



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

8725/S - Speaking

Introduction

A large number of centres took the opportunity to enter this second round of submissions. For some 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 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. At 8725 in particular, centres were entering students who were some way below the required standard, not least because their presentations were far too brief.

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.

8725W - Writing

Overview

This is the second series under the reformed Functional Skills in English specification, Level 2 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 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 (12 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 practise their basic writing skills, particularly in terms of SPG. In this series, some 28% 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 entry.

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 very challenging assessment.

Question 1

This question required students to write an email to a firm of solicitors, Smith, Bridges and Dean (SBD) reporting the events of an accident that the student had experienced. The stimulus material, a card from the firm of solicitors, asked for reports of accidents that were not the fault of the student. The card also made it clear that the solicitors were looking for 'brief details' of the accident. 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.

Most students had little difficulty in recounting some details of relevance to the task, many showing an awareness of hazards in the workplace as well as the responsibilities of employers to ensure the safety of workers. Traffic accidents were quite a popular scenario for answers and these often involved quite complex narratives to clarify the exact circumstances of the accident.

The best answers often provided a brief biographical introduction linked to an explanation of why they had come to contact the SBD. They then offered a clear narrative account of what had happened, often including date, time and place. Convincing details added significant credibility to answers. For example some students gave a very clear description of their employment role and the location that they worked in. The context of the accident was also well presented in terms of physical layout, signage, hazard avoidance procedures and so forth. The precise facts of the accident were the core of the best answers, with a clear account of what happened as well as the immediate physical consequences. Most strong answers also presented the broader impact of the accident in terms of loss of wages, time off work, the impact on mobility or family life. In drawing to a conclusion, answers at the top level generally made appropriate and well expressed requests for guidance and support from SBD.

The best answers adopted a measured tone, within a clearly organised response. Well-crafted sentence structures and vocabulary, sometimes adopting appropriate terminology, were factors in taking an answer into the top level for composition (5-6 marks)

In the middle level, ideas were not always well developed and there was a tendency to lose sight of the overall purpose. This could happen through an over-elaborate narrative account where detail was not always relevant. One examiner said, 'I seemed to get quite a few answers that did not hit the minimum word guidance and then usually did not provide enough detail to hit the top level in the mark scheme.' Another way students lost sight of the purpose was through the adoption of tonal features such as a sense of outrage, often delivered through rhetorical questions such as, 'How would you like it if you couldn't go to work because of ... ?' In this second level, students were not able to deploy language quite as effectively and sentences were not always well structured or word choice apt.

Approximately 14% of students fell into the lowest level (1-2 marks) for writing composition. This is a distinct minority of students, although it shows a slight increase on the January performance.

Achievement of this sort marks them as not ready for Level 2. Some answers at this level were very brief, struggling to meet the lower word limits for the question. Others went into detailed family/personal/employment histories thus providing inappropriate detail well beyond the maximum word limits and thus the needs of purpose and audience were not met. Sentence structures for all students at this level failed to work effectively and conveyed little meaning, with a very limited range of vocabulary.

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 submit a 'declaration of interest' to Bramby Council in order to gain funding for a community project. Students were informed that there was a funding pool with maximum grants of £20,000 for groups involved in a range of activities such as sport, arts, wildlife conservation and so on. The question was therefore a great opportunity for students to write positively about something that they cared about.

Responses generally had no difficulty addressing the task and nearly all chose a relevant organisation. Requests for funding were often very realistic and often showed an understanding of the need to match funding with sources of revenue from elsewhere. One examiner wrote: 'Q2 yet again boosted faith in a caring society. Yes, there were the usual sports clubs and youth centres but there were also many community initiatives which looked to help and make life more comfortable for the most vulnerable and deprived, from the aged housebound to the homeless. Unsurprisingly environmental projects were well represented with the development of many a green field and/or woodland site being rescued for future generations often with boosted wild life numbers.'

Very few answers sought money for buildings or for individuals, both of which were clearly not eligible for funding as the council notice indicated. In such rare cases, the student's answer was placed at the appropriate level in the mark scheme, but the maximum mark at that level was not available.

At the highest level (marks 10-12) students wrote very clearly about the group whom they represented. Often these were given credible titles and acronyms. Where the best answers shone was in the use of detailed explanation of the activities that their group pursued. In the case of sporting groups, such answers detailed how the group met the needs of the community through such features as after-centre clubs or holiday clinics or outings. Many focused their activities on deprived areas and on young children in particular. Some very interesting answers looked at the role of visual arts groups, such as a home-centred watercolour painting group that was targeted at people with restricted mobility. There were also excellent answers presenting music groups, ranging from aspiring rock musicians to string quartets and youth orchestras for those with mental health issues. At this level, students needed to deploy a range of linguistics strategies – whilst the primary purpose was explanatory, the role of persuasion was also significant. The best answers therefore utilised persuasive techniques in focusing closely on the amount of funding sought and the specific uses that the funding would target.

