



Level 1

Functional Skills in English

8720/S/W/R

Report on the Examination

8720

March 2020

Version: 1.0

Further copies of this Report are available from aqa.org.uk

Copyright © 2020 AQA and its licensors. All rights reserved.
AQA retains the copyright on all its publications. However, registered centres/colleges for AQA are permitted to copy material from this booklet for their own internal use, with the following important exception: AQA cannot give permission to centres/colleges to photocopy any material that is acknowledged to a third party even for internal use within the centre.

Please note that this report covers Functional Skills English for Level 1 (8720)

8720/S - Speaking

Introduction

A large number of centres took the opportunity to enter this second round of submissions. For many it was straightforward to verify their work. They had assimilated the standard by looking at the AQA standardising materials and they had completed the necessary record forms accurately.

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 a required element, and the subject as a whole cannot be passed without it. As parts 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 an audio-visual 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 candidate 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.

It is vital that teachers look at this material before making entries and certainly before assessing work.

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. Teachers should consider such things as: how well is the student looking at/engaging with the audience; how developed and structured is the presentation; how well does the student answer questions; how much interest does the student show in the chosen topic?

It is worth noting here that the standard of questioning can help students. Teachers need to be asking at least some of the questions and they need to allow the student to answer at length.

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 covering both activities

*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 second 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 make contact with the centres to help them with their next submissions.

8720/W - Writing

Overview

This is the second series under the reformed Functional Skills in English specification, Level 1 Writing (8720W). 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 page 9 of the AQA Specification

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

At Level 1 learners are required to produce straightforward texts such as narratives, instructions, 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 a pass at this level will be a strong indicator of ability in writing Standard English. It is consistent in its standard as a test of basic English writing skills and will be the foundation for secure progression. With the current demands of GCSE English, many centres and colleges are considering alternative routes for students. This qualification would also serve as a suitable alternative and an excellent progression route from The Entry Level Certificate (Step Up to English). It is important that centres and colleges enable students to have a realistic chance of acquiring valuable qualifications by mapping abilities against available qualifications. In this way, the reformed Functional English will provide important opportunities for both centres and students.

To ensure continuity under the reformed specification the writing papers have retained two questions. Each contains stimulus material leading into a task which is supported by bullet points, 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 increased to 27, with 9 marks for Question 1 (6 for composition, 3 for SPG) and 18 marks for Question 2 (9 for composition, 9 for SPG). An important point to note is that SPG comprises 44% of total marks, an increase of 4% over the previous specification, reflecting its importance at this level. 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>

At this level, centres now very rarely enter students who have little or no chance of getting inside the middle level of Mark Scheme descriptors. Students seemed generally confident and able to meet the requirements of the questions with 90% of students gaining a mark of 10 or more while over 50% gained a mark of 18 or more. Students achieving a mark of 18 are well suited to the demands of Level 2 and should be encouraged to progress. Students whose marks fall below a total of 18 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 students.

Question 1

This question required students to write an email to the Bramby Spring Festival with a contribution to its food competition. The stimulus material provided some basic information and outlined the type of response that the festival was looking for. Detailed recipes were not expected. Bullet points enabled students to develop a clear structure for the report with helpful suggestions including a rationale for the chosen food.

Students were asked to write between 80 and 120 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 band provided the standard of writing composition justified it. As the time advised for this question is only 20 minutes, students who spent too long and wrote too much may have been doubly disadvantaged. 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, although it is not possible to provide clear figures, approximately 75% of students met the requirements of word length for this question. It is becoming clearer as we move on with the new qualification that very short answers, below 50 words or so, nearly always achieve marks in the lowest level (1-2).

Generally, most students provided some information that was relevant in that an item of food was selected and then the answer was built on that choice.

