

## Chief Examiner Report for Functional Skills English

NCFE Functional Skills Qualification in English at Level 1 – 501/1660/5

NCFE Functional Skills Qualification in English at Level 2 – 600/0140/9

**August 2017**

### **Level 1**

#### **Not answering the question properly**

At a fundamental level some learners fail to read questions carefully and therefore don't answer them correctly. A Centre should encourage learners to answer every question – many learners failing these papers often leave out several questions. Learners should be told that they don't need to worry about spelling, punctuation or grammar – as long as their answers make sense, they won't be penalised for these errors. Similarly, they don't have to provide answers in full sentences, unless instructed to.

#### **Brief responses/failing to complete the test: Writing**

Learners must be advised to attempt every task in the paper, as not doing so will severely endanger their likelihood of passing the test. They must write a minimum of 100 words at Level 1 to be considered for full marks for Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar, and should aim to write between 200-300 words.

#### **Writing in capital letters/punctuation issues**

Learners should be told that they will be awarded 0 out of a possible 3 marks for punctuation if they answer a writing question in capital letters. Use of lower case 'I' for the personal pronoun is also an issue. This is especially noticeable for learners taking online tests. For those taking the tests online, they should be reminded that the program will not autocorrect their work so therefore extra care should be taken with reviewing and proofreading their answers. It is recommended that learners are provided with sufficient practice in writing on screen using non-correcting software.

#### **Using own knowledge in Reading tests**

Occasionally, learners provide responses that are drawn from their own experience rather than the information in the text. Centres should remind their learners to only use the information in the source documents to answer reading questions.

## Level 2

### Wrong level

At this time of year it has been noticeable that a number of centres are putting learners in for Level 2 tests when the learners are clearly some significant distance below that level. In fact some learners would struggle to get close to a pass at Level 1.

### Paragraphing

Inappropriate paragraphing is an issue with many learners. This currently manifests itself in a number of ways:

- No paragraphs at all
- Paragraphs consisting of single sentences
- Paragraphs that don't make sense

### Identifying the purpose of a text

As in most windows, some learners find identifying the purpose of a text difficult. Many learner answer this sort of question by giving an overview or comment about the text focusing on content instead of purpose.

### Using own knowledge in Reading tests

As for Level 1, some learners provide responses that are drawn from their own experience rather than the information in the text. Centres should remind their learners to only use the information in the source documents to answer reading questions.

### Not answering the question: Writing

Some learners are providing well-structured and sound texts in terms of spelling, punctuation and grammar, but then fail to answer the question and therefore are not providing a functional response. Learners must ensure that they read the question carefully and answer it to guarantee that their response is functional.

### Brief responses/failing to complete the test: Writing

Learners must be advised to attempt every task in the paper, as not doing so will severely damage their likelihood of passing the test. They must write a minimum of 150 words at Level 2 to be considered for full marks for Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar, and should aim to write between 250-350 words.

### Not answering the question: Reading

We have also seen that some learners are providing answers that are just a simple rephrasing of the question – especially in questions about features that convey information.

## Generic Overview:

### Reading

Learners generally responded well to assessments. Most of the straightforward identification questions were tackled well. Questions that required learners to actually process the information were often incorrect.

Exam techniques could be improved in three other areas:

1. Some learners wrote a lot of information for answers to questions that were worth only 1 point and less for questions worth more marks, therefore losing valuable marks.
2. It was noticeable that some learners do not understand the format of the multiple choice questions, as instead of writing A, B, C or D as a response, they wrote a completely different and unrelated answer into the box.
3. Another problem with multiple choice answers has been that some learners are writing two out of the possible choices, so can't be awarded a mark, even if one of the given answers is correct.
4. Several learners wrote general responses that were unrelated to the texts, which lost significant marks. Learners should be advised that responses are to be based on the information in texts, and not on any prior knowledge or personal opinion.

Although spelling, punctuation and grammar is not marked in the reading papers, it is still important that examiners can read learner's answers. Again in this window there were a small number of scripts that were nearly illegible, so learners should be advised to write clearly and neatly.

### Writing

Understanding the purpose of the task and being clear about the audience is essential. It was clear that some learners did not understand the purpose of some tasks and while the focus was almost always on topic, the texts were sometimes unstructured and consisted of a list of issues without any clear purpose being apparent. The strongest learners wrote responses with a clear sense of purpose, accurate content and appropriate paragraphing.

Responses that were less fit for purpose tended to omit required details, or occasionally to ignore the purpose altogether and merely produce paragraphs that were paraphrased from the source materials.

Centres should be advised to ensure that learners are being entered for examination at an appropriate level, there were several learners, entered for both Level 1 and Level 2 papers who were some considerable way off achieving the level and often were not operating at even the level below that for which they had been entered.

## Overcoming an area: Letter writing

Many learners lose very straightforward marks when writing letters for tasks at both Level 1 and 2. Letter format and structure is an easy win and often these marks could make the difference between a pass and a fail for borderline learners. I recommend centres take note of the advice below.

- A letter must have two addresses, the address of the sender and that of the addressee.
- Learners should not write their own name at the top of the letter.
- The letter must have a functional date; 'April 2018', for example, is not acceptable, nor is 'today'.
- A letter needs an appropriate and matching salutation and close. If the name of the addressee is not provided for a formal letter, it should be written to 'Dear Sir or Madam' and closed with 'yours faithfully'. Salutations such as 'To whom it may concern' or 'Dear Company' will not gain marks. In a formal letter where the name is given, marks are awarded for a correctly spelled name without the forename; so 'Dear Mr Brown, not 'Dear Robert Brown', and closed with 'yours sincerely' will be awarded marks.
- For female names, if the learner isn't sure if the addressee is a Miss or a Mrs, they should address them as Ms. For example, if they're told to write to Amy Greenland, the correct salutation would be: 'Dear Ms Greenland'.
- In a formal letter, **marks will not be awarded for any other ways to close a letter**. 'Kind regards', 'Best wishes', 'Yours truly' or anything other than 'Yours faithfully/sincerely' (as appropriate) won't be awarded marks.

Some learners waste valuable time in online tests trying to format their letters using the space bar to place their own address on the right hand side of the screen. They don't need to do this. As long as two addresses and a date are present, it doesn't matter if they are all aligned on the left. In fact, for speed, I would advise learners to write their addresses and date like this. In the assessments, if they are given an address to write to, they should take care to write it with correct spelling.

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