At the top level students used an entirely appropriate range of sentences, varying length and complexity to purpose. The enthusiasm of the students in the best answers, mirrored in an appropriate and proportionate way, was impressive. Good answers sometimes used a single clause sentence for effect when addressing the key point of the letter as in: 'We would like to apply for two thousand pounds of funding'. This is a good example of writer impressing through

simplicity, rather than elaborateness, of language. Strong answers were also distinguished by their use of specialist terminology within a well organised response reflected in a clear paragraph structure.

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, purpose of letter
- 2nd name of group and its activities
- 3rd the role of the group in the local community
- 4th specific targets for the group
- 5th amount of funding requested and rationale
- 6th re-iteration of case and conclusion

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 focus, sometimes linked to a lack of clarity over the role and purpose of the group, led to a weaker overall performance. Some students were unable to reach the highest level despite some really interesting ideas and this was generally as a result of poor sentences and a limited vocabulary. Sentences that seemed flabby and imprecise were typical at this level: 'Because of the reason that they mostly stay at home me and my team we where (sic) thinking to do some interesting things with them so...' A more targeted and efficient writing style would lift this.

In the 4-6 level, students tended to be rather direct about their views with statements such as 'I was wondering if you would let us gain funding,' without providing the sufficient detail to justify the request. 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.

Answers in the bottom band were confined to the the bottom 8% of the cohort which is better than Question 1 where 14% were at this level (bearing in mind that the bottom band in Question 2 covers 25% of the marks, while that in Question 1 covers 33%) . This is interesting and perhaps shows that students have difficulty addressing the word demands of Question 1 rather than a particular penchant for Question 2. Nevertheless, students might have felt more comfortable with the broader scope of Question 2. Answers in the bottom level are generally unable to produce effective writing on task. A response that deploys clear sentences and a reasonable vocabulary is extremely unlikely to receive a mark in this band unless it is excessively brief.

SPaG

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 effectivel to deliver clarity with report writing and to enable explanation. Words such as "clients", 'spcialise', 'slick of water', 'ligament', 'close-knit community', 'in advance', 'for consideration', 'trafficking and modern slavery' 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 want to gain funding for the group because firstly we need equipment. Which is really important to our plans.' 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 and
- inaccuracy with number agreement such as 'a course for this vulernable womens'
- the use of conjunctions

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

One examiner wrote, 'SPaG was often determined by sentence punctuation and spelling of more specialised words when vocabulary moved beyond the prosaic... The L2/L3 border was often quite interesting on Q2 with often the ambition of the vocabulary being the deciding feature- alongside the use of modals.' A good example of effective use of modality was quoted earlier in a different context: 'We would like to apply for two thousand pounds of funding'.

8725/R - Reading

A theme of festivals was chosen for the March series. Source A was a webpage about Glastonbury Festival; Source B, an interview with a festival-goer and Source C, a news report about the problem of plastics at festivals. Although source C proved somewhat more challenging, the materials appeared to be stimulating and accessible for the majority of students and overall, a pleasing level of engagement was evident.

Question 1 - this generated a surprising amount of confusion and difficulty with only 35% of students selecting the correct “*name of the Glastonbury Festival site*” as Worthy Farm. A variety of alternatives were offered: Green Glastonbury (this is one of the website links); greenfield music festival; Love the Farm; Leave no Trace (the slogan on the environmental pledge). The correct answer was located 2/3 through the text and all that was needed to secure the mark here was to read the source. It appears that far too many students are not doing that and it is advice which must be passed on to them. The way to success in this test is to read the whole of each source text carefully at the start of each section, before attempting any of the questions.

The other issue on this question was the surprisingly large number who made no attempt to answer. Although thankfully lower than the figure for the January series, this was still surprisingly high at 12.5%.

Questions 2, 7 and 12 test the ability to find the meaning of words using a dictionary, and this advice is given at the beginning of the question. These questions had the following success rates:

- Q2** “*permeates*” – 86%
- Q7** “*unpredictable*” – 78%
- Q12** “*spearheading*” – 71%

Whilst these are pleasing, there is still room for improvement and it appears that, once again, not all students are able or willing to use a dictionary effectively or have access to one in the examination.

Questions 3 and 8 which both test implied and inferred meaning had success rates of 76 and 60% respectively.

Questions 4 and 9 are the True/False questions in tick-box format. Q4 was considerably more successful than Q9 in terms of full marks, these achieved by 42 and 23% respectively. However, 28% secured no marks on Q4 as opposed to 19% on Q9. It was not possible to discern a particular pattern in which statements proved more problematic, other than some general confusion over the statement “*People can give their ticket to someone else*” being difficult to equate to “*non-transferable*” and there was also some evidence to support this in Q5.1.

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.

Question 5.1 requires the identification of two facts for one mark and this was achieved by 55% of students. If only one correct fact is offered, no marks can be awarded, as was the case with 45% of entrants. The main error here was in citing both “*Tickets are personalised to the (named) ticket holder*” and “*Only the specified ticket holder will be admitted*”, thus not recognising that these two mean the same.

