



RADLEY

Common Entrance 2026

(A series of detailed reports to provide feedback for Preparatory Schools)



Subject reports

ENGLISH

Writing Papers

The overall standard was very competent, with few responses lacking coherence or control. This reflects strong foundation work. Almost all candidates demonstrated accurate sentence construction throughout their responses. Solid grammatical understanding and reliable organisation of information was the norm.

There was, however, an opportunity to develop greater variety at the level of the sentence. Accuracy in individual sentences was mostly impressive, but the strongest writing also considered how sentences work in sequence, varying rhythm and length to guide and sustain the reader. The succession of well-formed simple sentences sometimes became monotonous.

In creative writing, coherent structure was a consistent marker of the best responses. The most effective pieces had a clear sense of shape and direction, consciously carrying the reader purposefully from opening to close. A few of the strongest pieces employed cyclicity to good effect. Weaker responses tended to accumulate incident without purpose, and in a small number of cases plots became unnecessarily complex or action-heavy, leaving little room for atmosphere and often running out of steam. Focused, well-managed narrative consistently outperformed those that attempted too much.

Vocabulary knowledge across the cohort was impressive, though occasionally students reached for striking words at the expense of consistency; this resulted in tonal unevenness. Sustaining a controlled, coherent style, rather than artificially displaying a wide lexical range, led to more successful pieces. There were also a few issues with verb tense consistency. Shifts in tense within a piece, though infrequent, were a recurring minor weakness.

The transactional writing tasks reflected excellent preparation in terms of format and convention. The chief opportunity for development in these tasks is in formal and stylistic variety. The most accomplished non-fiction writing modulated tone, adjusted register to purpose and audience, and made deliberate choices that gave a distinctive character. Many responses, while technically secure, followed predictable patterns that limited access to the upper mark bands.

Introduction

Thank you, once again, for the time and effort that you put into preparing boys for their Common Entrance Examinations. We continue to believe that the Common Entrance is the best preparation for senior school: its breadth and depth are unparalleled, and we believe that a terminal exam motivates pupils to learn new knowledge and skills right up to the point at which they join us. We enjoy marking it ourselves and we do so because we know how much effort you put into preparing boys for it. It's always brilliant to see what they can do.

We hope that the attached reports help give the boys useful feedback for how they can continue to progress in their studies and help you to get a sense of the knowledge and skills we're looking for in a Radley boy.

Thank you for everything you do to nurture these boys' minds and lay the foundation for the rest of their education. They are a credit to you.

Best wishes

Jonathan Porter MA (Cantab.)



Across both paper types, responses tended to cluster in the upper half of the middle of the assessment bands. This reflects the effectiveness of current teaching in securing solid, reliable marks. Encouraging students to take considered risks with their approach, both conceptually and structurally, to develop an individual voice, would help more candidates access the higher levels of the mark scheme.

Reading and Comprehension Section

Candidates engaged positively with the extract from Alfred Noyes's 'The Highwayman', and the overall standard reflects a cohort with a secure foundation in reading comprehension and literary analysis. Many responses demonstrated careful reading, with students showing a clear understanding of the poem's narrative, character dynamics, and atmosphere.

Performance in shorter comprehension-style questions was generally strong. Most candidates were able to identify key events and demonstrate a clear grasp of the personalities of the Highwayman, Bess, and Tim, drawing appropriately on details from the text. This indicates well-developed literal comprehension and an increasing ability to infer character from poetic description.

A particular strength this year was candidates' ability to identify literary techniques. Many successfully recognised methods used to create suspense, such as imagery, rhythm, and repetition, and were able to explain their general effect. There was also evidence of thoughtful personal engagement, especially in candidates' impressions of the Highwayman and their judgements about the characters of Tim and Bess.

