



FUNCTIONAL SKILLS ENGLISH LEVEL 2

8725/R/S/W

Report on the Examination

8725

March 2023

Version: 1.0

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

Copyright © 2023 AQA and its licensors. All rights reserved.
AQA retains the copyright on all its publications. However, registered schools/colleges for AQA are permitted to copy material from this booklet for their own internal use, with the following important exception: AQA cannot give permission to schools/colleges to photocopy any material that is acknowledged to a third party even for internal use within the centre.

8725/R

The March series focused on alcohol, with Source A and C concentrating on the particular element of underage drinking. Source A was a news report covering the appalling problems and events in Newquay some years ago caused by post-exam students descending on the town to celebrate, and the actions taken to address the issues. Source C focused on the dilemma of a mother wishing to support her teenage daughter in celebrating the end of her exams but wrestling with the daughter's request for her mother to buy alcohol on her behalf. Source B was a webpage expounding on the negative effects of alcohol on the human body. The materials appeared to produce a high level of engagement and interest.

Q1 asked students “*What were the teenagers who came to Newquay celebrating?*” On this very straightforward retrieval question, 30% of students failed to recognise that the teenagers came to Newquay to celebrate the end of exams. A wide range of incorrect answers appeared such as “*drinking*”; “*drinking till they passed out*”; “*partying*” etc. There was also a recurrence of the inexplicably high non-attempted rate of almost 7%. This can only be attributed to a significant number of students who have not had a chance to see a paper.

Qs 2, 7 and 12 are the dictionary questions. The latter two achieved success rates around 85% with **Q2** lagging behind, having only 60% able to identify the correct meaning of “*permissive*”. Whilst these percentages are reasonably pleasing, it remains clear that were all students supplied with and using a dictionary correctly, success rates 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 and both were very poorly done this series. Only 35% recognised that “*The local residents of Newquay*” were “*most responsible for starting the change in the town*”, with 37% opting for “*Newquay Town and Cornwall Councils*”. The results for **Q8** are even more disappointing: just under 14% gained the mark here for correctly identifying that “*The toxins in alcohol*” is a paraphrase of “*Alcohol contains poisonous ingredients*”. Over 60% opted for “*Alcohol is more fattening than chocolate*” – a complete misunderstanding of what the source actually says: “*The number of calories in alcohol means a few drinks are often the equivalent of a few bars of chocolate*”. It was further surprising to see that even common knowledge did not prevent 17% choosing “*Alcohol hydrates the body*”. Recourse to a dictionary to check the meaning of “*toxins*” or “*equivalent*” or “*hydrate*” could easily have avoided these errors.

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 almost 44% achieving full marks, nearly double that on **Q4**. Almost half gained no marks on **Q4** compared with 15% on **Q9**. Two options proved problematic on **Q4**: “*Three teenagers fell from the cliffs*” was wrongly designated as False, as a result of misinterpreting “*Two teenagers died falling from cliffs, while a third was seriously injured*”. Conversely, significant numbers felt that “*The nightclubs were solely responsible for the antisocial behaviour*” was True despite the clear statement by a resident of Newquay that “*The underage drinking and nightclubs contributed to the antisocial behaviour...*” These errors simply demonstrate a lack of careful reading.

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. Students should be reminded that **ticking only two boxes will mean no marks**, even if both ticks are in the correct place. A flawed strategy this series was to tick only those boxes which the student identified as “True”, almost seeming to think that the examiner would assume they meant the unmarked boxes to be “False”. This is not the case. 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 60%, which is pleasing but has scope for improvement. In **Q5.1**, marks were most often lost because the facts presented were not about Fiona Pendry, as clearly specified in the question. Likewise, **Q5.2** directed students to the specific section headed “*Newquay today*” and far too many tried to offer opinions from the early part of the text which were not valid. Interestingly, as in the previous series, **Q5.2** had a non-attempt rate (almost 3%) more than 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 but one which 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: It is really gratifying to be able to report a long-awaited improvement in this question testing writers’ use of language. When asked to explain how the writer uses language to describe the problems in Newquay, almost 9% achieved the full three marks and a further 41%, two marks. Crucially, students were directed to the first two paragraphs which contained a variety of language rich in figurative potential which was gratefully exploited. Many responses started with a focus on the metaphor “*in tatters*” though the majority equated it to the damage to Newquay itself rather than its image and reputation as stipulated in the source. “*Hardcore party resort*” and “*gangs of partygoers roamed the streets*” were also extremely fruitful and many students were able to identify the connotations of violence and mayhem in these phrases. Weaker answers merely concentrated on the facts about the unfortunate teenager deaths or the behaviour of the drunk teenagers or cited relevant language without valid comment. There is an increasing tendency to produce long answers listing relevant quotations and identifying their designation in terms of word classes or linguistic devices but these almost never attract more than one mark as they fail to take any one of these examples and explain how the words work, which is what is being tested here. Only 12% failed to secure any marks on this question, most often as a result of selecting language from the wrong section, and a further 5% did not attempt it. The mean mark rose to 1.4 – a significant leap compared with previous series – a cause for celebration and one which we very much hope will continue. Despite these encouraging signs, the guidance offered previously on this question is recreated below and will continue to appear in these reports in case it is needed.

