
FUNCTIONAL SKILLS ENGLISH LEVEL 2

8725/S/R/W

Report on the Examination

8725

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8725/S

Please note that this report covers the Spoken English component for Functional Skills English for both Level 1 (8720) and Level 2 (8725).

Introduction

A number of centres took the opportunity to enter this round of submissions. For most centres it was straightforward to verify their work.

Most centres used the newly designed Candidate Record Form (CRF) date 2022/3. This has been amended in the following ways:

- It no longer requires a student signature
- In the section on Presentation teachers are required to give the title of the student's presentation and then add some comments on their assessment of it
- The Discussion section is more clearly set out

Use of this form is now compulsory, as is the requirement to comment on the assessment of the presentation. A number of centres omitted to do this.

Overall this new form is working well and makes it clear to teachers that students need to fulfil all the criteria from 3.1 to 3.8 to be awarded a pass.

Continued improvement was seen in the range of topic students covered, and in the improved quality of questions, especially from teachers.

In each of these reports key problems are highlighted, and the three mentioned below were also mentioned in the November report. It would be really helpful if these issues could be addressed immediately by centres.

The first is that too many students read their presentation, without any attempt to engage with their audience. If this is the case in Level 1 then teachers must question the students at length and in depth for all criteria to be fulfilled. If it happens at Level 2, which is a higher standard with more rigorous requirements then the centre should deem the student(s) not ready to be entered. The student(s) should then be taught how to deliver a presentation, addressing an audience directly while still using supporting material where necessary.

The second problem area is an administrative one and involves the labelling of files on the submitted USBs. Some centres used their own labelling which was very unhelpful. Please follow the AQA guidance on naming audio visual files. At the very least your verifier needs to see the candidate number and the student's surname. It can be an impossible task for a verifier to find the student they need to look at if there is merely a list of first names, or even worse a random set of numbers.

The third issue involves seeking an exemption from filming in what should be a few and highly specific cases – after all a filmed presentation is a requirement of the specification, and this component forms part of the subject as a whole. Centres must understand it is not possible to seek an exemption from filming *after* they have already given the student a pass. The exemption must be sought before submitting a grade and the CRF must provide detailed description of the student's presentation. In some cases centres had not approached AQA at all, and simply wrote to

the verifier (who is not on the AQA staff) saying why they had given the exemptions themselves. This simply cannot happen.

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

Below are key aspects of the specification which have appeared in previous reports and are reproduced here as key facts for teachers and exam officers who may be new to the specification or need reminders.

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. These are separate assessments. Failure to do both of these, and equally importantly failure to *evidence* these, means the student cannot pass.

For a presentation there must be a video recording, plus a completion of the presentation part of the record form, with comment on the performance. 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 must fail, or probably more appropriately 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.

What follows below is a reminder of the systematic steps that need to be followed.

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 CRF.

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

The Candidate Record form should be completed at the time of the activity. This will indicate to the teacher whether the student has fulfilled all criteria, and is ready to be entered, or whether the student needs further opportunities and needs to be entered at a later date.

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.

Only those teachers who have followed the standardising procedures should be awarding passes.

Please **do not** enter students if you do not have the required evidence to do so. The negotiations that are required with centres to support belatedly what they awarded earlier can be very time-consuming and can lead to many withdrawals of students at the last minute.

5. So to summarise: *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.

6. Check that you are submitting the required sample size, that each student's presentation is on a separate clearly labelled file on a USB and that 8720 are separated from 8725.

7. Check that the files play on windows media player, on a computer. Check that visuals can be seen and that sound can be heard.

8. Do not compress files and crucially 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.

9. Check that you have completed and forwarded a CDS 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.

10. Have all materials ready for verification by the deadline.

11. 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.

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 with their students and their efforts are much appreciated.