However, as in previous years, there is room for greater precision and depth in analytical responses. Candidates are advised to pay closer attention to specified line ranges and to ensure their responses address the exact number of points required by the mark scheme. This attention to detail will help maximise marks and demonstrate thorough engagement with the question requirements. Candidates should also not repeat previous literary techniques from earlier questions. While techniques were often correctly identified, explanations of their effects were sometimes generalised. Stronger responses moved beyond labelling methods to explore how and why specific words, images, or structural features shape meaning and influence the reader. Developing more nuanced and detailed commentary will be key to future progress.

The use of textual evidence was frequent, but not always accurate or effectively integrated. Some candidates relied on lengthy quotation or imprecise references rather than selecting short, well-chosen phrases to support their ideas. As previously advised, quotations should be concise, accurate, and embedded smoothly within the candidate's own analytical voice. They should serve as evidence to support interpretation, rather than replace it.

Candidates also demonstrated sound judgement in their evaluation of characters, particularly in their interpretations of Tim and Bess. Many showed a clear understanding of motivation and moral perspective. However, written expression sometimes lacked clarity and fluency. Candidates would benefit from developing a more controlled and articulate style, ensuring that ideas are expressed clearly and supported by a wider and more precise vocabulary.

In longer responses, including the Section C question, most candidates structured their answers effectively, with a clear beginning, middle, and end. There was evidence of planning and an awareness of essay form. Nevertheless, these responses often lacked depth and detailed exploration. Many candidates relied on a limited range of literary techniques, with some repetition of basic devices such as metaphor



and simple sound effects. To reach higher levels, candidates should broaden their analytical toolkit to include:

- A wider range of figurative language
- Sentence structure and syntax
- Poetic rhythm, pace, and sound patterns
- Patterns of imagery and symbolism
- Narrative voice and perspective
- Structural development across the poem

Stronger responses were characterised by a clear line of argument, thoughtful organisation, and perceptive engagement with the writer's craft. These answers combined precise textual references with developed analysis and fluent expression.

MATHS

The Additional paper seems to have stepped up a gear, aiming at the top mathematicians - as it probably should - although it was evident that some of the boys did not meet this standard. Generally, those that gained the better marks were those who wrote clear and logical working, a reflection of their understanding. Quite a few were solving by trial and error rather than algebraically, finding it hard to form equations and then solve (Q3). Percentages, particularly reverse percentages, was also weak, as was conversion between units for area and volume.

The mental paper was fine. 40 questions in 10 minutes is tough though. Multiplying two decimals was a question that the majority got wrong.

Overall, the core papers were good, and again it was those with clear working that could be followed that scored well. We would have expected the algebra to be a bit stronger. Many couldn't solve equations with letters on both sides, successfully substitute with negative numbers or expand brackets accurately with negatives. Most boys could successfully answer the first few parts of questions but struggled on the later parts which tested the topic in a slightly different way, for example, the last part of Q13 on sequences (non calculator) and Q11d (calculator).

PHYSICS

The results reflect all the work done by prep schools to prepare their pupils for success in Physics. More than just preparation for Common Entrance, pupils were prepared with great care to link Physics to the world around them. The responses where students thought about the situation practically, as well as applying their understanding, were particularly pleasing.

We marked 75 scripts, with four students scoring over 90%. The standard of answers was very high, with an average of 76%. Students answered the electricity questions well and showed a great understanding of energy stores and pathways. The paper seemed very light on calculations. However, where answered, students showed some great re-arranging skills and use of conversions (milliNewtons to Newtons).



An interesting final question on aeroplanes and lift force - we have, in fact, a Sixth Former designing a wind tunnel as part of his Design project. Really encourage your students to draw their crosses for data points nice and large and in pencil.

CHEMISTRY

This year's exam covered a wide range of the syllabus (states of matter, acid/base/salts, chromatography, plotting graphs and simple depiction of molecules). The mean of this paper was a good 72%, which generally shows a solid understanding of most of the material taught. Only a small number made a few too many mistakes, which cost them valuable marks.

The multiple-choice section in Q1 demanded the knowledge of chemical tests and other basic facts. This was generally attempted well but a significant minority did not have the necessary knowledge about states of matter or did not count atoms correctly.

Q2 asked about the topic of states of matter. It was pleasing to see that most candidates had a good grasp of it.

