
Functional Skills Certificate

ENGLISH

Level 2

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 writing Standard English. This has been underlined through the recent Ofqual reviews which have given AQA's Functional English exams a clean bill of health, unlike a number of other providers who were required to change their papers and assessment procedures.

With a consistent approach to assessment, in terms of question style and mark schemes, the examination provides a rigorous and fair test of writing skills for candidates. It has established itself as a strong currency in regards to educational progression and employment and for some candidates this qualification may be the only formal English qualification of value that they have achieved. Centres are increasingly confident in entering candidates who are well able to meet the demands of the Level 2 paper although in this series there were rather more candidates entered who were not ready for this level. It may well be that some centres have bypassed the Level 1 examination and entered all candidates at this level, which is not advisable. Some candidates need to address the Level 1 skills before embarking on the Level 2 assessment regime.

This examination is excellent preparation for the GCSE English/English Language Unit 1 and with its focus on functionality it is likely to be well suited to future specifications. It is also important to note that in the context of recent reform, where re-sit GCSE may not be an option for candidates, the need to achieve a creditable qualification in English is paramount for some students and this is where the Level 2 qualification will have a significant role to play.

Component 1 Reading

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

The theme of the summer series was the sun with texts covering the dangers of sunbeds, sunbathing and the benefits of solar panels, to which the majority of candidates responded well.

As in the previous series, two of the multiple choice questions proved to be particularly challenging for a number of candidates. Pleasingly, those questions testing implication were not to blame this series, which indicates some good progress in this area.

Question 6

Having read the news report about a young woman who used sunbeds from an early age and contracted skin cancer aged 16, candidates were asked to identify “the most sensible response to the issues raised in the news report”. 50% opted correctly for “Share this on Facebook to warn your friends of the dangers of sunbeds”. Almost 700 candidates chose “Stick copies of this news report on the window of your local sunbed salon”. Whilst this may seem desirable, it cannot be deemed “sensible”. However, it is gratifying to see so many of our young people willing to consider direct action against something they perceive as unwelcome.

Question 8

This required candidates to simply extract information regarding the length of time it is estimated that the sun will continue to exist. 53% chose the correct answer; the vast majority of those who did not were caught out by a simple confusion between “million” and “billion”.

Question 9

This asked candidates to decide which element of the presentation of Source B “persuades people of the benefits of solar power”. The correct answer, selected by 51% of entrants, was “Speaking directly to the reader”. The most popular incorrect answer was “Using colours associated with the sun”. Whilst it is true that the text does so, the function of the colour scheme is not really persuasive but more to render the source attractive and appealing. Students should be reminded that there will always be answers which are partly right or plausible, but they are not necessarily the correct options.

There are still considerable numbers of candidates who fail to follow the very clear instruction to write the letter of their chosen option in the box. Circling or ticking the letter in the list happens too often. In addition, far too many candidates try to hedge their bets by offering two options and this strategy will always result in the mark being withheld. Candidates should be reminded that this is a test of reading, which also includes the questions and instructions. A further plea from the Principal Examiner relates to those students who use a computer to answer these questions. Some such candidates choose to type out the entire answer, which is unnecessary, wastes the candidate’s time and is deeply unhelpful to the examiner. Could centres please ensure that only

the letter A, B, C or D, relating to the chosen option is given by the candidate rather than the entire answer.

Question 13

35% achieved full marks, which is a slight increase on the March performance, with a further 29% scoring 3 marks, indicating some good teaching and performance. Unfortunately there are still too many candidates failing to use the given list of purposes or forgetting to include a short quotation. As ever, a few candidates gained no marks because they used the wrong source.

Question 14

This required candidates to identify six ways in which the sun could damage health and was well done overall, with 24% achieving full marks and a further 25% and 24% gaining 5 and 4 marks respectively. Where students did less well, it generally related to an inability to recognise that there were various ways of stating “skin cancer” only one of which could be accepted.

