

2020 VCE English Language examination report

General comments

Students should:

- be able to identify and demonstrate an understanding of the metalanguage specified in the study design for all outcomes. Students should be encouraged to refer to the social purposes as listed in the study design when reference to social purpose is required
- collect relevant and contemporary examples of English in Australian contemporary society and be able to analyse them using appropriate metalanguage
- identify the key components of each question in Section A, frame responses to appropriately discuss language features using accurate metalanguage and include examples with line numbers.
- select examples as appropriate to the question in Section A and be concise when identifying and explaining how those language features operate within the given text
- be careful when using the same example across multiple questions. While it is acceptable to do this, students should ensure that those examples are accurate and appropriate to the question being asked
- avoid providing more examples than required
- select the most relevant features of the text type for analysis in Section B and avoid shallow interpretations of features; features should be identified and explained in relation to the context and purpose. Students should select a range of features across the whole text, focusing on those features that best assist in supporting the text's functions and social purposes
- tailor their Section C essay responses to the topic. There were attempts by some students to modify pre-prepared responses to the given topics; these typically did not score well. Careful reading of the stimuli provided can be very helpful in guiding student responses towards relevant ideas
- make accurate linguistic links between the example and the topic when selecting contemporary examples for discussion in Section C. Students should use appropriate metalanguage when including and discussing examples from language in Australian contexts.

Specific information

Note: Student responses reproduced in this report have not been corrected for grammar, spelling or factual information.

This report provides sample answers or an indication of what answers may have included. Unless otherwise stated, these are not intended to be exemplary or complete responses.

The statistics in this report may be subject to rounding resulting in a total more or less than 100 per cent.

Section A – Short-answer questions

Text 1

In Text 1, Australian singer and musician Missy Higgins provides fans with insight into her thoughts about the direction of her life as well as recalling the last time she was in Perth, somewhat apologetically acknowledging the cancellation of her previous show due to illness.

Question 1

| Marks | 0 | 1 | Average |
|-------|----|----|---------|
| % | 20 | 80 | 0.8 |

Acceptable social purposes included Higgins building rapport with people watching, reconnecting with her fans to maintain a relationship with them and reducing social distance between herself and her fans.

The following is an example of a correct response.

To build rapport with the speaker's fans by providing details about her personal life and thoughts.

Question 2

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | Average |
|-------|----|----|----|---------|
| % | 50 | 28 | 23 | 0.7 |

For two marks, students needed to focus on a single discourse feature within the text and describe how that feature aided topic management. Alongside the formulaic opening and closing, discourse particles played a significant role throughout the text in managing the topic, allowing Higgins to shift, change and develop her discussion.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

Higgins uses an opening 'Hey everyone' (1), which signals her desire to start a new discourse and topic regarding her current location in Perth to any viewers, also acknowledging them as participants.

Question 3

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | Average |
|-------|---|----|----|----|---------|
| % | 7 | 39 | 33 | 22 | 1.7 |

For three marks, students needed to identify that the register was informal and provide an example of one language feature that supported informality, using appropriate metalanguage. Suitable examples included ellipsis of pronouns and auxiliaries, some discourse particles, colloquial expressions and contractions. These informal language features assisted Higgins to express her personal comments and, by reducing social distance, form a bond with her audience.

Discourse features marking spontaneity, such as non-fluency features, were typically not accepted as demonstrating an informal register as they occur across a wide range of registers.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

The colloquial opening 'hey everyone' (1) contributes to the quite informal register of the text as it enables Higgins to establish a friendly, conversational tone between herself and her audience by greeting them in a laid-back, inviting manner, that establishes a low social distance between herself and her fans on social media.

Question 4

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Average |
|-------|----|----|----|----|---|---------|
| % | 17 | 21 | 34 | 19 | 9 | 1.8 |

For four marks, students were required to discuss two aspects of Higgins' identity that were identifiable by language features. Higgins' use of language features reflected many aspects of her identity, such as her being a musician and a parent, having a relaxed, 'laid back' persona, being somewhat conflicted with her balance of work and family life and the importance of family time.

