DIGITAL MEDIA & DESIGN

Paper 9481/01
Portfolio

Key messages

- Candidates produced some beautiful work using simple techniques.
- Some scripts contained exciting observations about the relationship between words and images.
- Stronger candidates recorded detailed and relevant insights into the work of others.

General comments

The submission included a wide variety of projects and approaches with a strong tendency towards digital photography or video. Some centres submitted short animations, or animated GIFs. Sometimes artists or designers whose work was presented during research, were not credited and should always be identified and referenced. There was not always seen to be a clear distinction made between candidate work and source material. Technical information such as shutter speed or aperture size was often provided. More marks would be attracted where camera settings, for example are used directly in tandem with exploration and development of ideas. Candidates are encouraged not to depend on an over reliance on technology. Listing techniques such as filters, effects, or editing processes will not in themselves, demonstrate a connection between digital and design elements. Technical expertise is not always required for this component, and some beautiful work was seen using simple techniques.

Within the submissions there was a tendency to research photography from the early twentieth century in the United States. However, where a broader scope of research was seen, ideas were informed by different cultures, and often by contemporary practice. Where candidates follow a template or predesigned approach, there is a risk that they will not find sources relevant to their own work.

Where candidates used devices such as diaries to document their progress, the work would be improved by accompanying entries with images. Higher scoring scripts typically included diaries which clearly matched commentary with photography shoots, video recording or digital image editing, for example.

Approaches to the themes

Boundaries

This topic was often explored through metaphors or devices such as windows, roads, walls, or gates. Some animations typically illustrated with characters who overcame boundaries imposed by anxiety or emotional ill health. Other interpretations sought to develop storytelling through theatrical or cosmetic make up. Candidates frequently researched the work of artists and designers who work with the idea of boundaries. However, lower scoring scripts would benefit from a demonstration of the candidate's own interpretation of the theme. Marks would be also attracted by visual work which demonstrates this understanding, in preference to written commentary. Candidates are encouraged to avoid simply illustrating one form of boundary or another. Artists who specifically work with boundaries could be used to exemplify this approach. Where candidates compared and contrasted ideas, marks were attracted in AO1 and AO2. Some candidates worked towards an applied approach to the theme. Competent scripts often contained the results of feedback sessions or questionnaires which were reviewed during the final stages of the component.

The Digital Classroom

Among the scripts seen for this question there was an emphasis on the history of games design and on descriptions of software applications. Candidates would be better advised to establish a clearer link between this avenue of research and the theme. Most scripts were seen to rely on peer feedback to develop critical understanding. However, peer feedback alone may not be as helpful as a broader survey of opinion. Some scripts appeared to be collections of more diverse and successful episodes of coursework. Such scripts would benefit from a declared intention and sustained focus on one aspect of the theme as described in the syllabus. Candidates often made appropriate contextual references. The chosen artists or designers powerfully used words alone or made effective combinations of words and images. This was used by candidates in their own work and was rewarded in AO1 and AO2.

Digital Poetry

Some scripts contained exciting observations about the relations between words and images. Such investigations were often thorough and insightful, making appropriate choices about artists or designers to study. Higher scoring scripts demonstrated a confident control of fonts and colour palettes. The accompanying commentary often demonstrated a mature understanding of reference material and how this can inform the candidate's work. Some candidates used photographic motifs such as shadows or digital manipulation such as layer masking to reflect the flat character of letterforms.

Where candidates provided an ongoing commentary, this demonstrated that ideas were being refined and that the candidate was applying critical understanding. However, stronger scripts avoided large amounts of text. Additionally, such scripts avoided making claims which were not substantiated by the creative work and avoided addressing extraneous subjects. When writing, candidates are encouraged to provide context to broad terms such as *meaning* and *value*. Candidates often used the example of the artists they have looked at, to develop morally challenging, or politically conscious work. Some work of a very high standard was seen. Among these scripts, candidates recorded detailed and relevant insights into the work of others. This in turn was seen to inform the candidate's own observations. Candidates often used what they had discovered to inspire the initial stages of their work. The control of formal elements and an understanding of how images communicate meaning, often demonstrated excellent levels of engagement.

