

Chief Examiner's Report – January 2016

Functional Skills English: Writing Level 2

Section 1 – General Comments

Following the review of Functional Skills English by Ofqual in 2014, awarding organisations were asked to ensure sufficient emphasis was placed on accuracy of spelling, punctuation and grammar in determining a pass mark. Prior to this review, pass marks for different papers were set at a mark typically between 26 and 29 out of 50. Marks available across all categories other than spelling, punctuation and grammar totalled 27, meaning a candidate could achieve a pass with very low levels of accuracy. Therefore, in order to ensure candidates could not pass with low levels of accuracy, pass marks for current papers have had to be raised and now sit between 30 and 32 marks out of 50.

As a result, and as would be expected with any significant change, pass rates are slightly lower this academic year than in the previous academic year.

Another change introduced as the result of the Ofqual review is that questions at level 2 no longer provide a list of bullet points of detail that require expansion in the responses. Instead, candidates have to now read a realistic source document or a scenario and determine for themselves what the appropriate details are to include. All the necessary information is included in either the source material or the scenario, but is no longer explicitly listed.

Candidates seem to engage sufficiently with the topics presented, and also understand the type of document they are being asked to write. Some candidates are adversely affected by submitting very short answers to one or both questions. At level 2, candidates should aim to write between two hundred and two hundred and fifty words per response. Candidates who write fewer than one hundred and thirty words in a response are penalised accordingly; candidates who write more than three hundred words in a response are given extra tolerance in some marking categories, such as spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Section 2 – Performance relating to specific assessment criteria

Candidates who demonstrate a poor command of spelling, punctuation and grammar are unlikely to achieve a pass at level 2. However, it can be seen that a candidate who achieves close to maximum marks across all the other categories will accumulate 27 marks, thus requiring relatively few of the 22 marks that are available across both questions for spelling, punctuation and grammar.

1. Spelling

Poor spelling is a typical feature of weaker candidates. As all lower levels of Functional Skills English are subsumed into level 2, any errors in words associated with lower levels of Functional Skills English are penalised, in addition to words that are more demanding. It is evident that proof-reading and the use of spell-checkers and dictionaries would be hugely beneficial to many candidates.

2. Punctuation

Punctuation errors remain one of the most common reasons for candidates losing marks at level 2. The requirements at level 2 are for the correct use of commas, apostrophes (for both omission and possession) and inverted commas. As the lower levels of Functional Skills English are subsumed into level 2, candidates are also required to correctly use full stops, question marks, upper and lower case letters and initial capital letters to start sentences, irrespective of the type of document they are being asked to write. In particular, poor knowledge of the rules concerning the use of commas is a large factor in the loss of marks for many candidates. In addition, a significant number of candidates write entirely in lower case letters, especially when writing an email. Other typical errors include a failure to capitalise the first person personal pronoun, whether it is at the start of a sentence or not.

3. Grammar and Language

Many candidates demonstrate a sound knowledge of grammar, specifically verb-tense agreement and subject-verb agreement. However, significant numbers lose marks through poor grammar. Poor grammar can also affect the clarity and cohesion of what is being written, resulting in further marks being deducted. Many weaker candidates display confusion when using common homophones such as there/their/they're and two/too/to; these are penalised under grammar. It is also apparent that many candidates for whom English is a second language are being entered into the exam. Often, grammar and language present significant problems for these candidates, especially if they have been entered too early in their learning journey.

4. Format and Structure

In general, performance is strong in this area, even for weaker candidates. However, where marks are lost, it is often through not knowing how to lay out and structure a formal letter, not starting an article with a headline or title, or not starting a speech with a customary greeting of the audience. Any lack of paragraphing is also penalised under structure.

5. Persuasive writing

Most candidates are able to demonstrate at least partial performance in producing persuasive writing. It is important that candidates identify which of the two questions is asking them to write persuasively, so as to maximise the possibility of gaining full marks for this category. Candidates who achieve full marks in this category utilise a variety of persuasive techniques in their responses. Examples of valid techniques include making use of coherent, reasoned argument, emotive writing, rhetorical questions, juxtaposition of arguments for and against a viewpoint, repetition, use of second person personal pronouns, to name a few.

