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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.

The theme for January 2017 was camping, a webpage about hiring a GlamperVan providing the focus for the multiple choice questions. These were largely accessible, with one exception as follows:

### Question 5

Just under half of students gained the mark for this question which was simply asking for retrieval of information regarding the booking of a GlamperVan. The correct option was “*safety instructions will be given before the trip*”. All three of the incorrect options were chosen in almost equal proportions by the students who failed to score, indicating that this was a challenging, but well-discriminating question.

### Question 7

Question 7a required students to list four things a family should take with them when camping, and was very accessible with a large majority of students achieving full marks. Where marks were lost, it was largely as a result of generic information being offered, such as: “*Remember hygiene and medical needs*” rather than specifics such as “*sunscreen*”. As ever, performance was undermined when students failed to extract the information from the text, preferring to draw on their own knowledge of camping, this occasionally giving rise to some interesting suggestions such as “*a lifejacket*”!

Question 7b was less well done, just over half of students gained full marks for four pieces of advice to keep children safe at a festival. The main cause of lost marks here was copying of information without fully understanding it, so that essential parts of the text were missed out. For example; the instruction to “*write your mobile number on the inside of your kids’ wristband*” was presented as “*write your mobile number on the inside of your kids*” – a response which did not get a mark, although providing a moment of light relief. Equally, omission of the final word from the suggestion to “*dress your kids in something distinctive*” also provided some amusement but failed to score. 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 neither necessary nor desirable.

### Question 8

Performance on this question remains disappointing with very few students achieving full marks and a significant number scoring zero. Sadly, it appears that many students arrive at the

examination expecting to see, for example, sub-headings and pictures and cite these options with a generalised comment such as “it tells you what the paragraph will be about/makes it stand out”. If there is no evidence that the comments relate to the particular text under scrutiny, the marks are likely to be withheld.

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. Some students failed to attempt the question at all, either because they ran out of time or, more worryingly, because they did not know how to approach a question about presentation.

The general picture, however, is promising and a few students gained full marks. This indicates solid progress based on excellent teaching, for which teachers should be commended.

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 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 hitting at least 4 marks for content. Once again in this series, over half of the students at the top end of the distribution gained total marks of 15 or more and these students, well suited to the demands of Level 2, 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. 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 the importance of parks in the local community, by asking students to write to the local council in support of the Cleaner Park Group, a local activist organization. Students were invited to inform the council of the state of the parks, their own experience of parks and what should be done to improve them.

The best answers established a clear sense of purpose by adopting an appropriate letter form and a suitable mode of address for a local authority readership. Students generally explained why they were writing and then explored the issue with local parks. Very strong students at this point introduced a more general consideration, namely the role that parks and public spaces play in the life, culture and general health of the community. Specific examples of negligence and dereliction emerged in a range of responses but they tended to fall into categories that were provided in the stimulus material such as litter, vandalism, dangerous paths etc. Students who achieved marks of 4 or more for content, however, did not simply list these issues, but went on to explore the point

made in some detail. Where a pond was mentioned, for example, the danger to wildlife and fish was often presented and where vandalism was referred to, the worrying blight of challenging and sometimes obscene graffiti tended to dominate the discussion. Strong answers sometimes took on a clearly personal quality (as the second bullet in the question invites) with vivid and sometimes worrying accounts of unpleasantness with local youths, or the need to protect a child from inappropriate language. To complete the task, students then made very solid suggestions in terms of practical measures such as providing more litter bins, or organising graffiti cleaning days. Quite a number of students saw the need to invest funding into parks and others suggested setting up community groups that would play a role in maintaining the standards of the parks.

Students who gained less than 4 marks for content tended to fall down in a number of categories. Firstly tone: weaker answers were accusatory and confrontational, often using the direct question 'What are you going to do about it?' as the main plank of their response. Students need to develop a more nuanced approach to letters of this sort and exemplar material should be sought out and provided. Secondly, detail: weaker answers had very little specific detail and many relied simply on the words of the question to provide content. This paucity of content is often a function of failure in planning and thinking the answer through. Students should be encouraged to think clearly about the task and use the stimulus material as the foundation for the development of clear content rather than the source of that content via copying or close paraphrase. Thirdly, structure and language: some answers barely incorporated letter form and addressed the task without any sense of context. In such cases expression was often poor and meaning only just present, with a simple and inappropriate vocabulary adopted. As I have said many times before, though, answers of this sort are rare.

## Question 2

This question was a far more transactional task in familiar territory. Students were asked to contact Party Poppaz, a company providing services in setting up social gatherings and parties. The company's claims were provided in an advertisement as part of the stimulus material of the question and students were invited to request specific details in order to organise a party for 'family and friends'.

The better answers saw the need for transparency in presenting their party needs. Date, time and location of the party was always included, as were other highly relevant features such as the numbers attending, the age spread and the gender balance. Such students then went on to explain what kind of party was intended. Students often had highly developed themed approaches, where colour, music and costume were linked. Details were appropriately specific, with brand names, artists and other features playing a part. Food was often left until the latter end of the answer and often simply listed standard party fare such as sandwiches, colas and the like. More adventurous students saw food as part of the party's theme and suggested menus which might be colour specific or geographically focused. Often a cake would be the highlight of the party. Students who were able to put across a rationale for their choice of party features were often able to generate a coherence that ran across several paragraphs. Those on a mark of 4 tended simply to itemise their requests and such answers, though specific and developed, still remained in Band 2.

Weaker answers showed awareness of the task and the topic but failed to provide appropriate detail or simply presented a list of requests without any contextualising aspects. These answers often failed to provide the basic information required, such as date, time or any other identifying feature. In some cases, poor spelling and sentence structure got in the way of the information and although it appeared to be present, on closer reading the overall impact was quite insubstantial.

Performance on Question 2 was significantly weaker than on Question 1 and a larger number of students did not reach a mark of 4. The reasons for this are often down to time management and

the need to race to complete the paper. Functional English by necessity will always contain transactional questions of this sort and there is therefore a clear need to encourage students to tackle these questions with as much energy as those in which content might have a more emotional or personal appeal.

## 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.

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 student's work will fall into Band 1.

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.

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:

- very poor or extremely small handwriting is problematic in judging the accuracy of the student's answer
- 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'.
- 'could of' instead of 'could have'
- misspelling of common words: 'writting', 'defiantly' for 'definitely'; 'abit'; 'volintier'; 'are' for 'our' and similar errors; 'danceing'; 'heros'; 'stard' (instead of 'start')
- incomplete past participle such as: 'crack' instead of 'cracked' as in 'the path was crack'; 'recommend' instead of 'recommended' as in 'I was recommend';

## Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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