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# FUNCTIONAL SKILLS ENGLISH

Level 1  
Report on the Examination

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## Component 1 Reading

Some students sat this examination as an on-screen test. This report covers the on-screen test as well as the written paper.

The entry for this series was just under 1,000. The mean mark of 13.2, which was broadly in line with the June series, was attained by 65% of students, suggesting evidence of widespread good teaching on this specification, although it does represent a slight drop compared to this summer. The theme of driving was very well received, being a clearly relevant and aspirational element for the majority of students.

All the multiple choice questions were answered well with correct answers being gained by between 78.5% and 96.6% of entrants, indicating that the vast majority of students have been well prepared for this element of the examination. However, many students seem unable to fulfil the actual mechanics of the multiple choice questions, and adopt a variety of incorrect techniques, including circling or ticking what they feel to be the correct answer letter. It is imperative that students write the letter clearly in the box, preferably in upper case. Should they wish to change their mind, they should cross out the initial attempt and write the new attempt clearly next to the box. This will ensure that the examiner knows precisely which letter they have chosen and can then mark the answer accordingly. Over-writing the first attempt is likely to produce an answer which is not sufficiently legible and the mark will not be given. Any attempt to “hedge bets” by putting two letters – “A or C” or “B/D” will result in no mark.

Q7a seemed to prove particularly difficult this series, generating a significant discrepancy in performance, with 72% of students gaining full marks on 7b, compared with only 15% on 7a. 7a asked students to identify “ways in which the Junior Porsche experience could help young drivers” but many struggled to select material relevant to developing driving skills. 7b, however proved to be very straightforward as indicated by the high number attaining full marks. Those who underperformed on this question did so because they gave generic answers to the question “four things you need to know before booking”: “how tall you are, how much it costs, where it is” etc could all be written without any reference to the text and therefore provide insufficient evidence of having read the text.

Q8 still remains problematic with a mean mark of 2.5 out of 4; 39% of students scoring full marks and almost 15% failing to gain any marks at all. The latter figure is 3% higher than in June. Substantial and recurrent advice (appended below) has appeared in previous reports but clearly not all students are benefitting from this. It was gratifying to note, however, that some very good comments relating to the effectiveness of the picture of the Porsche were seen, replacing the generic and very unhelpful “it makes it stand out” type of comments which so often appear.

One other issue which requires clarification relates to hyperlinks. These are bound to appear in a photograph of a webpage but, in themselves, these are functional rather than presentational. In order to gain credit for these in Q8, students need to comment on the appearance of the links, i.e. “there are red links at the top of the page”; “links in boxes appear down the side of the text”.

The following advice has been offered in previous reports but bears repeating. Some Level 1 students continue to cite several presentational devices in the space saying “First way presented” then proceed to offer tortuous explanations which makes it very difficult for examiners to see the “valid link between the device and the explanation” which the mark scheme demands. Students

should be clearly taught to identify one presentational device in each space provided in the answer booklet and explain that device only. This should ensure full marks.

“Writing” is not a presentational device – students should refer to font or text, which are presentational choices. However, this question is testing the ability of students to explain why writers have used particular presentational choices in particular places. Thus, if a student refers to “bold writing” and can specify a location for it, such as “bold writing at the start of every paragraph”, this would be accepted. Simply citing “bold writing” leaves the examiner with no choice but to assume the student is referring to the written text, which does not constitute a presentational device.

The mark scheme for this paper is available and would repay scrutiny so that teachers and students can understand what is acceptable in terms of presentational devices.

Overall, however, the paper was successful and apparently enjoyable. The relative stability of the mean mark suggests that schools/colleges continue to do a fine job in preparing many of their students for this paper. With the advent of the new English Language specification and its much more rigorous form of assessment, Level 1 Functional Skills could play a significant part in helping students to climb the ladder of skills which leads to success in GCSE English or at the very least, offer the option of an alternative, credible English qualification for those students who may struggle with GCSE English.

## Component 2 Writing

Some students sat this examination as an on-screen test. This report covers the on-screen test as well as the written paper.