Emotions

This theme was explored through a variety of responses ranging from animations of emojis to exhibitions based on colour. Some prolonged and mesmerising video work was seen which combined both disturbing and intriguing imagery. Such work was rewarded in AO2 and AO4 where the visual texture was consistent with the action depicted. Some video work containing interesting ideas would benefit from more rigorous editing. Some video material embedded in PowerPoint presentations provided persuasive evidence of the exploration of media. Some scripts contained considerable amounts of written material. Whilst descriptions, notes, reflections or contexts are not discouraged, centres are reminded that this is a visual qualification. Centres are encouraged to use visual digital media, creatively as a way of expressing meaning. Candidates sought to explore emotions through moving image work.

Some of the stronger scripts contained storyboards and evidence of rehearsals. However, more marks would have been attracted by considering alternative scenarios or more concise editing. Among lower scoring scripts candidates made some interesting references to the work of others. This would sometimes be seen reflected in the proposal. However, more marks would have been attracted where reference material was used as a starting point for experimentation and investigation. Other candidates sought to explore emotions through the use of techniques such as double exposure or digital manipulation. This work was often interesting and was sometimes developed further by physical printing and manipulation, or unusual lighting. Scripts attracting lower marks would have benefited from a clear expression of intention. This would bring structure to the activity and help to focus investigations. Candidates are encouraged to refer to the suggestions for initial research in the syllabus. Those scripts which were well presented, paid attention to colour, typography and spatial layout, were rewarded in AO3 and AO4.

Travel

Among lower scoring scripts, candidates referred to the work of others which were not seen to relate to the theme of travel. Candidates are encouraged to make use of guidance provided in the syllabus for each of the themes. Many scripts were inspired by tourism or attractive destinations. This is a potentially rich source of visual and other research material. However, more marks could have been attracted by more focused investigations into the destination chosen. Candidates are encouraged to explore and develop a more vivid

portrait of such destinations. Candidates are also encouraged to experiment with different forms of recording in addition to digital photography. Some of the more competent scripts noted connections between patterns and textures found in everyday objects such as maps and landscapes. This approach was rewarded in AO2 and AO3. However, marks were frustrated where this creative potential remained unrealised.

Wellbeing

The majority of scripts demonstrated a greater concern for the topic than for the development of visual language to communicate that concern. In some scripts however, the theme was not stated or clearly identifiable, but was assumed by the nature of the supporting material. This tended to frustrate marking among each of the assessment objectives. In most cases, candidates illustrated their ideas through photography. Candidates used photo essays to present topics such as extreme sports, mental health, mindfulness, exercise and mood, and body type. Candidates are encouraged to avoid distractions such as questionnaires which gather data on sports and well-being, instead of seeking feedback on their own visual work.

Marks were awarded for gathering and selection of photographic work by sports photographers and in sports advertising. Many candidates referenced this style of layout, colourways and lettering found in advertising and cited similar target audiences, and sub-genres. Among lower scoring scripts video work was not seen to be supported by storyboards or adequate planning. This tended to limit marks in AO3. Some very low scoring scripts would benefit from a broader range of images as evidence of research and exploration, and a more secure indication of the candidate's intentions. However, some interesting scripts were seen with candidates conducting research among their local communities and by speaking to family members. This was seen to generate work which had more relevance and insight, and which began to tell a story.

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Key messages

- The term photo portrait was often interpreted as a portrait photograph, rather than a visual narrative compiled from a body of work.
- Where the most appropriate question was chosen, candidates developed a natural progression in their development of the theme.
- Research conducted among a candidate's immediate environment or local community provided relevant and reliable insight.

General comments

Some candidates had worked towards more than one assignment and their submission contained material related to each question on the paper. Candidates are reminded to answer one assignment. *Photo portrait* was sometimes interpreted as a series of portrait posters. The term photo portrait is better understood as a visual idea built from a broader or more detailed range of photographs, rather than a portrait photograph. A number of scripts worked with image and text comparisons. This is a demanding and exciting activity. The best of this work produced results which communicated ideas highly effectively. Candidates were seen to reference appropriate artists and designers. Centres submitted a range of work with a focus on photography. Some of the best projects developed ideas from a photography start, and the examiners saw a wide range of interactive apps, videos and animations. Many candidates selected the Nature Abstracted theme. This allowed them to explore accessible outdoors areas such as gardens or parks. Video productions for this component provided an opportunity to explore different techniques and software options. However, scripts would have benefited from sustained research into visual styles, approaches to narrative or the use of actors or locations among different film makers. All too often, this research was presented simply as a biography of a film maker without a satisfactory analysis of their work.

