
Functional Skills

ENGLISH

Level 1

Report on the Examination

4720

Nov 2017

Version: 1.0

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.

This paper was based on holidays, with Source A being an informative article about working as a travel agent. One of the multiple choice questions proved to be very challenging, with fewer than 60% of students achieving the mark.

Question 4

Students were asked to identify the main thing potential travel agents need to have, the correct answer being "*skill in dealing with people*". Those who did not secure the mark selected "a degree in Travel and Tourism". Whilst the source does suggest that such a degree would give the CV a boost, it also clearly states "*You don't need any specific qualifications to become a travel agent*". As ever, the error was caused by insufficient close reading of the text.

Question 7

7a: Students were asked to name four activities which students on a junior school trip could do at the Isle of Wight theme park, Blackgang Chine. It was heartening to see that almost 45% of entrants achieved full marks here, with 75% achieving 3 or better. The most widespread error was the failure to insert a verb in order to ensure the sense of an activity. In particular "*a Princess in your own Fairy Castle*" required the simple addition of "Be" in order to secure the mark.

7b: This part of the question was much less well done, only 19% gaining full marks and 43% achieving 3 or above. Unfortunately 29% gained no marks on this question. The difficulty arose where students did not remember that this is a test of reading, so all the answers must come from the source text, to which students are specifically directed twice in the question wording. Thus, "*four pieces of practical information the trip organiser would need to know*" means information from the text, not vague generalities from students' own ideas, such as "whether any of the children get travel sick". Students entering for this examination must be fully prepared for this type of question.

A further error arose when students forgot, or did not notice, that the trip was for junior school pupils, so that prices relating to over 60s and under 4s were not relevant. Neither was "*Free return visit within 7 days, except for groups*". 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

Despite some evidence of students being better prepared to identify presentational devices, Q8 is still relatively poorly done. 27% achieved 3 or 4 marks this series; over 12% scored zero and 2%

did not attempt the question. Generalised comments such as “it tells you what the paragraph will be about/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. Students know that these texts will always 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.

The overall mean mark at 12, however, 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.

The texts are always carefully selected for interest and topicality. Hopefully, on a cold, dim November morning, students were briefly transported to a world of sun and fun and reminded that summer will return!

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 50% gained a mark of 15 or more. Students 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 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 write a review of a visit to Forest Glades. The question indicated that the review should reflect the enjoyment that the student and friends experienced. As is the case with these questions, the stimulus material provides some pointers towards possible content while the bullet points gave some structural support to the answer.

Most students provided some information that was relevant, usually concentrating on a number of the listed points in the stimulus material as well as expressing a sense of pleasure, challenge and the value of a new experience.

The best answers tended to be those where the student moves on from the general to the specific, providing detailed and credible description. Students were able to take the scenario provided and build upon it to make an interesting narrative. Thus, one of the listed features was 'Monster Rides' and, using this generic element, the better students clearly indicated the nature of the ride, whether a roller coaster, tube or drop (or other type of ride) and then went on to depict the qualities of the ride that provided the key to enjoyment. In a similar vein, students wrote well about wildlife and restaurants. One feature that generated a lot of interesting material, beginning in narrative and developing into critique, was the park's 'Overnight Camping' facility. Many students had evidently been on camping expeditions as the wealth of detail was highly credible, while even those answers that tended to adopt a fairly conventional approach (heating marshmallows around the camp fire) were able to combine energy and commitment in their writing. The sense of a shared experience was also strongly present and seemed to underpin most of the better answers.

Strong students were able to use an appropriate vocabulary and sentence structure to convey 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.

Answers that achieved marks around 4 for content tended to address the issues very directly and baldly. Whilst relevant and often appropriately structured, they tended to be rather brief and gave the impression of dutiful task completion in the 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 3 or less for content would simply pick off aspects of the stimulus material and make a simple comment of 'the restaurant was good' type, without building upon the initial comment or providing any support for it. Such answers tended to be at the level of attempting, rather than successfully completing the task. Some weak responses, few in number, attempted to fill a page or two with handwriting that was barely coherent. These students should focus on the accuracy of their expression above all.

Question 2

This question offered students an interesting task, asking them to express their views about the banning of dogs on buses through a letter sent to a local newspaper. The question used a newspaper article to provide information and ideas for the students. One feature of the article was the inclusion of polarised views: an older man was hostile to the presence of dogs on buses, while a younger woman was sympathetic.

Generally, students performed slightly less well on this question than on Question 1 and there were rather more blank answers (but below 5%). This is almost certainly due to some students spending less time on this question.

Nevertheless, most students were able to deal with the question very effectively. As with previous questions of this sort, the best students used a range of information and opinion to put together an argument. There was stronger support for allowing dogs to remain on buses than for the opposite position. For many, the bullet points provided a clear structure to the answer. Not surprisingly, the first bullet point was the one which provided the springboard for the rest of the answer. In most cases students were able to recount some relevant experience relating to dogs on buses. For example, many students wrote about seeing elderly people displaying evident distress and others wrote clearly about the impact of dogs on their own allergies. Students then used their experience to provide the core of their answer, whether for or against the ban. In the best answers, the final section of the response incorporated more reflective and evaluative writing when the students considered whether the relative inconvenience of dogs on public transport was outweighed by other factors such as the need for guide or service dogs. Students were able to put across their position with the use of appropriate language, sometimes including specialist words, as well as adopting a suitably informative as well as persuasive tone. With regards to the conventions of letter writing, it is very heartening to see so many students using the correct sender's address, greeting and valediction as well as clearly indicating that there is a reader firmly in mind.

The topic was only barely evident in the responses of some students (at the bottom of Band 2 and below) who provided very limited information in addressing the first bullet, or provided information that was unclear or irrelevant. Factual information about the experience of dogs on buses was often omitted and response was restricted to simple statement in favour or against the ban. In some cases, the letter convention was inadequate at this level when students did not provide a sender's address, which would invalidate to some extent the functionality of the writing.

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 distinct improvement in performance at the bottom end of the mark scheme, with only about 14% or so receiving marks of 2 or less. For the very weakest student progression route through the Entry Level Certificate (Step Up To English) might be more appropriate.

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.

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
- mistakes with the use of past tense
- apostrophes in contracted forms omitted
- agreement issues with was/were seemed to be an increasing problem
- upper case was randomly present in answers
- common spelling mistakes such as 'allegie, 'aloud' (for 'allowed'), 'spashos', 'discusting'
- inconsistent tenses or verb agreement was an issue for some
- increasing use of US style contracted forms: 'wanna' and 'gonna'

Use of statistics

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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