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# Functional Skills

# **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 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.

For the March series, the chosen topic was cyber crime and cyber security. Source A was a news report about the experiences of the UK's youngest hacker. Success rates on the first 6 multiple choice questions were mixed, generally between 40-60% accurate. However, **Q5** proved particularly problematic with only 8% identifying the correct answer. This is surprising since the question was a simple test of reading and retrieval regarding the hacker, Cal Leeming. A careful reading of the text would have excluded the three wrong options and the phrase "*with jobs in cybersecurity and public speaking*" makes it clear that Leeming has more than one job – the correct answer.

Source B was a challenging text about the UK's first cybercrime intervention workshop. Q10 and 12 proved more difficult than the others:

### Question 10

This question required students to recognise the implication that "*cybercrime has not been taken seriously by the authorities*". Only 37% were successful in doing so. The remaining student responses were fairly evenly distributed across the other three options, indicating that there was not one particularly deceptive option, but that many students were uncertain in discerning the true implication.

### Question 12

Here, students were asked for the most sensible action a young person with good cyber skills should take. The correct, and most obvious, answer was "*research the qualifications needed for jobs in cyber security*." 1/3 of students selected "*apply for a place on an intervention workshop*". However, the text made it clear that participation in the workshop was offered only to those who had committed low-level cybercrime and there was no indication that one could apply to take part.

Once again, considerable numbers of students did not 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 students try to hedge their bets by offering two options and this strategy will always result in the mark being withheld. Students should be reminded that this is a test of reading, which also includes the questions and instructions.

**Question 13**

Performance on this question was considerably improved from the last series, Almost 68% achieved 3 or 4 marks, sadly, 11% gained no marks and 2% failed to attempt the question.

**Question 14**

This required a straightforward retrieval of six types of cybercrime and was very successful with 40% securing full marks and a further 21% scoring 5/6.

**Question 15**

Students were asked to summarise the aims and benefits of the cybercrime intervention workshop and the task proved quite challenging. 23% gained 4 marks or better but 7% achieved 0 marks, the same proportion as did not attempt the question. There were few very overlong responses this series but considerable copying and inclusion of irrelevant material undermined performance.

**Question 16**

It is gratifying to finally be able to report some progress on this question. Only 12% were awarded full marks but a further 32% scored 3 marks. Source A carried two contrasting pictures of a person working at a computer and it was relatively simple to gain 4 marks by comparing the connotations and atmosphere of these two images, then relating them to the overall message of the source. Thankfully, there were fewer of the empty, generic responses which plague this question and which have been bemoaned in successive previous reports. However, a very disappointing 20% scored zero or made no attempt so there is still work to be done, despite the excellent teaching evident in the improved performance. Hence, the following guidance is once again offered.

Students need to be taught what constitutes a meaningful comment on the use of picture(s) and colour. Students need to explain why **that** picture or **that** colour has been chosen to enhance the meaning in **this** text and examiners are directed by the mark scheme to look for a valid link between the device and the explanation of its effectiveness. A simple way to develop such understanding in the classroom would be for students to ask themselves how the impact of the text would be different if the picture or colour were changed. Sometimes, there are good, meaningful explanations of language or linguistic device use, but the question specifically refers to “visual presentation” meaning that such comments generally cannot be rewarded.

The mean mark this series was in line with that in January but considerably lower than the March 2017 series. There is clear evidence of some excellent teaching in places evidenced by many sound responses, but performance is patchy. The most concerning aspect noted by the Principal Examiner is those responses where earnest effort has clearly been expended but to no avail because the question has not been read or the approach has not been appropriate. Whatever can be done to address these issues would be most welcome.

We always attempt to select source texts which will be interesting and topical. In these days of widespread hacking and cyber-bullying, anything which helps to warn and educate our youngsters about enhanced cyber security should be welcomed and it is hoped these papers contributed a little to this process.