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, rather than interpreting.

Three marks are gained for a clear explanation, as shown by this response:

“The writer uses a lot of words that convey danger, such as ‘hardcore’ and ‘tatters’. These words were chosen to illustrate the unsafe environment there. Additionally, the writer describes the partygoers as ‘gangs’. These are often associated with violence, once again portraying how dangerous Newquay was.”

Some responses start from the meaning of the words, then go on to focus on what is implied in addition to the meaning:

“The writer uses the emotive adjective ‘permissive’ in ‘an end to the permissive culture’ ‘Permissive’ means tolerant which shows that the teenagers were behaving as they wish. Also writer uses a metaphor ‘in tatters’ which means torn to pieces. This suggests that teenagers cause serious damage to the Newquay town.”

Students **must** practise explaining what the writer was trying to do with the items 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.

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 showing glimmers of improvement this series but the persistence of low full mark rates 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 and asked about the physical effects of drinking alcohol. **Q10** specifically focused on effects on the face while **Q11** required identification of the impact of alcohol elsewhere in the body. Marks were lost when students failed to recognise the difference and offered answers which belonged in the other question, such as “*pale skin*” for **Q11** or “*smelly breath*” for **Q10**. The latter was far more successful with just over half gaining full marks and just under 2% scoring zero, most of whom had made no attempt at the question. The picture on **Q11**, however, was considerably weaker – just under one-fifth achieving full marks and over 9% failing to score. Students on **Q11** frequently offered general information such as “*5-10% of the alcohol you drink leaves the body straightaway through your breath, sweat or urine*” without identifying the actual effect on the drinker or offering “*hangover*” which is an overarching term for the general state caused by over-indulgence, rather than a specific effect. Despite errors, these two questions demonstrated a high level of engagement with the source and a real attempt to unpick its nuances.

Q13 The third of the list questions enjoyed considerable success with almost 70% securing full marks, 9% no marks and 3% with no attempt. Students were required to name ways in which modern life encourages young people to socialise without drinking alcohol and this clearly proved the least demanding of the three list questions, perhaps a kindness in the penultimate task of a long demanding paper.

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 students 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: Apart from a disappointing non-attempt rate of almost 10% - although this is a real improvement over the January rate of 16% - this final question testing comparison showed an encouraging level of performance. Just over 1% achieved full marks and it was a joy to be able to award the full six marks to several responses, while over 4% gained a mark in the top level of the mark scheme. The mean mark on this question was 2.5 – almost half of the full tariff, which is very pleasing and it was good to see more evidence of planning in the form of lists in various categories on each source. This is testament to some excellent teaching and preparation and strenuous efforts on the part of many students. Hopefully, this improvement, which has been noticeable over several recent series, will continue and inroads will be made on those who run out of time or energy – or both – and deny themselves the opportunity to achieve any of the six marks attached to this final question.

A starting point or an emergency strategy for those whose time management or stamina 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 student 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 commendable fortitude 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 March was an improvement on January at just over 17, achieved by almost 58% of the cohort. These students and their teachers deserve great credit for securing success despite the disruption to learning experienced by the whole candidature over the past three years.

Areas previously identified as needing improvement, notably Q6 and Q14, have shown exactly that in this series, which is very positive news. However, complacency must be discouraged and continued focus on these areas remain. 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.**

A plea regarding word-processed responses. Please could these students be advised that they **must number the questions**: it is virtually impossible to navigate a script which has few breaks between lines of response and no question numbers. For the multiple choice questions some students type out their chosen answer in full; some students even type out all four options in full – both are a complete waste of time. It is only necessary to type the question number and the single letter of the chosen response eg **Q2 A**. Compliance with these requests would be particularly helpful.