While many students referred to Higgins' Australian identity, there was very little evidence to support this in the transcript.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

Missy's use of consistency in terms of lexis relating to the semantic field of the music industry, such as proper noun 'John Butler' (7), a fellow musician, and nouns 'band' (5) and 'show' (8) are reflective of her identity as a singer and musician, as this lexis is familiar to her.

Further, her use of negatively connotated adjectival phrase 'increasingly hard' (16) allows Missy to describe her feelings of sadness that she is away from her young baby, with the emphasis on 'increasingly' amplifying her message. This reflects her identity as a caring mother by demonstrating these feelings of despair by being away from her child.

Question 5

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Average |
|-------|---|----|----|----|----|---|---------|
| % | 7 | 12 | 28 | 28 | 18 | 7 | 2.6 |

For five marks, students needed to discuss a number of spoken language features and how they contributed to the text as a whole. Relevant language features in this transcript included openings and closings; discourse particles; and non-fluency features such as pauses, filled pauses/voiced hesitations. Other relevant features from phonetics and phonology included prosodic features, vocal effects and sounds in connected speech. Some students re-used examples from prior questions. As long as those examples were accurate, this was acceptable.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

Higgins uses colloquial opening 'hey everyone' (1) to begin her Instagram update and to indicate a friendly address to her fans who would be watching. She frequently uses discourse particles 'so' (9), 'but' (20) and pause fillers 'um' (6), 'ah' (20) which indicate her attempt at adjusting her thoughts in spontaneous discourse as well as topic management regarding the discourse particles. Pauses also frequently appear throughout the text in varying lengths, some of which are accompanied by pause fillers. 'Um (...)' (13), 'ah=(..)' (13) which reflect Higgins reflecting on the best possible way to communicate her thoughts and feelings to the audience. Her use of shorter pauses 'really (.)' (8), 'do (.)' sometimes act to emphasize the reflective weight of what she is saying to the audience and also [...] makes clear the genuineness of her feelings regarding what she is saying.

Section B – Analytical commentary

Text 2

Question 6

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | Average |
|-------|-----|-----|-----|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|---------|
| % | 0.4 | 0.3 | 0.8 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 9 | 11 | 17 | 17 | 14 | 10 | 6 | 4 | 2 | 0.5 | 8.6 |

The text for this section was a formal written advertisement for the position of CEO of WorkSafe Victoria. The recruitment is being managed by an employment agency on behalf of WorkSafe and applicants have been given details regarding how to apply and who to contact at the bottom of the advertisement.

Functions of the text include advertising a position, providing information about the position and highlighting the characteristics of the sought-for applicant, and providing potential candidates with details on how to apply for the position. Social purposes include clarification of the requirements of the position and promoting the authority of WorkSafe and emphasising its important role in Victoria as well as promoting WorkSafe to potential applicants. The relatively formal register is appropriate for a job advertisement of this kind, particularly given the important role in an organisation critical to the workplace as the state's health and safety register. Given the nature of the text and its purposes, social distance and authority are reinforced. Lexical choices and lexical and syntactic patterning establish expertise.

Appropriate features to discuss in relation to the text were morphology and lexicology, such as the use of jargon, the prominence of descriptive adjectives within noun phrases, and lexical patterning, aiding cohesion to maintain the topic and reinforce the text's purposes. Similarly, syntax supported the formality of the text, including nominalisations and varied sentence structures. In terms of discourse and semantics, front focus, logical ordering, formatting and semantic fields all played a role in constructing a text that reinforces social distance and authority while also appealing to the potential applicants in inviting them to envisage themselves in the role of CEO.

The sample response provided below flags multiple functions and social purposes and addresses the context and register very well. The student identifies stylistic and discourse features across a range of subsystems and is able to successfully link many of them to a function, purpose and/or context. This response scored in the upper range of assessment.

This text is a predominantly formal advertisement that focuses on the domain of a career opportunity as Chief Executive Officer at WorkSafe Victoria. Given it is an advertisement, its audience are those who have skills and experience in leadership and business, with functions to inform the audience of what working at WorkSafe Victoria would entail, as well as a persuasive function to convince them to apply. These functions are supported by many social purposes, including promoting the face needs of potential applicants, establishing expertise and highlighting the companies positive values of inclusivity.

