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# Functional Skills

# **ENGLISH**

Level 2

Report on the Examination

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4725

Nov 2016

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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.

## Component 1 Reading

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

The theme of the November series was football and this was very well received. Any risk of gender bias/disengagement was challenged by making the first source text a report about the growth and success of women's football. The multiple choice questions on Source A were unproblematic, with success rates ranging high across the six questions.

There were two slightly more tricky multiple choice questions on Source B – a webpage about a football journalism internship.

### Question 7

A large proportion of students failed to realise that the main purpose of this text was to “explain how the football internship works”. Failing to recognise the purpose of a text can have implications for later questions and students need to realise that there will rarely be answers which are very obviously wrong; that most options will contain an element of truth but that their task is to select the **main** purpose.

### Question 11

Fewer than half the students gained the mark here, the vast majority of those that did not failing to understand the colloquial nature of the term “flagship”.

The good news, however, is that, once again, the questions testing implication were largely very well done, so that is pleasing progress.

There are still considerable numbers of students who fail 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. 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 candidate'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 candidate rather than the entire answer.

### Question 13

A worrying feature in this series was the increase in the number of students using the wrong source. The instruction as to which source to use for each question is clearly emboldened and appears twice in the instructions to Q13; however, far too many students simply do not seem to

notice. It is difficult to understand how students who have seen a paper in lessons or in a mock make this mistake.

A significant number opted for “entertain” as a purpose, not realising that, whilst this is undeniably the purpose of the National Football Museum, it is not the purpose of the text – a differentiation which could helpfully be taught in lessons. It is also worth reminding centres that “advise” in these papers should be interpreted as “to give advice or instruction” not as its more formal/legal sense of “to inform”. Other errors include a failure to select a purpose from the list provided and a few students who offered the same purpose in both parts of the question.

#### **Question 14**

This asked for six activities which visitors to the National Football Museum could do, and was generally well done, with a good proportion of students achieving full marks and a large majority scoring 4 or more. The main reason for lack of success here was the failure to include a verb. Thus “the museum boasts a wealth of interactive content” would not be rewarded as this is simply a piece of information. It needed to be presented as something a visitor can do: “use the interactive content/have a go with...” etc.

#### **Question 15**

The summary question worked very well this series, probably because the subject matter was interesting and stimulating to the vast majority of students. Occasionally, personal passion for and knowledge of football interceded unhelpfully but performance overall was very pleasing with over half of students gaining 4 or more marks; a small number of students achieved full marks. Students could helpfully be reminded that if the question asks for two elements – as in this case, the benefits and challenges of a football journalism internship – failure to cover one of these elements will result in a cap of 4 marks.

Overall, however, the skills of summary seemed greatly improved this series and there were fewer blank responses and overlong responses, although where these occur, they are generally centre-specific. Students should be taught that a summary does not mean including everything possible and that additional pages for this question generally indicate a lack of summary and should be discouraged.

#### **Question 16**

This remains the most puzzling question in terms of performance. There are still far too many students entering this examination apparently wholly unprepared for Q16, writing about anything other than the visual elements of their chosen source text. Sometimes, there are good, meaningful comments about language or device use, but these are not relevant to this question. As in June, some students failed to score any marks and only a small minority gained full marks. Generic comments will not be accepted and rewarded.

Teachers have done some sterling work on this question and more is required to ensure that future performance can be enhanced.

Overall, however, this series has seen many good responses leading to a mean mark of 21 and that is to the credit of teachers and their students. The Principal Examiner wonders if there will now be large numbers of young women enthusiastically signing up for girls’ football and swathes of

teenagers blissfully dreaming of penning a match report on England's performance in the 2020 World Cup, or shoving a microphone under the nose of Cristiano Ronaldo!

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 of the new GCSE English specification and its much more rigorous terminal assessment, 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 increasingly confident in entering students who are well able to meet the demands of the Level 2 paper although in this series there were rather more students entered who were not ready for this level. It may well be that some centres have bypassed the Level 1 examination and entered all students at this level, which is not advisable. Some students need to address the Level 1 skills before embarking on the Level 2 assessment regime.

This examination is excellent preparation for the GCSE English Language 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. One area in which the current style of AQA Functional English examinations offers real benefit for educational progression is the engagement with ideas and views as well as transactional, mainly factual, questions. In this examination, Question 2 provides the opportunity for students to express views and opinions to support a real world argument or debate, in this case the retention of books in libraries. We believe this approach is a distinct feature of AQA's provision and is especially useful in the progression of students to GCSE, where they are now required in Paper 2, Q5 to put forward an argument in a very similar, although perhaps less specific.

### **Question 1**

Question 1 asked students to write an email to a local college which was offering free two-week taster courses during the summer. There were 12 course options that enabled all students to make an appropriate choice in terms of their own knowledge, interests and experience. Students were asked to provide information about themselves in the email and were advised to write persuasively as places on the courses were strictly limited.