Question 15

The summary question was challenging this series, probably because there was a wealth of information on the benefits of solar panels and this made it more difficult for candidates to select what to include. Only 8% achieved full marks and the mean mark was just under 4, which is still respectable. Students should be reminded that not everything in the source will be relevant to Q15 and examiners look to see what has been omitted as much as what has been included. Students who lift large chunks of the source text are unlikely to do as well as they could if they were more selective.

Overall, however, the skills of summary have greatly improved and there were fewer blank responses and overlong responses, although where these occur, they are generally centre-specific. Students should be taught that a summary does not mean including everything possible and that additional pages for this question generally indicate a lack of summary and should be discouraged.

Question 16

This remains the most puzzling question in terms of performance. Once again, 11% of candidates scored no marks and fewer than 20% gained full marks. The March report made it clear that generic comments would not be accepted and centres are reminded of the need to emphasise to their students that they must make specific comments on why a particular picture or colour has been chosen to enhance the meaning of the source text. Teachers have done some sterling work on this question and more is required to ensure that future performance can be enhanced.

Overall, however, performance in this series has been pleasing with a mean mark 1 higher than the equivalent series in 2015. The papers offered to Functional Skills entrants are assembled thoughtfully, with texts designed to inform, interest and challenge and it is hoped that the candidates who took Level 2 in June this year will remember the dangers of sunbeds and over-exposure to sun, which will help them to protect their own health and that of their future offspring. The environmentalists among us will also look forward to the next generation opting for renewable energy sources such as solar power.

Functional Skills remains a good test of reading and understanding; is a useful step to further English examinations and a benchmark for EAL learners. With the advent of the new GCSE English specification and its much more rigorous terminal assessment, the role of Level 2 Functional Skills takes on new importance. The skills of close reading, understanding, selection, identification of bias, implication and point of view; purpose, audience and summary are all vital to success in GCSE English Language. Functional Skills therefore is an excellent vehicle in which to practise and develop these skills, possibly in Year 9 or 10, as preparation for GCSE. Those centres and teachers who are already working with such commitment on Functional Skills are very well-prepared for the use of this assessment as a stepping stone to the single entry GCSE or maybe as an alternative, credible English qualification for candidates unable to access the new GCSE.

Component 2 Writing

Question 1

Question 1 asked candidates to write a letter to a local newspaper in order express their views about the council's plans to sell Green Park Meadows to a development company who were proposing a mixture of housing, retail and leisure functions. Candidates were asked to take a clear view, either for or against, the proposed development. This topic area and the format are well established at this level and the question did not prove to be a hurdle for more than just a handful of candidates.

The questions seemed to divide opinion with just as many making the case for accepting the offer from Antler Estates and giving young people an opportunity to enjoy the arcade games as there were those who regretted the potential passing of picnics in the meadows and anglers in search of the 'one that got away'. Most answers certainly covered more than one category with jobs, homes and opportunities balanced against wildlife.

However some of the most passionately persuasive were those who wrote at length and in depth on one issue. For instance, a number of candidates wrote eloquently about the impact on wildlife if the development were to go ahead. The need to capture and release small animals and birds was often mentioned with real concern, possibly even anger. Those who looked closely at the economic benefits of the development were also well able to put forward a strong case, citing growth in jobs, the need for housing in a challenging contemporary context (often referring to homelessness and the refugee crisis) and the benefits to the local community of the retail outlets and leisure complex. Where strong ideas were organised to produce a really effective letter, examiners found that sentence structure and style were also equally proficient.

Weaker candidates tended to lack both energy and persuasiveness in their approach to the task. Points were made at a direct and rather simple level, indicating points of concern but unable to develop them convincingly. Weaker candidates also tended to showed only 'some success in using a style of writing appropriate to purpose'.

Question 2

Question 2 asked candidates to write an article about 'The Philly Pancake' restaurant for a travel website. The article was meant to capture the success of a family event at the restaurant and the

requirement for a positive piece was well received. The stimulus material contained some information that was helpful to many candidates and the requirement to write an appreciation or critique of such a location is now very well established.

