# AQA

# 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.

The March Level 1 paper focused on cybercrime and cyber security. Performance on the multiple choice questions was largely satisfactory apart from Q1 where 50% of students did not identify that the main purpose of Source A was to inform readers what happened to the UK's youngest hacker. Significant numbers opted for *"persuade teenagers not to get involved in hacking"* and although this might definitely be cited as a valid result of reading this text, it was not its **main** purpose.

**Question 7**

Students were presented with a leaflet containing information about the risks of not having secure passwords and advice on how to create strong passwords.

In 7a, students were asked to list four consequences of not having a strong password and this proved challenging for many, with 19% failing to score any marks and 33% achieving 3 or 4 marks. Students failed to secure marks when they neglected to base their responses on the text and offered ideas from their own knowledge.  A further error was in a lack of answers specific to the nature of cybercrime, eg *"people can get hacked"* would not have been given a mark, but "*people's email/bank accounts can get hacked*" would have gained the mark.  In the same way, *"people could use your credit card to buy things"* needed the clarification "*online*" to make it a valid response.

In 7b, students were much more successful when asked to cite four things people should not do when creating and using a password.  Over 60% achieved 3 or 4 marks and 3% scored zero. Where responses were not successful, it tended to be because the key word **"not"** in the question had been missed (despite being emboldened), and things which people **should** do were offered instead.

It is worth constantly reminding these students that the test of reading includes the whole of the questions as well as the texts and that responses must always come from the texts.

**Question 8**

Success rates on this question are still far too low: just 3% gained the full 4 marks – the same proportion as achieved 0 marks.  Identification of presentational aspects is reasonably well done but explanations of how these elements aid meaning are largely very generalised and disappointing. There is a worrying tendency for some students to offer what appear to be pre-learned devices, regardless of whether they are present in the current text, eg bullet points and sub-titles.  It is a very risky strategy to assume that such features will always be present.  As long as the standard for explaining the effect of a text's presentation is being tested, students must be

encouraged to look at the current text and make comments relating specifically to that text.  The advice and guidance offered in previous reports is once again repeated below.

Generalised comments on colours or pictures, such as "it 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. Most students know that these texts will generally 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.

At 10.2, the mean mark this series was slightly lower than the equivalent series in 2017. However, this is no cause for concern and indicates that the bulk of good, steady teaching and engaged approach to the papers are solid and consistent. This indicates some extremely good teaching and development of reading skills, for which staff and students are to be commended and urged to continue.  Non-selective copying in Q7 and careless commenting on the visual aspects of the text in Q8 sometimes undermine performance and should be roundly discouraged.

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.

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 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 consider improvements to their local area following an input of funding from the National Lottery. The task required students to write a letter to their local council making suggestions for improvement to a specific place. The stimulus material for the question took the form of a leaflet which put the student task into context. As is the case with these questions, the 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 showing a sense of interest and pride in their local area. Many students, however, took the requirement to write about a single place to mean a single aspect or feature of their local area. They often wrote about parks, for instance. This was not considered to be an issue and students taking this approach were not penalised in any way.

The best answers tended to be those where the students were really quite specific in the improvements that were sought. In one strong example, a student wrote about the benefits of a skate park: a clear location for the park was identified and the benefits of the park presented in terms of self-expression for the young as well as the accruing health benefits for all ages. Other good answers suggested upgrading the housing stock, with the need to take the homeless off the street the long term goal. Predictable, but nevertheless very sound, suggestions involved the creation of shopping malls with cinemas and other facilities. One or two students saw a role for the improvement of cultural aspects such as local libraries, community centres and youth clubs. However, the bulk of the answers at all levels seemed to target improvements to parks and public spaces. Although this was hinted at in the stimulus material, there does seem to be an undercurrent of desire here that might point to the erosion of civic standards in an age of austerity.

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.

Nearly 50% of students achieve a comfortable placing in Band 2 for content. The Band 2 descriptors recognize an element of relevance and the provision of limited information on the topic with limited structural elements and evidence of purpose. Such answers tend to present a very simple series of statements with little in the way of development. Students might write something such as '..and I would like monkey bars and swings..' which indicate a very straightforward relationship with the task. A number of students in Band 2 who show some skill and potential fail to reach Band 3 because they lose sight of the task and present a rather undisciplined and over long response that would seriously undermine its functional purpose.

In the main, weaker responses generally contained very little and struggled to convey clear information through a restricted use of language and structure. Marks in Band 3 are rare with less than 5% of the overall candidature in this category.

**Question 2**

This question offered students a straightforward, probably quite familiar scenario and one that students are generally well prepared for. The questions asked students to write an email to Kelsey Freeman, manager of Foodbox, an online food delivery service. The task entailed the writing of a complaint about the service.

Generally, students performed slightly less well  on this question in that there was a dip in performance for Band 2 answers which fell behind Question 1 but only by about 3.5% or so and

there were rather more blank answers (but below 4%). This is almost certainly due to some students spending less time on this question.

Most students were able to deal with the question effectively. The key task here for the student is to provide relevant information that would enable them to put together a functional email. The stimulus material provided a number of claims that students could counter in their answer, while the bullet points enabled them to work towards an effective structure. The best students provided ample and clearly identified relevant information that would serve as evidence in the case they were making. Many of these answers focused on one specific aspect of service, such as the quality of the food but a significant proportion of answers had multiple issues with the company. These stronger answers tended to contain information that was credible, and such aspects as the date and time of order, the specific food ordered and the exact length of time awaiting delivery were well deployed to make a strong case. In many answers, it was the rudeness of the staff which was the most significant failing and this justified the feelings of disappointment and anger that students wrote about. Good answers structured and developed points very effectively with an appropriately diplomatic tone. Sentences were clear and recommendations for improvement were often brought in to conclude the email in an often positive and sometimes conciliatory way.

For this question it was also the case that the style and tone of the answer was a key discriminator. The use of an appropriate vocabulary to provide the key points of evidence was supported by a move into the language of feeling. Good students also held themselves back from abuse, threats or the use of inappropriate language. Some students remained on a mark of 4, where a little more discipline and control might have taken them into Band 3.

Students at the bottom of Band 2 and below provided very limited information in addressing the first bullet, or provided information that was unclear or irrelevant. Emails tended to show very limited context for their complaint and often listed a few points to justify the email. In some cases, students wrote at some length, sometimes using effective spelling, but the content lacked any coherence or structure.

**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 rather more troubling performance at the bottom end of the mark scheme, where nearly 20% or so received marks of 2 or less.  For the less able students a 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. Many students use no punctuation whatsoever. Examiners continue to identify inconsistency in the use of upper case with some 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. It is sometimes the case that able students underperform significantly because their typing skills are inconsistent. Examiners are not able to give credit for what the student intends, but what the student does. This is something that I am sure centres will address.

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
- errors with apostrophes in contracted forms or omitted entirely
- subject/verb agreement issues with 'we was' a common occurrence
- upper case was randomly present in answers
- common spelling mistakes such as 'costmer', 'hygen', 'propely' 'toddilers' 'climing'
- inconsistent tenses or verb agreement was an issue for some
- syntax often very challenging for some students
- 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.