The March series has proved quite accessible for a large number whose efforts have been rewarded, along with those of their teachers who work ceaselessly on behalf of their charges. Equally, a number of students continue to struggle to answer questions, generally attributable to a lack of reading skills, which must be the focus of tireless classroom and personal practice. It is also of paramount importance that students are presented with past papers and taken carefully

through their structure and the wording of questions in order to build confidence under the time pressures of the real exam.

This series wrestled with a difficult and potentially divisive subject, but one which is at the forefront of modern cultural life. It is hoped that the materials, which appear to have been well received by the students, will have sounded useful warnings of the potential hazards associated with alcohol, particularly for young people approaching examinations, while also offering some useful and welcome information on alternative ways of socialising without drinking.

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

Many 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 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. It would be really helpful if these issues could be addressed immediately by centres.

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 next 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.

Another 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 and discussion. 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.

All centres need to understand that verifiers work at home, with no secretarial help. This means that centres must not send correspondence in batches, as it proves impossible for a verifier, with hundreds of items to deal with, to match up, for example, a USB in one envelope and a centre specific password (which is against the rules anyway) in another.

If you must use a password for your submission the June AQA password is MVx_2309

Centres should not send items using the Royal Mail silver labelled next day special delivery service. While it may seem as though this is the speediest and safest way to send items, it is neither of these, for the simple reason that posties are not allowed to deliver them unless the person they are addressed to is in the house to receive them. What happens is that they are delayed in depots, often for days, and involve lots of extra work.

And while on the subject of the postal system, please do not make your verifier pay a surcharge by putting insufficient (or in some cases none at all) postage stamps on the mail.

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 Candidate Record Form (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 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.

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 authentic experiences, which are then teased out for their implications by subtle and sensitive questioning. Some of the best of these were from students for whom English is not their first language and who have lived an already challenging life.

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/W

Overview

This is the 13th 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 March 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-band 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 as an alternative 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 32% of students achieved total marks of 15 or fewer, which is below the figures for the January 2023 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 an email to the news team of The Mercury, a news outlet, in order to contribute to a debate about a school's approach to the wearing of makeup by its students. The context of the debate was presented through an article that comprised the stimulus material. The question fell into the category of 'explanation' although other modes of writing might have been incorporated by students. At standardisation, the panel discovered that many students wrote their email with the head teacher of the school, Sonda Philips, being the intended audience. In some cases, other interested parties, such as the mother of student Jenny Miller, the centre of attention in the matter, were the intended audience. However, the template for the answer included the email address of Mercury, so it was felt that students who approached the task in these ways were applying an element of rhetorical licence and the answers were therefore deemed valid.

The nature and length of the answers indicated that this question had thoroughly engaged the vast majority of students. Answers were often quite animated, with clear sides being taken.

The best answers in terms of composition (5-6 marks, top band) nearly all took one side in the debate and established the reasons for taking that position. Those in support of the Sonda Philips put across the view that schools were places of learning and that distractions to that purpose were unwelcome. Rules were put in place for the interests of the majority and breaches of the rules were considered selfish or foolhardy. Many students said that rules were rules and needed to be followed irrespective of views. A contrary, well-argued position was that makeup was an element in the self-image of often vulnerable or insecure adolescents. It was valuable in reducing bullying and ensuring those with skin conditions were not mocked. In such responses, the school was presented as uncaring and narrow-minded. A minority of students attempted to present a balanced analysis of the situation and often did this with considerable skill. In a great majority of the answers, the students felt that Jenny Miller's mother was wrong to withhold her from school and they put forwards ways of dealing with the impasse as depicted in Mercury's article. Responses were rewarded not for the arguments that were put forward, but for the clarity of language, relevance of discussion and logical sequence to be found. What was recognised by the panel was the impressive energy and commitment of these top band answers.

Answers in the middle band for content, gaining marks of 3 or 4, tended to be effective and direct, with an evident focus on the topic. Some displayed elements of anger and annoyance which did not help in opening up the discussion. Many in this band expressed strong disagreement with Jenny Miller's mother, Janice, and spend rather too much time berating her. In some cases, the email was addressed to the mother, which had an impact on the purpose and audience. The mark scheme for Band 2 clearly addresses this issue with the following descriptor: 'An acceptable response, with some attempt to engage the reader'. Other answers in this band were focused, but lacked depth and the sentence structure was not quite up to the explanation provided.

