
FUNCTIONAL SKILLS ENGLISH

8725/S/W/R

Report on the Examination

8725

November 2021

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Please note that this report covers Functional Skills English for Level 2 (8725)

8725/S - Speaking

Introduction

A number of centres took the opportunity to enter this round of submissions. For some centres 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.

General improvement was seen in the range of topic students covered, and in the improved quality of questions, especially from teachers. Some students were recorded on site visits (one memorably handling a snake in a zoo), and these were always interesting to view. When teachers used recordings from zoom sessions these also worked very well, and actually helped teachers to ask good questions.

Problems remain though in two key areas. The first is that too many students read their presentation, without any attempt to engage with their audience. If this is the case then teachers must question the students at length and in depth for all criteria to be fulfilled.

The second problem area is the completion of paperwork for the submission. A centre declaration sheet (CDS) must be sent with the submission. Each student in the sample must have a centre record form (CRF), and for each student all criteria must be indicated to have been fulfilled.

Please note that submissions on DVD can no longer be accepted.

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 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.

In advance of submission of entry and grades

1. During the Functional English course students should regularly take part in presentations with questions and in discussions. The questions should, at least in part, be from teachers/adults and should be designed to ensure that students can reach the required criteria. There is guidance in section 5 of the specification.

2. When preparing for/practising presentations, students must be discouraged from reading verbatim notes or PowerPoints. Students should be speaking on a suitable topic of their own choice.

3. Teachers should collect evidence which will be a video recording of a presentation for each student in the sample to be submitted and notes on the discussions to be entered on the AQA Student Record Form (CRF)

If there are reasons that make it impossible to conduct visual recordings then exemptions must be sought from AQA well in advance of the submission deadline.

4. When students are entered the centre must already have collected the evidence that will allow them to give the student a Pass. This means they must have fulfilled **all** the criteria for both presenting and discussing. To ensure that you are familiar with the required standards (which for 8725 are obviously higher than for 8720) please watch the AQA standardisation videos, which are available via the AQA website. Please **do not** enter students if you do not have the required evidence to do so.

5. To summarise: *The procedure is: collect the evidence, complete the paperwork, check that all standards have been met by looking at criteria and watching standardisation videos, enter the student, wait to forward the evidence to the verifier.*

A check list of what is required once you are asked to submit your evidence for verification.

- Check that you are submitting the required sample size, that each student's presentation is on a separate clearly labelled file and that 8720 are separated from 8725.
- Check that the files play on windows media player, on a computer. Check that visuals can be seen and that sound can be heard.
- Do not compress files and do not encrypt with passwords known only to you. AQA does not require encryption. If you do, then please use the official password supplied by AQA.
- Check that you have completed and forwarded a Centre Declaration Sheet and a CRF form for each student in the sample. Double check that every student you have entered as Pass is shown to have fulfilled all the criteria on the CRFs.
- Have all materials ready for verification by the deadline.
- When notified of your verifier the sample should be posted to the verifier using first class post (fully paid) and without the need for a signature. It is helpful if the centre submits a short piece of correspondence to the verifier, making it clear what centre is sending the materials and which specification is being entered. Do not use Special/Signed for Delivery.

Conclusion

The very best talks are those where students talk about often unusual and very challenging experiences, which are then teased out for their implications by subtle and sensitive questioning.

Many teachers had worked very hard to work within covid-related constraints and their efforts are much appreciated.

[AQA | Notes and guidance: non exam assessment \(NEA\)](#)

Centre Declaration Sheet 2022 - [Centre declaration sheet 2022 \(aqa.org.uk\)](#)

[Functional Skills English Specification for first teaching in 2019 \(aqa.org.uk\)](https://www.aqa.org.uk/functional-skills-english/specification)

8725/W - Writing

Overview

This is the seventh series under the reformed Functional Skills in English specification, Level 2 Writing (8725W). Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, entries continue to be, understandably, very modest.

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 practice their basic writing skills, particularly in terms of SPaG. In this series, examiners felt that the entries were very strong and this performance is reflected in the statistics for the component. Only 11% or so of students achieved marks of 15 or fewer which is considerably lower than June 21 and therefore very encouraging. However, although there were a number of students entered who would have benefited from a Level 1 entry (with total marks of 12 or fewer), this was a much smaller percentage than in previous series.

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 asked students to write a report to the Bramby.com website about something that ‘inspired’ the writer during lockdown. There were a number of things and suggestions incorporated into the stimulus material and the intention behind this was to establish the scope of the expected answer. Students were invited to share their experience on the website, no matter what that was.

