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# 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.

## Component 1 Reading

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

The January source texts were based around the theme of camping. Source A was a newspaper report about the difficulty caused to camp site owners by the unpredictable British weather. Two of the multiple choice questions presented problems as follows:

### Question 3

This asked students to assess the relative effectiveness of a number of presentational features. Less than half of students opted for the correct answer of powerful photographs of the weather, of which there were two. A larger number chose "*campers' real experiences of weather*". This was a close distractor – the "real experiences" being largely those of campsite owners rather than campers.

### Question 6

This related to the requirement to select appropriate responses to the text. Just under half selected the correct option of continuing to camp despite the weather vagaries, almost an equal proportion deciding the best course of action would be to "*write to the BBC to complain about inaccurate weather forecasts*". Whilst this represents a pleasing indication of action on behalf of the consumer, it failed to recognise that the BBC are not the only producers of weather forecasts, nor were they mentioned in the source text.

The multiple choice questions on Source B – a webpage about Camp America – were largely unproblematic.

In this series again, the questions testing implication were largely very well done, indicating a much better grasp of this difficult element of reading.

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 student'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 student rather than the entire answer.

**Question 13**

A large number of students achieved full marks on this question, which represents a small improvement over November, but some students failed to gain any marks, which is difficult to understand. Once again, a noticeable number of students simply answered using the wrong source. A number of students continue to use “advise” in the incorrect sense of informing, while others inexplicably fail to use the given list of purposes.

**Question 14**

The question this series almost replicated that from November, in that it contained a requirement to select six activities someone could do whilst staying at the Ashurst Campsite. As in November, large numbers of students lost marks owing to simply lifting phrases or sentences and offering these as statements or simple pieces of information rather than activities. For example: “*you could hire a cycle*” would gain the mark but “*Cycle hire is available from Forest Leisure Cycling*” would not. The November report made it quite clear that in responding to such questions, a verb must be included and the activity distilled from the information in the text. Students will always do better if they are taught to extract the answer from the text very specifically rather than lift chunks of text in the hope that the correct option will be contained therein. However, almost half of students gained 4 marks or better, indicating that this question was a good discriminator of performance.

**Question 15**

Here, students were asked to summarise the ways in which working at Camp America could help someone’s development. Once again, those who simply copy large chunks of information are self-penalising in this question. The best answers choose the most relevant points and assemble them into a concise summary, preferably with an element of crafting which may contain some own words. Indiscriminate copying does not demonstrate the required skill of selection and is likely to include some irrelevance. In this series, any reference to exciting activities, travel or accommodation was not relevant to the notion of “development” and therefore detracted from the summary. More than half of students gained marks of 4 and above; several students did not attempt this question at all.

Overlong responses are still occurring: students should be taught that it is rarely necessary to include everything possible and that additional pages for this question generally indicate a lack of summary and should be discouraged. Overall, however, the skills of summary have steadily improved and it is clear that some centres are teaching this very effectively.

**Question 16**

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. More often, marks are lost owing to vague, generic comments which will not be accepted and rewarded. This series, a small minority of students gained full marks; a slightly greater proportion achieved no marks and a few students did not attempt the question at all. This is enormously disappointing and unnecessary if students are familiar with what constitutes a meaningful comment on the use of picture(s) and colour. A simple way to elicit such comments would be for students to ask themselves how the impact of the text would be different if the picture or colour were changed. A degree of accuracy is also required in the designation of presentational features, for instance, “sub-titles” are not the same as “sub-headings”!

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

The mean mark this series was somewhat lower indicating a level of challenge for which all students were not equipped. However, the degree of engagement with the source material was extremely promising, indicating some skilful reading and perhaps encouraging a surge in camping or a flood of applications to work in Camp America.

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 and in this series a very small minority failed to reach Band 2 for content.

This examination is excellent preparation for the GCSE English Language 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 1 provides the opportunity for students to express views and opinions to support a real world argument or debate, in this case the role of street performers and musicians. 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. In addition, Functional English at this level could be seen as the apex of a clear alternative progression route after Level 1, with Entry Level Certificate (Step Up to English) at its base.

## **Question 1**

Question 1 invited students to express their views about the impact of street performers and musicians in town centres. A newspaper article, presenting oppositional views on the topic, was used as stimulus material.

The question seemed to work very well and was tackled enthusiastically in the vast majority of responses seen by examiners. The intention behind the question was to engage students in issues that might affect them in daily life thereby providing an outlet, through a valid Functional English task, for informing the reader of the student's views and opinions. This type of question is significantly different from those of a more transactional nature, but it could be argued that, in a world heavily dominated by social networks, most writing that now takes place involves the expression of views and opinion rather than information.