Likewise, Q3 was answered very well although some boys confused solvent and solute.

The acid base and salt preparation chapter in Q4 proved a little more difficult in that many boys could not remember the correct colours of universal indicator in the three different solutions. The naming of salts also proved trickier than expected.

Q5 was reasonably well answered although the drawing of carbon dioxide was less successful, given the diagrams provided.

Q6 dealt with the separation technique of chromatography and seemed to have provided the most difficulties. Some boys struggled to analyse the chromatogram correctly and it was clear that they did not have an answer on how to identify the unknown dyes, which suggested that they did not fully grasp the power of this separation technique.

Q7 asked about environmental concerns and a good number of candidates thought that carbon dioxide affected the ozone layer. There was also little understanding of renewable and conventional fuel sources (for example, it is not true that fossil fuels are more efficient or generally have a higher energy density). Adding up three numbers from a pie chart was also not always accomplished successfully.

Finally, Q8 related to a practical example of measuring masses in the formation of copper sulfide. While many candidates accurately related the boiling point of sulfur to the removal of it, some could not find the mass of copper sulfide formed and simply misread or miscalculated the reading on the balances. Graphs were often plotted very well and the correct use of construction lines was evident.



BIOLOGY

Q1) A simple multiple-choice section for which most students were awarded full marks. If marks were dropped, it often related to a lack of knowledge about the stain methylene blue, the precise location of gas exchange, or the fact that laying eggs is not exclusive to mammals.

Q2) A simple match-up exercise producing dichotomous results; either students scored full marks or there was huge confusion between the function of each nutrient in the body.

Q3) Many students did not fully understand the difference between a zygote, an embryo and a fetus, and these terms were often confused. Another common mistake related to the timings of organ development in embryology, with students often incorrectly suggesting the second or third trimester.

Q4) Students were excellent at labelling the male and female parts of the flower. However, students provided vague answers on the mechanism of pollination, and the features of wind-pollinated flowers were not always accurately recalled with enough precision.

Q5) 70% of candidates achieved 6 marks or more out of 8 possible marks. Those achieving 7 or 8 marks understood the difference between plant and fungal cells and provided a clear explanation on the function of vacuoles, when prompted. Very few students who did not get full marks, or close to full marks, on the first two questions received marks for the subsequent questions, which were good at differentiating students who learned the content versus students who understood the content. Students with 6 or 7 marks often lost a mark by misreading and giving a cell feature not shared between animal and plant cells rather than plant and fungal cells, hinting at issues with reading and understanding the questions fully.

Q6) Students struggled to understand the data provided in the table (and apply their knowledge of respiration) to identify which of the various flasks in the diagram were indeed flask B, C and D. A common misconception was simply labelling the flasks 1, 2, 3 and 4 as A, B, C and D in a linear fashion. In addition, students struggled to explain why flask C failed to inflate the balloon and why flask D inflated the balloon the most.

Q7) Students generally had no issues counting a total number of leaves, but around a third then made an error in identifying the correct tree type using the provided data. Identifying anomalies was done well, but descriptions of the meaning of 'continuous data' were often poorly worded and few students achieved both available marks here.

Q8) Some common mistakes included mixing up the dependent and independent variables, and not using a ruler to draw a bar chart. In terms of exam technique, students were good at describing skills but often failed to respond appropriately to the command word *explain*. Students also lacked a proper understanding of the subtle differences between accuracy, precision, and reliability in science and often put down contradictory ideas.



FRENCH

We were delighted to see so many boys offering Levels 1 and 2 again this year. Modern Languages continues to be very strong at Radley, with uptake at GCSE and A-Level bucking the national trends, so this is always encouraging to see from our new joiners.

The papers gave us a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the candidates, particularly the speaking and writing elements, which allow them to manipulate the language to show us what they know.

In the writing, the strongest candidates showed a wide variety of vocabulary and all of the prescribed tenses (despite the Section 2 question not specifically asking for past tense - an error acknowledged by ISEB). The school topic allowed those who were able to use plenty of different opinion phrases and interesting adjectives.