Stronger answers clearly indicated what the food was in terms of its role in culture and family life. This was an important feature of the best answers. One or two students explained that the chosen dish was a family favourite and the student wished to share both the qualities of the dish in terms of flavour and texture and its qualities as a central feature of family celebration, such as at Christmas time, Eid, birthdays or other occasions. Other good answers pointed to how the dish represented the culture and background of the people who ate it. Key ingredients were highlighted to provide a geographical angle on the choice. Once the rationale for selection was clearly established, the best answers did not dwell in great detail on the recipe itself matching the sated request in the stimulus material, ‘...and we don’t want detailed recipes.’ An outline of the ingredients, with the method of preparation alongside advice on serving and eating was more than enough.

A number of good answers did provide quite detailed recipes, but these were not penalised per se. However, these tended to be quite long responses and the lack of focus in the answer tended to leave it in the second level (3-4 marks) when the phrase in the mark scheme ‘though length may not be appropriate’ would apply.

Many weaker answers did not provide enough clear detail to meet the requirements of the audience and a number were of inappropriate length, usually too short as has been noted already. Although the word limits are modest, some planning is called for to enable sufficient information to be provided. Some weaker answers provided information that was not particularly helpful, such as a discussion of the health benefits of the food. Whilst consideration of childhood obesity could be a good reason for the choice of food, an exploration of the dangers of this aspect of contemporary life would often produce unbalanced answers. It is important that students understand that a key feature of the new type of Question 1 is how closely focused the answer is on the task.

The very weakest answers, at the bottom level were almost invariably too short, with students unable to provide much beyond the identification of the chosen food. These were attempts, with little sense of purpose or audience. However, achievement at this level is limited to a minority, and in this series approximately 18% of students did not gain more than 2 marks for composition. This

is relatively high and indicates the need for careful preparation of students for this question particularly in relation to the length of the answer and focus on the task.

Before leaving Question 1, it is important to remember that it carries a maximum of only 9 marks (including SPG) and it is recommended that students spend no more than 20 minutes answering it. Students who spend too long on this question are putting themselves at a serious disadvantage because they are losing time on Question 2 which is worth twice as many marks.

Question 2

This question asked students to write a letter to Trecknation Shoes to inform the company about problems with a recent purchase. The question is in familiar territory and students are likely to have addressed similar tasks in their preparation for the examination. In meeting the specification requirements for writing texts, this question asked for explanations of what had happened and what the student felt about the treatment received.

The best answers, clearly in the top level for composition (7-9 marks) showed an understanding of the how the letter provided explanation supported by clear information. These answers established a clear context - when and how the shoes were purchased and what problems ensued. Explanations generated predictable content such as the loss of a sole or stitching coming undone. Where these answers gained marks was in the development of points made. For example, some students wrote about how the damaged shoe had an impact on their life, as in their daily jog or the need to wear new shoes for a special occasion. Further development around the cost of the shoe and the events involved in returning the shoes added to the quality of the answer and established a clear logical sequence. The best answers also utilised effective sentence structures, including well constructed complex sentences. In most cases, strong answers offered sensible suggestions to Trecknation about how to resolve the issues.

Answers in middle level (marks 4-6) offered some relevant material, often clearly linked to the stimulus material. Most of them were quite heavily dependent on a narrative account of events surrounding the shoes in question, without a great deal of considered explanation. What was lacking in some of the answers at this level was a clear sense of purpose beyond the transmission of information. Sometimes complaints about rude staff became rather abusive and students forgot to look for a way out of the situation through credible proposals. Sentence structures tended to convey basic meaning, and carry facts and information, rather than the more considered sentences in the top level. Answers in this middle level often failed to show logical sequencing and format was sometimes lacking, such as the need for paragraphs to guide the reader.

The weakest answers, in the 1-3 level were often extremely difficult to follow and the phrase 'meaning is unclear' from the mark scheme applied almost universally. At this level there was little vocabulary outside of that found in the stimulus material and some answers were extremely short. Whilst there are no advisory word limits for this question, it is very clear in most of these answers that 'length is inappropriate' (from the mark scheme). It is interesting to note, however, that only some 10% or so of students were at this level whereas there were around 18% in Question 1. This perhaps reflects the greater confidence that students have with this type of question, which closely follows the style and demands of the earlier specification.

