
Functional Skills

ENGLISH

Level 1

Report on the Examination

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Overview

This qualification continues to maintain very high standards and a pass at this level is a strong indicator of ability in reading and writing of Standard English. This has been underlined through Ofqual reviews which gave AQA's Functional English exams a clean bill of health. There is every reason to remain confident of the value of this qualification. It is consistent in its standard as a test of basic English reading and writing skills and is the basis for secure progression. With changes to GCSE English now with us, many schools and colleges might be considering alternative routes for students who are seriously stretched at GCSE. This qualification would thus serve as a suitable alternative and an excellent progression route from the Entry Level Certificate (Step Up to English).

Component 1 Reading

This report covers both the OnScreen and the paper versions of this test.

The theme for this series was dogs, Source A being a charity appeal from Dogs Trust. Two of the multiple choice questions had success rates around 50%, which is lower than the average.

Question 4

Students were asked to select the main point being made about Dogs Trust, the correct answer being that they never have enough money. This was clearly evident purely from the fact that the text itself is an appeal for money, but also made clear throughout the text by information about the costs incurred and “we urgently need the help and support...we would be very grateful for any support”.

Question 5

When asked to identify what Dogs Trust do for all dogs who are abandoned, 48% answered correctly that they would be neutered and microchipped, as stated in the leaflet. The vast majority of those who answered incorrectly chose “will be found new, loving homes”, a response which was dictated by hope rather than fact as the leaflet says “we do our best to find them loving homes”.

Question 7

Source B was an account of the duties of dog handlers and dogs in a Police Dog Unit in Glasgow.

In 7a, students were asked to identify four duties a police dog might be trained to do and this was well done in the main, with 80% achieving 3 or 4 marks. 5% unfortunately scored zero as a result of misreading the question and selecting duties of the dog handlers (required for 7b) rather than the dogs. 7b was somewhat less successful, a common mistake being inclusion of general information about the job, such as it being a partnership between handler and dog, rather than specific duties such as “dealing with dangerous dogs”.

General advice will always be to read both the questions and the texts carefully and take time to select the correct answers. Indiscriminate lifting and copying will never serve students well in this examination.

Question 8

Performance on this question is still disappointing, with no improvement seen in the numbers achieving 3 or 4 marks. 20% of students in this series managed only 1 mark, often almost accidentally rather than via any real meaningful understanding of how to approach the question.

11% scored zero and almost 3% failed to attempt the question, possibly owing to poor time management. The advice and guidance offered in previous reports is repeated below.

Generalised comments on colours or pictures, such as “it makes it stand out” are still rife and prevent students from achieving the second mark which requires a link between the device and its effectiveness. Most students know that these texts will generally contain a picture or illustration, colour and other common presentational devices such as sub-headings. Unfortunately, too many of them seem to settle for simply citing these with no attempt to engage with why that particular picture or colour has been used in this text. Sub-headings will always help the reader to navigate the text or “tell you what the paragraph is going to be about” but marks cannot be awarded if there is no evidence that the comments relate to the particular text under scrutiny. So at the very least, students need to identify the colour of the sub-heading or quote what it says, then explain its function.

It would be productive use of class time to look back at previous pictures and get students to discuss why a picture or illustration has been chosen specifically to support that particular text: how does it aid the message of the text or help the reader to engage with the text’s purpose and meaning? How would the meaning change had a different picture been chosen? Reproducing this approach and thought process in the examination should produce much more meaningful responses.

However, the mean mark of just below 12 is stable and indicates a consistent level of achievement, though there is clearly still room for improvement. There remains considerable evidence of extremely good teaching and engagement with the papers and skills, for which teachers are to be commended and urged to continue. However, performance is patchy and many students just need to be encouraged not to copy in Q7 and to think more carefully about the visual aspects of the text to improve their skills for Q8.

We always attempt to select source texts which will be interesting and enabling. It was gratifying to see how well the students engaged with the subject matter this series, not only in terms of facilitating performance in the test but also indicating that love of dogs which is so heart-warming to see.

