
LEVEL 2

FUNCTIONAL SKILLS ENGLISH

8725/S/W/R

Report on the Examination

8725

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Please note that this report covers Functional Skills English 8725/S/W/R

8725S – Non Exam Assessment: Speaking Listening and Communicating

Introduction

A large number of centres took the opportunity to enter this first round of submissions. For many it was straightforward to verify their work. They had assimilated the standard by looking at the AQA standardising materials.

The nature of the component

The spoken component is an integral part of the Functional Skills package called English. Along with Reading and Writing it is a required element, and the subject as a whole cannot be passed without it. As part of the component there are two activities that must be completed. These involve giving a presentation and taking part in a discussion. If both tasks are not completed and if no evidence is provided, a pass cannot be awarded to the student.

For a presentation there must be a recording, plus a completion of the presentation part of the record form. For a discussion there must be a completion of the discussion part of the record form.

Each of the activities has a sub set of skills that must be delivered for a pass. These are listed on the record form, and all of them must be achieved. This is called a mastery model of assessment, so even one cross in the 'no' column means that the student has not passed and should probably be entered at a later date. For example, if a student is not asked any questions after their presentation, or does not answer them, then they cannot be awarded a pass.

The standards

For each of Level 1 and Level 2 there is a set of standardising material which teachers must access via Secure Key Materials on e-AQA. If you do not have an e-AQA account you can request access via your Exams Officer.

Before each submission of work for these components, teachers should review these materials and match their own students' work to the work exemplified. Making some occasional comparative reference to these examples can help the verifier see that teachers have done this.

Submitting the entry

Please note the very important points below:

*Submissions must be made by the due date. If this cannot be done then centres should enter at the next opportunity

*For each student in the sample you must send recorded evidence of the presentation plus a fully completed record form.

*No passwords should be used to encrypt the work. The point of sending evidence to the verifier is so that it can be reviewed. Using passwords creates unnecessary delay.

*The sample should be posted to the verifier using first class post (fully paid) and without the need for a signature. Although sending by signed for delivery may seem more secure it is not, because inevitably the packages are frequently returned to the sorting office.

Conclusion

In this first submission some very interesting work was delivered by students for whom these qualifications are ideally suited.

There were also some teething problems which have been alluded to above. Where this is the case AQA will contact the centres to help them with their next submissions.

8725W – Writing

Overview

This is the first series under the reformed Functional Skills in English specification, Level 2 Writing (8725W). The 2011 standards have now been superseded by 'scope of study' descriptors which apply to Writing Composition and Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPG). These can now be found on pages 9 and 10 of the AQA Specification

<https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/resources/english/specifications/AQA-8720-8725-SP-2019.PDF>.

At Level 2 learners are required to produce straightforward and complex texts such as articles, narratives, explanations and reports of varying lengths. Each writing task will require learners to address one of the above categories although it is important to note that narratives and explanations can be embedded within different formats such as emails, blogs, letters, reviews etc

The reformed qualification is intended to maintain very high standards and the examination provides a rigorous and fair test of writing skills for students. It is expected to establish 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.

To ensure continuity under the reformed specification the writing papers have retained two questions. Each contains stimulus material leading into a task, enabling students to use some of the information in the question. There is an element of problem solving and functional thinking in completing each task. A significant innovation is that there are word limits established for Question 1, which will have an impact on the achievement of students and this is looked at in more detail below. The time allocated for the paper is now 1 hour with an advisory 20 minutes for the 1st question. The total mark available for the paper has been maintained at 30, with 9 marks for Question 1 (6 for composition, 3 for SPG) and 21 marks for Question 2 (9 for composition, 9 for SPG). SPG comprises 40% of total marks the same ratio as under the previous specification. The imbalance in the value of the questions has led to developments in the mark scheme, with a four level scheme applying to the writing composition element of Question 2, worth 12 marks. Mark schemes for both questions are now skill based and will remain unchanged for the lifetime of the specification and can be found at: <https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/resources/english/AQA-87202-SMS.PDF>

This examination is an excellent preparation for the GCSE English Language Unit 2 with its focus on non-fiction. 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. 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.

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 SPG. In this series, some 19% of students achieved total marks of 15 or fewer, which is some distance from a Level 2 qualification. The panel of examiners felt that this reflected the inability of students to write fluently and confidently, particularly in regards to sentence construction and punctuation, although the content was sometimes appropriate. However, there were a number of students entered who would have benefited from a Level 1 progression.