Fewer than 7% of students fell into the lowest band (1-2 marks) for writing composition. This is a minority of students, and a better outcome than the January 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 simple statements about the rightness or wrongness of the situation characterising the answers. 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 around 15% of answers were below the lower limit. In many cases, the shortfall was marginal and there was no penalty attached. It is felt that this reflected the interest in writing about this topic. 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 write an account about visiting a place for the first. The account was to be submitted to the lifestyle magazine, LifesABuz. The category of 'narrative' is clearly addressed in this task and it is familiar territory for Functional Skills in English at this level. The stimulus material left the choice of place entirely with the student and this ensured that the vast majority were able to meet the requirements of the task. A small minority of students wrote as if they were reviewing LifesABuzz and wrote about the website rather than about a place they had visited. Such answers tended to be in the lower bands and the mark scheme was deployed effectively to ensure that these students were fairly assessed on their response.

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 closely in line with the January 2023 series. One examiner, commenting on overall performance on this question, said: 'Even with the issues noted above, many Q2 responses managed to develop enough detail to get into Band 3 although many students followed the predictable pattern of writing about a holiday destination.'

In the highest band (marks 10-12) students presented a vast range of locations to write about with some very eloquent responses that captured the style of travel writing and holiday review very effectively, whilst others adopted a very distinctive voice to deliver their narrative. What was impressive about many responses was the detail of the specific location without falling into the rather predictable, 'Then I went into... and then we...' pattern. For example, one student described the view from the third floor of the Eiffel tower and looking down at 'the buildings, the parks, the miniature humans and cars...' In another excellent response the writer focused on their experience in the 'immersive room' at a Van Gogh exhibition in London. The students' evident involvement in presenting something that they had lived through consolidated achievement in this top band. Generally speaking, students who are able to write so effectively on specific elements of their answer are also able to structure their answer for clarity and readability.

The use of appropriate vocabulary to enhance specific detail is a key factor in taking responses into the top level. For instance, in one strong response the student mentioned 'a huge dark room with spotlights on certain artworks and pieces of text'. In other answers, the sense of appreciation and delight was conveyed, 'swinging, surfing and sliding, the ride was peaceful and quiet.'

In the top band students used an appropriately effective range of sentences, varying length and complexity. A good example would be (describing the Mona Lisa): 'Her eyes follow your movements, her face appears ageless and her beauty captures you.' The use of the anaphora to emphasise the writer's awe works really well here.

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

1. Initial context, reasons to visit Paris
2. Experiences at Eiffel Tower
3. Boat along the river Seine
4. Visit to Louvre
5. Final paragraph with wholehearted recommendation.

Responses in the upper middle level of achievement (6-9) marks were adequate for purpose and audience with a clear choice of location and a focused narrative. Students in this band gained marks for their organisation of material and an appropriate level of detail to convey the key points. The straightforward vocabulary of many of these answers restricted the marks available while many answers provided holiday narratives without conveying the personal thrill of experiencing a new place. These narratives often rather dutifully presented the elements of a holiday such as hotel, pool, restaurant and beach using rather generalised language.

In the 4-6 level, students tended to produce weaker answers for the following reasons: responses with very simple structure; limited vocabulary to provide a sense of the real experience in visiting a place for the first time; 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 'it was okay' and 'the staff helped us'.

Answers in the bottom band were confined to approximately 9% of the cohort which was slightly higher than for Question 1 and very much in line with the January performance. 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. Most were also distinctly brief, and their relevance was limited to one or two elements of vocabulary. 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 3.8% on Q2, 1% on Q1). It is possible that this was caused by time management issues in some cases. Some members of the panel thought that some students who wrote lengthy and committed answers to Question 1 would be disadvantaged on Question 2 and this may well have been the case.

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, 'accuracy was fine in the use of prosaic vocabulary and straightforward sentence structure but tended to become wayward when students used polysyllabic words or

attempted more complex structures. Apostrophes are still rather haphazard and there was perhaps more use of comma splicing rather than full stops in sentence punctuation.'

Spelling: at the top-level students used specialist language effectively to deliver clarity. Words such as, 'avoidable', 'unreasonable', 'inevitable' and 'outraged' in Question 1 were spelt correctly. In Question 2 words and phrases such as 'frantic activities', 'prominent', 'optional virtual reality', 'sanitise the surfaces', 'spacious arena' 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 shocked...'
incorrect forms such as 'they is...' (instead of 'there is')
failure to re-read, leaving omission errors such as 'It suitable for ages 2 and above'

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 14% 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.