Section 3 – Areas of good performance

1. Structuring and formatting of documents.

There is a finite list of the types of documents candidates may be asked to write (see Centre Guidance document). In general, candidates are able to display good knowledge of how to structure and format the documents from this list.

2. Inclusion of relevant detail.

Despite the removal of the bullet pointed list of details to expand upon (removed as a result of Ofqual's review of Functional Skills English), many candidates are able to understand what is being asked of them and do identify the relevant detail to include.

3. Persuasive writing

It is unusual for a candidate to not achieve at least one of the two marks available in this category. Candidates seem to engage with the topics and are able to produce coherent and reasoned arguments to support their viewpoints. Stronger candidates typically display a variety of persuasive writing techniques and consequently are awarded both marks available.

Section 4 Areas for development

As a result of the Ofqual review, it is now not possible for a candidate to pass with very low levels of accuracy in spelling, punctuation and grammar. However, moderate performance across all three, coupled with a strong performance across the majority of other categories, should ensure success.

1. Punctuation

The use of commas is always an area of difficulty, even for some stronger candidates. Obtaining a complete command of their use is not an easy task, but there are many resources now available to help in this regard. Weaker candidates should also be reminded of the need to punctuate all responses, irrespective of the type of document being written, including speeches.

It is surprising how often candidates fail to use upper case when writing the first person personal pronoun. Similarly, many candidates fail to use a capital letter when writing proper nouns or a post code as part of an address.

2. Spelling

Significant marks are lost through poor spelling. Access to dictionaries is essential for candidates, and the use of spell-checkers for those candidates word-processing responses for the paper-based route is to be encouraged.

3. Grammar

Candidates should be secure in their knowledge of verb-tense agreement and subject-verb agreement. In many areas of England, incorrect subject-verb agreement is a feature of the vernacular, but it is important that candidates understand that all documents they are being asked to write are formal in nature and, as such, should be grammatically correct.

Section 5 Recommendations / Advice for centres

- The Adult Literacy Core Curriculum and the Functional Skills English Standards should be used to underpin all teaching.
- Although there have been changes in the pass marks, and the levels of accuracy required in spelling, punctuation and grammar are greater, the typical errors and reasons for not achieving pass marks remain the same, and centres are urged to make use of not only this report but all previous Chief Examiner reports for Functional Skills English Writing exams.

- Functional Skills English is a summative exam and should only be sat once a candidate has demonstrated sufficiently high skill levels when sitting practice papers or centre-devised equivalents.
- Centres are advised to make use of the worked examples available on the City and Guilds website.
- Candidates should be given the opportunity to become familiar with the online platform through practice papers before summative assessment.
- Tutors should be familiar with the demands of all five levels of Functional Skills English, as all lower levels are subsumed into the level above. It is important that, whilst differentiated, teaching should be incremental in nature. Candidates should be secure in their knowledge of the lower levels before being entered into a level 2 Functional Skills English exam.
- Candidates who handwrite their responses should be reminded of the importance of the correct formation of individual letters so text is as legible as possible and that they are unequivocally upper or lower case, as determined by what is being written. Although legibility per se is not marked, illegibility can affect marks awarded across several categories. To this end, centres should ensure that candidates are entered for the platform which will maximise their chances of success.
- Review the Centre Guidance document to ensure complete understanding of types of documents candidates are likely to be asked to write and the inherent structuring and formatting requirements of each.
- No matter what type of document candidates are asked to write, correct punctuation is required.
- Centres are reminded that candidates who opt for the paper-based examination are entitled to word process their answers, and to make use of spell-checkers and grammar-checkers in the software being used.
- Planning and drafting of responses are not marked. It is always recommended that candidates do plan and draft responses if they need to, but candidates should also be aware of the time constraints in the examination and should not spend inordinate amounts of time doing so.
- Candidates should always aim to write between two hundred and three hundred words per response.