All the students seemed perfectly comfortable with the demands of the task and this is borne out in statistics which indicate that the majority of students achieved a mark of 6 or more on this question. Answers were often well structured with a neat balance between educational qualifications and

personal qualities and ambitions. As such, it was often the depth of detail and the matching of these ambitions to the courses on offer which distinguished between band 2 and band 3 responses. There were very few Band 1 responses and the sense was that they were students who displayed limited motivation in regards to the task rather than having difficulty understanding its demands.

The best answers used a developed vocabulary to display their knowledge of the chosen area and wrote eloquently about what appealed to them in the course. Many expressed a delight in their chosen subject and although the word 'passion' was perhaps overused, in many answers it was perfectly justified. Reflecting the concerns about jobs and future prospects which the question elicited, many of the stronger students were able to look at educational or vocational progression as one of the key benefits of attending the college course. Some very honest answers indicated that the candidate was not sure what direction their future learning and career might take, but the course would give them an opportunity to learn more about the subject and about their own feelings towards it. In strong answers sentences were fluently constructed with a judicious use of complex sentences and a balanced approach to rhetorical devices in developing the persuasive element.

Weaker students tended to take a purely transactional approach and were rather thin in terms of content and particularly in regards to the persuasive requirements of the question. So although the students presented facts about themselves, these were often left hanging with few links to the course. Weaker students seemed also to find it easier to write about the purely vocational courses (motor vehicle maintenance, hair and beauty) which might have reflected vocational choices already made.

In terms of structure, most students saw the need to greet the reader, Jane McIntosh, in a relatively informal way and to introduce themselves before embarking on the main body of the task and drawing it to an effective conclusion with a comment related to further communication. Students at the bottom end of the range saw no need to contextualize the email in these ways, thereby undermining the email's functional impact and holding students down to the bottom end of Band 2, or very occasionally Band 1.

## **Question 2**

Question 2 asked students to respond to a newspaper article which indicated that the local council was thinking of removing all books from the Central Library. The article pitted two opposing positions against each other and students were asked to respond to the article with a letter to the Editor, informing her of their views. As mentioned in the Overview, this type of question is quite distinct to AQA's Functional Skills approach and one that provides excellent training for Paper 2, Question 5 in the new GCSE. It also generates some excellent answers at the higher end where a strong proportion of students reached marks of 7 or more. This was higher than on Question 1, despite the fact that fewer students reached a mark of 6 or more, compared to Question 1.

It was actually both surprising and heartening to discover that those who favoured the retention of books were in a significant majority. Although this overall trend towards the values of books was well supported, there were a few impassioned pleas to move forward and to make the library a high tech space with associated coffee bars and other facilities. Students seemed well aware of balancing social needs between the differing age groups and their differing needs in a library.

The best students were able to look more closely at the implications of their chosen position. Those who wished to retain books often argued that books are a repository of information, not always matched by the internet, and had been the backbone of civilization for centuries. Many top

answers wrote very warmly about the physical pleasure in holding and reading a book, and about their convenience and portability. On the other side, students wrote about the inevitability of technological advance, linking the demise of books to the passing of horse drawn carriages and other historical redundancies. Environmental arguments were also adduced, linking the use of paper to destruction of trees and their habitat.

Weaker students tended to state their position without providing detailed support. They often wrote about the fact that people would fail to come to the library if books were removed, rather than exploring the positive features of books as stronger students often did. A number of weaker students stood back from the task to some extent and did not come out on one side or the other. Whilst this was not penalized in itself, those students who took this approach tended to produce weaker answers because they were trying to cover too much ground and not enough of that in any depth. (However, it does need to be said that some excellent answers took that approach that libraries could retain books **and** enhance the IT element).

Sentence structure is a feature of Band 3 descriptors and it was pleasing to see so many students reaching this standard and using effective and challenging sentences in their writing. Some weaker answers, in the mid to top end of Band 2 were held back from progression into Band 3, despite the fact that the content was otherwise approaching the B3 standard.

## **Accuracy**

There was a better performance in Question 1 than Question 2 in regards to the achievement of 4 or marks for accuracy. Paradoxically, performance at 5 marks and above was actually better on Question 2, but this might well reflect the enhanced content performance for this question where the interest and enthusiasm of students seemed to have been crucial factors.

One examiner wrote: 'Accuracy wise, sentence punctuation seemed to hold up quite well though it was often an attempt at any complexity which brought problems. Similarly with spelling - generally accurate but not a lot of ventures into a more expressive vocabulary'. This statement reflects the most crucial issue that we meet. Mastery of sentences is the key to clarity of expression which in turn leads to successful communication.

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 candidate 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 candidate 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.

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

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