

presents

English

How I got a Distinction in the Junior Cycle English Exam



By **Eve L.**

Eve L. got a Distinction in her higher Junior Cycle English paper. Here she shares what she learned.



The New Junior Cycle English exam is very different to the old course in that most of it is unseen – you won't know what's on the exam until you open it in June! However, this doesn't make it any more difficult to prepare for, thanks to the new Classroom Based Assessment and Assessment Tasks. This guide will give you a broader understanding of the aims of the new exam, and how to do well in it! At the end of the day, it's an English exam, so you'll do well so long as you can write!

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Layout

- ▶ The New Junior Cycle English is **marked out of 200**, of which the Final Examination is 180 marks (90%). The remaining 10% is achieved before you even go in to the exam hall through an Assessment Task!
- ▶ Additionally, you must complete two Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs) which will be reported on separately in your Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) which is released a month or so after Junior Certificate results.
- ▶ Also, the new Junior Cycle's Final Examination Grades are somewhat different to the old grading system so it's good to keep this in mind if you are aiming for a certain result:

Level	Percentage	Grade Descriptor
Higher, Ordinary, Foundation/ Ard, Gnath, Bonn	≥ 90 to 100	Distinction
	≥ 75 and < 90	Higher Merit
	≥ 55 and < 75	Merit
	≥ 40 and < 55	Achieved
	≥ 20 and < 40	Partially Achieved
	≥ 0 and < 20	Not Graded (NG)

- ▶ You will get your CBA results in your JCPA in October, after your results. They will be reported using the grades; *Exceptional, Above Expectations, In Line with Expectations, and Yet to Meet Expectations.*



CBA 1 – Oral Assessment

CBA1 is an Oral Assessment – a speech on a chosen topic submitted at the end of Second Year. The oral assessment counts toward your JCPA, but not your final Junior Certificate Grade. This does not mean, however, that you shouldn't put 100% effort into it, as it would be nice to see an 'Exceptional' on your JCPA!

- ▶ The purpose of this CBA is to help you **develop your research and communication skills**. It is important to remember you will not only be marked on how good your speech is but also on your preparation as well – this is worth remembering for the shy ones among us!
- ▶ For this CBA, you can choose any topic or issue you like and must carry out an 'exploration' over three school weeks. You can search for information online or through surveying, reading and note-making. **Get this done early** on so you can begin preparing your actual presentation. You can really choose anything you want. You can talk about your family holiday - just so long as you **do the research and communicate it well!** I spoke about feminism for this because it was something I am passionate about, so it
- ▶ was easier to talk about!
- ▶ Your speech can be a performance (drama, recitation, etc.), a presentation on a topic, an interview, and so on. With so much to choose from, this CBA should be a fun experience!
- ▶ Understandably, some people have a fear of public speaking or making presentations. Fear not – **you only have to do it in front of a teacher** with a camera for three minutes. Plus, it can be completed as a small group task as well as individually! **I recommend practicing** for friends, teachers, and parents so you can **gain confidence**, as this really helped me!
- ▶ Afterwards, you have to complete a Student Reflection Note. This is your 'declaration' of the part you have played in the assessment. It is also a



record of the resources used for preparation and finally it is an assessment of what you did well and how you could improve it. Here, you have to **speak about the work you did for this presentation - fill it up to get top marks!** (I wrote down the various sites from which I got my information!)

▶ And, if there are some things you would do differently, were you to do it again, write them down! **You are being marked for being able to evaluate your work truthfully – not for a perfect presentation!** You will have learned plenty, so write loads here, too! I wrote down that I learned how to properly format a speech using the necessary techniques. Next time, I hope to be less fidgety with my hands!

CBA 2 – Written Assessment

CBA2 is a Written Assessment – a collection of your writings submitted around Halloween of **third year**. This CBA is also part of your Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement, but it is also part of the Assessment Task, which goes toward your Final Grade. However, this isn't something that's done in third year alone - you should be collecting your best pieces of writing from first year on.

- ▶ With this CBA, you get the chance to show off your **writing skills** by compiling a collection of your work in a variety of genres over time and choosing your best pieces to present for assessment.
- ▶ You'll choose pieces you have written over the course of your writing career in secondary school. For example, you may have written a letter to the editor when studying media and select it as one of your chosen pieces.
- ▶ Your collection must be varied, with **at least four pieces of work**, each from a different genre (so you can show off your versatility as a writer!) These 'genres' may include functional writing pieces, autobiographies, poetry, drama or film script, etc. You can even write a piece



overlapping two genres if you really want to impress, such as a descriptive poem or a humorous opinion piece!

- ▶ You will pick your two very best pieces to submit, to make sure you get as good a grade as possible. Your teacher will advise you on this and you should **do rough drafts to make sure the end-product showcases your best abilities!**
- ▶ Afterwards, you have to complete a Student Reflection Note. This is similar to that of the note in CBA 1 in that you have to review your work and criticize it. This accompanies *each* piece included

in the collection. In your Student Reflection Note, you'll be asked why you chose this genre – that's pretty straightforward. For this, I wrote something along the lines of, 'I chose a piece from the genre *Expressive Pieces*, because I feel that I am good at writing poetry and that I am strongest at this style of writing etc.'