[AQA | Non-exam assessment \(NEA\) | Standardisation | Teacher online standardisation \(T-OLS\)](#)

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

[Centre Declaration sheet 2023](#)

[Candidate Record Form 2023](#)

[Functional Skills English Specification for first teaching in 2019 \(aqa.org.uk\)](#)

8725/R

The first series of 2023 offered three sources on the theme of makeup. Source A and B were both aimed at aspiring makeup artists with Source A promoting a trip to a high-profile trade show for makeup students and Source B a careers factsheet. Source C explored the history of men's makeup in the form of a podcast. The materials appeared to produce a high level of engagement and enjoyment.

Q1 simply asked candidates to state where in London the IMATS makeup show would take place and was correctly answered by just over 80%. Around 12% failed to secure the mark, some by a lack of specificity – “*Central London*” could not be a correct answer to “*Where in London*” – while others inexplicably talked about The London Eye or the West End – both were mentioned in the source but not as the venue for the event. Unfortunately, the historically high non-attempted rate on this question, which had dwindled to below 1% in November, escalated in this series to over 5%.

Qs 2, 7 and 12 are the dictionary questions and produced pass rates between 72% and 79%. Whilst these percentages are reasonably pleasing, it remains clear that were all students supplied with and using a dictionary correctly, percentages close to 100 would result. 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 virtually guarantees three marks in this examination; 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.

Qs 3 and 8 both test implied and inferred meaning. Q3 enjoyed a success rate of around 73% for identifying the implication that “*attending IMATS is essential for a career in the makeup industry*”. The most common incorrect answer was “*The travel company does not want to reveal the full price of the trip*”, inferred from the final line of the source: “*Trips typically from £169: contact us for exact price.*” This indicates a lack of familiarity with this style of marketing and may also represent some cynicism on the part of the students. Unfortunately Q8 proved far more problematical with only just over one-quarter gaining the mark for the correct answer: “*makeup artists need to be good at managing money*”. Almost 50% selected “*good references are needed to get into a career as a makeup artist*” inferred from reference to “*popularity*” and “*having a good reputation*”.

Qs 4 and 9 are the True/False questions in tick-box format. There was a significant disparity in success rates here with Q9 showing over 30% achieving full marks, double that on Q4. Well over half gained no marks on Q4 compared with just below 30% on Q9. The main problematic option on Q4 was “*Students will spend two days at the IMATS show*”, which was wrongly selected as True by those not recognising that although a two-day trip was on offer, only one of those days would be spent at the event, the other offering free time to explore the sights of London. The structure of the trip was clearly presented in separate content marked “*Day 1*” and “*Day 2*” plus the specific statement “*You have **the** day to spend at the...Trade Show*”, so it is difficult to understand why so many students misread this.

It is worth reminding students that full marks requires all four selections to be correct: two correct boxes ticked equals no marks. Some students tick only one or two boxes and immediately deny themselves any marks. An interesting strategy this series was to tick only the boxes which the student identified as “True”, almost seeming to think that the examiner would assume they meant the unmarked lines to be “False”. Simply following the instructions to “tick the boxes” is the best and only strategy here.

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, 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.

Q 5.1 and **Q5.2** test fact and opinion respectively and both had success rates of well over 50%, which is pleasing but considerably below the 70% gained in the previous series. In Q5, the question specifically directed candidates to the first main paragraph: inevitably some just grabbed easily-spotted facts about the price and duration of the trip but these were not from the first main paragraph so marks were lost. Students need to remember that it is not compulsory for facts to contain figures and statistics. Interestingly, Q5.2 had a non-attempt rate (over 4%) double that of Q5.1. These questions require **two correct answers for one mark** so completing only one answer space is instant failure. Students need to take time to read questions and text carefully – a very obvious pointer which must be repeated in classrooms up and down the country but is still not followed sufficiently well under the pressure of exam conditions.

A very simple point of guidance would be to repeat “Read and answer the question”. A further useful piece of advice here would be not to lift and copy whole sentences as these can often contain two or three acceptable answers which need to be offered separately in the two designated spaces.

Q6: Unfortunately, performance on this three-mark question remains dispiritingly poor. Fewer than 3% gained the full three marks for explaining how the writer used language to persuade people to attend the IMATS show. Almost 23% gained no marks, including almost 5% who wrote no response, and the mean mark was just over 1. These statistics show no improvement over the previous series and in fact a slight decline in the numbers achieving full marks.

