



## Chief Examiner Report for Functional Skills English

**NCFE Level 1 Functional Skills Qualification in English – 603/5058/1**

**NCFE Level 2 Functional Skills Qualification in English – 603/5054/4**

**August 2020**

**Level 1**

### Reading:

It has been pleasing to see that most learners were able to engage with the texts. The majority attempted to answer all of the questions. However, some of the specific demands of the reformed qualification are proving difficult for many learners. At Level 1, the Scope of Study statements that are proving difficult are: 10, 12, 14, 15 and 18. It is clear that many learners do not understand language and organisational features, or if they do understand them, many give very generic answers which fail to show clear understanding of the text. Language features might include rule of three, rhetorical questions, irony, exaggeration and so on. Organisational features may include images, bullet points, numbered lists, headings and subheadings and so on.

In questions that targeted SoS 18 and the use of punctuation, most learners gave very generic responses. For example, when explaining why the author used commas, an answer along the lines of 'to separate information in a list' is not awardable. Learners need to specify the information in order to demonstrate that they have read the text. Learners must directly refer to the text in these questions in order to access marks.

For SoS 15, learners were asked to infer meaning from an image. Learners must take care not to give a description of the image. Instead, they should consider the image in the context of the overall meaning of the document.

In every reading assessment at Level 1, the final question requires learners to compare some of the information, ideas and opinions given in Document 1 with Document 2. This is an area with patchy performance. Only a small minority of learners were awarded all three available marks for this by doing exactly what was required and marshalled their answers effectively using examples from the texts. Weak answers gave no comparisons and simply restated each document's content.

For full marks, Examiners were looking for answers that clearly used both documents to compare information, ideas and opinions clearly and effectively.





## Writing:

Most learners responded well to the activities in these assessments and produced appropriate content. However, many learners appeared to be unprepared for some of the specific demands of Reformed Functional Skills English Writing. At Level 1, marks for using complex sentences and paragraphs were rarely awarded as skills were generally very weak. This is new for Level 1 in the reformed qualification.

Poor spelling, punctuation and grammar skills are an issue for many learners. I am including the specific advice given in previous reports as it remains pertinent and must be taken into consideration when preparing learners for assessment.

Centres should look closely at the requirements in SPaG for Entry Level learners and understand that Level 1 learners should be able to show competence in all of these skills.

For top marks at Level 1, Examiners are looking for:

- **Accurate spelling**, including some ambitious/irregular words. Two-syllable words with double consonants, the doubling of consonants with suffixes and verbs such as would and could should be correct. Errors would stand out as one-off slips and are not repeated.
- **Punctuation used accurately**, including capital letters, full-stops, question marks, exclamation marks, commas and apostrophes. Meaning should be clear.
- **Grammar used accurately and to good effect**: accurate subject-verb agreement and tense. Accurate and effect syntax and sentence structure. Definite and indefinite articles are accurate. Grammar used to good effect.

The minimum awardable content at Level 1 is:

- **Spelling** of many straightforward words correct (including some with irregular prefixes and suffixes, as well as homophones).
- **Punctuation** at the start of sentences is correct. Commas usually used accurately in lists with occasional errors in clauses. Some inconsistent use of other punctuation marks.
- **Grammar**: some consistency in use of tense and subject-verb agreement.

Some learners fell below this level and were clearly very unprepared for the assessment in terms of the SPaG skills.

Similarly, learners should be taught how to write complex sentences and coherent paragraphs. Each task has two marks available for this criteria, which is a new requirement for Level 1 learners.





In this academic session, it was rare for learners to score more than one mark, and most failed to gain marks for this skill at all.

Most learners were able to write appropriate content for the writing assessments. Successful learners used the information in the bullet points to structure their responses and provided answers that clearly addressed each point. Learners giving very detailed and fully coherent responses gained all available marks. Weaker learners gave brief responses with undeveloped content and limited detail that often focused on just the first bullet point.