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## Component 2 Writing

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 students. It has established itself as a strong currency in regards to educational progression and employment and for some students this qualification may be the only formal English qualification of value that they have achieved. Centres are now confidently entering students who are well able to meet the demands of the Level 2 paper but there are many who still need to practice their basic writing skills, particularly in terms of accuracy. In this series, some 17% of students achieved total marks of 15 or fewer, which is some distance from a Level 2 qualification. The panel of examiners felt that this reflected the failure of students to write fluently and confidently, particularly in regards to sentence construction and punctuation, although the content was sometimes appropriate.

This examination is excellent preparation for the GCSE English Language Unit 2 and with its focus on functionality. It is also important to note that in the context of recent reform, where re-sit GCSE may not be an option for students, 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. Functional English at this level could be seen as the apex of a clear alternative progression route after Level 1, with Entry Level Certificate (Step Up to English) at its base. This is a route that schools and colleges need to consider closely when under pressure to enter students for exams they are unlikely to pass.

The standard of this examination is maintained through rigorous marking and awarding procedures and a pass in this series matches the archive of previous examinations. The determination at AQA to ensure the quality of the examination means that students entered for this examination should be aware of, and prepared for, the demands of a very challenging assessment.

### Question 1

Question 1 invited students to send a letter to a local newspaper in response to a previously published letter which challenged readers to consider the 'distractions and obstructions' within the town centre. The stimulus material provided significant pointers for students and the original letter was clearly intended to provoke strong feelings.

On a general level the use of the correct letter format was certainly much in evidence for this question and responses seemed to be split about 70/30 in favour of the liberal minded who revelled in the vibrancy of the High Street as opposed to those who wanted a dull, rather soulless place without musicians, beggars, charity workers and coffee stalls. However it was heartwarming to see just how many of the students showed understanding of the causes of homelessness and begging, discarding ideas of fecklessness and deserving poor. They were also quite eloquent in calling on local councils to take responsibility, provide shelters and not give way to carping critics, and to keep the High Street as a place of musical joy.

The best answers took the original letter and addressed each of the points made by the writer, Angela McKenzie, a retired nurse. Emotive views raised by Ms McKenzie were more often than not rejected by the students (see above) through a process of argument, putting forward a point, providing evidence and developing their point. For example the word 'intimidating' was used in the original letter and many responses addressed the issue by putting forward the view that this was entirely subjective, that people approaching you in the street could be turned away politely without the need to feel threatened in any way. The emotive topic of the homeless was often dealt with in a similarly logical way with appropriate vocabulary and sentence structure to enable the student's argument to develop. However, a number of very strong students wrote in support of Ms McKenzie and in the main these letters took two forms. In the first, students took a sympathetic approach to

the views of the retired nurse and explained that there were many grounds for concern in our modern town centres. Tonally, these letters were measured and clear with a well chosen vocabulary. The second type of letter presented an animated response to the original letter and proffered views that might well be supported by some incendiary journalists and politicians, especially in their comments about homeless people. These responses provided something of an ethical dilemma for examiners, but well written responses were rewarded, no matter what the views expressed. Where the tone of letters was outspoken, crude or abusive, the effect of the letter is diminished and this was taken into account in awarding marks.

Weaker answers with marks at the middle and bottom end of Band 2 tended to take a very direct approach and address each of Ms McKenzie's points with a simple counter point that was neither particularly well expressed or developed. Sentence structure was sometimes weak in such answers, and as a key descriptor for Band 3 is 'uses a range of sentence structures, including complex sentences,' these answers were unable to rise above a mark of 5. There tended to be a limiting sense of structure as well, often lacking conclusions and paragraphs. However, only 23% of students reached marks of 5 or fewer for content on this question. The very weakest answers, in Band 1, were extremely rare and such students might benefit from working through Level 1, or in some cases, Entry Level.

## Question 2

Students were asked to write an email to Serena Johnson at Liberty Estate Management to complain about the misleading nature of a property advertisement. Students were asked to write from the position of a resident in the property. Although the phrase 'reasonable rent' was used in the advertisement, students were not disadvantaged if they took on the role of a recent purchaser.