Many students have clearly been taught well how to identify language devices and techniques, including correct subject terminology, and some went to great lengths to list every persuasive device, word or phrase they could find but still ended up with just one mark because all such answers are doing is identifying. In many cases, what constituted an attempt to explain the persuasive nature of the language selected was nothing more than repeating the question in responses such as “*The writer uses words like “phenomenal”, “impressive” and “exciting” to persuade readers and make them want to attend the show*”. This type of response is still not accessing the two- and three-mark bands: two marks are gained for an attempt to explain the intended effect of these devices, words and phrases; three marks for a clear explanation.

A clear explanation could have been achieved with relative ease, as shown by this response:

“The writer uses words like ‘phenomenal’ to describe how good the IMATS is (possibly a very weak attempt). The writer then goes on and uses compelling words like ‘breathtaking’ and ‘impressive’ to persuade the reader. (Still not approaching any real explanation) The writer relentlessly exaggerates how good it will be – ‘this event has all the media makeup tips you need!’ (By the time they reach the end, they have achieved a clear explanation).

Students **must** practise explaining what the writer was trying to do with the things they identify. Perhaps classroom practice could utilise verbal explanations by students in pairs then moving to recreating these on paper.

It is disappointing to see answers of copious length, which have clearly taken time and effort to produce but which cannot be rewarded as they are not answering the question. Much of the guidance following feedback on this series simply repeats what has been offered in many previous reports and remains current.

Question 6 tests writers' use of language and can be a useful introduction to GCSE English Language, where the same skill is tested in a similar way. The Scope of Study descriptors for this question are:

- Understand the relationship between textual features and devices, and how they can be used to shape meaning for different audiences and purposes
- Identify different styles of writing and writer's voice

"How they (words and techniques) can be used to shape meaning" is a crucial part of the assessment here because the majority of entrants are not doing this.

What follows has appeared in multiple reports but sadly continues to be needed.

The mark scheme at the lowest level rewards "identification of relevant material" but statistics and purely factual information do not constitute relevant material for a "describe" task. As noted previously, considerable numbers of students spent their time selecting multiple valid quotations, any one of which could have been used to try and enhance the mark but three or four "simple identification of relevant material" is worth no more than one of the same – one mark. There seems to be an increasing move towards listing and exemplifying a range of techniques with no attempt to comment on how any of the quoted words or phrases work. Students should be guided to choose what they see as the most fruitful quotation and concentrate on **that one only**, trying to explain how the words work in terms of the picture they create or the feelings they evoke in the reader.

The picture of performance in this question is virtually unchanged and clearly indicates that we need much more focus on explaining how language works, particularly given its role as a potential stepping stone to GCSE English Language assessment.

Q10 & Q11 were both based on Source B – a factsheet about a career in makeup. Q 10 asked for *"three challenging aspects of working as a makeup artist"* and produced a full-mark rate of almost 38%. Around 16% failed to score, including over 3% non-attempted. **Q11**, which asked for *"three qualities or skills a makeup artist needs"*, was somewhat less successful with fewer than 30% achieving full marks but an almost identical zero-mark rate. The main issue lay in candidates transposing some of their selections between the two questions. For example, considerable numbers offered *"the ability to work in a variety of settings"* as a skill needed by a makeup artist when the source actually presented this as a challenge. *"Handling money / budgeting"* was both a challenge and a necessary skill and was therefore accepted as a valid answer for both. Despite the errors, these two questions demonstrated a high level of engagement with the source and a real attempt to unpick its nuances.

Q13 just made it into first place on the full-mark success rate – 1% above Q10. This question required identification of *"three pieces of evidence that men were using makeup before the 20th century"*. Despite, or maybe owing to, its potential for differences of opinion, this source about makeup for men proved very interesting for candidates although approximately 20% gained no marks, including over 4% who made no attempt. Lack of success largely occurred when entrants missed the crucial part of the question directing them to *"before the 20th century"* or defaulted to

generic comments about the widespread availability of men's beauty products and increasingly tolerant attitudes towards its use.

