2017 VCE Classical Studies examination report

General comments

Students generally wrote long and detailed responses to questions on the 2017 Classical Studies examination. They showed good knowledge of the works and most were able to place works in their socio-historical contexts. The difference between a higher-scoring response and other responses was the student's ability to discuss classical ideas and values.

Most responses addressed the question. There were few misunderstandings about what the examination was asking for, although students commonly chose to deal with questions simply and not explore much further. It appeared that students tried to engage with the questions rather than giving prepared answers, although it was evident that some students were adapting general comparisons of the texts to the terms in the question.

There was variety in the responses to some questions. The examination invited students to read carefully and plan thoughtful responses, and those who did were rewarded.

Most students finished the examination. However, some failed to include answers to two Section A questions and one Section B question. A few students were keen to write everything that might be relevant in response to their first question and may have spent too much time on it.

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 – Individual study

Question chosen	none	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
%	0	40	6	26	10	5	0	4	8

Part a.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average
%	2	5	19	38	29	8	**3.1**

Part b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average
%	3	3	23	46	22	4	3

Part c.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	3	2	4	9	17	24	22	13	4	1	1	5

Most students answered Question 1, the *Iliad* question, while no students responded on Cicero. The second-most popular Section A work was Question 3 on the *Bacchae*. The artworks were quite popular choices.

There were few errors of identification of passages and images. Students displayed a detailed knowledge of narratives and characters and they used the passages and images quite well, particularly in the analysis of techniques. However, many students appeared to read the questions superficially, and student responses did not address classical ideas and values as much as they should have. This resulted in relatively poor marks for part c. of the questions, which asked students to discuss significance, ideas or themes in the passages or images.

Consider the first sentences of two different answers to the instruction 'Explain the circumstances'. Both answers deal with events prior to those described in the passage. The first deals with the myth about the causes of the Trojan War, which is going back too far; it is not dealt with in Book 6 of *The Iliad*, nor in any other part of *The Iliad*. 'Circumstances' should focus on events in the prescribed sections.

Example 1

When Paris gave the golden apple to Aphrodite she promised him the most beautiful woman in the world – Helen. This was the beginning of the Trojan War.

Example 2

Observing the disarray of the Trojan army caused by the Achaean onslaught led by Diomedes, Helenus instructs Hector to return to Troy and organize a gift for Athena in the hope that she will take pity on the Trojan women and children.

Consider the following two responses to the instruction 'Describe the techniques'. Both answers address techniques. The first does little more than list words, but the second attempts to describe Thucydides' approach to writing his history.

Example 3

Thucydides uses strong language like 'showering' and 'hurling' and 'trampled' to portray the pressure the Athenians were under. They become 'disordered', 'greedily drinking in the deep river bed' and the Peloponnesians 'slaughtered them'.

Example 4

Thucydides takes pains to write in prose that is accurate and factual, without 'a romantic element'. As a result his descriptions are normally restrained and understated. But here his description of the utter defeat of the Athenians dramatically conveys the chaos and shocking collapse of morale with memorable images – the exhaustion and desperate thirst of the men and the constant barrage of missiles, and soldiers drinking muddy water stained with their comrades' blood.

Consider the following two responses to the direction 'Discuss the significance'. The first response addresses the significance to the narrative; the second addresses the significant ideas conveyed by the narrative, in particular, the relationship between mortals and gods, which would score more highly.

Example 5

This passage is significant because it foreshadows the death of Pentheus at the hands of his mother. Thus the will of Dionysus is played out.

Example 6

This passage reveals the nature of the gods and the price mortals pay for hubris. Dionysus shows no mercy towards Pentheus who has denied his divinity. The overbearing young king is gone, only a delirious peeping Tom remains.

Question 1
Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 6

Question 1a.