Most learners were able to use some formatting skills. However, some produced blocks of text without any formatting at all. Learners should be taught how to format documents correctly and to have a clear introduction and conclusion for each text they write. Expectations for format and structure are as follows:

- A letter should have two addresses, a date and a complementary salutation and close. If a name is given for the addressee, then the letter should be addressed to 'Dear Mr/Mrs Smith' and signed off with 'yours sincerely'. Letters without a given name should be addressed to 'Dear Sir or Madam' and signed off with 'yours faithfully'. Writing the sender's own name above the address is not appropriate. It isn't appropriate to write 'To whom it may concern'.
- A report should have a heading and subheadings.
- An email should have a plausible email address (or the correctly spelled email address provided in the instructions) as the addressee and a subject header, as well as an appropriate salutation and close, depending on the task set (formal emails need a salutation and close as in letters in the bullet above).
- An article should have an appropriate heading and may have subheadings and a lead paragraph.

## Level 2

### Reading:

It has been pleasing to see that the most learners were able to engage with the texts. However, some of the specific demands of the reformed qualification are proving difficult for many learners. At Level 1, the Scope of Study statements that are proving difficult are: 12, 14, 16, 17 and 19. The majority attempted to answer all of the questions, though it was notable that some learners are leaving the last two questions unanswered. This is not advisable as these last two questions are worth a total of seven marks, so leaving these questions blank seriously compromises the likelihood of achieving a pass.

As with Level 1, many learners gave generic answers in questions about the use of organisational features. Learners must be taught to make specific reference to the texts in their answers.





For example, while the majority of learners were able to give a generic answer about the use of bullet points, very few were able to give answers where their explanations were rooted in the text. These responses were not awardable:

- a) *to make important points easy to read*
- b) *to list information for the reader.*

Tone of writing and language features seem to be two areas that many learners find it difficult to gain marks in; many failed to give a correct answer when asked to describe the tone of the writing. Similarly, it was usually just very high scoring learners who were able to explain the use of language features with direct reference to the text. Simply explaining what a language feature is without reference to the text cannot be awarded marks.

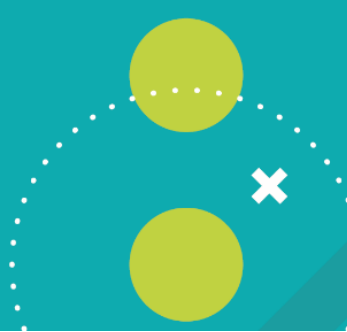
At Level 2, learners are often asked to provide an example of a fact and an opinion from one of the texts. Learners should ensure that the answer they provide in these questions is clearly a fact OR an opinion and not a mixture of the two.

As mentioned earlier, the last two questions in Level 2 Reading assessments are high tariff with three and four marks available, a total of seven marks. The penultimate question requires learners to compare the views expressed in one document with the views expressed in another, and how these views are conveyed. Weaker learners simply stated what the documents were about. To gain any marks in this question, learners needed to have some mention of at least one view expressed in both of the documents cited.

Three marks were awarded to answers that provided a clear and explicit comparison of views expressed in these documents with examples from both sources which gave a clear comparison of how views were conveyed in both documents. Learners often fail to make clear to which document they are referring. Learners should also consider the precise information from the documents the question requires of them. Some learners are making basic errors by comparing the wrong texts. Comparison must be explicit.

The final question asks learners to analyse **all three** documents and answer a question about them, such as explain which was the most or least biased/formal etc. Learners should provide examples from all three documents to support their decision. Responses to this question have rarely scored full marks. Some learners simply named a document in answer to the question with no explanation. Others described the bias or formality in each document but failed to answer the question. Up to four marks are available for this answer. To gain full marks, Examiners were looking for responses with a clear choice that considered all three documents in detail with comprehensive explanation, supported by examples.





## Writing:

It has been evident that many learners do not have the spelling, punctuation and grammar skills required for Level 2 Writing; these skills varied widely. I am including previous advice given due to the significant percentage of marks available for SPaG and the increased demand in these areas in reformed Functional Skills. Centres should look closely at the requirements in SPaG for Entry Level learners and understand that Level 2 learners should be able to show competence in all of these skills as well as those outlined for Level 1 above.

For top marks at Level 2, Examiners are looking for:

- **Accurate spelling**, including any specialist words, uncommon words, words with complex sound/symbol relationships and words with unstressed syllables. Competence should be shown in the spelling of possessive pronouns, prefixes, suffixes and homophones. Errors would stand out as one-off slips and would not affect meaning.
- **A wide range of punctuation used accurately** (this may include colons, commas, inverted commas, apostrophes and quotation marks) in a variety of sentence structures, and used for effect. Some learners have been writing entire answers in block capitals; this means that punctuation cannot be adequately assessed and learners will inevitably score low marks.
- **A full range of grammatical constructions is used accurately** throughout which adds to the effectiveness of the document (including subject-verb agreement, consistent use of tense, definite and indefinite articles, as well as modality devices).