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 one of the response spaces is the only way to achieve success in these questions. Entrants who are using word processors **must** label their points as 1, 2 and 3 in order to maintain parity with the stipulation for written responses. Typed responses which present all three answers on one line risk being limited to one mark.

Each of the list questions provides three designated, numbered spaces for the three responses. When candidates attempt to offer additional responses below the designated spaces or on additional pages, examiners will be instructed to disregard these. Nothing beyond the designated spaces is required or permitted and will not be rewarded. The only exception arises when something in the three designated spaces is crossed out and additional content is offered in replacement.

Q14: The November report was full of praise for the improvement in Q14 – the comparison question which carries the highest tariff on the paper. Sadly this trend has not continued in the January series, although there are some instances of very good performance and strenuous effort. Fewer than 1% gained full marks and just under 15% secured 4 marks or above. The mean mark was a disappointing 2.1 and it was of particular concern to see a very high not-attempted rate of over 16%.

This is not an easy question but it is difficult to accept that over 130 candidates simply ran out of time. It would appear that the demands of Q14 were beyond many of these. A starting point or an emergency strategy for those whose time management is compromised could be to make a simple double list, jotting down a few similarities or differences and this should help them to gain some marks on this question. It could then be used as a plan, allowing the candidate to develop their points.

However, great credit should go to those students and their teachers who have worked hard to improve performance on this final question, which also indicates very commendable stamina and determination.

A word of caution: 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 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 has been evident in every series so far.

The mean mark in January was somewhat below that of the previous series at just over 16, achieved by just over half of the cohort. These candidates and their teachers deserve great credit

for securing success despite the disruption to learning experienced by the whole candidature over the past two years.

Evidently, areas where improvement is needed remain, notably Q6 testing writers' use of language, where practice in explaining what the writer's words are doing is needed, and Q14 whose demands have proved too much for a significant number this series. In retrieval questions, students should practise reading a text, then the question, then the text again to ensure that they are selecting the best and shortest pieces of evidence to answer the question correctly. **Copying of whole sentences will very rarely, if ever, be required and should be discouraged. Copying paragraphs wastes the student's time and is almost bound to deny the mark.**

The issue of indiscriminate lifting of sections of text with very little attempt to select the correct answer is thankfully decreasing. Such responses will never be successful: they clearly signal a student who is not confident to identify the appropriate text and offers large chunks in the hope that these contain something of value. Functionally literate students read the question and do what it asks by searching for and selecting the salient points and presenting these in the correct way, avoiding any extraneous material which at the very least is likely to waste time but in the worst cases, may disallow the mark.

The advice in this report can be distilled into two specific instructions to students:

- 1. Read the question and do only what the question asks.**
- 2. Read the text and select only the words to answer the question. An answer which spills out of the space on any of the list questions, is too long.**

The January series has proved quite challenging for a significant section of the cohort but equally accessible for a large number whose efforts have been rewarded, along with those of their teachers who work ceaselessly on behalf of their charges. Perhaps the imminent arrival of Spring will generate renewed vigour and determination in the next cohort of Functional Skills students.

8725/W

Overview

This is the twelfth series under the reformed Functional Skills in English specification, Level 2 Writing (8725W). Although there is still some disruption to education in the wake of the pandemic, the January entry is reassuring.

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 SPaG) and 21 marks for Question 2 (12 for composition, 9 for SPaG). SPaG 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 substantively 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. Recent reforms have also ensured that GCSE re-sit in the post-16 context is not compulsory for all students. Functional Skills in English, therefore, is a route that schools and colleges need to consider closely when under pressure to enter students for exams they are unlikely to pass.

Centres confidently enter 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, some 30% of students achieved total marks of 15 or fewer, which is below the figures for the November 2022 series. The panel of examiners felt that performance below 15 marks reflected the failure 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 assessment, running at approximately 7% (who achieve marks in total of 10 or fewer).

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 letter to the editor of The Bramby Sentinel, a local newspaper. The questions asked students to include in their letter their views about the local council's plan to sell off Bramby Woods to enable housing development. The sale of the land would bring in income to build a centre for the elderly. The letter clearly met the requirement for 'explanation' in the writing paper, while the stimulus material provided enough information for students to respond effectively.