Question 5.2, which asks students to select two opinions was somewhat more successful with 62% achieving the mark. Almost 2%, however, did not attempt this part of the question. Two clear misunderstandings of what constitutes an opinion emerged here, firstly: “*Glastonbury is the largest ...in the world*” which can clearly be proven in terms of ticket sales or site area. The mark scheme allowed “*Glastonbury always feels like a safe place*” but a significant number of students lost the mark by omitting the key words “*feels like*”. It was considered that this made the statement too definitive and closer to a fact as “safety” in terms of crime numbers could be proven. The statement in the source text could easily be explained as one that not everyone might agree with, thereby indisputably an opinion. A few students misunderstood the task and offered their own opinions of festivals. Differentiating between fact and opinion is tricky and performance on this question would clearly benefit from sustained classroom practice and discussion.

Question 6 is patently an area of the assessment which needs much more emphasis and guidance to students, particularly since it is a clear stepping stone to GCSE English Language assessment. The question requires explanation of how the writer used language to “*describe the sights of Glastonbury Festival*”. 3.5% achieved the full 3 marks; 35% gained no marks and over 4% did not attempt the question.

A major flaw in students’ approach was a simple misreading of the question, which clearly asked for a focus on “**sights**”. Too many answers merely dealt with the atmosphere of the festival and were therefore self-penalising. There was considerable copying of chunks of the text, or paraphrasing and “translating” what words or phrases meant eg “*The writer described Glastonbury as ‘utterly breathtaking’, which means it took his breath away*”. Such answers demonstrate no attempt to explain how the language works.

As mentioned in the January report, a set of annotated sample scripts will be available in the future to help demonstrate the expected standard of performance in advance of the next series, whenever that may be.

Questions 10 & 11 were based on the interview with seasoned festival-goer Hanna Jones and were both straightforward selection tasks. Q10 asked for “*three things Hanna Jones loves about festivals*” and was successfully answered by 61% gaining 3 marks and 98% achieving 1 or better.

Q11 asked for “*three ways people attending a festival can look after their health.*” This was less well done, with just over 40% achieving 3 marks and 5% scoring no marks, of which, over 1% did not attempt the question. The main error denying marks here was in offering advice relating to safety rather than health – again, a misreading of the question or a lack of clear focus on what was being selected.

Question 13 was based on the more challenging, Source C and the results reflect this. 29% secured full marks; 13% achieved no marks and 2% did not attempt the question. Students were asked to select “three ways in which some festivals have reduced their plastics usage”, in addition to the campaign against single-use plastic tents. Too many responses contained reference to the latter and therefore denied themselves at least 1 mark. For some, it proved difficult to untangle the references to single-use plastic cups and bottles; reusable cups and bottles; branded reusable bottles and single-use bar cups. Another error was omission of a verb which was necessary to clarify the point eg, “*drinks in single-use cups*” is meaningless without “*banned*” or “*scrapped*”.

This question does require a little more discernment and probably more time spent on it. There is no reason why Source C cannot be attempted before Source B, since the more difficult selection in Q13 and the high-tariff comparison Q14 are both based on Source C.

In all three “list three things” questions, students must be aware that they will be awarded **one mark per response space** so the lifting of sections of text or whole sentences which contain multiple correct answers is a fundamental error in approaching this question. Select three individual items and write each one into one of the response spaces is the only way to achieve success in these questions.

Question 14 - over 8% did not attempt this most valuable question, presumably largely due to mismanagement of time, which adds more weight to the above suggestion regarding order of questions. In terms of performance, only 1% achieved full marks, 15% secured 4 or 5 and 7% scored zero. The vast majority, then, were offering answers in Level 1 or low Level 2 – “*simple contrast*” or “*a number of similarities/differences set out*”, most lacking in the kind of detail needed to attain the higher levels.

There was very limited evidence of planning but this would seem to be a sensible first step in terms of noting down some fundamental similarities and differences. There will always be a thematic link as a starting point and it would be wise to advise students to consult the first page of the insert, which clearly states the text type of each source. This is a given difference which can be utilised and built on: how does the difference in text type determine the choice of language or format, for example? It also removes the uncertainty around identifying text types which was evident in both series so far. Annotated sample scripts will again be available for assistance in this area.

Overall, however, the level of engagement with the challenges of the texts and questions was heartening to see, with many demonstrating a determined, tenacious approach. It needs reiterating that this is a test of reading. Careful reading of the text should come first, followed by careful reading of the question and re-reading the question during the process of answering to ensure that focus from the task has not drifted. The mean mark held up well against that in January and was achieved by well over 56% of entrants, which is very creditable.

It is hoped that, as the new papers bed in, familiarity will ensure that approaches are refined and guidance built on to address some of the areas for improvement noted in this report. I had hoped to end this report with a cheerful reference to the sources having whetted everyone’s appetite for the forthcoming festival season, but as I write this in self-isolation, we know that there will be no festivals this year. Hopefully, those taking place next year will be 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.