Most students began their account of 'circumstances' with Helenus' instructions to Hector, which was the best place to start, but few referred to the immediate circumstances of the passage. In the lines preceding the passage Hector notices Andromache's tears and he attempts to reassure her by telling her that he will die when he is fated to die and no man can change his fate. That is important because it explains Andromache's response and Hector's mood in the extract.

Question 1b.

A systematic approach worked well. Students went through the extract line by line, dealing with Hector first, then Paris. Most identified the epithet for Hector and the symbolism of his helmet. Most, too, identified the extended simile of the stallion for Paris. A few claimed that Paris was effeminate and sex-mad but did not provide convincing evidence for this. Higher-scoring answers explained the effects of these techniques. This question was well answered.

Question 1c.

There was a wealth of significance found in the passage. Many students focused on a comparison of the Atreides, Menelaus and Agamemnon, with the Trojan brothers, Hector and Paris. Few responses showed an awareness of the last words to pass between Hector and Andromache and the reasons for her tears and Hector's lingering. Many answers claimed that Hector realises he is soon to die, but that does not occur until Book 22. He lingers because his attempt to comfort Andromache failed.

Thoughtful answers noted that Hector is made aware of the incompatibility of his roles as a hero and as a husband and father. In Book 6 Homer includes many references to the clashing worlds of communities at war and communities at peace. Some students cited the killing of Axylus by Diomedes. Axylus, the generous host welcoming all comers in, in peacetime, is now reduced to carrion on the battlefield. Most ironic is the exchange of armour between Diomedes, lord of the war cry, and Glaucus. War and peace, the male sphere of the battlefield contrasted with the female sphere in the city – these are significant themes in Book 6. In the passage when Hector lingers and thoughtless Paris bounds forward, Homer draws our attention to the cost of war.

Question 2
Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*

Question 2a.

Some answers were focused on early events of the Peloponnesian War and not on the Sicilian Expedition. Higher-scoring answers started with the launching of the expedition and briefly summarised the sequence of events that brought the Athenians to the Assinarus River. Lower-scoring answers were vague about the turning points in the battle for Syracuse.

Question 2b.

The prose techniques of Thucydides proved elusive for many students. He tells us in his introduction how he intends to write. His techniques are built on a factual and disinterested approach, aiming at accurate retelling of events and the underlying causes. Good answers referred to Thucydides' introduction and assessed the passage in the light of the methods he said he would use. What is different about this passage is that it is not simply factual. It illustrates the utter desperation of the Athenians by presenting dramatic images. He does not write simply that many died. He writes that many were killed by their own spears in the chaos and the crush of bodies. He does not write simply that all order was lost. He writes that men fought to drink muddy water that was stained with the blood of their comrades. Thucydides draws attention to particular aspects of human behaviour in extreme situations.

Question 2c.

Responses commonly attributed this utter defeat to Athenian hubris and greed and often mentioned the irony of Nicias' end, since he opposed the plan in the assembly. But Nicias was also deceived. Higher-scoring responses mentioned the failure of foresight in the Athenian assembly and further failures of foresight that encumbered the Athenians in Sicily. This is one of the many instances where Thucydides shows us that war is a stern teacher. There is uncertainty in war, which most Athenians ignored while in the assembly, though their fears did emerge when making their farewells at the launching. There is irony in such a calamitous and utter defeat after such a confident setting out. Higher-scoring answers showed an understanding of Thucydides' views of war and human failings.

Question 3
Euripides, 'Bacchae'

Question 3a.

A good answer needed to do more than list the various ways in which Dionysus manipulates Pentheus. Dionysus is a god dealing with a mortal. The highest-scoring responses showed an awareness of the differences between gods and mortals. This question was answered quite well.

Question 3b.

Students needed to know the comical scene where doddery old Cadmus and blind Teiresias dress in fawn skins and propose to join the dancing in honour of Dionysus. They could then make a careful comparison with Pentheus in this passage. Most responses fell short of that detailed comparison.

Question 3c.