The Level 1 writing paper, with two questions containing stimulus material leading into a task which is supported by bullet points, enables students 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, schools/colleges now very rarely enter students who have little or no chance of getting inside Band 2 descriptors. Students seemed generally confident and able to meet the requirements of the questions with approximately 83% on Question 1 and 82% on Question 2 hitting at least 4 marks for content. This shows an increase in performance on the previous series and it is heartening to note that students are so very well prepared for this examination. It is the view of examiners that around 50% of students in this series, at the top end of the distribution with total marks of 16 or more, would be well suited to the demands of Level 2 and should be encouraged to progress. Close perusal of the schools/college's mark profile would be very useful in this context.

### Question 1

This question asked students to write an email to Keith Jones of 'Jones and Son, Shoe and Bag Repairs'. The purpose of the email was to inform Keith Jones about the student's experiences with the company and his/her ensuing dissatisfaction. An advertisement, containing claims about the service that Jones and Sons offered, enabled students to incorporate some of the content in the answer.

A number of students wrote about Jones and Sons as if their role was to sell shoes or bags. While the primary purpose of the advertisement was to offer a service, and not a retail outlet, it is nevertheless common practice for such businesses to sell items. This was taken into account at standardising and students were not penalised if their answer approached the question in this way.

Most students were able to refer to a specific incident which triggered off the email. Complaints about soles falling off, leather being scuffed, stitching falling apart or handles breaking provided the bulk of the answers. A significant number of students also wrote about the attitude and behaviour of staff in the shop, pointing to rudeness and idleness as the two main faults.

The stronger answers used a tone of measured emotion, whether that be annoyance or frustration. An appropriate style was used to match the content and students wrote about specific events, rather than generalities. A legitimate narrative context, such as a wedding or birthday party, was presented in some answers, which was often used to justify the importance of the repair, or the need for completion within a certain time frame. Some students developed the third bullet, 'what you think Jones and Sons should do now', very well. They asked for reasonable compensation for poor service, or requested an opportunity to speak to Keith Jones in person so that a compromise could be reached. In this series, over 52% of students achieved marks of 5 or 6 for this question which is very impressive.

Weaker answers often displayed a serious lack of awareness of tone with intemperate informal vocabulary being used within a generally inaccurate email, lacking clarity or structure. In some of these answers, there seemed to be an emphasis on the rudeness of the staff at a confrontation or

altercation within the shop. However, only 15% of students gained a mark of 3 or less for this question and only 1.4% failed to answer it.

## Question 2

This question asked students to write a letter of thanks to Gerry Holt, manager of The Venue, a location for parties and events. The stimulus material included pointers to the kinds of things that students might want to address in their letter.

Performance in this question was very close to that in Question 1. 82% of students achieved a mark of 4 or more which was very pleasing as there is usually a distinct fall in performance for the second question, with time problems and loss of concentration being the most obvious causes. It was felt that in this case the enthusiasm for the topic was the reason for the statistical lift.

Most students had no difficulty expressing gratitude, providing relevant details of the event they were writing about and conveying the enjoyment that was experienced by the party goers. Many different types of party were portrayed, covering a range from teenage parties, through adulthood into parties which involved the children and sometimes grandchildren of the students. Very few students fell into the trap of boasting about the effects of alcohol abuse or the impact of a fight that had occurred.

Weaker answers lacked depth and detail and sometimes failed to express gratitude. Extreme brevity in some cases led to a lower mark, where a student wrote something along the lines of: 'Thanks for the party, it was grate'(sic). The task was to write a letter on behalf of a group of people and such scant detail would have been a disservice to the group as well as being of little value in terms of its functional role. Poorly planned and structured answers produced low marks and letter form was virtually non-existent in the weakest answers. Once again, though, it is important to point out that only 13.1% of students achieved a mark of 3 or less which was actually a better performance than on Question 1. Sadly a rather larger number, some 4.6% of students, failed to answer the question, probably a result of time pressure.

## Accuracy

Perhaps the most important descriptor for Band 2 achievement is 'meaning is clear' and in this series approximately 80% of students reached this band on both questions. This is a stronger performance than the previous series.

Band 2 nevertheless 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 for accuracy.

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. There is certainly a great need for the targeted teaching of specific skills in most students but weaker students need to build up the most basic skills to enable written communication to take place. One examiner noted that some students showed accuracy at the beginning of a response, but sloppiness and inaccuracy in the latter part. Again, a focus on examination technique might help here. A target mark of 3 for accuracy which is reflected in the descriptor 'meaning is clear' must always be prioritised. Students need to be able to

work comfortably with Standard English and where this is not currently possible, time and effort needs to be invested to produce the skills required.

