
Functional Skills **ENGLISH**

Level 1

Report on the Examination

4720

March 2017

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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.

Component 1 Reading

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

The March series employed a theme of sight, incorporating an information sheet about working as an optician and a leaflet about Guide Dogs. The multiple choice questions were found to be slightly more challenging this series, with three of them gaining pass rates in the 50% region.

Question 3

Those who failed to secure the mark here seemed confused about the wearing of glasses and incorrectly selected “glasses need to be fitted to the patient’s eyeball” rather than “there are good opportunities for opticians”.

Question 4

The main point being made about the job of an optician provided the focus for this question and over 40% of students misinterpreted the text and selected “they write prescriptions for people’s lenses”. However, the source clearly cited this as the responsibility of an eye specialist, the line below indicating that the optician then used this information to make and fit the lenses.

Question 5

Opticians need to have “good people skills” would have secured the mark here, but a significant number of students decided that “years of experience” was the correct answer – a misreading of the text.

Question 7

7a required students to list four facts about who is allowed to own a guide dog. Some found this extremely straightforward but others undermined their own achievement by duplicating answers so that “people in their 70’s, 80’s and 90’s” was offered as three separate options for who could own a guide dog, rather than the over-riding answer of “there is no upper age limit”. Leaving out the word “upper” from this sentence was another relatively common mistake which rendered the answer incorrect. Only 12% achieved full marks on this half of the question.

7b was much more secure, with 36% achieving full marks for four pieces of information provided to people who want to care for a guide dog mum. Where students did less well here was in offering quite generic information such as “these dogs need a lot of care and attention” – something which applies to all dogs, not just breeding guide dogs.

Once again, there was some indiscriminate copying which will almost certainly be self-penalising as one of the standards being tested is the ability to **select relevant information**. General advice will always be to read both the questions and the texts carefully and take time to select the correct answers. Copying of whole sentences is usually neither necessary nor desirable.

Question 8

Once again around 12% scored zero on this question but a slightly better proportion – 8.8% achieved full marks. Generalised comments such as “it tells you what the paragraph will be about/makes it stand out” will not be rewarded. If there is no evidence that the comments relate to the particular text under scrutiny, the marks are likely to be withheld.

The advice remains the same as in previous reports and is reproduced below.

As previously stated, many students compromise their achievement by writing too much and including too many devices, thus risking not establishing the link between the device and the way it aids understanding, which is required by the mark scheme. Training students to offer, in each part of the question, **one** presentational feature with an explanation relating to **that** feature would improve performance further. Just over 2% failed to attempt the question at all, either because they ran out of time or, more worryingly, because they did not know how to approach a question about presentation.

The overall mean mark for March was somewhat lower at just over 11, representing a slight decrease on the January series. However, performance is patchy and there is considerable evidence of extremely good teaching and engagement with the papers and skills, for which teachers are to be commended and urged to continue.

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 an overwhelming majority of students on both Question 1 and Question 2 hitting at least 4 marks for content. Once again in this series, over half of the students at the top end of the distribution gained total marks of 15 or more and these students, well suited to the demands of Level 2, should be encouraged to progress. Students whose marks fall below a total of 15 may well need a little more in the way of skill development 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 required students to write an email to Eliza's flowers informing the company about the dissatisfaction they felt with the flower service. The stimulus material provided a list of claims that the company made about its service and students were able to use these claims to structure their response and provide pointers as to the areas of relevant information.

Most students wrote soundly about the task, providing a sense of grievance through selected details and through statements which reflected the feelings of the writer. The best answers clearly introduced their email with a valid context for their complaint. Many wrote about their expectations of Eliza's service, based on the claims in the advert included as part of the question. They then went on to detail the specific failings that they met. Some found the service unacceptable in terms of staff attitude to customers, with brusque questions and sometimes surly responses. These failures of customer service nearly always led into issues related to the supply of flowers. Such issues included the failure to provide the specific type or colour of the flowers requested and usually paid for. In a number of strong answers, the impact of these issues was described with some energy and the incorporation of an element of narrative was nearly always relevant and often poignant, particularly when the occasion was a funeral or wedding. Students then went on to describe feelings of upset and outrage quite effectively, using an appropriate vocabulary that did not exaggerate the feelings or undermine an appropriate tone. In conclusion, strong answers included a suggestion for improvement or a request for compensation, both of which are suitable ways in which to produce a definite sense of closure to the task. In these ways, the bullet points and stimulus material were effectively deployed