Section 1 was tricky for some, with the accuracy of verb conjugation causing difficulty, as well as many missing out the use of *pour* before the infinitive to mean 'in order to' on Q3 and Q4.

On the whole, the comprehension papers tested a wide range of vocabulary and the average scores for Level 2 were pleasing at 20/25 for the Listening, and 18/25 for the Reading. Many candidates had clearly benefitted from being introduced to vocabulary which goes beyond the Common Entrance specification, which is especially helpful for Section 5 of both papers, where there is often a focus on French culture, heritage or current affairs.

SPANISH

Candidates performed well overall in Spanish, demonstrating a secure command of the language across most skill areas. Reading was a particular strength, with many students proving they could ascertain the gist of longer texts, even when these contained unfamiliar vocabulary. Written work showed a range of attainment: some candidates produced straightforward responses with very limited development, while others wrote in considerable detail and demonstrated a wide variety of language and structures.

Areas for improvement include greater accuracy with agreements and accents, and a broader command of topic-related vocabulary. Encouragingly, there was clear evidence of stronger grammatical foundations than seen in previous cohorts, particular regarding tense identification and manipulation.

By continuing to build their vocabulary and extending their responses with more developed ideas, students should be well placed to make further progress in Spanish.

GEOGRAPHY

The grades were based solely on the examination, as not all schools submitted fieldwork. Fieldwork remains a crucial component of Geography at GCSE and A-Level, and familiarity with enquiry-based learning is strongly encouraged at prep school. Opportunities to collect, present and analyse geographical data help students to develop many of the skills required for success in later study.



The examination included a significant number of 1-mark questions, which proved effective in testing core geographical knowledge. These questions were generally answered very well, suggesting that candidates possessed a secure understanding of much of the content. Performance on the longer 3-4-mark questions was less consistent. A recurring area for development was the ability to structure responses according to the command word. Many answers lacked sufficient detail and development, preventing candidates from accessing the higher marks available.

Section A: Location Knowledge

Performance in this section was generally strong, with many candidates achieving full marks. Responses suggested that location knowledge had been thoroughly prepared, and candidates demonstrated confidence in recalling key places and geographical features.

Section B: Ordnance Survey Map Work

Most candidates performed well in this section and demonstrated a sound understanding of basic map-reading skills. Q4, which required candidates to measure distance accurately, proved challenging. Many candidates appeared unfamiliar with the process of using map scales effectively.

Q7, which asked candidates to explain the location of a factory, also posed difficulties. While many were able to identify features shown on the map, fewer were able to link this evidence to a clear geographical explanation. Stronger responses made effective use of map evidence to justify their conclusions, whereas weaker answers tended to rely on unsupported assertions.

Section C: Physical Geography

Performance in this section was generally secure, particularly on the shorter knowledge-based questions. Some questions revealed gaps in understanding.

In Q1b, many candidates struggled to identify key river features from the diagram provided, suggesting that the interpretation of geographical diagrams remains an area for development. Q1d, which focused on river transportation, was also answered less successfully, with many candidates finding it difficult to choose and explain the four key processes accurately. Q1e highlighted some confusion surrounding the term 'physical factors'. A considerable number of candidates appeared unsure of the distinction between physical and human factors, leading to incorrect explanations.

Q2e and Q2f proved demanding and revealed some uncertainty regarding the concept of latitude and its influence on climate. While these were among the more challenging questions on the paper, stronger responses demonstrated a clear understanding of global atmospheric processes and their geographical implications.

Q2h and Q2i, which focused on the jet stream, were answered poorly by the majority of candidates. Responses suggested that many candidates were unfamiliar with this concept and were therefore unable to explain its role in influencing weather patterns across the UK.

Section D: Human and Environmental Geography

The shorter questions in this section were generally answered well, indicating sound knowledge of key human geography concepts.