There was a tendency for a more concise approach in this paper resulting in a demonstrable ability to explore ideas and more focused investigations. However, there was also a reluctance to use analogue techniques to develop and communicate ideas. Candidates should not feel discouraged from using analogue methods as they can often provide creative and inventive opportunities to investigate and develop concepts. Notes, plans, mind maps, storyboards, thumbnails and sketchbook pages can all be scanned and included in the final PowerPoint.

Approaches to the assignments

1   Turn up, tune in and tone up

Responses to this question frequently included videos of groups of children or young people in sport and leisure activities. Such work was often supported by visualisations of locations, time of day, or lighting conditions. Some digital manipulation was used as a continuity device between scenes. These responses would benefit from some initial research from referenced sources which could be developed into a focused concept. Video work would have commonly been improved by more creative and decisive editing, reducing the length and potentially increasing the impact. More rigorous editing would also help to focus the activity and avoid distracting material. Weaker work would benefit from a reflection on the work of other film makers dealing with similar topics. Where candidates collected a photographic or video record of a local sports or community centre, this often provided a reliable platform for further investigation. Whilst some scripts used original material to produce competent graphic design outcomes, the outcomes were not always consistent with the question. This has the potential to affect performance in AO4 where candidates would otherwise be rewarded for realising intentions. Candidates are encouraged to avoid an over reliance on standard photo editing filters where this does not contribute to the refinement of ideas.

Some candidates presented animations. Among lower scoring scripts the animations would benefit from convincing preparatory work. Evidence of records of ideas, work with materials and development of ideas would have attracted marks to work which otherwise demonstrated limited connection between digital and design elements.

Some scripts which worked with the idea of friendship groups, realised strong narratives and competent solutions. Some stronger scripts with dialogue in the candidate's home language, contained enough visual competency to avoid confusion and to communicate effectively.

Responses to this question also included app and website design, photo-diaries, and poster design, each for the promotion of a community centre. Lower scoring scripts were seen to enthusiastically move straight into an initial idea, rather than investigating and documenting a range of visual references and potential routes for development. Opportunities were missed where photography was used to record everyday scenes or sporting events, without sufficient insight to be able to refine ideas.

Among higher scoring scripts, the work often included a sustained focus on community centre users of all ages and an understanding of the audience for the task selected. This approach, commonly conducted in video and stills photography, frequently resulted in a coherent and insightful response to the question. Investigations into healthy food advertising, often made interesting comparisons between packaging styles and their connotations for the community. Candidates were rewarded for discussing the effect the colour has on mood or attitude. Some candidates supported their work with effective animated gifs.

2   Listening Lounge

Among app design responses, higher scoring candidates developed an overall 'look' or style for their proposal. Scripts which sought to deconstruct iconic imagery from a range of musical genres, and then reform them using digital manipulation were effective. This kind of approach sought to demonstrate critical understanding and was rewarded in AO3. Among higher scoring scripts, candidates found their subject matter immediately to hand in their own musical activity or that of their friends. In such cases, the question was well-chosen, and candidates developed a natural progression in their development of the theme. The use of camera angles, different lenses, and a restricted palette for images and lettering, often produced highly effective graphics with visual impact. This was subsequently used to produce a confident and visually appealing website for a band.

App designers sought to apply desk top publishing principals to the layout of the screens. Informed choices were made for fonts, font sizes, and the stronger scripts paid due regard to a hierarchy of text. Candidates will, however, wish to be consistently accurate in the use of technical terms. This would attract marks in AO2. Where some scripts focused on the interior space aspect of the question, they often recognised the importance of colour, lighting, and shape of the space. This was seen to significantly inform the development of the work. Candidates often made appropriate choices in the artists and designers they studied. A number of scripts used friends or classmates to model for an imaginary band, and these participants were often well-outfitted and well-deployed.

