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# Functional Skills

# **ENGLISH**

Level 1

Report on the Examination

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## Overview

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 writing skills and is the basis for secure progression.

With two questions containing stimulus material leading into a task which is supported by bullet points, candidates 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 candidates who have little or no chance of getting inside Band 2 Mark Scheme descriptors. Candidates seemed generally confident and able to meet the requirements of the questions with an overwhelming majority of candidates on both Question 1 and Question 2 hitting at least 4 marks for content. It is the view of examiners that a majority of candidates in this series, at the top end of the distribution with total marks of 15 or more, would be well suited to the demands of Level 2 and should be encouraged to progress. Candidates 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 candidates..

## **Component 1 Reading**

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

The March series focused on a theme of the sea and candidates appeared to enjoy reading about the Cornish Seal Sanctuary and hopefully, learned more about the dangers of discarded plastic bags.

Two of the multiple choice questions proved to be somewhat more problematic this series:

### **Question 3**

Only 50% of candidates recognised that the correct answer was related to the expense of recycling plastic bags, almost a quarter of them opting for “sea creatures suffer and die from diseases”, apparently assuming that starvation and drowning are diseases.

### **Question 5**

This was even more taxing, with less than 40% achieving the mark. Confusion between “million” and “billion” was one extensive area of error but the most widespread mistake came from a lack of reading and understanding the sense of an entire sentence. The source said “Plastic bags are now amongst the top 12 items of rubbish found along coastlines.” Almost a quarter of candidates, in failing to read from capital letter to full stop, opted for “12 items of rubbish are found on coastlines”.

### **Question 7**

The first part of this question asked candidates to identify four ways in which The Cornish Seal Sanctuary helps sea creatures and this was largely very well done with over 54% achieving full marks. In 7b, however, the percentage achieving full marks dropped to 28. Several reasons are apparent for this. Candidates needed to select four things involving wildlife which a visitor to the Cornish Seal Sanctuary could do. The stipulation “involving wildlife” was ignored by a significant number of candidates who opted for kids quiz trail, café and pirate play area. A further error lay in a misunderstanding which led to candidates saying what they could do to help the Seal Sanctuary – such things as fund-raising. It is difficult to see how such a misinterpretation arose. The most widespread error was in the failure to include a verb so that answers such as “a starfish” or “Seal Hospital” became meaningless. It would be good practice for candidates to write or think of their answers to such questions as beginning with “they could/they can” which should lead to a rounded answer.

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## Question 8

Achievement on Q8 is relatively stable with 32% achieving full marks and 11% scoring zero. Many candidates still 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 candidates to offer, in each part of the question, **one** presentational feature with an explanation relating to **that** feature would improve performance further and would be very welcome. However, it is as ever, pleasing to see so many candidates doing well with this question and indeed, the paper as a whole.

Overall, this was clearly an accessible and enjoyable paper to which candidates responded well and thus performed well. It is hoped that they will remember Source A when they are required to pay for plastic bags and feel equipped to explain the reasons for this charge to anyone who questions it!

**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 candidates are doing a fine job of preparing their students for the demands of this test and they are to be commended for their success in doing so.**

## Component 1 Writing

### Question 1

This question asked candidates to write a letter to a newspaper, The Sentinel, in response to comments made by a reader about young drivers. The question invited candidates to present their own views of the reader's comments. The stimulus material, in the form of a letter to The Sentinel, contained some controversial views which were expected to provoke candidates. The task is highly functional, as the expression of views about important issues is a key element of everyday life.

The letter from the reader, Mr Bob Edward, provided enough material to generate good letters on either side of the debate. Many of the stronger letters took the part of younger drivers and addressed what seemed to be a fallacious position in Mr Edward's letter - that a person's individual experience of poor driving from *some* younger people can be applied in logic to *all* young drivers. Candidates quickly identified this fallacious position and, often alongside reference to stereotyping, put across very effective arguments. It was pleasing to admire the way candidates were clear and precise in their demolition of Mr Edward. These very pointed answers had two key strengths: firstly candidates adopted an appropriate tone and did not fall into abuse or personal attacks against Mr Edward;

secondly, they introduced evidence, such as the presence of a demanding driving test, which was effective in undermining Mr Edward's position.

The majority of candidates who disagreed with Mr Edwards or agreed in part offered alternative solutions (ie the use of a black box or more intensive tests). A lot of candidates discussed the irritating driving habits of older drivers. Other strong arguments put forward were those related to ageism and to the possibility of envy on Mr Edward's part. Another elegant point went as follows: if Mr Edwards learnt to drive as a young man, why should he then condemn young people of a different generation who wished to learn? It was no surprise that very few answers of this kind supported a raising of the minimum age for driving to 25, although one or two suggested a compromise at 19.