The standard of this examination is maintained through rigorous marking and awarding procedures. 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 challenging assessment.

Question 1

This question required students to write an email to a government agency putting forward suggestions that might help young people reduce their dependence on mobile phone. Students were asked also to explain why their ideas would be successful. The stimulus material provided some context for the suggestions and made it clear that ideas should be 'simple'. Students were asked to write between 150 and 200 words. It is important to understand that the length of answers is clearly addressed in the mark scheme and that marginal infringements of this aspect of the question would not deny a student access to the highest level provided the standard of writing composition justified it. A number of students showed real commitment to meeting the word limits as there was clear evidence of editing the answer to reduce the number of words. Overall, it seemed to examiners that students had little difficulty meeting the word limits and although it is not possible to provide clear figures, approximately 90% of students met the requirements of word length for this question.

Q1 certainly tapped into everyday lives of younger people and there was no shortage of something to say. As might be expected in this age, mental health issues received a lot of attention but there were many who offered constructive comments on access times and parental responsibility. The simple ideas often focused on alternatives to the use of the phone rather than improvements to phones or penalties for using them. There was little direct comment on the second part of the task - why the ideas might be successful - with often just the implication that these worthwhile activities were bound to work.

The best answers offered a clear rationale for the suggestions put forward. Sometimes, the impact of over-use of phones was established through sharply depicted vignettes of behaviour that was presented as damaging to the individual or anti-social in terms of families and the wider community. Many students put forward ideas that were perfectly credible such as opening youth clubs or providing some payment for community activity. Some very interesting responses put forward suggestions for ingenious mobile apps that established mechanisms to reward young phone users for time-limited use of the phone, or, in some cases, penalised them for over-use. What took these varied ideas into the top level was the level of development of the points made. Despite the length requirements of the question, many students were able to explain how their suggestions could be put in place and why they would be successful. The best answers utilised language fit for purpose with phrases such as 'physical activities', 'focus on education', 'perception of the outside world', 'provide an incentive' and so on. Sentences, varied and complex, helped to ensure that ideas were clearly established.

In the middle level, ideas were not always well developed and there was a tendency to make assertions rather than to explain why a particular suggestion would work. An example of this was the suggestion that counselling was a good approach. This may well be the case, but a comment such as, 'This will help a lot' is not really an explanation. However, students in this band made a good effort to address the task effectively and there was generally an attempt to sequence logically although the level of detail in some cases remained thin.

Approximately 8% of students fell into the lowest level (1-2 marks) for writing composition. This is a distinct minority of students, whose achievement marks them as not ready for Level 2. Answers tended to be very brief, struggling to meet the lower word limits for the question. Sentence structures conveyed little meaning and the needs of purpose and audience were rarely met.

Please note that as Question 1 is worth a maximum of only 9 marks (including SPG), students who spend too long on this question are putting themselves at a serious disadvantage. They are losing time on Question 2 which is worth 21 marks.

Question 2

This question asked students to adopt the role of a volunteer on a community leisure website and provide a review of a visit to Wildworld Adventure Park, incorporating an account of the student's visit alongside the perceived strengths or weaknesses of the park. The question is in familiar territory and students are likely to have addressed similar tasks in their preparation for the examination.

Responses followed the pattern we have come to know so well of 'working through the phases' of the points provided within the stimulus material. There was suitable description of the main features of the park including comments on the educational courses and their value to school parties. Whilst most responses reported a generally positive experience there were some who used the review to express negative views.

At the highest level (marks 10-12) students ensured that readers understood the genre of writing. In some cases, this was delivered through the use of clear headlines or other formatting, including star ratings and similar web-influenced symbols. Others provided a keynote phrase such as, 'A well-deserved 7/10' where the deliberately patronising tone adds to credibility.

As with the previous specification, it was detailed development of comments which enabled students to reach the higher levels. In such responses, key features of the visit were described with an appropriate element of carefully crafted detail such as '...with animals such as monkeys from Africa and parrots from the Amazon...' Sentence structures incorporated variety and complexity and there was a clear sense of a judgment being formed as the writer explored the park. Enthusiasm often helped students to deliver strong reviews with effective closure incorporating recommendation.