Among higher scoring scripts candidates recorded extended photoshoots. This provided opportunities for informed editing and image selection. More successful scripts studied examples of portrait work, documentary filmmaking, animation, or information apps. This approach was seen to be more productive than collecting images of popular bands or musicians. When researching and recording, candidates often found good examples of graphic design practice. This frequently provided inspiration for the candidates use of colour, typography, and page design. Higher scoring scripts often went on to combine original photographs with typographic layouts. Some candidates presented moving image work. Among higher scoring scripts, this work was typically supported by visual examinations of proposed locations, detailed storyboarding, and script writing.

Higher scoring scripts not only demonstrated a visual awareness, but an ability to plan ahead and schedule workflows, pursue stated intentions and gather relevant first-hand research from a range of sources. This approach was sympathetic to unexpected results and made good use of them. Good use was also made of lighting, natural and artificial environments, and models and props.

3   Nature abstracted

This question was most frequently interpreted as a starting point for pattern development, or as an expression of concern for the environment. Many scripts adopted the point of view of a creature in a park. This often resulted in attractive images of insects, birds, and foliage. Some digital manipulation was used to

emphasise patterns and colours found in nature. These scripts, however, would have benefited from a greater scrutiny of the objects and environments observed. Some research revealed how insects and animals see colour and shape. However, more marks would have been attracted by using this research as a starting point for visual experiments.

Scripts often contained examples of artist's work which observed both nature and abstraction. These scripts would have been improved by avoiding a merely descriptive approach. Higher scoring scripts drew insight from their research and applied this to the progress of the assignment. Candidates often made appropriate choices of photographers or artists who observe nature. This was often helpful in revealing patterns, textures, and abstractions in the natural world. Among higher scoring scripts, candidates avoided studying artists whose abstractions were superficial or illusory. Many candidates adhered closely to the brief provided by the question. Scripts frequently contained beautiful images of flowers, trees, and open spaces. Higher scoring scripts paid close attention to the observation of nature. This provided a secure platform for further work, and for a final outcome. Marks were awarded where images and ideas were tested using comparisons of scale, contrasts and light and using colour manipulations. Scripts which largely or exclusively contained text, frustrated marks in each of the assessment objectives, especially AO4. Where candidates had looked at artists who work directly from the landscape and natural forms, the resulting scripts gained a degree of confidence and fluidity.

A popular line of investigation was a kaleidoscope effect. Some candidates developed this idea using live 'in camera' filters and created videos from random collections of clips taken from nature. However, few examples of analogue work were seen. For example, candidates could have made their own bespoke kaleidoscope and recorded the results using video. Among lower scoring scripts candidates typically presented video footage of walks in malls, nature-trails, car parks, or holiday resorts. Such scripts would be improved by making more informed and critical selections of locations which offer the richest imagery and opportunities for development. Whilst candidates often made appropriate choices of artist to reference, they appeared to find the process of purposefully focusing their investigations to be a challenge. Candidates would be better advised to make use of feedback and testing to develop their critical understanding. This would be rewarded in AO3.

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Paper 9481/03
Personal Investigation

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Key messages

- Higher scoring candidates showed a clear and systematic development of ideas towards their final outcome.
- Higher scoring scripts moved beyond basic technical information which did not inform the investigation or describe creative and analytical thinking.
- Higher scoring candidates planned their submissions carefully with reference to the examples and guidance contained within the syllabus.

General comments

Candidates presented Personal Investigations based on a range of topics from dystopian themes to Covid-19, personal identity, artificial intelligence, and disaffection and disorientation. Other themes included the landscape, civil rights, emotions and personal resilience. Some scripts displayed a refreshing interest in contextual study, architecture, body as sculpture, and performance art.

Where appropriate, candidates provided statistical evidence to support their conclusions. In such cases, candidates referred to other artists, or designers who have dealt with similar subjects. This helped candidates to begin to navigate their territory. Where candidates referred to a broader scope of research, higher grades were awarded by remaining focused on the original intention of the investigation. Candidates are encouraged to research how their chosen topic can be explored and communicated through visual language. This is in preference to research into the chosen topic itself where marks can be frustrated in each assessment objective. Among higher scoring scripts, topics were typically examined in a variety of contexts and through a range of perspectives. Such scripts conducted their investigations with intense visual scrutiny. The observations which were recorded provided genuine insight into the investigation. However, some promising scripts appeared to move quickly to a final work. In such cases, it was not clear how the investigation represented a period of sustained and focused study. Where the final work represented the majority of the submission, it limited the opportunity to reward evidence for AO1, AO2 and AO3.

