
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.

This series, the topic was travel and holidays. As ever, two of the multiple choice questions proved to be particularly problematic.

Question 2

This was a test of reading based on a leaflet advertising a Kenyan holiday. Students were asked to interpret from the phrase “*Daily departures*”, that this holiday can be started on any day of the week. Unfortunately, only a quarter of students were successful in understanding this expression.

Question 8

This was also a question testing the fundamental standard of “obtaining relevant information”. Source B was an article about a company specialising in vetting and assessing trips marketed as environmental and ethical. The correct answer for Q8 was “*the holiday in Antarctica is the most expensive one quoted*” – a fact which can easily be elicited by reading the source, but only 30% of students were able to do so. 60% chose Option A – “*100 000 customers rated their holiday at least 4 out of 5*”: had they read the whole sentence as a unit of meaning, they would have noticed that it actually said “*90% of our 100 000 customers have rated their holiday at least 4 out of 5*”. Careful reading is always essential. 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.

Question 13

Just over a quarter achieved full marks, with 12.5% gaining no marks at all. Some students are still inexplicably using the wrong source while others are confusing “advertise” with “persuade”. Almost 2% did not attempt this question at all.

Question 14

Happily, this question was very successful. Almost 50% of entrants achieved full marks when asked to identify 6 tasks a holiday rep might be asked to do. However, 10% only managed 1 mark,

generally as a result of indiscriminate copying of information about skills needed by travel agents, or career progression paths, neither of which can be classed as “tasks”.

Question 15

This asked students to summarise Responsible Travel's ideas about how to create more responsible tourism. The task proved difficult for many students, presumably because “ideas” is a more abstract concept, leading to many responses which were purely based on the practical criteria which a trip approved by Responsible Travel must meet. Almost 30% achieved 4 marks or above, but only 2% achieved full marks. 8% did not attempt the question. From a cultural perspective, it was really encouraging to see a good number of students writing passionately about the issues relating to the environmental and local impacts of tourism and a good awareness of how we might all behave more responsibly in these areas.

There were, as ever, some very overlong responses: it is an ongoing issue for some of the most earnest 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. 7% achieved no marks; almost 6% failed to attempt the question and the total of these two categories was higher than those gaining full marks – just under 12%. It is difficult to understand why this is. 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 noted upon 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.

The mean mark this series was just below 19, which is a slight drop on the previous series and the reference year but still indicates some good teaching and earnest endeavours on the part of students, which are always welcome. The texts seemed interesting and engaging and it is hoped that many students will have gained some awareness of the need for ethical and moral considerations when venturing abroad. At the very least, on a cold, dark November morning, the notion of a Kenyan safari or basking on a sun-drenched beach brought a little reminder to students that summer will return!

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, a significant number of students achieved total marks of 15, 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 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.

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 write a letter to a local newspaper in response to an article which indicated that some local schools were considering introducing a 'no meat day' into their week. The stimulus material introduced the topic through two clearly articulated and opposing views of the issue. Students are now familiar with this kind of scenario where they are expected to inform their reader of their own views and introduce a persuasive element into the answer. There was virtually no evidence of students misinterpreting this answer or providing a (valid) alternative route into the answer. Most students avoided the obvious error and did not simply discuss the role of vegetarianism in today's world but discussed the relevance of the proposed school policy instead.

The question seemed to work very well and was tackled enthusiastically in the vast majority of responses and was clearly seen by examiners as an 'enabling' question. Students almost always seemed to have plenty to say with opinions split. The strongest answers tended to subordinate discussion of the merits of diet, whether they were happy to embrace the vegetarian agenda or not. Instead, they chose to discuss the value of forcing children to adopt a pattern of behaviour, whether beneficial or not, which they had not consented to and perhaps, more significantly, that their parents had not consented to. The question, therefore, became a discussion on the rights of parents and children. Needless to say, whilst most of these answers were balanced and brought in a wealth of factual and sometimes statistical information, they were nearly always convincingly persuasive. A minority of students supported the schools, mostly because they supported the vegetarian agenda, whilst the majority opposed the schools (even when they were vegetarian themselves) because of the inherent restriction on freedom of choice. In terms of formal aspects, strong answers were able to utilise a vocabulary that was perfectly appropriate for such abstract consideration as well as adopting a tone that matched purpose and audience.