At the top level, structure reflected logical progression and each paragraph contributed to a balanced response. A very good example provided a paragraph structure as follows:

- 1st general introduction, context
- 2nd animal enclosures
- 3rd go karting and pool
- 4th rides
- 5th restaurant and standard of food
- 6th conclusions and recommendations.

Responses in the upper middle level of achievement (6-9) marks were adequate for purpose and audience with relevant material at an appropriate level of detail. Occasional lapses in tone, sometimes generated by rhetorical devices such as the rhetorical question, did not hamper clarity. Students in this band also tended to cover each topic of the stimulus material in a diligent way. In this band, however, some students with good writing skills lost sight of purpose with rather hectoring intrusions about animal care and safety. Another common weakness in this band was to dwell on an aspect such as the pricing structure, leading to an unbalanced response that presented a skewed set of priorities.

In the 4-6 level, students tended to be rather direct about their views with statements such as 'My overall view was that this was a waste of my time,' without providing the detail to justify the comment. The mark scheme identifies these responses as conveying meaning, but not really meeting the needs of purpose and audience. Answers in this band are unlikely to reach the mark required for a Level 2 pass.

As with Question 1, answers in the bottom band were confined to the the bottom 10% of the cohort and these are generally unable to produce effective writing on task. A response that deploys clear sentences and deploys a reasonable vocabulary is extremely unlikely to receive a mark in this band unless it is excessively brief.

SPG

The headline statements are:

Top level: Quality of SPaG supports clear meaning

Middle level: SPaG does not detract substantially from the general meaning being conveyed.

Lowest level: SPaG errors detract from meaning.

Spelling: at the top level students used specialist language effectively, not only to depict the park itself but to provide a lexis for critical judgment. Words such as 'entertained', 'enclosures', 'gourmet', 'vegetarian', 'overwhelming', were spelt correctly. When ascribing a level to spelling it is not simply the correctness of the spelling that matters but the range and ambition of the vocabulary. At the bottom level, 'a few examples of conventional spelling' is a key descriptor in the mark scheme.

Punctuation: sentence demarcation is the most significant issue in punctuation and answers in the top level displayed accuracy throughout. Occasionally, more complex punctuation is used but not always accurately and students provide other punctuation for coherence, such as dashes and quotation marks. In the middle level, sentence punctuation is accurate when sentences are straightforward. A common error is to introduce a full stop before a subordinate clause which then subsequently becomes an incomplete sentence. An example of this would be: 'I really enjoyed my visit to Wildworld Adventure park because firstly it was cheap. Which is amazing and everyone will be able to afford to go.' At the bottom level, sentence punctuation is either inaccurate, barely present or not present at all.

Grammar: At the bottom level a range of grammatical errors are found which makes reading very difficult. The main problems were:

- Inconsistent use of tense and auxiliary verbs;
- subject/verb agreement;
- incorrect forms such as 'would of' instead of 'would have'
- the absence of definite and indefinite articles;
- the use of conjunctions.

The final mark for spelling, punctuation and grammar takes into account achievement across the three elements.

8725R – Reading

This was the first entry point for the new paper on the reformed Functional Skills specification. The duration of the paper and the number of sources presented to students were unchanged from the legacy specification but a number of new question styles were employed and assessment of skills in language, fact and opinion and detailed comparison was introduced. It is pleasing to report that the overall approach and performance were encouraging.

The paper continued to present sources linked thematically, this series on the subject of cats, and the materials appeared to be accessible and appealing to the candidature.

Source A – an advertisement for a cattery

Source B – a factsheet about indoor and outdoor cats

Source C – a letter to the local Member of Parliament

Question 1 is intended as a fairly straightforward introduction to the paper and will always be a simple test of reading and retrieval. It was therefore very surprising to see that only 63% of students were able to identify the date on which the prices at Cranborne Cattery were last changed. The question did not rely on understanding of the word “*tariff*” as there was no other date in the source which could be a credible answer. In most cases, the mark was lost as a result of incomplete information: the whole of “*January 1st 2019*” was needed to constitute a correct answer. Even more concerning is the 22% of students who did not attempt this question, largely for unknown reasons. It can only be assumed that in the heightened atmosphere of commencing the examination, some students just did not see the question. The layout of the paper will be checked to ensure complete clarity but students must be trained to read and follow **all** the instructions.