Most students had little difficulty in providing meaningful content for this question. Students generally provided a brief context to the answer, often providing a family or personal dimension that enhanced the response. One examiner felt that this question was ‘possibly the best answered question I have seen in a Functional English Writing examination.’

The best answers generally provided a very useful introduction, in most cases establishing how the period of lockdown had proved to be very challenging. Some spoke of the pressures on family life while others were able to write honestly about the need to address their mental health which was under strain during this period. The range of content that was presented was extraordinary but a few examples of excellent responses might serve to get this across. One student wrote with great enthusiasm about discovering the ‘art of animation’. The student explored how they had come across the work of talented animators ‘across the globe’ and how this experience served as an inspiration to take up the practice. Another student wrote of the impact of the lockdown in very personal terms, presenting the challenge as journey into health, the inspiration in this case being the establishment of a routine of activity and exercise. Answers that focused on a cultural product such as a book or a film explored the notion of inspiration by writing about how they became more aware of the complexity and beauty of the world around them. There were also many heart-warming answers which showed a real appreciation of loving family support and concern for those who were struggling.

These better answers were successful in their expression, with the use of complex sentences and interesting vocabulary. Phrases such as ‘wallowing in despair’, ‘wealth of talent’, ‘stunning production standards’ and ‘the people online who supported and encouraged me’ were found across the range and the quality of the language in most cases underpinned answers in the top level. Very rarely would a top level answer show serious deficiencies in the way language was used (as opposed to purely technical error in SPaG) as this crosses two of the descriptors in the mark scheme.

Answers in the middle band for content, gaining marks of 3 or 4, tended to be effective enough in that some context was provided and then the subject of the answer presented but this often took the form of recounting the narrative of a book they had read or a box set they had watched or a sports event they had seen. Such answers, while competent, often lacked a sense of why their chosen subject matter had been inspiring. This was perhaps the single most evident discriminator between the middle and the top level, covering the issue of development of the key idea. Those in the top band were ‘fit for purpose’ while those in the middle band were ‘acceptable’ in terms of the way in which they engaged audience. Often, too, the language of these answers lacked expressive energy and conviction.

Only 5.3% of students fell into the lowest level (1-2 marks) for writing composition. This is a very small minority of students, and a significantly better overall performance than the June series where approximately 17% of students fell into this category. Achievement at this level marks the

student as not ready for Level 2. It was apparent to the panel that most answers at this level were very brief, struggling to meet the lower word limits for the question. Information was spare and not always relevant.

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 send an email to Carla McLeod, the manager of Bramby Cosmo Foods, a local takeaway service, giving an account of unsatisfactory service that they had received. The stimulus material was a leaflet which presented Bramby Cosmo Foods' claims about its service, which could provide some focus in planning an answer.

Virtually no students had difficulty understanding the task and this is a measure of how effectively centres have incorporated key concepts in Functional English Writing.

The best answers established a clear context for the account, whether it was a special family occasion or an individual returning home after a day at work, too tired to cook. Such an introduction was important in establishing the tone of disappointment in the email, generated by the contrast between expectation and the reality of what took place. The best answers were very detailed and used appropriate language to present the issues. In most cases students wrote about the quality of food, the attitude of the delivery person or the poor quality of customer service over the phone or in the shop itself. Students wrote of the 'warning flags' that indicated the possibility of poor quality, such as the flimsy food containers or grease staining the carrier bag. Disarranged pizza toppings, squashed burgers and fish that seemed to be alive were targets of often pointed descriptions with effective language that allowed an appropriate tone to emerge. Phrases such as 'with my appetite slowly slipping away...' and 'rather unsavoury language...' helped students to produce strong responses.

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:

1. Initial context, reason for the purchase of the takeaway.
2. Description of delivery and packaging
3. Detailed description of the food itself
4. Comment about the student's disappointment
5. Conclusion with a reasonable request for compensation

Answers which fell into the middle two bands tended to address aspects of the poor service in a purely factual way and lacking in development of both the details and the impact of the service on the student. This tended to reduce the effect of the email in terms of establishing the right tone for complaint either through inconsistency or poor expression. In these bands, too, students tended to exaggerate the problems so they lacked authenticity. Occasional adoption of devices such as the rhetorical question were not always helpful to the student as they can be repetitive, reducing the impact of the answer and giving the impression of a rather formulaic approach.

Answers in the bottom band were confined to the bottom 3.5% of the cohort in contrast to 5% on Question 1 for the same level. This showed that students at the lower end of the scale may have been able to tackle this question, where the emphasis was on narrative, with a little more enthusiasm than Question 1. Answers at this level were marked by serious deficits in terms of skill

in expression as well as the ability to produce any kind of satisfactory structure. Students achieving marks in this content band would be better sitting the Level 1 exam.

