
Functional Skills

ENGLISH

Level 1

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.

In this series, we chose to focus on dental health and the issue of sugar. Source A was a news report about The Children's Dental Health Survey. Success rates on the first 6 multiple choice questions were mixed, generally between 39 – 77% accurate. Some of these questions are worth examining to see why these success rates were not higher.

Question 1

This question always asks students to identify the main purpose of the text; the word "main" clearly indicating that there is more than one purpose, in this case, "*to inform readers of the results of the Dental Health Survey*" as noted by 46% of students. However, almost as many opted for option B – "*explain how dental problems affect children*" – a subsidiary purpose.

Question 6

This question focused on how the text met the needs of the audience/readers and is obviously linked to the purpose of the text. Thus, those who are errant in identifying the main purpose are likely to stray when meeting Q6. Fewer than 40% selected the correct option – "*describes some progress in improving children's dental health*"; 31% chose "*advises children and teenagers to take care of their teeth*" and 23% felt the report best met audience needs by "*informing parents how to improve their children's dental health*". Time in class spent investigating the multiple purposes addressed in the majority of texts would pay dividends in these questions and in Q13.

Source B was a leaflet about the fascinating British Dental Museum. Despite the interest and engagement in this text by the majority of students, two of the multiple choice questions proved problematic for many.

Question 8

This was a relatively simple test of obtaining relevant information about the opening times of the museum. 43% chose the wrong option – "*you can visit the museum on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons only*", having failed to notice the sentence "*Please phone for appointments at other times*" – the correct option selected by fewer than 40%.

Question 10

This question required students to identify the implication that "*people today should appreciate improved dental treatment*", recognised by only 40%. 52% selected "*the museum would be of*

interest to a variety of people”, not noting that this is **explicitly stated** in the text and could not, therefore, be considered to be implied by the leaflet.

Once again, considerable numbers of students failed 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 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 is somewhat puzzling. 63% achieved 3 or 4 marks, which is generally steady but 17% gained no marks at all and 1% failed to attempt the question. A significant number of students wrote about the wrong text, despite being specifically directed to Source C, twice, in emboldened font, at the beginning of the question. Some students also failed to read the word “**two**” in regard to the number of purposes required for identification and offered the same purpose in both parts of the question, thereby immediately losing at least half the marks. Students should be reminded at every opportunity that a test of reading includes the questions as well as the sources.

Question 14

Students were asked to select six ways to reduce the amount of sugar in the diet, a task which proved reasonably accessible. 67% achieved 4 or above; 15% gaining full marks. However, 3% achieved zero marks and 1% failed to attempt. Where students did less well, it related to offering answers from their own knowledge rather than from the text, or failing to specifically relate their points to the task of reducing sugar. Thus, “*Eat nuts*” in itself is not creditworthy but “*Eat nuts instead of biscuits*” would gain the mark.

Question 15

Students were asked to summarise what the British Dental Museum has to offer and why a trip there would be appealing, the latter point being a test of implication. This proved to be quite a difficult task: generally, the lifting of information about the activities and resources was well done but the majority found it difficult to say anything meaningful about the appeal of the museum. 33% gained 4 marks or better; 3% achieved no marks and almost 4% failed to attempt the task.

Question 16

Performance on this question remains reasonably stable, albeit disappointing. Only 11% were awarded full marks and a further 26% scored 3 marks. 14% gained no marks and 4% failed to attempt the question. Source B offered a wealth of visual elements on which to comment and there were some excellent analyses of this source but also some empty generic responses rearing their heads again. 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 the March series but somewhat lower than that in June 2017. There is clear evidence of some excellent teaching in places evidenced by many sound responses, but performance is patchy. The most disappointing 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. As with the Level 1 paper, if useful advice and knowledge about dental health and reducing sugar has been internalised via this examination, the smiles of future generations will benefit.

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 write a leaflet about cybercrime in response to stimulus material that pointed out how prevalent this dangerous aspect of modern life can be. The question asked students to produce a response that would be suitable for all ages.

Most answers produced texts that were clearly meant to provide readers with sound information and advice about cybercrime. Students generally approached the task by providing an introduction which defined cybercrime and then went on to outline the best ways to deal with it. The leaflet form varied in the level of appropriateness but most answers showed that the students had a clear model in mind.