Questions 2, 7 and 12 all test understanding of word meanings and the question clearly invited students to use a dictionary. Were they to comply with this suggestion, one would expect success rates of close to 100%. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Only 23% achieved a mark for “*discerning*”; 45% for “*dwindling*” and 73% for “*encroaching on*”. It may be that some preferred to guess or thought they knew the meaning without recourse to a dictionary. Alternatively, dictionaries may not have been available in the examination or some students simply lacked the skills and knowledge of how to use a dictionary. It is therefore clearly good advice to ensure that students have dictionaries available in the examination and that they are competent in their use, facilitated by regular classroom practice.

Questions 4 and 9 were presented in the new tick-box format, each offering four statements which students needed to decide were true or false and tick the appropriate box in each case. These were generally well attempted although both questions had a disappointing proportion achieving no marks - 20% and 17% respectively. It is worth reminding students that two marks are awarded for all four correct and one mark for three correct. Responses which identify only one or two correctly will not be awarded a mark. Therefore, it is important that students are aware that **they must attempt every statement**: a small number of students ticked only one or two boxes, thereby instantly denying themselves any marks. A significant number of students seemed to think that if they were identifying a statement as “*False*” they needed to use a cross rather than a tick; others used a sort of blob or a dash. Regardless of what symbol was employed, marks were awarded for the correct box; however, the instructions clearly say “*tick*” so students should be encouraged to read and respond appropriately to instructions in the question.

Question 5 introduced the first new area of assessment: identification of fact and opinion. Students were required to select two facts in Q5.1 and two opinions in Q5.2; in each case, two correct responses were needed for the award of one mark. These questions proved to be quite challenging, with success rates of 46% and 31% respectively. Some students transposed their answers: if they realise this and alert the examiner in some way, they will not be penalised. Others simply could not distinguish between the two types of statement, indicating that considerable practice in class could prove beneficial.

Question 6 tested writer's use of language, in this case, to persuade the reader to use Cranborne Cattery. Future series will vary the purpose in this question according to the type of text. Three marks were available here and were attained by 15% of students. 10% were not able to offer valid responses which could be credited with any marks and over 3% did not attempt the question, which is very disappointing. Close study of the mark scheme and indicative content, together with exemplar scripts which will be available following the March series should provide useful material for developing skills on this question. This will be very important, not only for success in this component, but for those who are progressing to GCSE English Language, where this skill is tested further.

Questions 10, 11 and 13 all asked students to list three things from the relevant source. Questions 10 and 11 had much more pleasing success rates than Q13, the full three marks being attained by 57%, 64% and 14% respectively. The proportions achieving no marks were 1%, 2% and 20% respectively. Students were clearly more adept at identifying benefits and risks for cats who go outside.

Question 13 focused on the complaint letter from Mrs Barkley who was angered by the cats entering her garden and the consequences of this. The question required students to list three actions Mrs Barkley would like the law to take against irresponsible cat owners. This demanded a little more discernment and precision in the answers, hence the lower success rate. However, 30% achieved one mark and 33%, two marks, indicating a good level of discrimination.

Question 14, like Q6 assesses skills which are tested at GCSE level and is therefore excellent preparation for progression. Students here are required to compare Sources A and C in terms of content, format, language, presentation and writers' views. There is therefore a good deal of scope available to access the six marks for this question. The full range of achievement was evident here, 12% attaining the top level; 28% in Level 1. 10% did not attempt this question, presumably owing to lack of time, stamina or motivation. There is no set way to approach this question: block and integrated comparisons are equally creditable. Good advice would be to undertake a little planning in the form of two columns prior to writing the answer and ensure they are not comparing apples and pears. "*Source A is a persuasive advertisement but Source C hates cats*" is not a valid comparison.

Overall, this was a very encouraging inaugural series with 59% achieving a pass. Most students approached the new questions enthusiastically and there were a number of high calibre responses to the GCSE-style questions, which augurs well for the future. It was also gratifying to see the compassion and care for our furry friends demonstrated in many of the responses and the condemnation of Mrs Barkley's spiteful views was heartwarming.

General advice for the future would be to access the Scope of Study descriptors in the new specification and ensure that students are familiar with these and with what is being assessed in each question. As alluded to previously, exemplar scripts can be requested via AQA's Curriculum Support team and further material will be available later this year. Constant reading practice and

work on identifying writers' views and how they are expressed remains the bedrock of Functional English preparation.

This first examination demonstrated the hard work which has gone into preparing the students, credit for which must go to their teachers, but also to the students themselves for their determined efforts.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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