Students should be advised that this question carries 18 marks and should therefore be given enough time to gain as many of these marks as possible. There was clear evidence, in a large number of answers, that the students had not spent sufficient time on this answer in either planning or writing.

SPG

Spelling: at the top level students used specialist language effectively. Words such as 'sauté' 'simmer' 'annoyed', 'violated', 'replacements', 'dangerous', 'expectations' 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, '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. In the middle level, sentence punctuation is accurate when sentences are straightforward. 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:

- issues around tense;
- subject/verb agreement;
- the use of definite and indefinite articles;
- the use of conjunctions or coherence markers.

In middle and top levels the scale of grammatical inaccuracy varied considerably but the crucial indicator was the ability to follow what was written.

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

8720/R - Reading

The March series focused on a theme of festivals. Source A was a webpage about Glastonbury Festival; Source B an extract from an interview with a festival-goer and Source C a travel blog about Longleat Festival of Light. The three sources produced a pleasing level of engagement and a good deal of accurate response.

Questions 1, 4 and 15 required students to read a number of statements and decide whether each of these was True or False.

Q1 - just over 1/5 of students achieved the full 2 marks and the same proportion scored zero. A significant number of students did not recognise that “*The tickets cost £1*” was a statement referring to the first festival in 1970 and that “*cost*” in this sentence was past tense. Simply reading on to the next sentence – “*Today, though tickets cost more...*” - would have clearly indicated that this statement must be false.

Q4 saw much greater success in terms of 2 marks (42%) but over 1/4 again securing no marks. It was not possible to identify any one particular statement which caused difficulty here.

Q15, similar to Q1, yielded 25% gaining full marks but a disappointing 36% scoring zero. The main difficulty here seemed to rest on a misunderstanding over the first statement: “*The family went to Longleat just for the Festival of Light*”. This was easily verified in the first sentence of Source C: “*We saw the Festival of Light as part of a full day out at Longleat Safari Park...*” so the confusion here is somewhat puzzling.

Question 16 tests Fact and Opinion, also in tick box format. There were very similar figures here: just over 25% achieving full marks; over 30% scoring zero. 2% did not attempt this penultimate question. Applying a test of “*Can this statement be proved?*” or “*Could someone else disagree with this statement?*” should help students to perform better in this question and may be good classroom practice.

For all the tick box questions, the instruction is “*put a tick (✓)*”. A significant number of students did not follow this and instead utilised a variety of symbols, such as circles, dots, dashes, the letter V; diagonal lines which fill the entire box or a mixture of ticks and crosses according to whether they are selecting T or F. Some even wrote the full words in the chosen box, which is simply wasting time. Whilst examiners are directed to award the mark if the symbol is in the correct box, this is a functional test, which includes the ability to follow instructions. It would also be worth making it absolutely clear that all four statements must be attempted. Some students tick only one or two boxes and immediately deny themselves any marks.

Questions 2, 5 and 13 are the dictionary questions, testing the meaning of “*sprawling, unrivalled and pinnacle*”, respectively. Over 60% were successful with “*sprawling*” and “*unrivalled*” and a very pleasing 79% with “*pinnacle*”. However, the questions clearly state “*You are advised to use a dictionary*” and it seems that not all students are availing themselves of this. 1% did not attempt both Q2 and Q5 and over 2%, Q13. The numbers not securing the mark here does suggest a reluctance or inability to use a dictionary or, of more concern, that one was not available in the examination.

Questions 7.1 and 7.2 had commendable success rates of 84 and 78% respectively; the majority of students had little difficulty in identifying a positive and a negative aspect of festivals, according to Hanna Jones in Source B. The main barrier to gain a mark in Q7.2 was commenting that the festival could be confusing, when the source clearly related the confusion only to the size and

complexity of the site. Students need to ensure that their answers are based on the source text and are very specific.

Questions 3 (picture); 6 & 12 (purpose) and 9 (punctuation) were all largely successful with pass rates between 68 and 82%.