The register of the text is quite formal in order to ensure clarity and professionalism, but does contain some slightly less formal features to engage directly with readers. The use of elevated lexis in the form of nominalisations such as 'compensation' (6), 'commitment' (22) and 'transformation' (9) clearly reflect the formality of the text, which serves to project a professional image for the company. This, coupled with many jargonistic proper nouns such as noun phrase 'Minister for Workplace Safety' (12) and 'WorkSafe Board' (12), may obfuscate slightly since the reader is unlikely to be familiar with the jargon, but makes up for it by demonstrating the company's expertise in the domain of occupational safety. The use of complex sentences such as 'with the ever-changing ... effectively,' (6–9) as evidenced by the subordinate conjunction 'while' (8) allows the author to compensate for the lack of clarity of the jargon by providing information about how the company balances its values of being 'inclusive' (8) with how it maintains efficient and effective performance, assisting the informative function. However, the use of second-person pronouns 'you' (20, 23) and 'your' (27)

indicate that there are also some informal features that carry a slightly different purpose of engaging directly with applicants, decreasing social distance with the audience as to make their company seem more friendly and appealing to work at, assisting the persuasive function.

Beyond register, the social purpose of highlighting the company's positive values and managing the reader's face needs are also supported through the language. The advertisement is riddled with positive connotated lexis in relation to the company, in particular the listing of positively-connotated adjectives 'inclusive, empathetic and tailored' (8) to describe their service, which supports the social purpose of indicating the admirable qualities of the company to convince readers that it would be a comforting environment to work in. This is further supported by the front focus of adverbial phrases 'with a ... commitments' (14) and 'with a ... engagement' (16) to created parallelism by repeating the initial preposition 'with'. By using front focus, the company is able to highlight the positive mechanisms they have in place, such as 'a commitment to stakeholder engagement,' which again underscores the benefits of working at the company as a persuasive technique. Face needs are another key social purpose, with the writer using many positively connotated lexis such as adjectives 'driven' (21) and 'strong' (23) to describe applicants to attend to potential applicant's positive face by making them feel as though they would be respected by their peers if they were to accept the job offer. These social purposes, consequently, assist in the persuasive function of convincing readers to apply for the job.

To make the text both easy to follow and comprehensible, cohesion and coherence play vital roles in this text. The use of anaphoric referencing such as the noun 'organisation' (15, 26) to refer back to 'WorkSafe Victoria' (5), and 'this role' (27) referring back to 'Chief Executive Officer' (2), creates cohesive ties throughout the text, as the reader will be aware of what these references refer to. Further, hyponyms are evident in the listing in Lines 18–19, with the nouns 'representatives' (18) 'employers' (18) and 'government agencies' (18) all belonging to the hyponym of job titles the CEO would interact with, not only creating links between these nouns, but serving to clearly inform the applicant of what types of people they would interact with, aiding coherence as well. Coherence is further highlighted by the logical ordering of the text, with there being a clear job title and description at the beginning (Lines 2–4) so that the reader understands what the advertisement is for, as well as a formulaic ending, with the imperative 'to apply for this, please Subject (27–28). This logical ordering not only allows the reader to understand the domain of the text from the beginning, but knows how to apply by the end, establishing a coherent text that invites the reader to apply, fulfilling its main persuasive function.

Section C – Essay

Students were mostly successful in exploring the concepts embodied in the questions, choosing relevant contemporary examples that were explained using accurate metalanguage. Reference to the provided stimuli was incorporated effectively by the vast majority.

| Question | 0 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|----------|-----|----|----|----|
| % | 0.4 | 50 | 30 | 20 |

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | Average |
|-------|-----|-----|-----|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|---------|
| % | 0.5 | 0.2 | 0.5 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 8 | 12 | 15 | 15 | 14 | 11 | 7 | 5 | 3 | 0.8 | 8.8 |

Question 7

Responses to this topic included discussions surrounding the changing awareness of language attitudes and the power of language in society, including higher rates of acceptance of variation and the effect this has on speakers. Innovative language forms provide value to speakers and society more broadly, as well as help shape how speakers are perceived by others. Social variation of language plays a role in reflecting speaker identity, as well as the attitudes towards those speakers. Students provided language examples from a variety of contexts to support their discussions, referring to non-standard varieties of Australian English and ethnolects, politically correct language, slang, doublespeak and political rhetoric.