- ▶ **Record also what you learned.** This is really an individual question that will really come from your personal experience of the task – for me, I learned how difficult it was to compare pieces from different genres, as I had pieces from the Aesthetic Language and Argumentative Language, as well as Informative and Narrative, and couldn't decide which were best because they were all so different! You also have to **mention what you would do differently next time**, just like in CBA1 – I wrote that I would get more guidance from my teacher in choosing my pieces.

Assessment Task (10%)

The Assessment Task is a reflection on the learning outcomes for CBA 2. It is a test completed during a double English class, or over two classes in the week. This is submitted to the State Examinations Commission for marking along with the Final Assessment for English. It is worth 20 marks, or 10% of



your final mark. It is an excellent opportunity to achieve the full 10% before you even go into the exam hall! The process is simple:

1. Firstly, you pick the two best pieces from your collection, list the name and genre, and select and write an extract (100 words approx.) from one of these pieces into the booklet (this could be a paragraph, verse, etc.). I picked a poem I had wrote around the time we started studying Seamus Heaney, from the *Aesthetic Language* genre, and wrote this in for the extract. My second piece was a letter to the editor I wrote when Katie Hopkins appeared on the Late Late Show.

2. Then, you must pick one of the following two questions to answer on the written extract:

a) *Explain how two features of the extract you have chosen are typical of its genre*

- OR -

b) *Identify a change that you made in the course of writing this text that you think improved it and explain how it improved the text.*

3. You then have to answer two more

questions on this piece. For example, in 2017, they were from the following list:

- *How the things I read helped me to be a better writer*
- *How I worked with classmates as part of developing my writing skills*
- *How a specific piece of feedback was useful to me*
- *How I hope/would like to use my writing skills in the future*

4. Then, in class 1 of the Assessment Task, you have to read/watch/listen to and then discuss one piece from the NCCA website.

5. These are **videos, recordings, or letters**, in which people speak about their experience of compiling a collection of texts, what inspires them, etc. These so-called 'prompts' are to be discussed in class - how it is alike/unlike your personal experiences of compiling your collection of texts, and also, things the speakers said that you can relate to. I listened to Sinead Gleeson, who said



'you can't be a writer without being a reader,' and that 'there is inspiration everywhere.' These were true for me as I was inspired by Heaney after reading his poetry!

6. Your teacher will then give to you the assessment task booklets, writing prompts, and time to think. You should **take your time to read the questions in the booklet and the writing prompts and think about how you might respond.**

Take as long as you need for this - some teachers might let you reflect on answers overnight. In this case, I would take note of the questions/prompts to look at them at home. If

you need to, ask the teacher to read questions aloud and give you the meaning of words or phrases. After all, if you can't understand a question - you can't

answer it! **Use the reflection period wisely!**

7. In the second class, you will be supervised as you write your answers into the booklet. As before, **you can have your two texts, reflection notes and any previous drafts, to refer to, examine and quote from.** I would highly recommend doing this. After this 40-minute long exam, you will hand up your booklet to a teacher with your exam number, and this will go off to the State Exams Commission to count for 10% of your final mark!

Final Examination (90%)

The final examination is the first of your exams in June. It takes place over 2 hours, and is worth 90% of your grade (180 marks). This exam is a little unusual as there is no real structure or set number of sections or questions.

Your paper will have a theme, e.g. Mysteries was the theme in the 2017 exam. All the questions will then fit within this theme. It could be absolutely anything!



The State Exams Commission has said that they are testing your ability in three key areas in the exam, under which every question on the exam will fit:

- 1. Responding to Stimulus Material*
- 2. Responding to Studied Texts*
- 3. Writing for a variety of purposes*

1. Responding to Stimulus Material

- ▶ **Stimulus Material** is material you haven't seen before. It's basically a fancier, more inclusive name for the Unseen Poetry, Drama, and Fiction section from the old paper, but it's much broader. You could be asked about a poster, a website, a radio typescript, a brochure – **ANYTHING!**
- ▶ The State Exams Commission wants to see if your English language skills go beyond learning off quotes from your studied texts – time to showcase your creativity skills! They are looking to see if you can **think on your toes** and answer questions, in detail, on new texts. (Using PQE of course)
- ▶ Obviously, it is hard to study for this section. You can, however, practice responding to texts you haven't seen before. There are tons in the **past questions on Studyclix**. The idea is the same on both courses – you just need to become really **skilled at spontaneity!**

2. Responding to Studied Texts

- ▶ **Studied Texts** are the plays, films, short-stories, novels, and poems you've been studying since first or second year. You'll probably have about two plays, short-stories or novels, a single film, and several poems, for which you have loads of notes.
- ▶ My advice would be to **answer these types of questions first**. You know everything about your texts. You know the quotes and techniques from each poem off by heart, character



analyses are memorised forwards and backwards! Therefore, any question that appears on the exam will be something you've either answered before, or something very similar, so you can manipulate your answer to suit it. This is your opportunity to **show off your knowledge of your texts!**

