
Functional Skills

ENGLISH

Level 1

Report on the Examination

4720
June 2017

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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.

This summer's paper focused on food waste, a topical subject which proved interesting and accessible for the students. The multiple choice questions were based on an article advertising Asda's initiative to sell strangely-shaped vegetables rather than disposing of them as has been the tendency in the past. Unusually, one of the multiple choice questions proved particularly tricky this series.

Question 4

This required students to identify the main point being made about Asda's WonkyVeg boxes. The correct answer was "cheap" but a large number of students failed to spot the references to the good value of the boxes.

Question 7

Almost 60% managed to identify the names of four things on Q7a which could be made from stale bread as required by this question. The main error was in including "wrap" as one of the options: the text informs us that Wrap is an organisation which is trying to cut food waste, rather than an edible product, so this error was simply a result of misunderstanding.

Q7b was even more successful, with almost 70% achieving full marks when asked to name four ways to use up left over fruit.

Unfortunately, almost 5% of students achieved no marks on Q7 overall, indicating that reading levels are not always commensurate with the requirements for Level 1. Additionally, there was some indiscriminate copying which 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 and was explicitly not required in Q7a.

Question 8

Q8 is still relatively poorly done: this series almost 15% achieved no marks and fewer than 6% scored full marks. A glimmer of light was seen in the fact that fewer students than in March did not attempt the question at all, but the evidence points overwhelmingly to a distinct lack of understanding of how to approach this question. Generalised comments such as "it tells you what the paragraph will be about/makes it stand out" will not be rewarded. Students know that these texts will always contain a picture or illustration, colour and other common presentational devices

such as sub-headings. Unfortunately, too many of them seem to settle for simply citing these with no attempt to engage with why that particular picture or colour has been used in this text. Sub-headings will always help the reader to navigate the text or “tell you what the paragraph is going to be about” but marks cannot be awarded if **there is no evidence that the comments relate to the particular text under scrutiny. So at the very least, students need to identify the colour of the sub-heading or quote what it says, then explain its function.**

Further advice on how to improve performance in this question remains the same as in previous reports and is reproduced below.

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.

The overall mean mark for June was an improvement on March at a very respectable 12.8, indicating that the paper overall was highly accessible. There is considerable evidence of extremely good teaching and engagement with the papers and skills, for which teachers are to be commended and urged to continue. However, performance can be patchy and many students just need to be encouraged not to copy in Q7 and to think more carefully about the visual aspects of the text to improve their skills for Q8.

The texts are always carefully selected for interest and topicality and often address an important or ethical aspect of modern living. It is hoped that at least some of this series’ entrants will have learned and will retain much of the advice about minimising food waste offered in the June texts.

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 congratulated for their patience and 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 send an email to the manager of Wickby Cinema informing him or her about their recent visit. The question indicated that the email should contain details about why the student was unhappy with the visit. As is the case with many of these questions, the stimulus

material provides some pointers towards possible content while the bullet points gave some structural support to the answer.

Most students provided some information that was relevant, usually concentrating on a number of the starred points in the stimulus material as well as expressing a sense of disappointment, outrage or injustice. The best answers provided a context for the information to be provided. This was often a special occasion, such as a birthday or friends' night out and the subsequent narrative that was provided enabled the student to match reality against expectation. Narrative accounts provided the core of the letter as the events themselves were analysed and commented upon. In most cases the chronology matched the sequence of paying for tickets, buying refreshments, finding seats and so on. Students often found staff at the ticket desk and refreshment stall quite rude, exemplified particularly in the inconsiderate use of mobile phones and the use of disrespectful language or the display of haughty attitude. Once inside, the quality of the seats was often cause for complaint – not only in terms of comfort but also cleanliness and odour. Further into the account, students found their evening spoilt by noisy spectators who were not admonished by staff at all.

In such strong answers, some key elements emerged. Firstly, the accounts were credible and even where there was a catalogue of unpleasantness, each aspect in its own right was quite believable. Secondly, students adopted an appropriate tone in conveying information about their experience and feelings. The expression of anger or consternation was balanced and justified while the use of threat or abuse was rare. Finally students were able to use an appropriate vocabulary and sentence structure to convey the information.

Weaker answers, ones that achieved marks around 4 for content tended to address the issues very directly and baldly. These were relevant answers, but they remained undeveloped and therefore stayed within Band 2 of the mark scheme. It may well be that many students in this category could gain more marks with training in the planning of answers and developing their points through solid paragraphs.

Some students wrote very little and struggled to convey clear information through a restricted use of language and structure. Typically, answers at a mark of 3 or less for content would simply pick off aspects of the stimulus material and make a simple comment of 'the seats were not comfortable' type, without building upon the initial comment or providing any support for it. Some weak responses, few in number, attempted to fill a page or two with handwriting that was barely coherent. These students should focus on the accuracy of their expression above all.

Question 2

This question offered students an interesting task, enabling them to write positively about their lives through a letter sent to a local newspaper. The question involved writing about a favourite place that would be suitable for walking or cycling. Students were asked to say what was special about the place and why they enjoyed it. Whilst the picture in the stimulus material indicated a park/outdoor location, students who wrote about more enclosed areas such as shopping malls or museums were not penalised in any way.

Generally, students performed less well on this question than on Q1 and there were rather more blank answers (but below 5%). This is almost certainly due to some students spending less time on this question.

As with previous questions of this sort, the best students use a range of narrative and descriptive skills to get across their experiences either walking or cycling. For many, the bullet points provided a clear structure to the answer. Not surprisingly, the first bullet point was the one which provided

the springboard for the rest of the answer. In most cases the naming and identification of the location was taken further with informative background information. For example, biking trails were often presented as providing specific kinds of challenge such as muddy terrain or steep hills. Students would then move on to what was special about the place and this usually involved a clear delineation of the kinds of activities that were undertaken: dawn departures, stopping for food, outdoor bathing and viewing wildlife were just some of the many depicted. In the best answers, the final section of the response incorporated more reflective and evaluative writing when the students considered what it was about the place that ensured their enjoyment. Students were able to present their enthusiasm in the selection of appropriate language, sometimes including specialist words, as well as adopting a suitably informative as well as persuasive tone. With regards to the conventions of letter writing, it is very heartening to see so many students using the correct sender's address, greeting and valediction as well as clearly indicating that there is a reader firmly in mind.

The topic was only barely evident in the weaker responses (at the bottom of Band 2 and below) which provided very limited information in addressing the first bullet, or provided information that was unclear or irrelevant. Factual information about the chosen location was often limited to identification alone and the depiction of what was appealing about the place was often not present. In some cases, the letter convention was inadequate at this level when students did not provide a sender's address, which would invalidate to some extent the functionality of the writing.

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 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:

- failure to use capital letters for proper nouns
- upper case was randomly present in answers
- mistakes with the use of past tense

- apostrophes in contracted forms omitted
- agreement issues with was/were seemed to be an increasing problem
- 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
- 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: common spelling mistakes such as 'exersise', 'lack' ('lake), 'famaly', 'faifully', 'pieceful', and similar errors.

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.