Students picked up on liveliness, entertainment, community spirit and the general joy that was added to their neighbourhood by the activities of street entertainers; not to mention the diverting of their children's attentions from mundane shopping. Many answers referred to those who had gone on to commercial success after starting as street entertainers, notably Ed Sheeran and Dynamo.

Strong answers tended to look at the issue from a number of points of view; from pedestrians; from the performers; from the local council; from the elderly and disabled; from children. Incorporating these views effectively, students generated a very clear and logical structure to their response. The majority of these students presented a sympathetic approach to the homeless and less well off. They examined their attempts to boost their meagre incomes by entertaining others and explored the drive to showcase their talent and express themselves. However, a number of students supporting the council's ban, adopted an oblique and sometimes satirical approach complaining of cacophonous rackets, pavements congested, intimidation and perceived links to various forms of criminal activity. Many strong answers put across the view that street performance should be regulated, perhaps geographically, to ensure that performers would be able to continue their activities without bothering those who did not want to watch them.

Strong answers adopted a suitable tone and style for writing that would enter into the public domain. Sentence structure was varied and well developed, with a mix of simple and complex sentences, often varying length for effect. As sentence structure is considered as an element of content in the mark scheme, answers which got into Band 3 tended to be very assured in this aspect. It should also be added that letter form presented no barriers to students and this is surely a reflection of targeted preparation.

Weaker students, whose marks were in the bottom end of Band 2, or even Band 1, tended to struggle on two fronts. Firstly they found it difficult to explore the topic and tended to write very simply and from a single point of view. This is often a function of poor planning and students should be encouraged to think questions through, perhaps in classroom discussion and exercise. Secondly, students lacked an appropriate vocabulary to tackle the abstraction required to explore the issue. Sentences were often simple in structure or undisciplined and rambling so that meaning failed to emerge. At the very bottom of the range, answers which gained 3 marks or less for content were typically very brief.

## **Question 2**

Question 2 asked students write an email to a sandwich company, Sandy's Sarnies, following dissatisfaction with the company's service at a party arranged for a group of friends. Students were asked to write persuasively and to make a request for a refund.

As was expected, Question 2 did revisit familiar territory as questions of this sort involve real world scenarios. The question was predominantly transactional and the expression of ideas tended to be statements around the quality of food or service provided. This type of question thus complements the more abstract type of task exemplified by Question 1. Interestingly, performance on this question dipped as fewer students achieved a mark of 6 or more for content compared to Question 1. This was discussed at the award and it was felt that alongside issues around time management, there may well have been a reduction in engagement with a much more mundane, but realistic and

appropriate, topic. It was felt that students need to be aware that transactional tasks of this sort have as much validity as the perhaps more engaging issue type of question and within the confines of the exam have an equal value. Students should not invest more in terms of time or effort in answering one question as opposed to another.

With regards to content, there was much that was straightforward and predictable: mouldy bread (usually stale and white), smelly fillings, a lack of exotic food, a lack of pitta bread/wraps and surly delivery persons. Deliveries often arrived hours (if not days, in some cases) late. Also, a considerable number of students used the reference to 'gluten-free options' as a means of introducing narrative element, occasionally rather over-dramatised with serious illness and hospitalisation as key elements.

There was a slight variant reading from some students, derived from the phrase 'In the shop;' that the company operated some sort of restaurant with complaints on table service, toilets and interminable waiting to be served. However there was usually enough validity in the substance of the responses for them to meet functionality.

Stronger responses gained credit from their intelligent use of structural devices. One effective approach was to make an initial statement that praised Sandy's Sarnies in terms of quality of service and product. This enabled the student to move clearly into the complaint itself and the request for a refund. Another device was the use of a short list of the company's failings. Some students invited the reader to put themselves into the shoes of the writer - an event ruined, disappointment and sadness amongst the guests. 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. Vocabulary in the best answers was wide and varied while tone was appropriately diplomatic and persuasive.

Weaker answers, at a mark of 4 or below, tended to be extremely simple in their approach and often failed to provide a credible context for the complaint. One or two pieces of information about the disappointing service were mentioned and often the request for a refund was not conveyed. Without the request, the persuasive aspect of the email was lost and the functionality disappeared. Again, as with Question 1, the very weakest answers were simply bereft of content.

### **Accuracy**

There was a better performance in Question 1 than Question 2 in regards to the achievement of 4 marks for accuracy.

One examiner wrote: 'Spelling continues to be sound in a functional vocabulary; mistakes usually came when students were looking to be more expressive. Similarly with sentence punctuation. It was usually attempts at variety through a more complex structure which led to missing punctuation or incorrect comma splicing. Extended punctuation appeared rarely, usually the odd explanation mark or a question mark on a rhetorical sentence in those adopting a more persuasive style. 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. 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. 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.