- ▶ This section is easy to study for, but is time consuming so **I advise hitting the books early on in the year.** Your teacher has probably stressed **the importance of quotes** one-too-many times but they're not wrong. Quotes are essential to PQE paragraphs. PQEs are answers built upon making a brief **point** about the text, (e.g. Such is a very erratic character) **quoting** the text (e.g. this is shown when he says '...') and **explaining** why this quote proves your point, (e.g. This statement shows that Such never considers consequences to their actions. He is erratic). PQEs are fact-based and so they almost always get full marks. Long story short – learn off the quotes. Have **a page of important quotes from each character and poem,** etc. to reference to when necessary, or record them on your phone!
- ▶ I also recommend making **mind-maps on various topics within your studied texts.** Make one on the characters from your respective novels, films, and plays, and the themes and techniques from your poems. You can make them 'visually appealing' to help you study, or get an app such as Prezi to do it for you so you can revise on the go. Just put your topic, e.g. the character's name, in the centre, and arrows extending from it to various keywords, such as 'villainous,' or 'naïve.'
- ▶ I swear by **visual and audio study.** What I mean by this is, try to get your hands on a copy of your studied films, go to a live performance of your plays (or online, if you can, and better yet, if there's a loyal film adaptation) and listen to people read your poems online! **You can read notes all day long, but you're more likely to remember quotes and the plot and order of events if you have a clear picture in your head of the text.**
- ▶ A great resource for people studying Shakespearian material can be found at '**No Fear,**



Shakespeare! online. Very handy if you're not up to speed with period language!

- ▶ Get to **understand key terms and techniques!** Make an English dictionary full of words such as 'onomatopoeia' and 'hyperbole' so that if they come up on the exam, you aren't left stuck. You can also impress examiners by using these words when writing about your pieces.
- ▶ And just like Responding to Stimulus Material – **practice is key**. Memorising your notes is all well and good, but doing questions from old and sample papers over and over will ensure you've considered all areas of the text.
- ▶ Personal Opinions are all you're getting marked for, at the end of the day. It's however **you** feel about the text, so be sure to use the phrase, 'I think that...' when responding to questions.

3. Writing for a Variety of Purposes

- ▶ By Christmas of third year, you'll be able to write in almost any style – from narrative to argumentative and everywhere in between! The State Exams Commission now wants to see you **write something on the spot to see your writing ability** – the heart of English!
- ▶ You could be asked to write a story, script, speech – to name a few, so you need to **know the necessary formats** for each. Where the addresses go on a letter, what techniques are used in a speech, etc. I was asked to write a dialogue, so I had to know to put the names of the characters in block capitals on the left margin, before every line they spoke, and to skip a line after, etc.
- ▶ **Spelling and grammar are important**. Really important!
- ▶ **Read lots** between now and the exam – it'll **expand your vocabulary and give you some ideas**. Read the paper, Letters to the editor, your novel, even blog posts on the internet!



- ▶ In the exam hall, **spend one minute of your time designing a mind map or plan for your piece.** You'll end up wasting more time thinking if you don't plan. Trust me.
- ▶ Lastly – **practice.** Past papers, sample papers, homework assignments – everything you can. Hand them up to your teacher if you want, for assessment. And remember; nothing you write will go to waste as it can all be considered for CBA 2!

Helpful Hints

- ▶ **Timing** = The exam is 120 minutes long and is marked out of 180 so you should spend no more than 3 minutes on a 5-marker, or 10 minutes on a 30-mark question, etc.
- ▶ **Get the balance** = don't write too little OR too much – you can be penalised for both. Fortunately, the new exam has assigned writing space – so you should only need more paper if you have huge writing. Don't neglect other sections just because you have loads to write in one!
- ▶ **Blue or black pen** = No pencil. And don't fill in the barcodes or doodle with your pen – your exam will be scanned for marking, so the barcode is needed.
- ▶ **Order** = I would go to *Responding to Stimulus Material* questions first, to read the text only, so you can be thinking about it in the back of your mind as you tackle the studied text questions after. Then, proceed to answer the stimuli, and finally, the writing questions. This is how I tackled the exam; I left all my time till the end for writing a script! This prevents rushing the writing section. **Answer every question**, even if you have to leave some unfinished!
- ▶ **Additional time** = use this to improve answers. This is what I did, and happy I did so rather than leaving early, like my peers. Marks can only be got in the exam hall!



- ▶ **Supervisor** = ask them for help with understanding a question if you need to. They won't answer it, nor give you a definition to a word – but they will clarify certain things if they are generally misleading.
- ▶ **Work hard on your CBAs** = it will pay off. The Assessment Task also requires attention for 20 marks out of 200.
- ▶ **Don't panic** = In English, you don't lose marks; you earn them. Work hard and practice and you'll do superb.



Good Luck!

I'm sure you'll do great.