The minimum awardable content at Level 2 is:

- **Spelling** of simple, everyday words, including some correct plurals but there may be frequent errors in more complex words.
- **Punctuation** at the beginning and end of sentences is correct with some attempt at punctuating complex sentences. Some inconsistent use of other punctuation marks.
- **Grammar**: basic grammatical constructions are used accurately most of the time (including definite and indefinite articles).

Some learners fell below this level and were clearly very unprepared for the assessment.

Paragraphing, sentences and the use of organisational markers were also patchy. There are three marks available per task (so six in total) for using organisational markers, writing in coherent paragraphs and writing complex sentences accurately and consistently. Generally, learners are scoring low marks for these criteria as they are not using any organisational markers to establish cohesion in their texts.





Centres should be teaching learners how to use appropriate linking words to support the purpose of their texts. Paragraphs should relate to a single idea. Sentences within a paragraph should be in a logical order. High marks are awarded when the use of paragraphs, complex sentences and organisational markers aid clarity and establish cohesion.

Most learners were able to write appropriate content for the writing assessments and adopted appropriate tone and register. Some learners produced fluent, cohesive responses that were entirely fit for purpose. Weaker learners tended to give short responses with undeveloped content. Some learners seemed to ignore some of the specific instructions in the question. Learners must pay close attention to the instructions of each assessment to ensure they are able to access all available marks.

Most learners were able to use some formatting skills. However, some produced blocks of text without any formatting at all. Learners should be taught how to format documents correctly and to have a clear introduction and conclusion for each text they write. Expectations for format and structure are set out in the Level 1 section above.

### Generic Overview Level 1 & Level 2:

Learners should be adequately prepared prior to being entered for an assessment. Some learners were evidently not at the level being assessed, with some very low marks being awarded. Reformed Functional Skills qualifications are now a year old and there are some clear distinctions between the reform and legacy qualifications. We advise that centres ensure all learners undertake an initial/diagnostic assessment prior to being entered for any assessment, so that they can be entered at the correct level. This will also enable centres to identify gaps in learners' skills and formulate a learning plan that meets these needs prior to undertaking the required level of assessment.

The specific Scope of Study statements that are proving difficult for borderline and failing learners are outlined above.

Basic exam technique is an issue. Learners need to check the precise wording of a question. This applies to both reading and writing assessments. If learners are tasked to write an article but produce a letter, or if they ignore the context of the instructions, they will lose valuable marks. Learners should be advised to answer all of the questions in an assessment. This is vital in writing assessments, where learners simply cannot achieve a Pass if they only answer one of the questions. It is also highly advised that they answer each question in the reading assessments too. Learners should provide sufficient detail in their responses. Answers should also be suitably clear. In reading tests, one word answers may sometimes be appropriate, but this is not always the case. Learners should take care that their answers make sense.





In writing assessments at both levels, learners should use the information provided in the question to help structure their responses. If the question has bullet points, they should ensure their response has addressed each point listed. Learners who do this and give detailed and fully coherent responses will gain high marks for content. Weaker learners gave brief responses with undeveloped content or with errors in the specific information given in the question (such as incorrect email address, or the name and address rewritten with spelling errors). Some learners completely ignored some of the information given in the question and gave responses that were completely off-task. If a word count is given, learners must provide an answer within the range given.

In online assessments, the system tells them the number of words written. Centres should let learners know that there is a mark available for writing content of an appropriate length within a word count (if specified). Learners will not be awarded this mark if they provide responses outside of the range given. In writing assessments, learners need to take note of the specific format required (ie a letter, email, article and so on). They should also adopt appropriate language and tone. An informal email to a friend would not be overly formal, and an article for a newspaper would not be informal, for example.

For reading, successful learners tended to give complete and succinct answers using information found in the source documents. Learners failing or at borderline found questions based on higher order skills more challenging. At both levels, many learners are giving generic answers to questions instead of giving answers that clearly refer to specifics in the source documents. In questions that require learners to compare information across the documents, successful learners do just this and make it clear to which document they are referring. Some learners answer the question without due comparison which lost them marks.

In both assessments, learners should spend time reviewing and checking their answers.

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