Most students had little difficulty in providing relevant content for this question and there was an impressive array of answers that ranged from very strongly in favour to those deeply opposed to the council's plans. Only a very tiny minority were unable to grasp the requirements of the question. There was a lot of focus on green issues and preserving the natural world against the encroachment of modern life. The OAP centre didn't seem to work as a quid pro quo for the loss of the woods. Many students simply thought that it should be built somewhere else. There were also plenty of childhood memories in the woods to which students wished to cling. It was felt that the question allowed good students to write effectively while allowing others to achieve a mark that reflected their performance. The question was therefore considered both fair and a good discriminator.

The best answers in terms of composition (5-6 marks, top band) very often took a side in the debate and established the reasons for taking that position. Those in support of the council wrote very well about the need to stimulate the local economy by offering new housing to incomers whose spending and activity in the area would provide that much-needed boost. The centre for the elderly was seen by this group of students as a side benefit of the sale and not a major focus. The environmental issues were considered secondary to the economic ones. Other excellent answers, in fact the majority of answers, opposed the development and for most of these the environmental impact was well presented. There was consideration of the value of trees and their destruction in terms of clean air and the carbon footprint; the impact on wildlife was also warmly argued. Of equal significance for many was the need to maintain open space for local people (and their dogs) to exercise or simply to wander outside of the constraints of work and family life. As alluded to above, a significant number of good answers incorporated a personal element; for some, Bramby Woods had been part of their life since childhood and they wished to use this as a rhetorical presence in their arguments to the editor.

A good number of top-band answers actually addressed both sides of the debate and included points in favour of each. In the hands of a good student this approach is very fruitful and elevates the discussion. The approach was therefore justified.

Answers in the middle band for content, gaining marks of 3 or 4, tended to be effective and direct, with some details provided but lacking in specificity. A significant number, especially those at the bottom end of the band were too short and this was taken into consideration when allocating a mark. Some of the answers in this band also attempted to take a balanced approach, but did so

ineffectively by not clearly coming out for one side or the other and leaving the reader somewhat at a loss as to the writer's own views on the matter.

Only around 8% of students fell into the lowest band (1-2 marks) for writing composition. This is a minority of students, although higher than in the November series. Achievement in this lowest band marks the student as not ready for Level 2. It was apparent to the panel that a worrying proportion of answers at this level were very brief, struggling to meet the lower word limits for the question. In many cases the student was unable to address the topic in any meaningful way with some simply identifying the loss of the woods in the simplest way. Some other students in this band were clearly struggling to use standard English in a viable way.

Please note that as Question 1 is worth a maximum of only 9 marks (including SPaG), 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. In relation to the issue of word length, examiners felt that some 25% of answers were below the lower limit. In many cases, the shortfall was marginal and there was no penalty attached. However, in some cases, the shortfall was too evident to ignore and this was taken into account in the marking of the composition element. It was also felt that a number of answers in the middle band were too long, which would impact on the time available for students to answer Question 2.

Question 2

This question asked students to adopt the persona of a reporter for a local community website. The task entailed writing a story about a car boot sale that took place at 'The Old Cricket Club'. The question was in very familiar writing territory and the task clearly fulfilled the requirement of a narrative. The stimulus material provided basic information with clear pegs to hang narrative content on.

Nearly all students were able to provide answers that covered the territory well with approximately 45% or so reaching a mark of 8 or more for the content (out of a maximum of 12). This was a weaker performance than the November series. One examiner, commenting on overall performance on this question, said: 'There was a feeling in many scripts of ticking boxes in dealing with the various aspects of the car boot sale. There were, of course, some sparkling answers but weaker ones were unable to engage with the topic.' One issue that did arise was that a number of students wrote about a cricket match rather than a car boot sale. These answers tended to be at the bottom of the range in terms of expression and structure and in most cases, where there was a clear (if undeveloped) narrative, the descriptors in the mark scheme provided the means to award a fair mark.

