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# Functional Skills

# **ENGLISH**

Level 2

Report on the Examination

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4725

Jan 2018

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Version: 1.0

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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 theme for the January 2018 series was dogs. Students found the multiple choice questions on Source A - a newspaper report about the Dangerous Dogs Act – more challenging than usual. In particular, the following questions had low success rates:

### Question 4

When asked to select what the report was implying, only 30% of students realised that the report was suggesting the Act should stay as it is, the vast majority choosing the opposite option of “needs reforming”.

### Question 6

This question tested the students' ability to select the most appropriate response to the text for someone worried about the findings in the report. Having discussed both sides of the arguments around the suitability of the Dangerous Dogs Act, the report concluded that the Act was operating successfully and that dogs categorised as dangerous were no more of a risk to humans than those not labelled so. Therefore, the option to “find out which dogs are dangerous and banned”, selected by 64% of students was not the most sensible option. The correct answer of “find out how to treat dog bites” was selected by so few that one can only assume this was dismissed as not worthy of consideration.

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.

Source B was an advice sheet for dog owners and students found the multiple choice questions here far more accessible, with success rates ranging from 52-85%.

### Question 13

48% achieved 3 or 4 marks on this question requiring identification of purposes, but 17% achieved no marks and 3% failed to attempt the question at all. Some students are still inexplicably using the wrong source; others offer the same purpose, despite the question clearly asking for “two different purposes”. Still others seem to have no understanding of how to approach the question or select randomly from the list of purposes, apparently without reading the text.

### Question 14

This required students to read the text relating the experience of working as a police dog handler, then select six tasks a police dog might be expected to do. This was a very straightforward question and those who read the question largely achieved 5 or 6 marks (58%). Unfortunately, a significant number offered six tasks a police dog handler might do as part of his/her job: thus 17% scored zero, with a further 1.5% not attempting the question. It should not need saying that careful reading of the question is essential.

### Question 15

The summary question this series was a simple task requiring students to select information and advice regarding a dog's diet and exercise needs. 35% managed to score 4 marks or more. Sadly, considerable numbers of entrants were self-penalising by including irrelevant information about high temperatures in cars, play or excessive barking, none of which were required. This seems to be attributable to either failing to read the question or just indiscriminate copying, neither of which is the way to success.

There were, as ever, some very overlong responses: it is an ongoing issue for some of the most dutiful students whose version of success is writing as much as possible. In preparing students for this question there must be an emphasis on selecting relevant information and presenting it as succinctly as possible, preferably with some use of own words. Students need to know that fewer marks will be awarded for overlong responses. Useful practice in class would be to highlight what could be left out of a text while still retaining the salient points.

### Question 16

Once again, Q16 elicited poor performance. Only 7% achieved full marks, with a further 19% scoring 3. The latter group clearly identified two relevant presentational devices but were able to successfully explain the effect of only one. 16% scored no marks; 6% failed to attempt the question. There were obvious and relatively straightforward features in both sources, on which meaningful comments could be made but there is far too little willingness to venture beyond those empty, generic responses which continue to plague this question and which have been bemoaned in successive previous reports.

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.

Teachers have done some excellent work on this question and there are some high calibre comments which are a delight to read and would be worthy of high marks on the legacy GCSE. Unfortunately, too many students are let down by their lack of awareness of how to approach this question.

Given the errors seen this series, it is not surprising to note a reduction in the mean mark to just over 17. 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 into 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. The texts themselves seemed interesting and engaging to students, many of whom demonstrated a great interest in, knowledge of and love for man's best friend.

## **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, nearly 20% 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 often appropriate.

This examination is excellent preparation for the GCSE English/English Language Unit 2 and with its focus on functionality it is likely to be well suited to future specifications. 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 even 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 send an email to Oi Lin at World Tastes Exotic Catering to arrange a 'special party for a friend's birthday'. The stimulus material provided significant pointers for students.