The following is an example of a response that scored in the upper range. In exploring the topic, the student discussed how language can both influence and reflect attitudes of people in the community, using language surrounding climate change and disadvantaged groups, as well as inclusive language and taboo as their examples. Included here is the student's opening statement and excerpts from two body paragraphs.

Because language is highly dynamic and its use can be manipulated and changed over time, it is an extremely powerful tool that fulfils many purposes. In the words of linguist David Crystal, 'language has no important existence aside from its users', a quote which is particularly true given how its users utilise it as an indicator of values, attitudes and beliefs. It is undeniable that language can both influence and reflect the attitudes of both wider and narrow communities; attitudes which may be directed to social changes (like coronavirus, gender equality and climate change) or to more broad values like egalitarianism or mateship. As a whole, language provides a mirror that gives a clear reflection of existing and influencing attitudes in contemporary Australia.

Language is a very effective tool for influencing the attitudes of other people in the community regarding the climate and disadvantaged groups. Climate change is one of the most prominent issues of the time, causing the media, and in particular, the Guardian, to amend style guides. Earlier this, year, the noun phrase 'climate sceptic' was replaced with 'climate science denier' while the collocative 'climate change' was amended to 'climate emergency' by the Guardian. In the latter example, this language change is more 'emotive and powerful' (Stimulus D) and acts to provide connotations of urgency. It is in this way that this linguistic change helps to influence how Australians see such important issues, helping them to visualise the climate as something they need to protect rather than something simply changing.

...

Not only able to influence attitudes, language has the power to reflect attitudes held by the majority of Australians. A prominent attitude is that friendliness and inclusiveness should be used with everyone, a key part of one of the many Australian attitudes. Colloquial language such as the shortened 'no wuzzas' and 'arvo' as well as the vocative 'mate' and elided 'G'day' are all central to expressing the attitude held towards informality. Often regardless of the context this casual language is used, even with figures of authority. For example, earlier this year an Australian local used the imperative structure to tell Scott Morrison (PM) to 'get off my grass mate' which demonstrates just how integral this colloquial language is to reflecting the identities and attitudes towards informality that are respected in contemporary Australian society.

Question 8

For this question, students explored how social media and other digital platforms as media of communication have affected the use of language in contemporary Australian society. Discussions by students included the impact of text messaging on face-to-face communication, how emojis contribute to meaning, the increasing prevalence of informal registers in public language, language manipulation via social media, and the social implications of language change driven by social media and other digital platforms. Students discussed language and its use and connected this to how groups perceive one another and how readily they may interact with each other using technological platforms.

The following is an example of a response that scored in the upper range. This student thoroughly discussed the impact of social media and other technologies on language use in Australian society, focusing mainly on informal language used online to promote inclusion, solidarity and identity. This student did refer to Australian identity, which was not an examinable component in the 2020 exam, however it was acceptable for students who were familiar with the content to include it in their responses. Many high scoring responses to Question 8 did not refer to Australian identity. As part of this student's discussion, they considered how language is modified by public figures, such as politicians and other government figures, when communicating with Australians online. Included here is that paragraph.

