

The 20-Marker Masterclass

AQA GCSE Media Studies Paper 1, Question 9: a complete annotated model answer

The 20-marker is the biggest single decision in Paper 1: it carries 20 of the 84 marks and half of them sit in one assessment objective, judgements and conclusions. This free extract from the Margin Notes practice paper shows a complete top-level answer with the margin notes that explain exactly why it earns its marks.

The question

'Only films made by large media conglomerates can succeed in today's global film industry.'

How far do you agree with this statement?

Answer with reference to:

- how the media operate as commercial industries on a global scale
- the social and cultural contexts of the media
- *Black Widow* and *I, Daniel Blake* (Close Study Products).

[20 marks]

How the 20 marks work

Level 4 (16–20): assured understanding of industry concepts and contexts driving a consistently focused discussion of the statement; perceptive, well-supported judgements with CSP evidence throughout. **Level 3 (11–15):** good understanding and frequent effective discussion; judgements usually supported. **Level 2 (6–10):** sound understanding; discussion only sometimes convincing; uneven CSP support. **Level 1 (1–5):** limited discussion, judgements asserted rather than supported.

Marking rules that matter: depth and breadth are rewarded equally; an answer with no CSP evidence cannot normally climb out of Level 2; ignoring both films' contexts makes Level 4 very unlikely; a one-sided argument can reach the top if it is properly evidenced; agreeing, disagreeing and "it depends" are all acceptable conclusions.

Points worth crediting: for the statement, Disney's integration, budget, franchise audience, synergy and global release muscle behind *Black Widow*; against it, *I, Daniel Blake*'s independent funding, festival route, awards, proportionate profitability and cultural impact; complicating it, the pandemic release context, streaming disruption and competing definitions of success.

The model answer

I disagree with the statement to a large extent. Conglomerate ownership clearly gives films like *Black Widow* enormous commercial advantages on a global scale, but *I, Daniel Blake* proves that an independent, low-budget film can also succeed globally, as long as we accept that "success" means more than box-office takings.

At first glance, *Black Widow* supports the statement completely. As a Marvel Studios film owned by Disney, one of the world's largest media conglomerates, it benefited from vertical integration: Disney funded its production, controlled its distribution and even owned an exhibition platform in Disney+. Its estimated \$200 million budget bought A-list star power, global marketing and a simultaneous worldwide

release in July 2021, while synergy across the Marvel Cinematic Universe franchise guaranteed a ready-made international audience and cross-promotion through merchandise, trailers and Disney's own media channels. No independent producer could buy this kind of global reach, which suggests that in the mainstream blockbuster market, conglomerate muscle is close to essential.

However, *Black Widow*'s own release complicates the statement. Its social and cultural context, the Covid-19 pandemic, forced Disney into a hybrid release, putting the film on Disney+ Premier Access on the same day as its cinema release. Box-office takings fell sharply after the opening weekend, and the star, Scarlett Johansson, sued Disney because the streaming release cut into her box-office-linked earnings. This shows that even the largest conglomerate cannot guarantee success when audience behaviour shifts, and that the streaming era, itself a cultural change in how global audiences consume film, is rewriting what a "successful" release looks like. Conglomerates dominate the industry, but they do not control it.

I, Daniel Blake challenges the statement far more directly. Ken Loach's social realist film was produced independently by Sixteen Films with support from publicly funded bodies including BBC Films and the BFI, on a budget of around £2 million, a fraction of *Black Widow*'s. It could never compete with Disney's marketing spend, so it reached its global audience through an alternative route: the festival circuit. Winning the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 2016 acted as free worldwide publicity and secured international distribution deals, and the film took over \$15 million globally, proportionally a far bigger return on its budget than many conglomerate blockbusters achieve. Its success was driven by its social context rather than by marketing. Its angry portrayal of the benefits system in austerity Britain resonated with audiences far beyond the UK, was debated in Parliament, and gave the film a cultural and political significance that no Marvel film has matched. If success includes critical acclaim, cultural impact and profitability relative to cost, *I, Daniel Blake* succeeded globally without any conglomerate involvement.

In conclusion, the statement is too absolute. The two CSPs show that there are two different routes to global success operating in the same industry: conglomerate-made films like *Black Widow* dominate commercially through integration, synergy and saturation marketing, while independent films like *I, Daniel Blake* can succeed through festivals, critical reputation and cultural relevance. Conglomerate backing makes blockbuster-scale success far more likely, but it is not the only way a film can succeed, so I largely disagree.

Why it earns its marks

The 20-marker rewards an *argument*, not an essayful of knowledge; half its marks sit in judgements and conclusions. This answer declares its position in the first sentence, tests the statement from both sides, and lands a supported verdict. Three things put it in the top level. First, all three bullet points are genuinely covered: global commercial operation, the contexts of both films, and both named CSPs in detail. Second, contexts are always linked to consequences. The pandemic isn't mentioned for its own sake but for what it did to *Black Widow*'s release, and austerity Britain explains why *I, Daniel Blake* travelled. Answers that ignore the CSPs' contexts rarely reach the top band, and answers with no CSP evidence at all are capped low however fluent they are. Third, the redefinition of "success" is the kind of astute move that turns a good answer into an excellent one: it engages with the *exact wording* of the statement. A confident one-sided argument can also reach full marks if it is evidenced; balance is a choice, not a requirement. Around 550–600 words is a realistic top-band length for the 25 minutes you'd have in the exam.

**Half the 20-marker's marks are for judgements and conclusions.
Argue a position, test it from both sides, reach a supported verdict.**