

# Commentary on candidate evidence

## Justify an appropriate complex classical studies issue for research

The candidate was awarded **1 mark**.

The candidate specifies what the subject of the dissertation is: 'to what extent Greco-Roman writers had distorted views of the Middle East, with specific reference to the concept of 'Orientalism''. So, it gains a mark for that.

However, it could be a problem that when the candidate attempts to expand on this to explain the importance of the subject, no clear focus is indicated and the parameters of what they plan to do are not specified. For example, what is meant by 'the Greco-Roman periods', 'two entities that came to dominate the world'? What is an 'intrusive form, overarching a heterogeneous set of identities'? The candidate must show clearly and unambiguously what they are talking about and never rely on the marker interpreting what they mean.

Orientalism has been specified in the question and Edward Said is certainly a very important scholar, but Orientalism is not a contemporary work as it was published almost half a century ago, so we need some indication what exactly the candidate understands 'Orientalism' to be.

In attempting to explain the importance and complexity the candidate essentially says that focusing on something and writing about it will give them a greater understanding of it. This is true, of course, but the point is to explain why focusing on this particular subject is of value; and the sweeping and vague phrase 'the current unrest in the East (and the West's opinions)' does not make anything clear. Using the terms 'East' and 'West' here as such broad generalisations is unhelpful. It implies that there are two homogenous entities called 'the East' and 'the West', which is untrue, so the candidate has not clearly expressed the importance or complexity.

The candidate then indicates some personal reasons for pursuing this topic, which gains no marks in Advanced Higher Classical Studies.

The attempt which follows to explain the importance of this topic is incoherent. There is no clear explanation of what is meant by 'trying to balance these two worlds — Occidental and Oriental', and even if the marker could form a clear interpretation of what this means, that would not be acceptable. It is the candidate's job to make clear what they are talking about. There are other examples of this type of writing: most significantly it is unclear what is meant by "the legitimacy of these distortions" when the candidate begins to explain a methodology.

The explanation of the research lacks specificity. The comments essentially say that books have been consulted in libraries: this is not of any value at Advanced Higher level, and there is no explanation of what these books are, or indeed what specific limitations the primary sources may have.

The attempt to explain why this particular title was chosen amounts to saying that they thought it a bad idea to select a title which was not classical studies, so they selected one which was.

## **Research the issue using a wide range of sources of information**

The candidate was awarded **7 marks**.

The candidate has used at least five primary sources and two secondary sources effectively and they have provided comment of some value on Herodotus and Aeschylus. Although their comments are not especially well developed for Advanced Higher level, and contain some inaccuracies or poorly expressed ideas such as this statement on page 13: 'it must also be noted that Herodotus states he happens to know specifically some details of the practices in the Persian Empire 'first hand', and thus we realise that his narrative is purely based on speculation, partnered with distortion".

## **Analyse the issue**

The candidate was awarded **5 marks**.

The candidate made at least five analytical points, but we could not identify four of these which could be considered well-developed.

The candidate tends to use generalisations and rhetorical descriptions of basic points of classical knowledge. For example, on page 20, 'The most significant interaction between the Athenian Empire and Persian Empire was the series of conflicts known as the Greco-Persian Wars. These wars, particularly the Persian invasion of Greece in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, had a profound impact on Athenian society and politics. The Athenians fought against Persian expansionism and successfully repelled the invasions, establishing themselves as a major power in the Aegean region'.

This point fails to explore any nuance: a good development of these basic points may, for example, recognise that Athens was not an empire when the two states first came into conflict and may see the candidate explain what the impacts on politics and society were, and clarify how Athens used the war to become the major power in the Aegean.

## Compare the classical world and later times

The candidate was awarded **2 marks**.

We accepted a basic point of comparison with the conflict in Palestine/Israel on page 10. It hints at depth but does not explain any assertion included.