The best answers addressed the task of ensuring suitability for all ages very effectively. Many focused on the ways in which scammers target vulnerable old people in order to defraud them of savings or other assets. Readers were advised never to provide details of bank accounts or passwords of any form. This kind of sound advice was often linked to a tone which showed a strong awareness of the fact that older people tend not to be as technologically 'savvy' as younger people. Students helped their readers by providing clear, organised descriptions of the ways in which fraud can occur and the steps needed to address it. Of course, online fraud is only one area of cybercrime and strong answers looked closely at other aspects such as identity theft, bullying and even grooming. Sensitivity to the ways in which bullies use mobile phone applications and social media in particular to target younger victims was very evident. Sound advice focused on the need to speak to an adult either inside or outside of the family, including the police, and within the school or college context this appropriate adult was often a head of year or counsellor.

Because this question addressed a topic that was of relatively recent provenance, there was, in the best answers, an evident attempt to use language that was neither too technical nor too simplistic. It was necessary in some cases for the writer to introduce technical jargon such as 'IP address' without losing the reader and the best answers did this. Good answers also used an appropriate tone to provide advice with a good balance of well-constructed imperative and declarative sentences.

Weaker answers tended to fall into two types. The first type took one of the areas in the stimulus material such as bullying and focused on that alone, which undermined the functionality of the leaflet they were writing. Many such answers tended to drift into the wider manifestation of bullying in terms of face to face confrontation and physical assault. One or two of these answers were actually sound enough but simply did not address the cybercrime aspect of the task and although this would not automatically produce a fail for the student, it would mean that the mark for content would be at the bottom of the band, or possibly in the band below, depending on the overall weakness of response. The second type of weaker answers understood the need to cover a range of material but left the content undeveloped in the form of, say, bullet-pointed lists. In such cases, students often mentioned the threat but did little to provide protective advice. In weaker answers, language was often inadequate to the task, either too simple or poorly structured.

Question 2

This was familiar territory for which students were often very well prepared, which might go some way in explaining a strong performance on this question. The question entailed an area of functional writing which is of immense importance to young people in particular, namely the writing of an application for employment, although in this case the prize was an internship opportunity rather than a job. Students were asked to write an email to their local council via Jenny to whom the email was specifically addressed. The email was expected to contain information about the student's suitability for the internship as well as indicating preference in terms of skill training.

Students were likely to have met this kind of task before so answers displayed an awareness of the need to make a positive case to the reader. 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 the student's background effectively, by providing relevant information about educational achievement, work experience and training. They also provided believable content that was tailored to the skills that were selected for the internship. A strong emphasis on the chosen skill area was often the key aspect of the answer as students explored their own interest in the skill area and put forward a strong case. Some students who expressed an interest in the parks and gardens option explained that they had been interested in horticulture and

gardening for many years. Some said that they actively maintained their own, or a relative's garden or managed an allotment. It was this level of detail in whatever skill area, combined with an enthusiastic tone that was at the heart of the best answers. In many cases, a range of simple and complex sentences alongside an ambitious vocabulary, was deployed in a very competent manner, ensuring that the application was both persuasive and interesting.

The selection of suitable material was an important element of the mark scheme and it was disappointing to come across potentially very strong answers that were undermined by overstated academic qualifications (e.g. Oxford PhD in astrophysics) or dubious work experience such as running a highly successful chain of restaurants.

As we have seen of late Band 2 students tended to work through the main points with a small amount of development on one or two. Such responses sometimes lacked any significant sense of persuasion, leaving the reader aware of a student's suitability for the post in terms of experience and qualifications but without any real sense that the student actually wanted to take up the internship. 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. A very low percentage of students fell into the Band 1 category at an average of only 5% for each question. This is very heartening and shows that centres have generally realistic views of their students' potential.

Accuracy

There was a better performance in Question 1 than Question 2 in regards to the achievement of 4 or more marks for accuracy. Question 1 produced 54% at this standard while Question 2 produced 49%. In this series, the statistical evidence pointed to approximately 44% 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: 'Basic spelling was sound with errors running alongside attempts at a more extensive level of expression; sentence punctuation was again the most obvious area of weakness in punctuation even when structures were limited to simple statements'

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
- words commonly misspelled: social, interested, engineer, qualified, library, serial number, receipt, reference, account, scamming,
- elision leading to confusion, as in 'I feel want apply internship'
- agreement of subject and verb as in 'we was..'

Finally, the Principa; 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.