Not all students were able to maintain an appropriate tone and a number adopted a very strident and aggressive approach from the outset, without contextualizing the email. Such approaches would not be successful as the reader would be put on the defensive very quickly. Those responses where students took a more emollient approach, often emphasizing previous excellent service from the company, were much more successful. It was the inappropriateness of tone in some quite well written answers that held them down to the bottom end of the band as students fired off a series of insults, clearly meant to use humour but without success, which would diminish the overall impact of the email. The very weakest answers, struggling to stay in Band 2 or clearly in Band 1, displayed even more fundamental weakness with very thin and inadequate content, little sense of the task and simple language. As I have said in many previous reports, this latter group is a small percentage and answers with 3 or fewer marks for content were less than 20% of the overall candidature.

Question 2

This question invited students to undertake a familiar task: a job application where students were asked to write to Dovercliff Care to put themselves forward in a voluntary capacity. The stimulus material listed the aspects of work at Dovercliff that were on offer and then invited students to send a letter of application.

Students are well able to approach tasks like this and the overall strength of the response reflected this. There was virtually no drop-off whatsoever in the marks awarded for content on this question, which is very reassuring. It would seem that issues around time management were superseded by the students' enthusiasm and readiness for the task. Nearly all the students were able to communicate context, purpose and appropriate tone.

The best answers often outlined where they had come across the advertisement and their initial favourable responses. Such an approach is often effective as it provides the reader with a sense of commitment from the writer, in contrast to more dutiful responses. Students were well able to explain what aspects of the work they were most interested in. This was linked to the student's background in terms of education and experience. One or two, for instance, were able to claim a familiarity with sign language. Where the strongest answers were most effective was in their capacity to express interest and enthusiasm for working with elderly people. Some talked of family experience, such as a strong relationship with a grandparent, and how this shaped their attitudes. Others wrote of the inherent warmth of most elderly people as well as their wealth of interesting

stories which fleshed out the past. Many wrote also of their desire to provide comfort and safety to older people, many of whom felt weak or vulnerable. A number of students were able also to voice their willingness to approach more unpleasant aspects of dealing with older people such as coping with the depressive state or curmudgeonly attitudes of some older people. I am confident that such honest responses would have been very well received in a real world situation.

Once again, it was the thinness of content that held weaker students down. Simply addressing the bullet points without any development will generally lead to a mark of 3 for content, particularly when the language is simple and imprecise. A number of students clearly had difficulty with the adjective 'elderly' and this led to answers where the student masked this lack of understanding by repeating the words of the stimulus material time and time. . Band 1 answers(1 or 2 for content), only about 5% of students, tended to fail in basic communication, such as writing clear sentences that related to the question task. Students at this bottom end of the range of marks may well be better suited to entry-level qualifications such as the Entry Level Certificate (Step Up To English) where the demands are more appropriate to the student, and which will provide a measure of progression over time.

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.

Band 2 nevertheless represents a modest level of achievement with written Standard English. Students in this band would typically provide some grammatical sentences, syntax would be largely appropriate for Standard English and the spelling of common words would be mostly accurate. When these are not present, the student's work will fall into Band 1.

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

Spelling was generally of a good standard although weaker students resorted to phonetic transcriptions of more difficult words.

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:

- very poor or extremely small handwriting is problematic in judging the accuracy of the student's answer
- inconsistent tenses or verb agreement was an issue for some - possibly EAL students
- increasing use of US style contracted forms: 'wanna' and 'gonna' as well as creeping text language such as 'yr' and 'u'.
- 'could of' instead of 'could have'

- misspelling of common words: 'passed' instead of 'past', 'mentiond'; 'collage' instead of 'college'; 'worke'; 'hear' for 'here' and similar errors.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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