The following issues were raised by examiners:

- Misspellings:  
imform, recieve, realy, writting, wrighting, complant, compleate, discraseful(l), manor, manger.
- common grammatical/usage errors: i (lower case, very common), gonna, where/were/wear, there/their/they're, of/off/ov.

I would also like to remind those schools/colleges that enter students for on-screen assessment of the importance of students checking their work. It would appear that students taking this route into assessment produce weaker scores on the accuracy side. It is often difficult for an examiner to distinguish between a spelling/grammar/usage mistake and a typographical error (a 'typo'). What is assessed is the final product of what the student has typed in. Examiners are not expected to give wholesale benefit of the doubt to students whose writing is peppered with typos so the mark for accuracy will quite rightly reflect the descriptors in the mark scheme. It is very important, therefore, that schools/colleges train students to check over their work and use a dictionary if necessary. It is disheartening for an examiner to be forced to give a low mark for accuracy when the student's abilities and talent, as indicated by a higher mark for content, are clearly quite strong. 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.

## Component 3 – Speaking, Listening and Communication

It was pleasing to note that in many schools/colleges suitable records are being kept and are being retained for an adviser to monitor. Please note, though, that schools/colleges are required to retain all records from one adviser visit to the next.

Although group discussion only is required for level 1, it did not automatically follow that it was the 'easier' component for those aiming at level 2. There were quite frequent examples where students were able to perform better when working as an individual than they were when contributing to a group. This would suggest that the skills of group discussion need to be taught and practised before assessment takes place.

Schools/colleges should note that AQA regularly produces DVD support material for this specification, which is available online. The material for 2014-15 was filmed in Newham and shows post -16 students. Previous DVDs from Rochdale ( 2012) and Wolverhampton ( 2013) should also be used to access the standard. DVD support material should be watched by all teachers assessing students for this specification.

It is important to point out, though, that whatever the age of the student, the same principles apply around task-setting and assessment.

### Tasks

There are things to consider when setting up groups and tasks. It must be stressed that group work will not merely happen by putting students together and expecting them to get on with it. Group work needs exemplifying and its skills need drawing out before assessment begins. Groups need focused tasks with definite end results, and individuals within the group may need to assume certain roles, such as chair, initial speaker, summariser etc. Not all of them need to be assessed each time. Experience shows it is hard to assess more than 3 students at any one time.

It also helps if the task itself is distinctly 'functional' – one obvious criterion for being functional is that the talk could be linked to that which is seen in a workplace in its broadest sense . Of course this inevitably involves some form of simulation if the talk is taking place in a classroom, but much better this than talk which is based on literary sources, which does not work well in a functional context.

Example of good tasks were filmed in Wolverhampton, where students had to plan a school event ( crucially they arrived with some research already done), or provide ideas for catering at a local theme park. In Newham students discussed welfare issues in their college and 'stop and search' as a key issue within their community. In all cases the local dimension, alongside the need to research, plan and resolve, led to some fruitful work at all levels of ability.

Much good functional work has involved students discussing school and college issues with important institutional figures within their school/college. This is exemplified in the Newham DVD. Interestingly the adults ( and even senior students) seem to enjoy this as much as those being assessed.

In the vast majority of cases the individual presentation is still being delivered through a talk to the class or group. This year we have seen some good presentations emerging from the conclusion of

the group task, and others in which an element of rhetoric is required. Needing to persuade your listener towards a point of view can lead to engaged and engaging talk.

### **Record keeping/standardisation**

It must be stressed again that advisers need to see **a full and efficient set of records, which include all student entered since the last advisory visit**. Where such records indicate that there has been some form of internal standardising, then they carry a greater sense of reliability.

### **Conclusion**

Good Speaking and Listening work in Functional English can be fun to participate in and fun to watch. Advisers have received warm welcomes in many schools/colleges and seen students who are really keen to do well and to project themselves as young people with good interpersonal skills.

A number of advisers reported that when they contacted Heads of English in schools/colleges, the Head of English was unaware that Functional Skills English was in fact being taught there. This problem is not easily solved, but any teachers of Functional Skills reading this report should check that the Head of English knows of its existence in the school/college, as they are likely to be the first person contacted regarding visits and administration.

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

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

## **Converting Marks into UMS marks**

Convert raw marks into Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) marks by using the link below.

**UMS conversion calculator** [www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion](http://www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion)