

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

February 2016

Level 1

Writing:

Most learners are able to provide responses that are clear and coherent and have a logical sequence. However, some learners are missing out on what can be 'easy wins'. Learning how to marshal appropriate language, format and structure is a straightforward skill. Format marks, in particular, are easy to get right:

- Letters must have two addresses, a date and a complimentary salutation and close.
- Articles and reports should have a title and subtitles.
- Emails should have an addressee and subject header.
- All documents should be appropriately paragraphed with an introduction/conclusion where appropriate.

My comments regarding spelling, grammar and punctuation are:

- These skills are expected to be beyond that required at Entry Level 3.
- Centres must ensure that learners are taking the test at an appropriate level and that their spelling, punctuation and grammar skills are up to scratch.
- For Level 1, most learners are able to spell very simple or straightforward words correctly. However, there are a number who do not.
- Omitted punctuation, indiscriminate use of capital letters and basic spelling mistakes are common in learners failing to gain a pass.
- Many of the very poorest learners fail to show spelling, punctuation or grammar skills above Entry Level 2.
- Learners should be reminded that they are allowed to use dictionaries in the exam.
- A number of learners are unable to copy accurately from the source material; missing out words or spelling given words incorrectly.

Poorer responses tended not to have appropriate introductions/conclusions. Some learners miss the point of a task entirely – for example when asked to write a persuasive text, instead they may write a text with an aggressive admonitory tone, rather than the persuasive one required by the question.

Reading:

Most learners are able to gain marks with simple comprehension questions – when being tested on ‘Read and understand texts in detail’. However, some learners give answers that are not included in the texts at all – and therefore score no marks. It is vital that students take the information for their answers from the texts provided.

Most learners are able to identify the main points of texts, however they often struggle to identify features of presentation or layout. The standard that most learners seem to find difficult is to correctly utilise information contained in texts. Poorer learners often use their own knowledge instead of using information from the texts provided.

It is essential that learners are taught the different formats that text can be written in and be able to identify the features of these formats. They should also be taught to recognise and explain the different purposes of text, for example, to persuade, give opinions, provide information etc., they also need to be able to identify the language and format features used that help to convey meaning.

Some learners find it difficult to answer questions about how a text is written to achieve its purpose. For example, how a text attempts to persuade the reader to a point of view. Some learners simply list persuasive techniques with no reference to the text. Better responses refer to such features and explain how these helped to persuade the reader.

Learners should pay attention to the number of marks a question is awarded. Many miss this altogether. For example, in a question worth 4 marks, as a general rule, examiners will be looking for 4 points. Sometimes the question tells learners the number of points to make, but this isn’t always the case.

Level 2

Writing:

Most learners are able to produce a logical piece of writing, and some make very good use of the source material to inform their answers. However, a number of learners write answers that don’t hit the brief and they can lose significant marks for not providing a functional response. Centres should stress the need to carefully read the question set and provide an answer that fully meets it.

Many learners taking Level 2 papers do not know how to correctly format all text types. See my comments above for detail. Learners should be taught the correct formatting that must be used for each document type. All writing assessments must be written in paragraphs and if appropriate the text should have an introduction and conclusion.

Some learners are clearly performing well below the required skill standards for Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar at Level 2. Very poor learners often have skills at below Level 1. Ability in SPaG is essential at Level 2 and the centre must ensure that their learners are able to marshal these skills effectively.

Poorer learner responses are characterised by clumsy expression, poor control of punctuation, and careless spelling. A failure to express themselves clearly and accurately can also impact on marks awarded for content and organisation.

There is little evidence that learners take the time to read through and proofread their responses. Learners should be taught how to proofread their responses and make sure they do so during the examination.

Reading:

As with Level 1, learners should pay attention to the number of marks a question is awarded. Many miss this altogether. For example, in a question worth 4 marks, as a general rule, examiners will be looking for 4 points. Sometimes the question tells learners the number of points to make, but this isn't always the case.

Some of the most challenging questions for Level 2 learners seem to be about features of language or features of presentation. Students who have clearly been taught what presentational devices and how to comment on language features that the author has used to convey meaning are able to answer these questions correctly.

Features of layout or presentation may include the use of headings, subheadings, bold type, changes in font size or style and bullet points or lists. Those who haven't been taught, fail to score marks. Language features might include persuasive language, formal/informal language, the use of humour, addressing the reader directly, the use of questions (rhetorical or otherwise) and the use of the imperative.

The learner may be asked to provide an example of this from the document. Centres should also access sample mark schemes and previous reports to see what is acceptable in terms of presentational and language features.

Some questions will ask learners to gather information from more than one text. This type of question tests the ability of students to select and use different types of texts to obtain relevant information and analyse texts in relation to audience needs. Those learners who rely on one text, will inevitably score low marks.

Generic Overview:

Centres should note that learners should only be entered for these tests once all learning is completed and learners are fully prepared. During this window there were a significant number of learners who were clearly insufficiently prepared.

Another area where learners are underperforming is in giving a sufficient response. This is the case for both reading and writing and at both levels. In reading papers learners should pay attention to the number of marks awarded to a question. Generally, the number of marks available for a question is indicative of the number of responses required. Examiners frequently see just one answer given in a three mark question. Some questions will state how many responses are required, but this is not always the case.

In writing papers at Level 1, as a bare minimum, examiners are looking for 100 words. At Level 2, the bare minimum should be 150 words.

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