Only 1.5% of students offered no response to this question which is an indication of the confidence that they felt in answering questions of this sort.

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.

One examiner wrote in relation to the overall standard on this paper, '...accuracy levels, particularly in terms of specialised spelling, were a lot higher [than previous series] as was sentence punctuation and the use of modality.'

Spelling: at the top level students used specialist language effectively to deliver clarity. Words such as 'prowess', 'encouragement', 'heritage' 'budgetary', 'mechanical', 'awkward' and 'pandemic' in Question 1 were spelt correctly. In Question 2 words such as 'copious', 'arrangement', 'business', 'unsavoury' and 'disappointment' 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.

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 few thing'
- the use of conjunctions

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

The bottom level of achievement for SPaG would generally place the student well outside of the possibility of gaining a pass, although this is very much a minority of those taking the examination. Students who do achieve marks in this band would need to strengthen their skill base if they were to re-take the examination. In this series, for Question 1 about 5% were in the bottom level comparing favourably with 19% in June, while for Question 2 there were 5% compared to 17% at that level in June.

8725/R - Reading

The theme for the November series was chocolate. Source A was an article about the use of child labour used to pick the cocoa beans needed to manufacture chocolate. Source B examined the health risks and benefits of eating chocolate, while Source C attempted to persuade readers to give up chocolate for one month to raise funds for the British Heart Foundation. The variety of content was well received overall and led to a number of engaged responses.

Question 1 required the identification of the two countries in which cocoa beans are grown. Almost 30% of entrants failed to secure the mark, 9% of whom did not attempt the question.

Questions 2, 7 and 12 are the dictionary questions, demonstrating success rates ranging from 88% down to 48%, clearly indicating that a substantial number of students are still not using, or not having access to, a dictionary in the examination. Clearly, for many modern students, a dictionary is an archaic resource long-since overtaken by Google but the ability to use one is a required element of the Functional Skills assessment and has up to 3 marks attached to it; it is therefore worth the effort. Students should also be taught that there is often more than one definition of a word; thus they need to be guided by the numbers and also check the meaning of the word in context.

Questions 3 and 8 both test implied and inferred meaning. Just over 2/3 of students gained the mark for Q8 but Q3 proved more problematic with only a little over half selecting the correct option. Students found it difficult to recognise that the article was suggesting a lack of knowledge about the use of child labour rather than a lack of care.

Questions 4 and 9 are the True/False questions in tick-box format. 55% of students achieved full marks on Q4 but Q9 generated a lower full-mark rate of 32%, largely as a result of misunderstanding that just because “*chocolate is one of the most popular sweets in the world*” does not make it “*the most popular*”. Almost one fifth of students gained no marks on Q4 and 1% on Q9. These questions may look straightforward, but careful reading of the text is essential to secure full marks.

For all the tick box questions, the instruction is “*put a tick (✓)*”. A significant number choose to ignore this and utilise 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 write the full words in the chosen box. 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 clear that all four statements must be attempted. Some students tick only one or two boxes and immediately deny themselves access to any marks.

Questions 5.1 and 5.2 test fact and opinion respectively. Achievement on these questions in this series saw an impressive improvement with just over 70% of students achieving the mark on both questions. Those who were not successful did not observe the instruction to select material from the first two paragraphs of Source A (facts) or the last two paragraphs for opinions. A range of opinions were selected by students who have clearly been taught to seek out judgmental or evaluative words – “*pleasure*”, “*luxury*” and “*delicious*” for example. A similar strategy was used in Q5.1 where “*statistics*” often equalled “*facts*”, quite correctly. However, care must be taken to ensure that what is presented as a fact actually makes sense. Indiscriminate copying and unrelated pronouns are likely to disallow the mark. For example, “*But only about 6% of this goes to the farmers*” makes sense only if its preceded by “*The chocolate industry is worth around 100 billion dollars...*”. Copying these two statements into the two designated spaces would gain the

mark only if they were presented in the correct order. In the same way, “70% of which are cultivated in Western Africa” must be validated by linking it to the opening phrase about cocoa beans.

Differentiating between fact and opinion is tricky and would clearly benefit from sustained classroom practice and discussion.