There were also a number of strong answers which supported Mr Edward. These answers often took the comments that Mr Edward made and developed them into a more significant step in making their own case. Thus, many discussed the nature of road manners and explored the way in which younger drivers showed recklessness and disrespect. Many, of course, mentioned the very high costs of car insurance for younger drivers and the number of accidents in which younger drivers took part. Most of these answers, inevitably, supported Mr Edward's view that the driving licence be withheld until the age of 25.

Weaker answers tended to be very thin with little or no substantive comment. A number simply borrowed text from the stimulus material and knitted it into an answer that was usually quite ineffective. Some simply pointed to one aspect of young people's driving, such as playing music loudly, without developing the point and putting it into a structured argument. A number of poor answers simply missed the task entirely and attempted to provide advice on how to become a good driver. In one or two cases, these answers managed to go beyond the Band 1 descriptor 'not suitable for purpose or audience' and provide enough material for the bottom end of Band 2.

## **Question 2**

For this question, candidates were asked to send an email to Jandra Wilson at Grandpa's Chicken Shack, a local fast food outlet. Candidates were provided with stimulus material that included a list of claims that Grandpa's Chicken Shack made about the company and the service it offers. Candidates were asked to report an unsatisfactory experience to Ms Wilson.

Again, this question was answered well. Some candidates got a bit carried away as usual, suggesting court action or being very forceful in tone threatening to inform the hygiene inspectors.

Although this was a familiar task within a familiar format, the overall performance on this question was some 4% down on the key indicator of 4 for content. At the lower end of the spectrum, there was a

higher percentage of candidates on Band 1 marks for content (marks of 1 or 2). Presumably, this was a result of time management issues as the question itself was arguably considerably less demanding than question 1. It may be the case that when candidates approach Question 1 with enthusiasm, as so many did, there is a possibility that they lose sight of the need to discipline themselves within the time frame of the exam.

There were many successful responses which closely followed the bullet points in the question and utilised the information contained within the stimulus material. The best answers contained a clear opening which identified the issue, explored some details of the issue followed by a suggested solution. Stronger responses also clearly identified when the incident took place. Most responses focused on the chicken being undercooked, the service being slow or the rudeness of staff. Quite a number of responses indicated that staff needed training in retail skills, which possibly reflected the curricular interests and knowledge of some of the candidates. A number of answers, still well within the upper reaches of Band 2 and above took a much more narrative based approach. Such answers would usually indicate the impact of the Chicken Shack's poor hygiene or quality control on family members.

A weakness in a number of Band 2 answers, which addressed the topic and provided limited information, was the lack of a context for their email. They tended to move straight into the catalogue of criticism without indicating when the events occurred and how they developed. This is generally an issue with planning and does not stem from poor writing per se. Nevertheless, it can hold back some otherwise sound responses from reaching a Band 3 mark.

There was a small minority of responses which were not suitable for the purpose as they were complimenting the chicken shack throughout and did not identify an issue. A couple of candidates also just focused on how the advertisement could be improved. Where the topic of the chicken shack was clear and the answer was otherwise well written, such answers could gain a mark of 3, very occasionally 4, but would not be able to reach Band 3.

As I have indicated in many previous reports, the percentage of candidates who remain solidly in Band 1 for content, with a mark of 1 or 2, is very low indeed.

### **Accuracy**

It was interesting this series to note that while there was a drop in performance in Question 2 in marks awarded for content, there was no accompanying drop in the marks for accuracy..

The most important descriptor for Band 2 achievement is 'meaning is clear' and in this series the vast majority of candidates reached this band.

Band 2 nevertheless represents a modest level of achievement with written Standard English. Candidates 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 candidate'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 candidates displaying hit and miss approach. Some candidates made errors such as omitting words which could have been self-corrected through proof-reading.

Spelling was generally of a good standard although weaker candidates 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 candidates taking on-screen assessments or providing word-processed answers. Generally, the performance for on-screen tests is not as strong as that for the traditional format and centres are advised to think seriously about this when entering candidates. Practice in the use of word processors without spell/grammar check is very important and candidates should be advised to write concisely as longer answers are often packed with errors. Also, when candidates produce very short answers, with unchecked typos dominating the reader's experience, it is highly unlikely that the candidate would score well for either content or accuracy.

Examiners pointed out the following specific issues in relation to accuracy:

- an increasing number of candidates don't seem to use apostrophes for contractions
- agreement issues with was/were seemed to be an increasing problem
- some very clear responses with long sentences or missing demarcation
- some responses started out by using punctuation consistently but then towards the end missed full stops/commas
- common spelling issues with 'ie' words particularly 'view' and 'believe'
- inconsistent tenses or verb agreement was an issue for some - possibly EAL candidates
- increasing use of US style contracted forms: 'gonna', 'wanna',

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## **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](#)