Approaches to the Personal Investigation

Final outcome

Most scripts demonstrated elements of a good command of digital media which were used to develop a creative response. Final outcomes ranged from designing album covers, developing access to public transport, colour and nature investigations, to reflections on landscape and photography. At A Level, candidates will wish to rely on more than standard effects or filters provided by digital manipulation software or cameras. Candidates are encouraged to demonstrate their own ability to communicate using visual language. Among lower scoring scripts, some attractive and visually dynamic work was seen. However, these scripts would have benefited from further exploring the potential of such work. This could have been achieved by a variety of digital and physical approaches. Often, higher scoring scripts addressed this challenge with a radical response to the artists studied and the ideas being developed. This included activities such as dressing up, performance and self-portraiture.

A number of competent responses were seen which focused on style and fashion. Higher scoring candidates took their investigations in innovative directions. These often challenged stereotypes, expressed environmental concerns, and described a fear of technology. Candidates that chose to include 3D environments were rewarded for their work in modelling, lighting, Look Development, texture maps, as well as animations and fly-throughs. Basic flat rendering of freeware models for still images was rewarded in the basic band.

In the middle ability range, candidates displayed some competent experimentation. However, higher marks would have been attracted by an ability to use digital techniques that applied directly to the candidate's theme and intentions. For example, among architectural responses, candidates would be better advised to avoid repetitive use of filters, or repetitive capturing of similar images. More marks would have been attracted by a more sympathetic response to the architectural subject matter. This could have involved balanced compositions, and more attention to geometry, scale, and perspective. Higher scoring scripts demonstrated well-considered placement of buildings within the 'frame', and a comparison of architectural forms with human figures. Some higher scoring scripts also featured architectural model-making.

Some candidates were seen to have been frustrated by lack of realistic work scheduling. Promising early episodes of gathering, exploration, and development of themes were not seen to be satisfactorily realised. Some scripts appeared to run out of time before a fully developed personal digital response could be produced. Higher scoring candidates planned their submissions carefully with reference to the examples and guidance contained within the syllabus. Higher scoring candidates showed a clear, methodical development of ideas towards their final outcome. For example, some characters and environments were produced that were a result of a sensitive and iterative development of an animation project.

Lower scoring scripts were seen to rely heavily on images from the internet, and a limited body of original photography, with a basic ability to develop ideas. Analogue approaches were sometimes included within the digital response without a coherent explanation. Candidates are reminded that the choice of media should be relevant to the theme, and consistent with the creative direction of the investigation.

Written element

Candidates are encouraged to combine their command of technology with a sustained exploration of the themes selected for the investigation. Where the candidate's visual work appears to be highly polished, but the written element does not substantially support the content and describe the development of the investigation, marking is potentially frustrated. Even among the highest attaining scripts the examiners recognised scope for more insightful analysis. Such writing was often a detailed story of the journey undertaken during the Personal Investigation. However, more marks would be attracted by recognising how visual elements inform aspects of analysis and vice versa.

Scripts frequently referred to other photographers, artists or filmmakers. Among the most successful scripts, the work of these practitioners was examined to bring insight to the investigation. However, images of the individual artist, or biographical details were not seen be relevant to the candidates' intentions. Such work may not attract marks, and candidates are better advised to focus on the work of the artists chosen. Candidates often provided notes to accompany their work. This was seen more frequently with digital photography submissions. The more successful scripts avoided literal descriptions and focused more on the way in which their work developed the potential to communicate ideas. However, densely packed text that addressed the subject choice but did not address the visual attributes of reference material and the development of the candidate's work, tended to frustrate marking. Lower scoring scripts would have benefited from a consistent response to feedback provided by others. Amongst scripts where candidates were seen to respond to feedback marks were attracted across assessment objectives. Candidates are encouraged to include their project proposal with their scripts.