The Level 1 test is a good preparation for moving on to Level 2 and thence to GCSE and the reading skills which students develop through these tests will stand them in good stead in their everyday and working lives. Overall, it is clear that those working with Level 1 students are doing a fine job of preparing their students for the demands of this test and they are to be congratulated for their patience and success in doing so.

Component 2 Writing

With two questions containing stimulus material leading into a task which is supported by bullet points, students are able to use some of the information in the question. There is an element of problem solving and functional thinking in completing the task. At this level, centres now very rarely enter students who have little or no chance of getting inside Band 2 Mark Scheme descriptors. Students seemed generally confident and able to meet the requirements of the questions with over 90% of students gaining a mark of 10 or more while nearly 52% gained a mark of 15 or more. This reinforces earlier comments about the standard of students for this examination and I would stress that those achieving a mark of 15 are well suited to the demands of Level 2 and should be encouraged to progress. Students whose marks fall below a total of 15 need a little more in the way of skill development at both sentence and whole text level before they progress on to Level 2. Close examination of the centre’s mark profile would be very useful in establishing appropriate progression routes for students.

Question 1

This question asked students to send an email to johnselectricals@email.com in regards to services provided by John Wright. The email would take the form of a standard complaint where students would be expected to inform the reader about the salient events as well as asking for some form of redress.

It was not difficult for the vast majority of students to provide information about electrical services, and, despite the picture contained in the stimulus material, this was taken in its broadest sense. There were many straightforward complaints involving the loss of power in a house or flat following Mr Wright's work. Some students wrote about miss-wiring, where a light switch might start an electric shower or the television would come on. Others wrote about problems with computers and wireless internet. Not only did students write about work undertaken in their household, but they also wrote about other aspects that were indicated in the stimulus material. There were complaints about cost and punctuality while rudeness seemed to be an occupational trait.

Good answers tended to be those where the student provided clear and well established evidence on which to base their complaint. Specific details were provided, such as the time it took for Mr Wright to come to the house or the details of the electrical fault which remained unfixed. A number of very good answers were able to list a number of flaws in the service without being caught up in details that would distract the student from establishing a clear function for the email. In the better answers, students made it very clear what redress they would expect – either a full refund or the work being done again at no extra cost. Very few of the stronger answers breached the appropriate style by introducing unnecessary threats or abuse. It was also very pleasing to see good students writing concisely and amongst the better answers, many were well within the page limits. Concise expression is an element that is targeted in Level 2, so students who are able to work effectively within time and space limits are already on their way to progression in this subject.

Strong students were able to use an effective vocabulary with terms such as 'misleading', 'idle' and 'inadequate' and phrases such as 'come to my attention' being used to enhance the information. Some of the better answers were able to deploy complex sentences very effectively and to balance them against simpler sentences to provide a satisfactory variety. Stronger students were able to use structure effectively as well and better answers often deployed a short, strong, final paragraph to state clearly the demands that were being made against the poor service received.

Answers in the middle band of the mark scheme, receiving a mark of 3 or 4 for content contained limited relevant material and generally lacked effective structure. They tended to be rather brief and took a very simple and direct approach to the bullet points rather than an energetic approach to writing about a real experience. In such answers, vocabulary tended to be restricted and rather simple.

Some students wrote very little and struggled to convey clear information through a restricted use of language and structure. Typically, answers at a mark of 2 or less for content would attempt to provide information with very limited success. If one or more points are clearly made, and the topic of the answer is appropriate, then that answer is likely to gain a mark of 3. Where these very basic aspects of the email are missing, through inaccurate writing, poor expression or failure to understand what is required, then a mark in the bottom band is likely.

Question 2

This question offered students a straightforward and highly relevant functional task, namely a letter of application for employment. The employer, Thirlmere Water Park and Gardens had a range of posts available on both a full-time and part-time basis. The thinking behind this was to provide an

element of flexibility so that individual circumstances would not be a hurdle to an applicant. The question asked students to provide information about themselves, why they applied and why they would be good at the job. With regards to the stimulus material, one phrase – ‘water features’ – opened up variant interpretations, with some students writing about swimming pools while others picked up on the intended meaning of fountains, ponds and water courses. As these variant readings were perfectly valid, there was no disadvantage to students who put such interpretations forward in their letters.

