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# 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.

## Component 1 Reading

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

November saw a theme of football introduced into the papers, with multiple choice questions based on a leaflet promoting the Old Trafford Stadium Tour. The papers drew a good response and the subject matter seemed popular.

Unusually for Level 1, two of the multiple choice questions proved particularly problematic this series:

### Question 2

The correct answer here was “the Red Café is not open every day”. The students who gained the mark here did so because their careful reading of the text correctly noted “the café...is open to the public every day, **except on weekend match days**”. A large proportion of students chose “the tour finished in the Megastore”: it does not – the text advises participants to collect their certificate from the Megastore once they finish the tour.

### Question 4

This question required students to identify the main point being made about the stadium tour. Those who had correctly chosen “persuade people to go on the Old Trafford Stadium Tour” in Question 1 were better placed to realise that Question 4 was asking about the strongest selling point, this being that the tour “has won a local tourism award”. Only a minority of students scored the mark here; the majority of students incorrectly chose “has been running for 130 years”: this statistic refers to the club not the tour. Many students opted for “includes a visit to the players’ dressing room”. Whilst this is true, it is not the **main** point. Students could helpfully be taught that just because something is factually accurate, it does not signify that it is the main point sought. There will rarely be an option which is so incorrect as to be obviously wrong. More careful, thoughtful reading would have eradicated these errors.

### Question 7

Question 7a was based on four things someone could learn on a refereeing course and was very well done overall, with a majority of students gaining full marks. Where marks were lost, it was either as a result of presenting information about what a referee needs to know rather than what s/he could learn on this course; or by simply offering the module titles – a short-cut which would not gain credit.

Question 7b saw a stronger performance with a large majority of students gaining full marks for identifying four things which would be provided to participants on the referees course. Too many students, however, simply copied the bullet point list without seeming to notice that four of these needed to be provided by participants themselves. Students should be reminded at every

opportunity that just copying chunks of text in this examination 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 not needed or desired.

### Question 8

This is still an area of concern with a small minority of students failing to score any marks and an even small number of students achieving full marks. 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. Generic comments such as “the headline tells you what the text is about” will not be rewarded, as they could apply to almost any text. Students must make a comment which is specific to the particular text in question. However, it is concerning to see that some students seem to have absolutely no idea what is meant by “presentation” and be unaware of the need to comment on the visual aspects of the text.

Despite these elements of weaker performance, some encouraging work was seen: a strong proportion of students achieved marks of 16 and above, with some even gaining full marks on the paper. Achievement overall remains steady with a mean mark of 12, indicating some excellent teaching and solid progress.

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 them for the demands of this test and they are to be commended for their 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 achieving at least 4 marks for content. In this series, many of the students who achieved 15 marks or more, would be well suited to the demands of Level 2 and 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.

### Question 1

This question asked students to write a letter of application to Andrea McPherson of the Palmerston Garden Centre. The students were asked to indicate what aspects of the work of the centre that they would like to undertake (gift shop, café or gardens) and on what basis, whether full or part time. They were also asked to provide information about their skills and experience and

what would make them a good choice for the job. There were virtually no unattempted answers and all others knew exactly what was required of them. It should also be said that most students are now well prepared for questions of this sort.

The best answers established a clear sense of purpose by adopting an appropriate letter form and a suitable mode of address. Students explained how they had come across the advertisement, then informed Andrea McPherson, to whom the letter was directed, of their specific interests, background, skills and why they would be good for the post. Some revealed that they had a background in horticulture, whether at a hobby level or in a more vocational capacity. Many strong students also indicated their love of flowers and how that was behind their application. A number of students expressed an interest in more specific aspects of floristry, such as display where a sense of colour and balance was important. Others had some retail experience and were able to inform Ms McPherson of their experience at the till or in stocktaking. Not only were such students able to provide highly relevant information about their experience, but many were able to write a little more generally about the skills that they believed were crucial in any job, teamwork in particular, as this was highlighted in the advertisement itself. Relevant vocabulary, at times very impressive, was utilised and sentence structure enhanced the impact of the letter.