Some answers, at the bottom end of Band 2 tended to miss out on the issues outlined above and become entangled instead in the debate about eating or avoiding meat. Such answers often

provided comments on healthy diets, attacks on obesity and the freshness and variety of the food. Animal welfare was also strongly lobbied and here some students allowed themselves to adopt a highly emotional approach that actually weakened the overall impact of their case. Others, however, were determined to keep their inalienable right to eat burgers, pizza slices and other fast foods – often conveyed in a rather blunt way. Some parents thought that their children would struggle to survive a single day on a non-meat diet and that educational performance would nosedive. These answers also tended to use a more restricted range of vocabulary and sentence structure, with occasional lapses where tone became negative and occasionally aggressive, again weakening their case. Band 3 answers, where the key discriminator in the mark scheme is the word 'limited' were very rare. Such students are still some distance from Level 2.

Question 2

Students were asked to write a positive review for a travel website of a visit to Hammond's Farm and Theme Park. The stimulus material provided plenty of information in the advertisement for the farm so students were able to develop their answers within an informational framework, which many used to good effect. The task of writing a review is now very relevant as so many decisions about leisure are taken within the context of on-line booking and reviews. The request for a 'positive' review is important in that it did provide some element of discrimination although very few students chose to ignore the instruction and write a critical review.

The use of detail was a discriminating factor in Q2. As ever with this type of stimulus many students worked their way through the bullet points. Students achieving higher marks tended to be those who developed some opinions and ideas. There were some very interesting responses which brought life into the phrase 'a working farm in action' by depicting features of farm life with energy and accuracy. Watching and sometime taking part in activities such as collecting eggs, driving a tractor or baling hay were presented as key factors in a wholly enjoyable experience. The theme park rides were also very effectively described, students sometimes adopting an impressive technical vocabulary to enhance their account. Restaurants are generally well reviewed and one student, inspired by question one, indicated how impressed he was by the policy of 'meat free' days, showing, as he suggested a respect for the life of farm animals. Such strong answers tended to adopt a structure in which sufficient detail of the day was delivered through a narrative account, which then led into a value judgement about the experience narrated. This was very successful for some students and allowed a healthy element of selectivity to emerge so that they did not feel they needed to deal with all of the listed points in the stimulus material. It is interesting to note how many students see the issue of free parking and disabled access as a key factor in their successful day. As is the case now with these strong answers, the positive tone, both enthusiastic and measured, is matched by a use of extensive and appropriate vocabulary within a varied and impressive sentence structure.

Weaker students tended to fall into the rather formulaic approach of addressing each of the listed points in the stimulus material and saying something about it in a generic and rather bland way such as: 'We were able to see the animals up close and this was great...' Whilst the language of such statements is accurate enough there is no evidence here of the student attempting to generate a personal response with specific details. These undeveloped answers generally gained a maximum of five marks, with some 20% or so of students gaining this mark for content on this question. Generally, a mark of at least six for content is required to pass at this level, so the issue of developing a point through the use of specific detail is a skill that is extremely useful for this exam. As with Question 1 there was a very small minority of students in Band 1, less than 5% and this is encouraging.

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 66% at this standard while Question 2 produced 54% which is actually a better performance than the summer but this might be expected in a re-sit context. 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 seemed similar to previous series. Many students were sound on basic spelling and punctuation but attempts at anything more ambitious in vocabulary and variety of punctuation was where the problems came. Although variations in sentence endings, question and exclamation marks, were often used accurately.'

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.

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
- 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 – 'a lot', 'given' instead of 'giving', 'kidz'
- 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

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.