

Chief Examiner's Report - January 2016

Functional Skills English: Reading Level 1

Section 1 – Overall performance

As a result of the review of Functional Skills English undertaken by OFQUAL, a new model of assessment for Functional Skills English Reading exams was introduced from September 2015. As would be expected, overall pass rates are lower than in the previous academic year.

Whilst many candidates are passing, significant numbers are not. The aim of this report is to try to highlight some of the aspects of the assessments that candidates are finding difficult, and to provide guidance to centres that, if implemented, should ensure a higher pass rate for their candidates.

It is very apparent that many candidates are sitting the exams before they have been adequately prepared for assessment. As Functional Skills English is a summative exam, candidates should only be entered after the teaching and learning has been completed and the candidates are familiar with the types of questions they are likely to encounter.

Section 2 Areas of good performance

At level 1, there is no particular assessment criterion that stands out as being problematic. Where candidates are dropping marks, it tends to be across all four assessment criteria.

Section 3 Areas for development

Insufficient number of responses submitted

One very significant contributory factor to low marks is a failure by candidates to submit sufficient responses to questions. As a general rule, the number of marks available for a question is indicative of the number of responses required. It has been very common to see only one response offered for a four mark question, for instance.

On occasion, a question will specify how many responses are required, but frequently this will not be the case; therefore, it is imperative that candidates take note of how many marks are available for each question, and then submit the appropriate number of responses.

As an example, a question may look similar to the question below:

What needs to be provided for candidates? 4 marks

Upon reading this, the candidate should immediately assume that there will be at least four responses within the document and that four responses are required.

An additional factor to this issue may be that responses are likely to be spread throughout the document. A candidate should not expect to be able to find all four required responses in the same paragraph.

1.2.1 Understand the main points and ideas and how they are presented in a variety of texts

Candidates sometimes struggle to distinguish between the main points and ideas and how they are presented in a text, and the detail within a text. A typical question may ask the candidate what the main points are, and candidates should be able to identify them through reading sub-headings, for example, or summarising the first paragraph of a newspaper article. All the source documents used at level 1 are specifically chosen, edited or written to be appropriate to level 1, and to facilitate direct assessment of the Functional Skills English criteria. Therefore, certain devices will be used so that main points and ideas stand out and are clearly visible. In order to answer a question that addresses 1.2.1, candidates should not have to read a text in detail.

On occasion, it appears that some candidates merely write out a list of layout features they have been taught, and do not actually check the source material to see if bullet points, for instance, are present.

1.2.2 – Understand different texts in detail

Some candidates struggle to read and understand the detail within a text. Questions are designed to require the candidate to find the relevant answers in the detail of the text, and the answers will not necessarily be in the same paragraph, but spread throughout the text. At times, candidates resort to copying out large chunks of text in the hope of hitting upon the correct answer. When this is apparent, markers are instructed to take this into account when awarding marks, so candidates are advised to persevere in trying to find the relevant answers only.

1.2.3 – Utilise information contained in texts

On occasion, candidates are providing responses that do not come from the source documents, but are based on their own experience and knowledge. Candidates should understand that responses must come from the source documents.

Section 4 Recommendations/Advice for centres

1. Instruct candidates to take note of the number of marks available for a question.
2. Make use of the Guidance for Centres document, available on the City and Guilds website. The guidance document includes a section on typical teaching activities that will help prepare candidates for the exam.
3. Make use of the sample papers and worked examples available on the City & Guilds website.

4. The Adult Literacy Core Curriculum should still underpin all the teaching and learning when preparing candidates for the Functional Skills English exam.
5. As part of the learning process, centres should expose candidates to all types of source documents, including web-sites, articles, formal letters, emails, leaflets, promotional material and advertising. These should be studied in combination with the Functional Skills English Reading Level 1 criteria, with a view to candidates being able to:
 - identify the purposes of texts
 - understand techniques employed by authors to engage readers and convey understanding
 - understand layout features and their effects
 - identify the main points and ideas in a text by looking at headings, subheadings, final summaries or bold lettering, for example
 - read texts in detail
 - utilise information contained in texts
 - identify suitable responses to texts.

Section 5 Additional information

Centres should be aware that pass marks may vary from paper to paper as a result of an awarding process undertaken by City & Guilds. Any difference in pass marks reflects the perceived and actual difference in demand of the exam papers, including the source materials and the questions themselves. Therefore, it is possible that two candidates with the same score may have different overall results (pass or fail) if they sat different papers.

Evolve platform

Evolve is the on-screen platform that candidates can use when taking the Functional Skills exams. It is apparent that some candidates are not scrolling down the page when reading some questions, therefore missing important aspects.

Centres are reminded that candidates who opt for the paper-based route may still complete the tasks using word processing software, with spell checking and grammar checking facilities turned on. Candidates should always have access to a dictionary for the exam, and should be encouraged to use it.

Spelling, punctuation and grammar are not tested, so any errors in these features are not penalised. Similarly, there is no need for candidates to repeat the stem of the question or to write in complete sentences, as this wastes valuable time.

The Guidance for Delivery document, sample papers and worked examples can be found on the City & Guilds website:

<http://www.cityandguilds.com/qualifications-and-apprenticeships/skills-for-work-and-life/english-mathematics-and-ict-skills/3748-functional-skills-qualifications#tab=documents>