The comparison to Dubai on page 14 is not clearly explained. It seems to rely on hearsay, 'some are weary...', and does not clearly show how this might link to the points about Cleopatra. It is a shame as the stated theory, 'what might be seen as decadence by one group could be viewed as a display of political power by another', could have some merit; but there was no attempt to evidence this regarding Roman attitudes or modern attitudes.

We did accept the comparison on page 15 between *Salambo* and the lines quoted from *Trojan Women* though, again this was not closely explained. A quote from the novel itself would have been useful, rather than from a literary critic.

## Evaluate the classical world

The candidate was awarded **2 marks**.

There were several points of evaluation though none of them were well-developed.

As with the analysis, the evaluation suffers from generalisation and lacks the nuance we would expect at Advanced Higher level. For example, 'during Antiquity, women were believed to be materialistic' page 15.

At Advanced Higher level, we would expect a candidate to realise that antiquity refers to a period of over a thousand years, covering many different cultures.

Often the candidate seems to try to develop a point with unevidenced assertion and generalisation which obscures any meaning. For example, on page 21, "Their works reflect cultural biases and political tensions, shaping perceptions of the East in Western thought". It could be worth considering that by making the language sound more sophisticated, the candidate reduces its value. For example, stating "this author is biased", is far easier to evidence, than "this author exhibits cultural bias" as the latter requires evidence to show what the cultural bias is before we can assess whether the author shows it. Comments like "shaping perceptions of the East in Western thought" implies that this author's audience equates with "Western thought", which cannot be evidenced anyway because it cannot be true.

Synthesise evidence to develop a sustained and coherent line of argument The candidate was awarded **2 marks**.

The candidate has a challenge to maintain a coherent line of argument when they have not clearly identified in the justifying section what their argument is specifically about. A piece of work which is just a collection of interesting comments about a very broad topic, could be of value for its insightful analysis or evaluation in places and that will be recorded as appropriate against the criteria. This criterion assesses how well they have constructed a coherent argument.

In order to show “distortion” which is what they set out to do, the candidate would need to present evidence of what is not distorted and then evaluate examples of distortion being shown by writers. Unfortunately, we judged that this dissertation did not coherently do that. We cannot credit a claim that someone’s view was distorted because we think it probably was at Advanced Higher level. The candidate must present evidence to coherently argue their position.

The argument as presented does not maintain coherence or avoid breaking down. Some examples are detailed below.

### **Argument breaking down**

We see examples of using unjustified assertions to make points, which seem debatable at best, such as on page 16, ‘Though largely believed to be a weak reflection of the West, there is evidence of Western attempts to replicate Oriental culture;...’ which then goes on to cite Arrian recording that Alexander the Great took on Persian dress and customs. It is hard to assess what point is being made: this piece of evidence cited seems to be a fairly strong counterexample to the argument they are making. This is where the problem of talking about the East and the West becomes most apparent. We need the candidate to specifically tell us which writers, events and/or consequences they are talking about before we can find any coherence in the argument.

Another example of how the argument breaks down occurs when it appears to challenge itself. On page 16, the comment that Suetonius and Tacitus make the same type of criticisms of Roman emperors appears to undercut the argument significantly: if these Romans are being criticised for decadence as well, then we cannot be sure that any criticisms of decadence have a particular link to national identity, far less to an identification of oriental or eastern.

### **Incoherence**

On page 19 there is an example of incoherence in the way the argument dwells on a point about Alexander’s punishment of Bessus, then moves through observations about Athens in the previous century; then cites an extract from Herodotus commenting on Cambyses’ troops indulging in cannibalism. It is hard to follow any necessary logical connection; and the quote is cut off before Herodotus comments that Cambyses disapproved of this behaviour.

**Total 19 out of 50.**

This candidate has taken on a very complex task. There is no credit given for ambition of topic. The Advanced Higher dissertation gives candidates the opportunity to develop the research and presentation skills required for success in higher education: candidates need to appreciate that their points must have clarity, be explored in depth and be backed up with unambiguous evidence. And they must be able to present a coherent argument. Regardless of the topic chosen, all candidates must be able to do this to access higher marks.