Most students were able to produce letters which met Band 2 criteria or above. Letters were focused on the topic and some information about the student was provided. Structure was generally evident, with most letters following the bullet points quite closely. Letter format was generally quite sound, although the student address was missing in some answers. Whilst flaws in letter format are significant, the relevant Band 2 descriptor is: ‘limited ability to present coherent structure/form to letter’.

Better answers were able to provide information that was specific and targeted at the position offered. Some students were able to talk about their interest in gardening or a record of previous employment in garden centres. Others were able to distinguish themselves through their acquisition of formal qualifications. Some students referred to qualifications in forestry and horticulture whilst some emphasised life-saving and other swimming qualifications. Many students chose to apply for part-time employment citing family circumstances and, often, the hope that part-time would become full-time in due course. Students also wrote about other skills (sometimes called ‘soft skills’) such as working with teams and showing initiative, which are now considered to be as important as formal qualifications. One important feature of the best letters was the attempt not simply to inform but to persuade. The ability to persuade is explicitly addressed at Level 2 and students showing such ability at this level are well placed for progression although it should be noted that this tended to emerge in answers that received marks of 5 or 6 for content.

The topic was only barely evident in the responses of weaker students (at the bottom of Band 2 and below) who provided very limited information in addressing usually just one of the bullet points. In a number of cases a simple statement about the student’s background was the only substantive element in the letter. Others simply wrote ‘part-time job’ without contextualising the point being made and leaving the reader to do far too much to understand the purpose and function of the letter. Some Band 1 answers managed to provide some vestiges of letter form but the failure to provide clear expression could not support a mark beyond 2.

Accuracy

The most important descriptor for Band 2 achievement is ‘meaning is clear’ and in this series the vast majority of students reached this band and in this series there was a very solid performance in Band 2 with 76% of students achieving a mark of 3 or above. It was interesting to note that this was almost the same for both questions, which indicates that accuracy of writing tends to stand up better under time pressure. For the weaker students, who achieve marks of 2 or below for accuracy, further remedial work is necessary to make meaningful progress.

Band 2 represents a modest level of achievement with written Standard English. Students in this band would typically provide some grammatical sentences, but not necessarily in a consistent form throughout the answer and syntax would be largely appropriate for Standard English. The spelling of common single and double syllable words would be mostly accurate although weaker students resorted to phonetic transcriptions of more difficult words. When these features are not present, the student’s work will fall into Band 1 for accuracy.

One point is important with regards to spelling and it may not have been made in earlier reports. Students who attempt to use a more ambitious vocabulary would not be penalised. For example, the attempt to use words like ‘attention’ and ‘appreciated’ (see below) indicates that the student has chosen words which enhance tone, formality and meaning. The key descriptor for Band 1 is ‘common spelling errors’ which would not apply in these cases.

The construction of grammatical sentences with clear full stops and capital letters remains worryingly elusive. Examiners continue to identify inconsistency in the use of upper case with weaker students displaying a hit and miss approach. Some students made errors such as omitting words which could have been self-corrected through proof-reading.

I would also like to emphasise the importance of checking writing. This is particularly significant for those students taking on-screen assessments or providing word-processed answers. Practice in the use of word processors without spell/grammar check is very important and students should be advised to write concisely as longer answers are often packed with errors. Also, when students produce very short answers, with unchecked typos dominating the reader’s experience, it is highly unlikely that the student would score well for either content or accuracy. I should say however, that performance in on-screen tests is improving.

Examiners pointed out the following specific issues in relation to accuracy:

- failure to use capital letters for proper nouns
- use of part participle as simple past tense (e.g. ‘I seen’ instead of ‘I saw’)
- apostrophes omitted in common forms such as ‘Im’ or ‘dont’
- apostrophes used in verb forms such as ‘eat’s or run’s’
- agreement issues with was/were seemed to be an increasing problem
- upper case was randomly present in answers
- common spelling mistakes such as ‘enviroment’, ‘allot’ (for ‘a lot’), ‘siuted’, ‘discusting’, ‘attenshun’, ‘payed’, ‘appreashated’
- inconsistent tenses or verb agreement was an issue for some
- increasing use of US style contracted forms: ‘wanna’ and ‘gonna’

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.