In regards to comparative performance in relation to Question 1, it was clear that there was a significant drop in this question. This applied to both content and accuracy. Centres need to remind candidates to allocate an equal amount of time to both questions as the loss of a mark or two in Question 2 could lead to failure at this level.

As in previous questions about restaurants, many candidates wrote at length about the mouth-watering tastes and textures of the food on offer, often minutely described. Generally speaking, the use of different categories was striking- the range of pancakes, the décor, the staff, the manager, Katerina De Longhi and the free coffee refills.

The most convincing answers used an effective repertoire of affirmative and positive language to establish the tone of the article. Phrases such as 'instantly felt at home in the US themed diner' and 'coffee refills that came with a blazing smile' were utilised within a clear structure of narrative and explanation. Details were also used to great effect as candidates who were able to convey a sense of a real restaurant with specific decor and furnishings tended to do much better than those that tended to adopt a more generic approach. For example a number of excellent responses introduced the idea of 'retro' interior design incorporating the red, white and blue and the stars and stripes, both of which were implied in the stimulus material. Other strong answers spent some time praising the manager Katarina De Longhi, and how helpful she had been during the family event.

As sentence construction is assessed under the content descriptors it is important to note that very well expressed responses are always likely to be considered for top band marks.

Weaker responses tended to adopt the generic approach with little to convince the reader that the subject of the article was a real place. Simply saying that the service of the waiters was 'great' or that the food was 'really good' or that the establishment was 'clean' do not provide the specificity or detail that makes for a good response. These kind of responses tend to reflect a failure in thinking through and planning, and the tendency to resort to cliché such as the ubiquitous 'to die for' was also evident. Weak expression also tended to accompany responses that lacked texture and depth and the declarative simple sentence was rather too evident, the lack of sentence variety holding marks down to the lower end of Band 2 or even Band 1.

Accuracy

Although examiners mentioned an increase in general levels of accuracy, there was a dip in performance in Question 2 that matched the clear dip in content. Importantly, less than one fifth of candidates in Question 1 and less than one sixth of candidates in Question 2 achieved marks of 5 or more for accuracy.

One examiner wrote: 'Spelling seems to hold up well but punctuation of sentences seems to get weaker and does sometimes have an effect on meaning'.

This statement reflects the most crucial issue that we meet. Mastery of sentences is the key to clarity of expression which in turn leads to successful communication.

The most important descriptor for Band 2 achievement is 'meaning is clear' and in this series the vast majority of candidates reached this band. However, this descriptor is likely to carry a mark of 3 unless correct grammar, punctuation and spelling are present to some significant extent.

Unfortunately, some candidates are unable to produce correctly punctuated sentences, lacking closure with full stops and failing to begin with upper case. Where this is consistent, the candidate is unlikely to gain more than 3 marks, and where it is intermittent the mark is likely to be 4.

Candidates who cannot sustain clear, well punctuated sentences are unlikely to achieve a Band 3 mark for accuracy (5-6), no matter how well written the response is otherwise. It is also the case that poorly constructed sentences are rarely found in answers where the mark for content is 6 or above. It is clear, therefore, that some candidates would benefit from additional support in these areas.

Generally, grammar is effective. The main areas of weakness here are subject-verb agreement and the use of appropriate tense. The occasional mistake would not hold a candidate back from achieving a top band mark, but regular mistakes in grammar would generally mean a Band 2 or even a Band 1 mark. Alongside grammatical weakness, syntactic inadequacy often reflects mother tongue interference in second language speakers. Such candidates would benefit from additional support.

Spelling is often very good indeed and it is not unusual to find highly accomplished spelling of an enhanced vocabulary accompanying grammatical error as described above.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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

Converting Marks into UMS marks

Convert raw marks into Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) marks by using the link below.

[UMS conversion calculator](#)