Question 6: This question tests writers’ use of language and is a useful introduction to GCSE English Language, where the same skill is tested in the same way. The majority of students attempting this question would benefit from a clear focus on the difference between “what the text says” and “how the writer says it”. This series, students were asked to explain how the writer uses language to describe the lives of the child labourers. The text was laden with emotive language and strong visual descriptive words relating to the horrific, punitive existence of these exploited children. Very few students focused on **how** the writer used these words, largely defaulting to repeating the facts of the children’s treatment at the hands of the farmers. The mark scheme differentiates between identifying relevant material, attempting to explain the intended effect of that material and clearly explaining the effect. Answers which simply offer a quotation and follow this up with a paraphrase or a generic comment such as “*showing you how the children are treated*” are not focusing on the use of language and cannot be awarded more than 1 mark. Only 8% of students managed to offer a “clear explanation” of writer’s use of language, for example, by commenting about the abuse and lack of choice in the connotations of “*deprived*” or “*taken from their homes*”. 38% achieved 2 marks by offering an “attempted explanation” which often fell into a generic category such as “*makes the reader feel sorry for them*”. It is only a very short step to move these responses to the type of clear explanation worthy of 3 marks. Just over 20% of students were unable even to identify relevant language in order to achieve 1 mark and almost 3% did not offer any response.

This remains an area of the assessment which needs much more emphasis and guidance to students, particularly given its role as a stepping stone to GCSE English Language assessment. A set of annotated sample scripts was due to be made available at some point to help demonstrate the expected standard of performance. The lack of a summer 2020/2021 series and the continuing disruption caused by the pandemic and working from home have thus far interfered with these plans but these scripts will hopefully appear quite soon.

Questions 10 and 11 asked for three ways in which eating chocolate can benefit or harm health respectively. Both questions had full mark rates of around 50% and only 4% gaining no marks, indicating some careful reading and selection. A few students offered vague responses to Q10, such as “*mood*” or “*vision*” without the qualifiers “*improved*” or “*better*”. However, over 95% of students gained at least one mark on these questions.

Question 13, the third of the “list” questions proved particularly challenging this series as indicated by only 1/4 of students achieving full marks and almost 10% failing to secure any marks. The task was based on the British Heart Society appeal for fundraisers to take part in Dechox and give up chocolate for one month. Students were required to list three tips to help someone keep going **once they have started** on Dechox. A significant number of students listed tips designed to help people **get started** on Dechox - tips which were completely invalid in terms of the question. The structure of the text and its topic sentences made it very easy for students to navigate to the correct sections as long as they had read the question carefully.

Indiscriminate copying of text has been a feature of Functional Skills for many series and it is never successful: it clearly signals a student who is not confident to select the appropriate text. Students should be steered away from such an approach.

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. Selecting three individual items and writing each one into each of the response spaces is the only way to achieve success in these questions. Entrants who are using word processors should label their points as 1, 2 and 3 in order to maintain parity with the stipulation for written responses.

Question 14: There was a distinct improvement in the quality of many of the comparison questions this series. This is the highest tariff question on the paper and 3% - some 18 students – achieved the full 6 marks with a further 9% gaining 5 marks. Just 8% scored zero, most of these offering no response, probably owing to poor time management. Many more responses were focused on similarities and differences, often identifying more than one of each and supporting their comments with detail from the source texts. A small number of students tried to compare all three sources or occasionally just focused on Source A. The question requires a comparison between Source A and Source C. Source B should be entirely discounted. For those students who struggled with timing or focus at the end of the examination, it has been suggested previously that it would be perfectly permissible to deal it remains an option to deal with Source A and Source C before Source B, thus generating the possibility of more time to spend on this more valuable question. Advice given previously remains relevant and helpful and is reproduced below.

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.

There was a very low percentage of non-attempts, with the exception of Q1. In spite of the ongoing rigours of masks, absence and anxiety, a concerted effort has been made to engage with the texts and tasks and produce a very creditable, in some cases, excellent level of performance, exemplified by a mean mark of just under 19 achieved by 2/3 of entrants.

This is great credit to these students and their teachers, particularly given the very trying circumstances in which the learning and assessment has taken place. There are clear areas where improvement is needed, notably Q6 testing writers’ use of language. A continued emphasis on reading, which encompasses the three texts and all the questions, is essential for success. Students should practise reading a text, then the question, then the text again to ensure that they are selecting the best and shortest piece of evidence to answer the question correctly. Copying of whole sentences will very rarely, if ever, be required and should be discouraged.

It was my sincere hope that this series would be the last to be taken in the shadow of Covid but events have not transpired in this way as we look ahead to more restrictions and further uncertainty over the forthcoming 2022 series. For Functional Skills, examinations have gone ahead as usual but the preparation and revision for these is likely to have been particularly taxing for staff and students alike. The effort and determination of the November cohort and their teaching staff deserves to be recognised and it is to be hoped that, with Christmas looming, a few chocolate treats will be the order of the day.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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