

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

October 2015

Level 1

Writing

Inappropriate use of the source documents remains an issue for weaker learners. Some use entire sections of documents and simply rewrite them as a response. Centres must stress to learners that this is a test of their own writing skills. The documents are there to provide background information and should not be used to quote from verbatim.

Some easy wins in document formatting are being missed by many borderline or those not achieving at these writing tests. This is reported in almost every report, but still remains an issue. 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 remain the same. These skills are expected to be beyond that required at Entry Level 3. For Level 1, most learners are able to spell 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 are failing to show spelling, punctuation or grammar skills above Entry Level 2. 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. Learners should be reminded that they are allowed to use dictionaries in the exam and centres should encourage their use by providing these resources.

Sufficient response – centres should encourage learners to write a balanced response. The two writing tasks have equal weighting, so each should have a similar length of response. As a guide we expect to see a minimum response of 100 words at Level 1.

Reading

Many learners failing to gain a pass in reading at Level 1 are misreading questions. This failure to read questions with care means that an incorrect answer is given. Centres should encourage learners to rehearse close reading skills.

Most learners are able to answer questions that require a simple answer such as extracting detail. It's higher order reading skills that struggling learners find more challenging so focus on these.

Level 2

Writing

The same comments about inappropriate use of the source documents remain an issue for weaker learners at Level 2 as at Level 1. Some use entire sections of documents and simply rewrite them as a response. Centres must stress to learners that this is a test of their own writing skills. The documents are there to provide background information and should not be used to quote from verbatim. It is a test of the learner's own writing skills.

Again, as with Level 1, for Level 2 learners many are missing some easy wins in document formatting, especially for many borderline learners not achieving in these writing tests. 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 remain the same. These skills are expected to be beyond that required at Level 1. For Level 2, most learners are able to very spell straightforward words correctly. Omitted punctuation, indiscriminate use of capital letters and some quite basic spelling mistakes are common in learners failing badly. 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. Learners should be reminded that they are allowed to use dictionaries in the exam.

Sufficient response – centres should encourage learners to write a balanced response. The two writing tasks have equal weighting, so each should have a similar length of response. As a guide we expect to see an absolute minimum response of 150 words at Level 2.

Exam technique is an issue for some learners. Stress to learners that they must address the question asked. Each window, examiners continue to see well-structured and sound texts in terms of spelling, punctuation and grammar, skills at or even beyond Level 2, but because they haven't answered the question set are not offering a functional response. Learners must also be made aware that both questions are equally weighted so equal time and effort should be devoted to each one during the examination.

Reading

The lowest scoring learners at Level 2 tend to miss out a large proportion of the questions asked. Learners should be encouraged to answer each question to give them the best chance of achievement.

Less proficient learners are finding questions relating to the following coverage and range statements particularly difficult:

- Detect point of view, implicit meaning and/or bias
- Analyse texts in relation to audience needs and consider suitable responses

There is evidence that some learners are wasting valuable time and not completing the assessments due to time spent editing. Again, I would advise centres to tell learners not to worry about correcting 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.

Generic Overview

As with every report, some centres need reminding that they should ensure learners are entered for the tests at an appropriate level. We still see entire cohorts of learners being submitted for a Level 2 test, for example, when the learners are barely at Level 1.

Centres planning to sit the tests online should ensure that their learners are provided with enough practice in reading and responding on-screen. Skills in editing on screen and knowing that the computer will not autocorrect work need to be rehearsed. Reading onscreen can be more challenging for learners, so ensure they are given sufficient practice.

Centres are able to book online practice assessments and there are sample papers available at www.ncfe.org.uk/functionskills.

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