Q2c was clearly the most demanding question on the paper. Many candidates demonstrated only a limited understanding of containerisation and consequently struggled to evaluate its advantages and disadvantages effectively. While some were able to identify basic features of container transport, fewer were able to develop their ideas sufficiently to produce well-reasoned responses. This question



highlighted the importance of moving beyond simple recall and applying geographical knowledge in context.

Overall, candidates demonstrated generally secure core knowledge. The principal area for improvement lies in examination technique, particularly in responding appropriately to command words such as *describe* and *explain*. Many candidates would have benefited from developing their answers in greater depth, especially in the 4-mark questions where simple statements often needed further explanation.

Students should focus on structuring responses carefully and using the number of lines provided as a guide to the expected depth of answer. Continued attention to accurate geographical terminology, full sentences and correct grammar, including the use of capital letters for place names, will also help candidates communicate their knowledge more effectively.

HISTORY

The unseen evidence question was answered moderately well, with most candidates securing over 10/20. It would be worth asking if pupils were taught to look for two inferences, as suggested by the mark scheme; almost all candidates inferred only one point from the source rather than two. Despite this, two marks were awarded even for only one inference.

On Q2, most candidates were able to see the differences between Source A and Source B, though again, often only one. Very few candidates were able to identify any similarities, so answers were chiefly in the Level 2 category.

Q3 saw many generalised or supported answers which lacked judgement, with limited or no substantiation. This helped differentiate the stronger candidates who were able to give more focused answers, which showed reasoned judgement and sound substantiation. Alarming, some candidates were suspicious of books as a reliable source of information.

In the essay section, students were generally able to tackle all three parts of the question. In Part A, whilst some candidates lost marks due to only considering one aspect, some were held back by a lack of factual detail supporting their answer. Some did not read the question carefully, failing to identify the focus of the question (for example, features, causes, consequences). Some causes and consequences offered were too distant from the event to be convincing and appeared to be candidates searching for a factor they could connect from their broader knowledge.

For Part B, candidates often did not receive top level marks because they only considered one factor rather than comparing with others. Some failed to clarify which was the main reason or consequence of the subject in question, which again provided a point of differentiation. As with Part A, detail was sometimes sparse.

For Part C, the long essay, the stronger candidates made sure that their structure enabled an evaluation of different factors. Some answers failed to maintain an analytical approach and slipped into narration, thus losing sight of the question; this was a significant point of differentiation.

Finally, sufficient concrete detail appropriate to the question set needed to be deployed in order to access the top marks.



THEOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY and RELIGION

Across 37 scripts, the average score was 74% (an A grade), with the highest score being 98% and the lowest 43%. The general strength of candidates' results reflects most especially the quality of their biblical literacy.

Most answered the question on the parable of the Prodigal Son. For Part A, all were able to describe the younger son's asking for his inheritance, squandering of his wealth, and return to his father; but the best answers highlighted the responses of all three protagonists - the younger son, his father, and the elder son. Those who quoted any of the three scored particularly well. The rewards for factual breadth and depth were seen in the other Part A responses too.

Generally, candidates struggled to maintain the quality of their answers in Part B. Responses were often limited to just one or two ideas. On the significance of the prisoners in Plato's allegory of the cave, for example, typically answers concentrated simply on the literal meaning of their actions rather than their role in making the epistemological and political points Plato intended the allegory to make. The best answer to the question related the prisoners' violent objections to the truth to Plato's insistence upon the need for philosopher-kings. As such, Part B responses would have benefited from more thoughtful engagement with the questions.

The best Part C essays took the important steps to evaluate the arguments they presented, rather than simply juxtaposing them then adding an evaluative gloss in the conclusion. For example, one answer to the question on whether 'humans are solely to blame for the state of our world' addressed the opposing arguments directly to explain. As such, a genuine debate was had with ideas interacting with each other. Ideally, this would have been done in all essays.

Across all questions and parts, the command of English was generally good. Low-hanging fruit remained, however: God and Bible are proper nouns, for example, so should be capitalised.

