an article by Ethan Joella, lithub.com

MARKS

Total marks — 30

Attempt ALL questions

1. Look at lines 1–7.

Using your own words as far as possible, explain what impression we are given of the writer.

You should make **two** key points in your answer. **2**

2. Look at lines 8–12.

By referring to **one** example of word choice and **one** example of sentence structure, explain how the writer makes it clear that writing can be difficult. **4**

3. Look at line 13 'I didn't feel like I was getting anywhere; then came Taylor.'

By referring to any part of this sentence, explain how it helps to provide a link between the writer's ideas at this point in the passage. **2**

4. Look at lines 19–25.

Using your own words as far as possible, summarise what the writer already knew about Taylor Swift.

You should make **four** key points in your answer. **4**

5. Look at lines 26–31.

By referring to **one** example of language, explain how the writer makes it clear that Frankie is in control of the situation. **2**

6. Look at lines 32–43.

Using your own words as far as possible, explain which aspects of the song appealed to the writer.

You should make **six** key points in your answer. **6**

7. Look at lines 44–52.

Using your own words as far as possible, explain how listening to Taylor Swift has affected the writer.

You should make **four** key points in your answer. **4**

8. Look at lines 53–63.

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain how the writer makes it clear that Taylor Swift is an exceptional artist. **4**

9. Look at lines 64–68.

Select any expression from these lines and explain how it contributes to the passage's effective conclusion. **2**

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[OPEN OUT FOR QUESTIONS]

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