
Functional Skills

ENGLISH

Level 1

Report on the Examination

4720

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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.

In June 2018, the paper explored the important topic of dental health with Source A being a newspaper report about the state of children's teeth in Wales. Two of the multiple choice questions proved quite tricky.

Question 2

This was a simple test of identifying information: only 44% of students recognised that the correct answer "*Leah Ennis has two children*" could be easily elicited from the sentence: "*Leah Ennis is a mum to a three-year-old and a three-month-old*".

Question 5

This question proved to be even more problematic, with fewer than 1/3 of students choosing the correct option – "*the number of five-year-olds with tooth decay is falling*" which is a paraphrase of the sentence in the text: "*The latest figures show a reduction in the number of five-year-olds with tooth decay*". In general, questions containing numbers or statistics do seem to present more difficulty to Level 1 students so a greater focus on these in the classroom is recommended.

Question 7

In Source B, students were given a webpage from NHS Choices offering advice on how to brush babies' and children's teeth and reduce the amount of sugar in babies' and children's diets.

7a: Four instructions for brushing babies' and children's teeth. This was quite successful with almost 70% achieving a mark of 3 or 4, but almost 4% gaining zero. Where students fell down was in offering general or irrelevant information rather than specific instructions: "*Fluoride toothpaste helps to prevent and control tooth decay*" would not get a mark as it does not qualify as an instruction, whereas "*Use fluoride toothpaste*" would be credited. This may seem a fine distinction but the question asks for instructions rather than information, therefore the correct answers must have the function of instructing.

7b: Students fared slightly less well when asked to give four ways to reduce sugar in babies' and children's diets, with 59% scoring 3 or 4 and almost 5% gaining no marks at all. Some thought was needed to ensure that points were relevant, eg "*The best drinks for children are milk and water*" only becomes relevant to reducing sugar in the diet when offered as an alternative to sugary drinks.

A useful reminder would be that not everything in the text will be relevant to the answer so a level of thought and discernment is necessary.

Question 8

Sadly, there has been no improvement in this question – just over 3% achieving full marks and 17% scoring no marks at all. Of particular concern this series was the fact that the graphic representation of sugar as an evil monster devouring a cowering tooth offered myriad opportunities for explanation of presentation and these were very rarely taken. It would be helpful to spend classroom time on modelling the implications of visual aspects of texts and training students to practise these in order to develop their ability to explain how these visual elements aid the reader in interpreting the meaning of the text. The Principal Examiner would strongly urge teachers not to expect their students to be successful in this area of the examination simply because they have learned the names of devices which **might** be included in the text. It is a very risky strategy to assume that such features will be present. Students must be prepared to look at the text in front of them in the examination and make comments relating specifically to that text.

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.

The mean mark this series was 10.8 which is somewhat lower than the equivalent series in 2017, but in line with the previous series in March of this year. There is much evidence in students' responses of excellent teaching and preparation for the examination. Unfortunately, some answers also show the opposite – students who have not been adequately prepared for the paper and perform well below the standard required, as evidenced by the statistics. The Principal Examiner would like to offer sound praise and congratulations to those teachers and students whose unstinting efforts have led to success and to hope that those pockets of under-achievement can gain from the example of others and the advice and guidance in this report.

The nature of Functional Skills means that texts selected for examination must be functional and transactional in nature. Alongside this, we always try to cover subjects which are topical and/or useful in current or future daily life. Anything which helps to improve the dental health of current and future generations should be welcomed and it is hoped that this summer's students took from this paper, not only a Level 1 certificate but also some useful information and advice for their own and their children's smiles.

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. Teachers who work so hard to prepare their students for these tests should be warmly congratulated on their efforts and urged to continue.

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 jarykhan@email.com in regards to garden services. Students were asked to write expressing gratitude for the standard of work provided for a relative who did not own a computer. In a small minority of cases, students understood the stimulus material to refer to a shop which provided floral services. This was a valid interpretation of the stimulus material and photograph and therefore students were not in any way penalised if they took this approach.

It was not difficult for the vast majority of students to provide relevant material information about garden services. There were many straightforward accounts of lawn care and weeding. Some students wrote about how significant improvements to the relative's garden were made. Others wrote about new plants being introduced and wildlife being encouraged. 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 was praise for Jary's manner and the mention of special rates for older customers was often highlighted.

Good answers tended to be those where the student provided clear and well established evidence on which to base their email. In most cases, the relationship between the writer and the relative was very clearly presented, often incorporating an element of vulnerability on the relative's side. Specific details were provided, such as the time it took for Jary to complete the work or how favourably Jary's work compared with that of a previous gardener. A number of students wrote very effectively about the garden design that Jary had managed to bring out of the chaos of overgrown grass, weeds and bushes. These accounts very often contained the names of specific plants, and not always the obvious roses or daffodils. In most cases, examples of the way in which Jary's politeness impressed the writer's relative was also conveyed. It was 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 'design', 'attractive' and 'business' and phrases such as 'pleased you were recommended to her' 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.

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 presenting information about Jary's services. In such answers, vocabulary tended to be restricted and rather simple.

Weaker students generally 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

The content provided in answer to this question was reassuringly healthy, with some 73% of students gaining four or more marks, in contrast to only 69% on Question 1. This is unusual in that Question 2 is often the weaker response, with time management and lack of planning playing a role. Examiners put this unusual occurrence down to the general enthusiasm of students for the subject matter of the question.

The question asked for a response to a council leaflet in which put forward proposals to ban the eating of food in local parks. Students were asked to respond via a letter to Jenny Radcliffe at the Leisure Services Department of the council.

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 proposals 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 to letter'.

Better answers were able to provide information that was specific and targeted at the position offered. Those who opposed the council's plan explained clearly that barbecues and picnics were a key element of family life and supported good relationships between parents and children. Convincing proposals for alternatives were made, such as having clearly demarcated areas within the parks for food and non-food, as well as ensuring that sufficient bins were available and placed appropriately around the park. Rather fewer good answers supported the council's position, but these were able to introduce emotive material about litter and the consequent threats to wildlife or the encouragement of vermin. Letters on both sides were persuasive, a skill 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 which on this question amounted to 44%.

In good answers, students often used a range of techniques to convey their emotion. Complex sentences were utilised and a sensible approach to rhetorical devices was evident. The fashion for bombarding the reader with a series of questions, some of which might be ill judged in their emotional impact, seems to have passed. Ambitious vocabulary was present in good answers as well as a sense of formality in regards to a letter to the local council.

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 either support or opposition to the council's proposal was the only substantive element in 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 produced a very solid performance in Band 2 with 71% 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 'regarding' and 'appreciated' 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.

The Principal Examiner 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. However, 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 past participle as simple past tense (e.g. 'he done' instead of 'he did')
- apostrophes omitted in common forms such as 'I'm' or 'don't'
- 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: flowers, gardening, through, clean, fresh, barbecue, picnic, sandwiches, benches,
- 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.