In the highest band (marks 10-12) students presented the context of the task before embarking upon the main elements of narrative. Thus, students were able to engage in the event, in their role as a reporter, accompanied by family members or friends. A number of interesting responses deliberately underplayed the idea of a car boot sale in order to provide an element of surprise later when the student found them self being wholly engrossed in an entertaining and productive day. Of course, the hints in the stimulus material gave students opportunities to write about personal enthusiasms or interests. One student wrote about being a collector of technical literature related to vintage video games. This writer's description of their pleasure when coming across a stall which contained masses of these publications was extremely well expressed. Other strong responses dealt with the many bargains that could be found in vintage clothing, furniture or household ornaments. It was specific detail that lifted these narratives – a Marks and Spencer's checked cotton shirt, a small Lego kit, the painting of a boat in a storm and so on. Such details enhanced readability and provided credibility to the answer.

The use of appropriate vocabulary to enhance specific detail was a key factor in taking responses into the top level. For instance, in one strong response the student mentioned 'possibly the most complex and bewildering work of fictitious literature'. In other answers, a tone of surprised delight was introduced into the account for effect: 'The food was quite astonishing for such a local event and my family and I were amazed at both the quality and quantity.'

In the top band students used an appropriately effective range of sentences, varying length and complexity. A good example would be: 'I arrived at 9.20 am with my dad, who shared the same view: it was a day that was going to be wasted' The use of the colon to introduce their (mistaken) view of the day shows an admirable sense of rhythm and balance.

Strong answers were very well structured and an example of the paragraph structure of one is as follows:

1. Initial context, reasons to visit the sale, sense of doubt
2. First impressions
3. Finding a book stall
4. Detail about specific books
5. Final section showing appreciation of the day and reversing initial views.

Responses in the upper middle level of achievement (6-9) marks were adequate for purpose and audience with clear presentation of a specific challenge and some exploration of the theme in a structured response. These tended to be very straightforward and many of them took the narrator through three or four aspects of the sale without really developing the content.

In the 4-6 level, students tended to produce weaker answers for the following reasons: very formulaic responses with very simple structure; limited vocabulary failing to provide a sense of real experience; a generalised account lacking in personal experience; short responses that provided a partial account of the experience. In this band, sentence variety was limited and the vocabulary struggled for impact with phrases such as 'some old stuff' and 'this was really good'.

Answers in the bottom band were confined to approximately 9% of the cohort which was slightly higher than for Question 1. Such answers were marked by serious deficits in terms of skill in expression as well as the ability to produce any kind of satisfactory structure. While students achieving marks in this content band would be better sitting the Level 1 exam, the figures indicate that this would apply only to a small minority.

As in November, a higher percentage of students failed to produce an answer for this question than Question 1 (approximately: 4% on Q2, 2% on Q1). It is possible that this was caused by time management issues in some cases.

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, 'prosaic vocabulary and simple sentences are written accurately but mistakes occur when students stride into more ambitious territory... the prevalence of commas instead of full stops seems to be on the increase.'

Spelling: at the top-level students used specialist language effectively to deliver clarity. Words such as, 'sentiment', 'prolonged', 'inevitable' and 'deforestation' in Question 1 were spelt correctly. In Question 2 words and phrases such as 'on a critical note', 'astonishingly', 'beautifully crafted glass', 'hipster coffee', 'exciting atmosphere', 'glimmering green gem' 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. In this series, there was evidence that students were using more ambitious punctuation, such as colons (see above). In the middle level, sentence punctuation is accurate when sentences are straightforward. Students in the lowest band often display only threshold skills in the use of punctuation, in many cases omitting it altogether.

Grammar: At the bottom level a range of grammatical errors are found which makes reading very difficult. Some emerging features in this series:

- Over-use of co-ordinating conjunctions to produce unwieldy compound sentences
- subject/verb agreement as in 'we was surprised...'
- incorrect forms such as 'I am talk about...'
- misuse of articles
- failure to re-read, leaving very simple grammatical errors such as 'I was a great day out'.

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 16% were in the bottom level, while for Question 2 there were around 13% at that level which aligns closely with the November series.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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