Although many students were unlikely to have experienced living independently, answers displayed an awareness of the difficulty of living in housing that was not entirely satisfactory, substandard or even dangerous. Answers were in the main plausible and convincing, with a strong persuasive element as the question required. The main discriminators were the use and development of evidence, sentence variety, tone and email structure.

The best answers tended to outline a number of credible faults with the property and develop them in a measured and effective way. Thus, for many students, poor wifi was considered a real problem in terms of fulfilling work related tasks out of the office or in providing a platform for homework/revision where children were part of the household. Predictably, health issues relating to aspects such as mould or vermin, were very much part of the arsenal of complaint while noisy neighbours and heavy traffic also played a part. Many of the best answers provided a strong context for complaint. For example, students explained the family circumstances in some detail and a number presented the predicament of single, independent living - with some students expressing a tangible sense of threat in their new neighbourhood. Tonally, the best answers adopted a diplomatic approach, as there was a need to ask Serena Johnson to address the problems presented. Inappropriate or abusive language is counterproductive in such circumstances and good answers were able to avoid such pitfalls. A number of strong answers showed an awareness of the world of business by requesting a meeting with Ms Johnson to discuss the outstanding issues.

As we have seen of late Band 2 students tended to work through the bullet points with a small amount of development on one or two. Such dutiful responses also lacked any significant sense of persuasion, very few asking Serena Johnson to take some form of action and many just letting her know that they were going to leave the accommodation. Language in such answers is also rather straightforward, with sentence variety and complexity not particularly in evidence. As was

remarked about the last series, a key difference between a mark of 5 and a mark of 7 was more often than not, sentence structure and the level of expression. Better answers tend to have a more ambitious vocabulary whilst those in Band 2 used a more restricted range of terminology. Persuasive technique was less successful in Band 2 responses, and although devices such as the rhetorical question were often used, their effectiveness was limited to some extent by their rather obvious and routine deployment.

### **Accuracy**

There was a better performance in Question 1 than Question 2 in regards to the achievement of 4 or marks for accuracy. Question 1 produced 59% at this standard while Question 2 produced 49% which is actually a noticeably weaker than in January 2018. Perhaps the demands of using a more technical or specialist vocabulary in Q2 in the description of property led to this dip. In this series, the statistical evidence pointed to approximately 40% of students on 3 marks or lower for accuracy on Question 1 and 48% on Question 2 which is unlikely to lead to a pass at this level. A small, but significant percentage of students achieved marks of 6 or sometimes 7 for content which was detailed and appropriate, but they were let down by weak grammar and syntax. In such answers, spelling was often acceptable but the general fluency and effectiveness of the language often left them with marks of 2 or 3 for accuracy.

One examiner wrote: 'On accuracy, spelling of a prosaic vocabulary of regular patterns is quite reliable and I do find that our students are less willing to launch into a more expansive vocabulary than they used to. Sentence punctuation does seem to be slipping with either inappropriate comma splicing or no end of sentence punctuation whatsoever. Other punctuation - apostrophes, semi colons - tended to be more accurately used.'

The most important descriptor for Band 2 achievement is 'meaning is clear' and in this series the vast majority of students 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 students are unable to produce correctly punctuated sentences, lacking closure with full stops and failing to begin with upper case. Where this is consistent, the student is unlikely to gain more than 3 marks, and where it is intermittent the mark is likely to be 4. Students 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 students 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 student 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 students 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.

Amongst key concerns were:

- the use of 'gonna', 'wanna' etc
- use of the 'therefore' and 'however' as conjunctions

- the use of 'of' in verbal contexts – 'couldn't of', 'wouldn't of' – whilst perfectly comprehensible is not yet acceptable in Standard English
- failure to use upper case for proper nouns
- the use of speech marks for indirect speech
- simple errors – 'absoloutly' 'mold' (extremely common error) 'minuits' 'belive' ...
- grammatical ommision, as in 'I feel like mislead me'
- agreement of subject and verb as in 'we was..'

Finally, 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. This could lead to the paradoxical situation where the energy and productivity of a strong student is the very reason that that student fails. 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

## **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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