Only about a small number of students failed to reach a mark of 4 or more for the content element on this question and these tended to fall down, not so much on the form of the letter, but on the very thin content that was supplied. Some students said little more than that they wanted the job and could start at any time. The baldness of the content was immediately evident answers of this sort. At the very least, it is necessary for the examiners to see evidence of the topic and (limited) information. This is very difficult to find in such answers and whilst brevity in itself is not penalised, when sentence structure and grammar are poor and sentences incoherent, the brevity does become a major issue. Other answers, longer and unstructured, tended to have very little relevant information and simply provided information that the reader needed to decode to see any link to the topic. The kind of answers fell down on purpose meeting the descriptor in the Mark Scheme: 'limited evidence of purpose of letter to present a case for employment.'

## Question 2

This question offered students another familiar task, namely writing a complaint to a company which has provided a service to them. In this case, students were asked to approach a clothing repair company Stitchright1, via an email to the manager, Jenny Chang. Clearly, with a named recipient, the email would retain many of the formal qualities of a letter of complaint. This was an opportunity for most students to write about something that they had experienced for themselves and to enable them to incorporate detailed narrative to provide the backbone of the complaint. Most students also ensured that they indicated why they were unhappy.

One variant reading cropped up a number of times when students wrote about a defective sewing machine, rather than a repair service. When this approach was adopted, students were not penalised per se, but the misreading of the question often accompanied weak answers.

As with previous questions of this sort, the best students use a range of narrative and persuasive skills to get across their experience with Stritchright1. For many, the bullet points provided a clear structure to the answer. Understandably, the first bullet point was the one which tended to produce most of the information as this was primarily narrative. Stritchright1's failures tended to be of three sorts: failures in repairing clothing; rudeness of staff; communication and cost. Failure to repair clothing often caused major family trauma, at weddings or parties while rudeness tended to assume rather familiar aspects with lack of respect for the customer at the heart of it, shown in long delays, offensive language and occasional abuse. In regards to communication and pricing, some

students pointed out that the advertisement indicated friendliness and free coffee when neither were actually present. A number of students picked up on the disparity between the original quoted price and the price they were actually forced to pay. All of this material was relevant and led the students into the second bullet point where they were able then to express feeling. Here, the best students shifted the tone a little and used an appropriately emotive style, often with the use of effective rhetorical questions such as ‘How would you like...?’ With regards to the final bullet point good answers pointed to a request for compensation, apology or having the work re-done, all of which are absolutely valid responses. Where threats crept in, the functional purpose was undermined and this was reflected in the final mark.

Weaker students (at the bottom of Band 2 and below) provided very limited information in response to the first bullet, or provided information that was unclear or irrelevant, and sometimes the topic was only barely evident. Factual information about Stitchright<sup>1</sup> was delivered through the use of simple statements, often in unpunctuated sentences that were difficult to decipher. Some weaker students failed to understand the nature of the task (but see above) and seemed to write a job application. Again, very poor spelling, punctuation and grammar massively disadvantaged weaker students. One examiner said ‘There were still inappropriate starts/tone - Hi or Hello - to e-mails which are complaining about a service’, and this points to the need for centres to look at appropriate tone and style, even at very basic levels.

### **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. However, on Question 2, a small proportion of students stayed in the bottom band. If anything, this points to the impact of time pressure on weaker students and the need to ensure that time management skills are worked on.

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 candidate’s work will fall into Band 1 for accuracy.

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.

The importance of checking writing should also be emphasised. 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 candidate would score well for either content or accuracy. However performance in on-screen tests is improving each series.

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 candidate's answer
- mistakes with the use of past tense

- agreement issues with was/were seemed to be an increasing problem
- upper case was randomly present in answers
- usage such as 'Past eight years, I...' instead of 'For the past eight years, I...'
- common spelling mistakes such as 'bunton' (button), 'dere', 'shope' 'you'r', 'peple', 'stuf', 'intreasted'
- 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'.

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

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