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# Functional Skills

# **ENGLISH**

Level 2

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 theme for the June 2017 series was food, which appeared to be a very popular topic, producing many engaged and lively responses. The multiple choice questions were overall well done but a couple proved more problematic than others and are worthy of scrutiny here. Both were based on Source A, a leaflet advertising Social Bite - a socially responsible sandwich shop chain offering free food, drink and employment to homeless people.

### Question 4

This question asked students to detect implication in the leaflet, the correct answer being “other sandwich businesses are only interested in making money”. The majority of incorrect respondents selected “homeless people would starve without food from Social Bite”. Perhaps the low accuracy rate of 45% on this question is a pleasing testament to the lack of cynicism in the students.

### Question 6

This question required selection of the most likely response after reading this leaflet. Over 1/3 of students chose “make a donation to a homeless charity”, which would be a perfectly valid thing to do after reading this text. However, since the leaflet was all about Social Bite and finished with an invitation to donate towards the provision of free coffees in the shop, it should have been obvious that the **most likely** response would be “contribute to the Suspended Coffee scheme”, as recognised by 52% of entrants.

It would be worth reminding students preparing for this paper that very few of the options offered will be wholly or obviously wrong: the key to success is to work out the best/most accurate of the four choices.

There are still considerable numbers of students who do not 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. A further plea from the Principal Examiner relates to those students who use a computer to answer these questions. Some such students choose to type out the entire answer, which is unnecessary, wastes the student's time and is deeply unhelpful to the examiner. Could centres please ensure that only the letter A, B, C or D, relating to the chosen option is given by the student rather than the entire answer.

### Question 13

Compared to the previous series, there was a significant decrease in the numbers gaining full marks: 24% as opposed to 55% in March, but 13% did not gain any marks, which is difficult to understand. A noticeable number of students simply answered using the wrong source, while 1% did not attempt the question. A number of students continue to use “advise” in the incorrect sense of informing, while others inexplicably fail to use the given list of purposes.

### Question 14

The text for this question was a newspaper article about a project run by Sainsbury’s to cut food waste. Students were asked to select six practical strategies the company were employing to achieve this. 65% scored 4 or more on this, but only 8% achieved full marks. Students fell down when they offered advice to householders rather than identifying actions by the company, so that “giving households a free fridge thermometer” was awarded the mark but “use a fridge thermometer” was not. Another common error was to quote statistics and information about the quantity of food wasted which was simply not answering the question. Students could usefully be reminded that a test of reading includes reading of the question. Students will always do better if they are taught to extract the answer from the text very specifically rather than lift chunks of text in the hope that the correct option will be contained therein.

### Question 15

This question was based on Source B – an opinion piece about training to be a chef, which was clearly very accessible and appealing to a large number of students. The task of summarising the benefits and challenges of becoming a chef was very well done overall, 62% achieving 4 marks or better. However, since extracting information from the text was relatively straightforward, an element of crafting and assembling the response was needed for the award of full marks and only 4% achieved this. Sadly, 3% did not attempt the question.

The biggest problem with this question is that students forget or do not realise that it is a summary, i.e. the skill is not in writing as much as possible! Selecting a balance of the correct information and presenting it succinctly is what is required here. This series, large numbers of students submitted additional pages containing sometimes twice as much as had already been written in the answer booklet. Students need to know that these are not “summaries” and 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

It is dispiriting to report once again a disappointing performance on the presentational question. This series, for the first time, more students achieved 0 marks (16.6%) than full marks (14.4%). It is difficult to understand why this is. In Source B, the topic sentences were colour coded according to whether the paragraph was addressing a benefit or a challenge of training to be a chef. The use of a photograph with smiling chefs and a cartoon representation of a very angry chef also provided easily recognisable material for comment enabling some students to achieve full marks with ease. It is therefore inexplicable that so many continue to offer weak, generic comments such as “It makes it stand out”, which will never be credited. Some students simply do not know what “visual presentation” is.

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. A degree of accuracy is also desirable in the designation of presentational features, for instance, “sub-titles” are not the same as “sub-headings”. 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.

Overall, however, performance in this series was very pleasing, indicated by a mean mark of just over 20, suggesting a good deal of sterling work for which teachers and students should be commended.

Functional Skills remains a good test of reading and understanding; is a useful step to further English examinations and a benchmark for EAL learners. With the advent this summer of the new more rigorous GCSE English examinations, the role of Level 2 Functional Skills takes on new importance. The skills of close reading, understanding, selection, identification of bias, implication and point of view; purpose, audience and summary are all vital to success in GCSE English Language. Functional Skills therefore is an excellent vehicle in which to practise and develop these skills, possibly in Year 9 or 10, as preparation for GCSE. Those centres and teachers who are already working with such commitment on Functional Skills are very well-prepared for the use of this assessment as a stepping stone to the single entry GCSE or maybe as an alternative, credible English qualification for students unable to access the new GCSE.

## **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 confident in 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, a significant number of students achieved total marks of 15, which holds them back from qualification. The panel of examiners felt that this reflected the failure of some students to write fluently and confidently although the content was often appropriate.

This examination is excellent preparation for the GCSE English 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.

## **Question 1**

Question 1 invited students to write a positive review via email to [itsafivestar.com](https://www.itsafivestar.com) of something that they have experienced in their local area. The stimulus material highlighted the range of material that was invited as well as underlining the emphasis on positivity. An alternative approach to the task emerged in the answers of those students, approximately 25%, who wrote about positive

contributions they had made in their local community. Although this approach was based on a misinterpretation of the phrase ‘a positive review of something you have done...’ – students providing a review of something positive rather than a positive review – this was judged to be an acceptable response to the task and there were no penalties for taking this approach.