Most students wrote about the narrative and many saw this passage as foreshadowing Pentheus' death – which is true, but there's more. Dionysus is a powerful god who places a high value on the recognition of his divinity by the Thebans and a low value on their lives. This is not simply perverse and cruel. It is the nature of the gods. The message for mortals is: be careful, be modest, do not be

like Pentheus. Pentheus has defied a god and this humiliation is part of his punishment. It is ironic that a proud and masculine monarch is persuaded to wear a woman's robe and be paraded through the town. Dionysus can reverse the order of things. Many of the higher-scoring answers noted that Dionysus is androgynous, subversive, irrational and the director of his own entertainment.

Question 4
Greek vases

Question 4a.

Heroes, Achilles and Ajax, in full battle gear, play a board game. The scores tell us that Achilles is winning. There was interesting speculation about this scene. Most settled for calling it a break from combat, which makes sense. Perhaps it shows the heroes to be human; perhaps it illustrates their competitive ways. Most agreed that it shows their closeness and their friendship. It also suggests their ends, with Achilles, scoring four, dying a noble battlefield death while Ajax, scoring three, dies miserably, a suicide. In the painting of Ajax's suicide he is naked, alone and impaled on the sword given to him in an exchange of gear by Hector. Most students knew what led to Ajax's suicide and earned good marks describing the circumstances.

Question 4b.

Some students identified the vase types and the decorations but most focused directly on the painted scenes, which are the main interest. Black- and red-figure techniques were competently discussed, the incised lines and decorations on the black figures compared with the painted details on the red figure. There was also the difference between the vulnerable and pale Ajax suiciding and the powerful black figures of the game-players. Many responses noted the symmetries in design, the slanting of the spears and the strikingly vertical sword impaling Ajax.

Question 4c.

Many students who did well on Questions 4a. and 4b. stumbled when required to discuss the portrayal of heroism on these vases. Achilles and Ajax compete in a board game because heroes were competitive. They are also never without their war gear. They do not even put their spears down to cast the die. Ajax suicides because he has been denied recognition as the greatest hero after Achilles. Honour is everything to a hero. Heracles was popularly used for a comparison, and Oedipus. Ajax with the body of Achilles suggests aspects of heroism relevant to these vase paintings. To score well students needed to address aspects of the heroic code that found expression in the vase paintings, not simply describe the scenes and call them heroic.

Question 5
Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 4

Question 5a.

Students were well prepared for an analysis of Dido raging at Aeneas and most knew the story of the 'marriage' between Dido and Aeneas. Higher-scoring answers gave attention to the role of the gods in bringing about this confrontation.

Question 5b.

Virgil explores the character of Dido through the words that pour out in this speech. There is no authorial presence here. Students identified the storm of accusation in the rhetorical questions and repetition. They noted the changing tone, from fury to pleading to disdain, and the hyperbole. This is evidence for the Roman view that passionate love is an illness and Dido displays the symptoms.

The passage contained many classical ideas and techniques, and many students found plenty to write about.

Question 5c.

Responses often focused on Dido exclusively and the fact that she presages her death. They noted the dangers of uncontrolled passion, Dido's furore and lack of pietas. Those who considered the speech more broadly in the context of Book 4 saw it as a test for Aeneas and a turning point for him. Despite his love for Dido, Aeneas is steadfast. He will now sail to Italy as Jupiter decrees. Higher-scoring answers took into account Aeneas's response to this speech.

Question 6
Cicero, 'In defence of Marcus Caelius Rufus'
No students attempted the Cicero question this year.

Question 7
Metamorphoses

Question 7a.

Most responses satisfactorily described the events leading to Medea's internal monologue. The higher-scoring answers noted subtleties in Ovid's version of the myth – suggestions from the start that Jason was only using Medea. They also noted the high status of the visiting Greek heroes in a barbarous land where a princess dreams of distant civilised cities.

Question 7b.

Medea is revealed to the reader. Through her thoughts Ovid establishes her character, her passionate nature, her ambition and her infatuation with Jason. His primary technique is the internal monologue, which most responses recognised. This enables Ovid to show the reader what is hidden, Medea's dreams, her judgments and the hint of the vengefulness that is to come.