Q17 presented the context of advising a friend on how to make the most of a trip to Longleat Festival of Light. The question clearly asked for “*a list of useful instructions*” and in order to achieve full marks, at least one of the statements offered by students needed to be presented in the imperative. Sadly, many responses simply copied large chunks of the text without any attempt to select what was most useful for the friend to know, or to comply with the direction of “*instructions*”. There was also considerable confusion over the term “*Piazza*” leading a significant number of students to inform their friend that they could obtain pizza there!

It would be very helpful if students could be instructed to make sure they are following the commands in the question as they will not be fully rewarded for simply lifting information which does not fit the task given. However, 37% of students did fulfil the task as required and were awarded 3 marks. 10% failed to secure any marks and almost 7% did not attempt the question at all.

Questions 10 and 11 are the areas which need the most attention. These ask for two similarities and two differences respectively, between Source A and B. The marks achieved are very low: only 6% were able to identify two valid similarities and 5% two valid differences. 40% and 66% respectively did not achieve any marks and 4% did not attempt either question.

It is therefore clear that considerable guidance and coaching in how to approach these questions is needed. In essence, students need to be taught that they are being asked to say **four things** in both of these questions: **two points about each source in each answer space in the booklet**. The layout of this question has been discussed in detail and more space will be provided in future papers.

The following points will hopefully be of use:

- There will always be a thematic link so students can say “*Both are about.....festivals*”. They can then identify a specific point relating to the content of the sources eg “*Both refer to music at the festivals*”.
- There was a lot of uncertainty about the text types: Source A was referred to as a leaflet, a poster, an information sheet, a fact sheet, an advertisement...anything but a webpage. Advise students to look at the front of the insert, which clearly identifies the text type.
- Students need to be specific in the points they make so steering them away from the type of generic comments which appeared in Q8 responses in the legacy specification would be advisable. Responses such as “*Both texts use paragraphs*” or “*Source A is a webpage and Source B / the other one isn't*” are unlikely to get a mark. The latter comment simply points out that the sources are different, which the question also indicates. Students need to say what the difference is.
- Some students appear to enter the examination with a pre-prepared response such as “*Both texts use sub-headings*”, which, if wrong, simply indicate that the student has not even looked at the sources in an attempt to identify a similarity or difference.

- Comments which are not comparing like with like are sometimes offered: “*Source A uses sub-headings and Source B is a script*”, for example.
- Finally, pictures. One of the sources will always contain a picture, in order to deliver the scope of study descriptor assessment for Q3. There is no guarantee that both sources will contain an image so the pre-planned response referred to above must be avoided. If both sources do contain an image, students will be able to gain a mark for identifying this in Q10. If only one source contains a picture, this will not form a valid route for a mark in Q11. However, if both sources contain an image, a mark can be gained in Q11 by identifying a difference in the function of the pictures such as this excellent comment from this series: “*Source A uses pictures for information but Source B uses a picture for decoration*”.

A further area where students lose marks is by not attempting some questions. It was noticeable that this proportion increased as the examination progressed, as it did in January. From Qs 1-6, it rose above 1% only once, on Q5. Q7 was over 2% on both parts. From Q8 onwards, the percentages varied between 1.29 to 6.58 on Q17, with Q10 & 11 at almost 4%. Clearly, some students’ time and stamina desert them as the exam progresses and it might be worth exploring exam strategies in class in order to counteract this tendency. There is no reason, for example, why Source C and its 10 marks of questions could not be attempted first.

Overall, however, the performance of many students was encouraging and commendable. There was evidence of pleasing engagement with the material and good understanding of information in many areas. The majority of students were well-prepared, grappled tenaciously with the assessments and performed well, which is a testimony to their hard work and that of their teachers. The mean mark was slightly lower than that in January but was attained by almost 60% of students.

It is a sadness that, as I write this from self-isolation, I am unable to end with a comment alluding to the possibility that these papers may have whetted many appetites for the festival season ahead, but hopefully, those taking place next year will be even more eagerly anticipated and doubly joyful.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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