LATIN

This year we received 12 papers for Level 1, 31 papers for Level 2 (of which 18 candidates may have been better off sitting Level 1), and 18 papers for Level 3 (of which 3 candidates would have been better suited to Level 2). As in previous years, grades were based principally around the Level 2 percentages, with higher grades available on the more demanding Level 3 paper, and a cap of a B on Level 1 to reflect its greater accessibility.

There was much to be encouraged by in this year's cohort. Average marks rose at all three levels compared with previous years, reaching 62% at Level 1, 52% at Level 2 and 73% at Level 3. Particularly pleasing was the strength of performance at the top end of Level 3, where ten candidates achieved an A* grade, including one excellent script which scored 91%.

Nevertheless, vocabulary remains the principal area for improvement. In Level 1, *parvus*, *constituo*, and *teneo* proved especially challenging in Q1, while very few candidates successfully recognised *pono*, *ponere*, *posui* in Q3. At Level 2, a significant number of candidates



confused *ceteri* and *celeriter*. At Level 3, *periculum* and *proelium* were frequently muddled, sometimes with significant consequences for candidates' understanding of the passage.

At Level 2, tenses also proved challenging to a number of candidates. Very few correctly identified the tense of *poterimus* in Q1, and a surprisingly small number noticed the shift to the imperfect tense in *ambulabant* and *spectabant* towards the end of Q2. Likewise, the present tense of *dant* in Q3 was often misidentified.

Across all three papers, candidates would benefit from paying closer attention to punctuation, which is often included to support comprehension. For example, in the Level 1 paper, many candidates struggled with *da mihi auxilium*, despite the speech marks suggesting the presence of an imperative. Similarly, in *parve domine*, the preceding comma clearly signalled a vocative.

More generally, candidates should be encouraged to think carefully about who is performing the action in each sentence. In Level 1, Eumaeus was frequently and incorrectly made the subject of the second sentence.

Candidates should also be encouraged to consider the broader sense of the story before committing themselves to a translation. This was particularly important in Level 3, where only the strongest candidates were able to maintain a clear grasp of the longer sentences. Most failed to distinguish between Alexander and Alexandrum, with predictable consequences for their handling of the verb forms later in the passage.

Very pleasingly, however, the English into Latin sentences were often completed with a good degree of accuracy and produced higher marks than might have been expected from candidates' performance elsewhere in the paper. The strongest candidates demonstrated a secure grasp of the core grammatical structures required, while even many weaker candidates showed a commendable ability to apply their knowledge when translating into Latin.

We would be very satisfied if students arrived from prep schools having thoroughly mastered their prescribed vocabulary and the principal noun and verb endings, while also developing the habit of reading Latin carefully and thoughtfully. A secure understanding of these fundamentals would enable candidates to make far greater use of the clues provided by inflection and syntax, and would lead to greater accuracy across all sections of the paper.

GREEK

In total, 12 candidates took Greek: ten at Level 1 and two at Level 2. The overall quality of responses was good, with all but two candidates achieving 60% or more. (Those that did not reach this milestone scored significantly lower.) As expected, candidates fared best on the transliteration tasks, with no clear pattern to the handful of errors made. There were no major discrepancies between the marks gained in subsequent sections; those candidates that did well did very well on all of them, while those who fared worse did not find the composition particularly more challenging than the comprehension or unseen translation.

We would encourage stronger candidates to feel they can aim for the Level 2 test. Both candidates that took it did well (80+%), and it would be interesting to see how the very strongest candidates on Level 1



(including one who scored 96%) would have fared. The difference in difficulty between the two levels is not as great as it may seem.

CLASSICAL CIVILISATION

There were a number of well-informed scripts this year, with Greek topics being particularly popular. Students were able to recall plenty of useful details from the myth of Odysseus or Athenian/Spartan upbringing. A visit to the Roman baths was another popular title. Arguments were generally well expressed and sense was clear. Higher scoring candidates were able to write with greater accuracy and relevance and respond more consistently to the 'what qualities does he show' or the evaluation element of the question, but all candidates showed an encouraging engagement with the mythology and culture of the ancient world.