Question 7c.

The best approach to discussing the significance of the extract was to see it as providing a contrast with the destructive monster that Medea later becomes, after her metamorphosis. Her dreams of Greece prepare the ground for her disappointment and anger. Her willingness to condemn Jason if he were to prefer other women to her foreshadows her response when he betrays her. This passage describes the thinking of the person who is still innocent but who will become an embittered spirit of vengeance.

Question 8
Roman portraits

Question 8a. and 8b.

Students described the portraits confidently and most could identify both emperors and the symbols adorning them. Styles were identified, specifically the use of youthful Classical Greek torsos beneath the middle-aged heads, Greek and Roman iconography and the exaggeratedly realistic portrait of Claudius as opposed to the ideal portrait of Commodus. Higher-scoring answers addressed the element of propaganda in these portraits, noting that the real people were quite unlike the representations. There were many good observations about the ironies of the representations.

Question 8c.

Students were quick to note the main similarity between the two works, namely that they both depict emperors in costume. The costumes were compared and suitable conclusions reached about their propaganda value and the intended audience. Most thought the intended audience of

the Commodus bust was probably Commodus. The chief difference identified was that the Claudius statue refers to republican motifs while Commodus only directly references Herculean myth. Some responses compared these statues to the Portrait of Vespasian, noting the naturalistic representation of Vespasian's face, as opposed to the veristic or exaggerated realism of Claudius or the ideal visage of Commodus. Most students found plenty to write and their comparisons showed a solid understanding of the works.

Section B – Comparative study

Question chosen	none	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
%	1	17	10	35	1	9	<1	27

Essays were long and filled with generally accurate information and quotes drawn from the works.

In their preparation students should work assiduously to gain a detailed knowledge of the works, supported by a large number of quotes and some knowledge of the works' socio-historical contexts. This knowledge makes a strong foundation for a good essay. In addition to this knowledge a student needs to be able to read a statement carefully, plan a response and select the material that is required to support a persuasive argument. There is work to be done here, to improve reading, planning and selection skills. Students are inclined to be hasty in choosing their response to the statement. For instance, many students agreed that both 'The Persians' and *The Histories* provide support for the statement that 'War causes suffering for victors and vanquished alike', but they struggled to find evidence in either work for the suffering of victors.

Many essays showed attention to structure. Students built a base for their argument in the opening paragraph and stuck to their position. They began with the statement they were responding to, the meaning of that statement as they saw it, the position they would argue, the texts they would use and the main line of argument.

Essays did not always sustain this clarity. Many students did not select their material carefully and often strayed from the subject.

Criterion 1

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	2	1	1	5	14	16	28	17	10	5	1	**5.8**

Students earned higher marks on the first criterion than on the other three. This criterion is used to assess knowledge of the works and their socio-historical contexts.

Most students showed they knew the works and they addressed the socio-historical contexts in their essays.

Some material was irrelevant to the argument and many lower-scoring essays turned into storytelling after a promising start. There was a common failure to link socio-historical material to the topic. Sometimes socio-historical material was distant and of limited relevance – several essays contained background material relating to the Persian Wars as the socio-historical context of Aristophanes' 'The Clouds'. Sometimes important contemporary events were ignored – many students related Aristophanes' criticism of cultural decline in Athens to the plague of 430–429 without mentioning the arrival in Athens of the sophists. Similarly, the execution of the generals after the battle of Arginusae was seen as the most relevant event to the 'Crito' when there were many much more important events that occurred after the fall of Athens. Those who tackled Roman works were able to identify relevant socio-historical material more confidently.