The relaxed and 'friendlier' nature of online communication has enabled Australian politicians and Government organisations to adopt a more vernacular communication style than previously seen, where covert norms can be used to establish intimacy as well as national solidarity. Daniel Andrews, Victorian Premier, frequently exploits this 'laid-back' nature of social media in order to promote solidarity with his Victorian audience, which has been particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in recent Instagram posts, the non-standard diminutive nouns 'hospo', 'souva' and 'parma' were used by Andrews in order to assert his specifically Australian identity as well as particular identity traits such as playfulness and being laid-back, where there covert norms establish solidarity between Andrews and his Victorian audience over a shared identity. Furthermore, the use of the colloquial noun 'mate' in the verbal phrase 'see your mates at school again' and the vernacular verbal phrase 'get on' and shortening 'pub' in the simple declarative 'it's not time to get on the beers down the pub yet', that featured in Instagram posts further establishes Andrews as a genuine, everyday Australian through the use of such everyday Australian vernacular, and increases the likelihood that Victorians will trust his leadership if they see Andrews as equal. The relaxed and laid-back nature of online communication has enabled such covert norms to hold greater prestige than more traditional overt norms when used by politicians. This feature of digital platforms was also clear in an advertisement by the Victorian Government on Snapchat where the colloquial opening 'Hey Melbourne' was used in order to capture the audience's attention before explaining COVID-19 instructions. The fact that such official and traditionally prestigious organisations and individuals are resorting to use such covert norms over more traditionally prestigious overt norms therefore indicates that social media and online platforms are changing the way we communicate in terms of what carries more prestige in modern society.

Question 9

In this question, students needed to explore the extent to which formal written and spoken language are essential in contemporary Australian society, considering contexts where it is and is not essential. Student responses considered the nature of 'appropriate language use' and how this varied according to context, helping speakers achieve their purposes, touching on contexts where it was safe to break linguistic 'rules' and where it was not. Formal language can promote clear communication to diverse groups of people, which is necessary in serious and professional contexts, but formal written and spoken language can also easily obfuscate and confuse; clarity of expression sometimes requires less formal language. Formal language is therefore not always appropriate in a given context, with informal language playing an important role in successful communication, helping speakers and writers maintain relationships and fulfil other social purposes.

The following is an example of a response that scored in the upper range. This response engaged very well with the topic, dissecting the essential role of formal written and spoken language in contemporary Australian society while also acknowledging that formal language is not always the most contextually relevant register. Particularly well done was the coupling of relevant metalanguage with contemporary examples. Included here is the opening statement that clearly addresses the idea that formal language is not necessarily essential in all contexts, and a body paragraph acknowledging the worth of formal language in both written and spoken modes. The student incorporates Stimulus D to complement their selected contemporary examples.

In modern Australian society, formal language plays a vital in communication due to the plethora of social purposes it can adopt. The key to ensuring that formal language is used correctly, however, is by having a clear understanding of one's social purpose and the context they are in since '[changing] any one factor, [may mean] language may also have to change', (Kate Burridge). On one hand, when context demands for clarity, formal language can be essential to present a clear message, although formal language is equally useful when the purpose is to obfuscate. However, although both spoken and written formal language are undoubtedly essential in some contexts, when our purpose is to access covert prestige, informal language may be more useful.

Both the written and spoken modes of formal language can be used effectively in order to establish clarity. This is particularly useful when it comes to jargon, which, as John M. Smith puts it, 'we invent jargon because it saves time talking to one another.' Jargon is inherently precise, and while this can be obfuscatory to some, is essentially in ensuring brevity amongst those who are familiar with it. For instance, I work at a supermarket, where my co-workers and I frequently use jargon such as noun 'backstock' to refer to excess stock we have in the storeroom or initialism 'VA' which stands for 'Value Added', a euphemistic term to describe salads wrapped in plastic that are better value than loose produce. While we could use Plain English to explain these terms, given how busy the supermarket gets, the formal jargon ensure both conciseness and understanding, making it particularly useful. Other forms of formal language, particularly in regard to the use of imperative sentences, ensure clarity; both written and spoken. For instance, the imperative 'DO NOT re-enter the building' on an emergency procedure sign certainly does not attend to negative face needs that a more informal 'it would be great if you stayed outside' would, however, the power behind the formal, direct language ensures the reader gets a clear message as to not potentially risk their life. This was similarly shown by Premier Daniel Andrews when he instructed Australians 'Stay home. Get tested. Don't go to work,' if they were sick. This time, even in the spoken mode, the parallelism of the simple, imperative phrases, clearly instruct Victorians what is allowed which is necessary to ensure the containment of the virus; a power only carried by this formal, authoritative language. Hence, both written and spoken formal language is crucial to ensuring clarity.