In this question, the most successful answers were those who worked through the bullet points and were able to develop clear information in a range of categories to provide to Oi Lin. These answers tended to involve a wealth of context. In particular the subject of the party was the focus of many answers; that person's age and interests, and tastes in food were used as the basis of the party plan. Party themes were a constant factor: colour, super-hero, 1960s, fancy dress and so forth. Moving further into the answer, students addressed the specifics of food with well thought out menus and table arrangements. There were many surprise parties and requests to Oi Lin to adopt a level of secrecy in the delivery. A number of requests involved dietary vigilance and students were often very forthright about what food would not be appropriate. Party numbers ranged from intimate friends to large gatherings of almost convention size and budgets ranged vastly in the amount allocated per head. What was impressive about these good answers was the clarity of structure which enabled the reader (Oi Lin) to know exactly what would be required for the event and in this way the emails were strongly functional. Although the primary role of the email was to

provide information, a good number of students wrote very movingly about their friends, which often made reading a distinct pleasure.

Students at or around the top end of Band 2 tended to approach clarity but with only 'some' convincing detail and information and although the word 'exotic' was clearly flagged in the stimulus material a lot of students tended to fall back on simple everyday food. The term 'special party' was included in the wording to elicit responses that were more than just a regular weekend gathering to watch a film or play computer games. Students need to look closely at the stimulus material as there are always clear pointers to an effective answer.

Less successful were those who asked questions of what could be provided and therefore were not so clear on the function/purpose of providing information. The weakest were, again, undeveloped answers where there was simply not enough information to go above a limited response to function. Some answers read like a takeaway order, rather than a more elaborate and considered party plan. It was the lack of detail here which held such answers at or below 4 marks. At the very bottom end, there were a number of students whose level of expression was some considerable distance from Band 2 and these would be better placed at Level 1.

## **Question 2**

Students were asked to respond to a leaflet in which informed readers about plans for a snooker hall and night club to be built locally. They were asked to write a persuasive letter to the Chief Planning Officer of Wickby with their views about these proposals. Breaking with well established precedent, students generally performed better in this question than they did for Question 1: 54% of students reached a mark of 6 or more for content on Question while 62% reached the same mark on Question 2. Examiners suggested that this was almost certainly due to the emotive quality of many of the answers and the need to provide a persuasive response.

The use of the correct letter format has certainly improved of late and was much in evidence in Q2 responses. Many responses treated the two developments as separate entities with a general level of approval for the snooker club alongside more general misgivings as to events at the night club. Strong answers generally provided an initial position followed by supporting information to establish the persuasive impact. Students looked at the problems of the proposals from a number of angles. One line of argument was that there would be environmental damage caused by the building work, with heavy traffic and noise providing further concerns. Some students very cleverly wove in concern for local wildlife into their answer. A second area of concern was the impact of a night club in the local area which would eject its customers after 2 am, thereby causing disturbance in the quiet residential areas. There were many good answers that deployed emotive argument to support this position. For example some said that older, retired people had expected a quiet life after many years of hard work and the night club would effectively ruin this. A third line of argument suggested that there would be an increase in crime and dangerous driving as a result of the late licence in the night club.

Not all strong answers opposed the proposals. There were a lot of answers that suggested that the snooker hall would bring the community together and that activities such as competitions and exhibitions could only be of benefit to the local area. It was also suggested that there would be a significant boost to the local economy.

Answers gaining between 4 and 6 marks for content often contained some information and lines of argument that reflected the concerns of better answers but were undeveloped. 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.

Students scoring 3 or fewer marks for content came in around 6% and these students would really benefit from looking at gaining Level 1 if they have not already done so. If they already have a Level 1 qualification a great deal of supportive work is needed to lift such students towards the top end of Band 2 and the possibility of a pass at this level.

### **Accuracy**

There was a better performance in Question 2 than Question 1 in regards to the achievement of 4 or marks for accuracy. Question 1 produced 61% at this standard while Question 2 produced 64% which is actually a better performance than the recent November series or the summer of 2017, but this might be expected in a re-sit context. In this series, the statistical evidence pointed to approximately 37% of students on 3 marks or lower for accuracy on Question 1 and 32% 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: 'Accuracy levels seemed similar to the last two series. It could be that students are being taught to play safe - with general accuracy confined to those who stayed with reasonably simple sentence structures and a prosaic vocabulary. It was usually in those students showing a little more ambition in their expression that punctuation and spelling errors were more frequent; although, in these latter cases, usually with little effect on meaning so that it was possible to give 4/5 marks depending on the level of intrusion..'

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 apostrophe
- 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
- the use of speech marks for indirect speech
- simple errors – 'dosen't', environment, louad, drastisly...
- control of tense
- agreement of subject and verb as in 'we was..'

Finally, 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. 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.