Criterion 2

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	2	1	3	7	15	25	22	15	7	3	1	**5.4**

More attention needs to be given to the techniques of the writers and artists. Genre is important. Many essays did not mention that 'The Persians' is a play in verse, which makes use of pathos to appeal to its audience, while *The Histories* is a prose work based on logos, an appeal to reason. The three Greek pairings involve works from different genres; students should use this to highlight different ways of presenting ideas, and in their comparisons of the works. The pairing of 'The Clouds' and 'Crito' invites a comparison between comedy and Socratic dialogue, one a fictional account not meant to be taken as fact, the other an attempt to recreate a conversation that was real. Differences in techniques were less marked in the relief sculpture of the Parthenon and the Ara Pacis but students did note the portraits of Romans on the Ara Pacis as opposed to the idealised figures in the Parthenon metopes and frieze. Many essays on the Parthenon and Ara Pacis tended to be too descriptive and failed to adequately address the underlying messages that these monumental works were built to convey. As always, the higher-scoring essays discussed the ideas in the works: the legitimate use of force, for instance, in *Odyssey*, Books 21 and 22, or the abuse of power in Tacitus or the power of propaganda in the Ara Pacis.

Criterion 3

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	3	0	3	10	17	24	21	12	7	2	1	**5.2**

By comparing works students explored different contemporaneous ideas in classical societies and the changing ideas in classical societies over time. Herodotus has a markedly different view of war from Aeschylus in 'The Persians'. Sophocles and Homer present different views of the hero. Livy and Tacitus present different views of Roman values and behaviour. Ovid and Horace had quite different lives as a result of their experiences in Augustan Rome.

Students' comparisons ranged from simple juxtaposition of observations about the works to detailed examination of similarities and differences. Some comparison was limited to socio-historical differences. Students noted the different experiences of Horace and Ovid with Augustus, but did not often compare their poetry directly.

Students could have discussed the two works separately early in the essay but this is a foundation for comparison, not a complete response to the statement. Many comparisons appeared to be additions to two separate general surveys of the works, rather than the intended destination of the argument.

Criterion 4

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	2	1	2	9	17	25	23	10	6	2	1	**5.3**

In reading time students should think about the statement they have chosen as their essay topic. What is it saying? What terms need to be defined? The statement in Question 7 asserted that 'small details' in the Parthenon and the Ara Pacis are significant. The phrase 'small details' needed to be defined. Many students agreed with the assertion and proceeded to argue that the Parthenon metopes bore it out. But are the metopes 'small details'? Question 3 is clearly saying that Odysseus is the cause of bad outcomes. The phrase 'disaster, discord and pain' needed definition.

Students may address each term separately but it might be better to restate the assertion and argue, for instance, on the subject 'Odysseus is the cause of suffering'. Students cannot change the meaning of the statement but are entitled to shape it a little, as long as they make it clear what they are doing.

The statement in the question is not meant to initiate a discursive reflection on the works. The object is to prompt a student to develop an argument. The opening paragraph should set out the structure of the argument. For instance:

> *The statement asserts that Odysseus is to blame for bad outcomes in The Odyssey Books 21 and 22 and in Sophocles' tragedy, Ajax. I don't agree with this statement and this essay will argue that Odysseus is not responsible for the 'disaster, discord and pain' that occurs. I interpret 'disaster, discord and pain' to include wrongful deaths, outrages causing division and human suffering. This essay will argue that in The Odyssey, the slaughter of the suitors and unfaithful maids is not wrongful and that it restores the legitimate king to his throne, bringing healing, not division. It will also argue that in Sophocles' Ajax Odysseus is not responsible for Ajax's suffering and death and that his intervention actually heals divisions and reduces suffering.*

Evidence should be provided for all but the most obvious assertions. Many students were assiduous about the provision of supporting quotes and paraphrases, although occasionally memorised quotes were worked into the essay but they did little to support the student's argument. Students should be aware that their task is to present an argument that is coherent and well supported by evidence, and most attempted to do this. The most noticeable differences between convincing arguments and unconvincing ones lay in the detailed knowledge of the works and the student's grasp of the foundational ideas of classical culture.