The question seemed to work very well and was tackled enthusiastically in the vast majority of responses seen by examiners. The intention was to elicit a mix of factual reporting alongside value judgement and the expression of personal preference. A significant number of stronger students were able to use the opportunity to write in a very familiar vein and chose to review local restaurants, theatrical events and so forth. Such answers tended to resort to the familiar phraseology of television food programmes with reference to delicate notes and bold flavours. Appreciative approaches also included reference to friendly and considerate service. Students did not simply throw approbation at their subject, but chose to support their views with clearly selected information. Some chose to review a pleasant day with family and friends, a perfectly valid response as the stimulus material hinted at this. These reviews were often charming in the way the students saw their own family, often accompanied by babies and pets and there was, of course, plenty of material on local attractions, parks being the most usual. Where students chose to write about something positive that they had done a considerable number wrote about local voluntary work which had notably increased the writer's self esteem. Others wrote about helping homeless people, not just through donation but through befriending and showing an interest. These simple and personal reviews often produced the best response with genuine social concern, appropriate voluntary action and a general sense of a future possibility blending in a response which clearly met the function.

Stronger answers showed a good range of sentence structure with a well developed and appropriate vocabulary which enabled students to write effectively about factual matters as well as dipping into a deep resource of language to expressive more reflective mode. In some answers where arts events or restaurants were reviewed the use of specialist terminology was impressive and in all good answers there was a strong use of affirmative adjectives and modifiers. Tonally, students wrote well about aspects of their lives that they saw as good, positive, effective or entertaining.

Weaker answers did not always fall down on tonal aspects when the content was relevant, but there was a failure to develop the material to hand. Simple narrative accounts, rounded off with rather brief (but nevertheless positive) comments were typical of students gaining 5 marks or fewer for content. As sentence structure is actually part of the content descriptors (an Ofqual requirement) students who struggle to manage their content effectively though the use of varied and grammatical sentences will not get into Band 3. On the other hand, it should be noted that only a very small percentage of students produced content that was in Band 1 and such students would need to develop all aspects of writing before they are likely to approach a Level 2 pass. It is not always appropriate to enter all of a centre's students into Level 2 unless a clear initial assessment is made and quite number of students would benefit from entering at Level 1 first.

## **Question 2**

This question required students to write a letter of complaint to Danny Banks, at ‘The Van Guy’. The stimulus material provided number of claims which students would be able to address in their response. Again, some students made valid assumptions about the nature of the work advertised and thus ‘The Van Guy’ was seen variously as: a van hire contractor, a mobile van repair company, a removals firm, a window cleaning company, a builder and a number of other roles. As the work of ‘The Van Guy’ was established as much through the picture as words, all valid interpretations of the question were accepted and no students were penalised.

The answers produced a litany of complaints ranging from professional error to the most severe damage to person and property. Grandparents and elderly acquaintances were often left tearful as expensive televisions, sofas and treasured family heirlooms were treated with abandon by either Danny or one of the company employees. Sometimes students focused on rude and uncivil behaviour which included smoking indoors, taking tea/coffee breaks without permission and using offensive language. Given that this type of question does depend on scenario that is there to be developed, it is not surprising that there are many lively accounts of undesirable events. The best students established a context for the letter, most of which emphasised the fact that the writer was an advocate, speaking on behalf of a relative whose inability to take up their own cause was clearly established. In the delineation of the events, students adopted a neutral and objective approach to the facts which were then used to further the writer's case. Thus there was a clear expression of opinion and judgement about the issues under complaint, where the writer was able to incorporate language that reflected moral and ethical values, which were often accompanied by revealing rhetorical questions. Finally, students approached the issue of compensation and the best answers requested fair treatment and not punitive amounts of money. In such letters, it is possible to slip into a mode of address that is abusive and threatening, but the best answers avoided this in their use of diplomatic and measured phrases. In fact, students often praised some aspects of 'The Van Guy' and explained that they thought the issues were untypical of the company. This is an effective writing strategy and it is heartening to see how students are able to adapt this to the specific needs of the question. As in Question 1, answers that were in Band 3 displayed a variety of sentences, often complex in structure, which reinforced the overall impact of the letter.

Weaker answers failed to gain marks for the following two reasons. Firstly, a bald and factual account that lacked detail and credibility was often followed by an unrealistic request for compensation, often attached to a threatening demand for an apology. The lack of relevant detail and thoughtful development often indicated lack of planning. The second area of weakness was the adoption of an abusive and belligerent tone to the letter, which sometimes invalidated the content itself.

### **Accuracy**

There was a better performance in Question 1 than Question 2 in regards to the achievement of 4 or marks for accuracy. Question 1 produced 55% at this standard while Question 2 produced 49% which is considerably lower overall than performance in March. 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: 'Technical accuracy still held up quite well. As ever, sentence punctuation and spelling of more ambitious vocabulary were the weak points but again there were many who produced a clear piece of work, somewhat unambitious in vocabulary and range of punctuation, but with a basic accuracy running through it, aiding clarity. As such, marks of 4/5 were quite common.'

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. In this series, the statistical evidence pointed to a very high percentage of students achieving a mark of 3

for accuracy (in the region of 35%) which is unlikely to lead to a pass at this level. 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
- failure to use upper case for proper nouns
- the use of speech marks for indirect speech
- simple errors – 'a lot', 'should of', 'given' instead of 'giving', 'kidz'
- control of tense
- inappropriate use of modal auxiliary verbs

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. 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.

## **Use of statistics**

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.

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

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