



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 2018

Level 1

Reading:

Presentation features

Learners need to understand what presentation features of texts are and to be able to identify them in a document. The majority of struggling learners failed to correctly identify features of presentation in the texts. Presentation features may include images, bullet points, numbered lists, headings and subheadings and so on.

General reading skills

For some learners, there seemed to be a general issue with close reading skills, both for gleaning correct information and for using the information to interpret an answer. Learners must pay close attention to understanding the specific wording of questions as they must answer the precise question set and reading comprehension skills in general. For example, some questions ask learners to quote two words from the document, instead many provided several phrases or entire sentences. Some learners need support in tackling questions that require them to interpret meaning in texts.

Detailed answers

Many learners need to look at the number of marks a question is worth to ensure they are giving enough details in their answers.

Main point

Weaker learners need to be able to identify the main point of a text and its intended audience.

Writing:

Spelling, punctuation and grammar

Poor SPAG, often well below level 1, continues to be an issue for many learners.

The following skills are expected:





Entry Level 3: Use basic grammar, including appropriate verb–tense and subject– verb agreement. Write grammatically correct sentences using the past, present and future tenses as needed (for example the bus was, the buses were) with correct subject–verb agreement. Spell accurately and check work for accuracy. Spell correctly common words and relevant key words used at work, leisure and study.

Level 1: Use correct grammar, including subject–verb agreement and correct and consistent use of tense. The writing needs to be accurate with few errors expected at this level. Sentences should be complete and where necessary use appropriate conjunctions. Singular and plural subject–verb agreement should be used consistently.

A high level of accuracy is expected in certain applications and contexts. In a formal letter of application, there should ideally be no errors. In a long document, such as a formal report, errors may be acceptable, but generally a high level of accuracy is required. Errors must not alter the intended meaning of the writing, and should not substantially diminish the impact, validity or seriousness of the document.

Spelling should have:

- Regular, common words spelled accurately. Words provided in the document are accurate
- Two-syllable words with double consonants are correct (common, kettle), able to use -ful for doubling consonants with suffixes
- Would, could, should be 100% correct
- Words with suffixes: -al, -ary, -ship, -ness, -ible, -able, -tion, -sion should be accurate
- Entry Level 3 requirements should be accurate: Vowel digraphs, familiar compound words (e.g. football), words with common prefixes (un-, dis-, de-, re-, pre-), words with silent letters, (kn, gn), words with common suffixes (-ful, -ly, -less).

Punctuation should be totally secure at Level 1. Capital letters should only be used for proper nouns and at the start of sentences. Commas must not be used at the end of sentences. Proper nouns must be correctly capitalised. The personal pronoun 'I' must be capitalised. Sentences must start with a capital and end with a full stop.

Grammar must demonstrate accurate subject verb agreement and the use of tense should be consistent.

Structure and format

Many learners need to work on the use of secure and accurate paragraphs. They also need to know how to format documents correctly and to introduce and conclude their writing. Format and structure marks are relatively easy wins. Responses should be structured appropriately:

- A letter should have two addresses, a date and a complementary salutation and close. If they have a name to write to 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 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.

Some learners waste time using the space bar for online assessments to try to add structure to addresses and dates. They should be advised that they don't need to do this, examiners will give the marks for addresses if they are present and functional, they don't have to be aligned.

Accurate and sufficient response

Many learners produced answers that were far too brief. Learners must be advised to attempt every task in the paper, as not doing so will severely jeopardise 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 200-300 words.

Level 2

Reading:

Presentation features

At Level 2, learners are expected to explain how presentation features are used in reference to the document they have read. Many learners struggle to do this.

Exam technique

Learners must take care to use the information in the texts as the source of their answers and not their own personal knowledge.

Use of language

Learners need to be able to answer questions based on the writer's use of language. At Level 2 there will be questions requiring them to comment on this and to provide an example from the text to support their answer. Learners should also note that if asked for an example from the text, this means they should provide a specific quotation from the text when asked to and **not** a paraphrase.

Comparing and contrasting

Many learners continue to struggle with this. They need to know that they have to compare each document and explain how they differ to the others in the document in regard to the question set. Unjustified personal





opinions should not be given. See my December 2017 report for specific advice on this.

Checking answers

Many learners would benefit from thoroughly checking answers to ensure that they make sense in the context of the question being asked and are accurate. A careful proofread could have saved several marks for many learners.

Writing:

Spelling, punctuation and grammar

Many learners who failed to achieve were let down by poor SPAG, often far below level 2. For top marks at Level 2 learners should be able to accurately use of the full range of punctuation including commas, apostrophes and inverted commas. Learners using lower case for the personal pronoun I will not score high marks. Punctuation must demonstrate progression from Entry Level.

For spelling, the following from Level 1 should be near perfect: regular, common words spelled accurately. Words provided in the document should be accurate. Two-syllable words with double consonants are correct (common, kettle). Learners should be able to use -ful for doubling consonants with suffixes. Would, could, should be 100% correct. Words with suffixes: -al, -ary, -ship, -ness, -ible, -able, -tion, -sion should be accurate. For Level 2 the demand is for: possessive pronouns to be spelled accurately (their, theirs, your, yours, my, mine). Trickier prefixes should be correct: auto-, bi-, trans-, tele-, circum-. Suffix -cian should be correct. Words with unstressed vowels should be correct eg: interest, different. Homophones should be correct: ate, eight, grate, great, rain, reign, rein.

Structure and format

Format and structure marks are relatively easy wins. Responses should be structured appropriately:

- A letter should have two addresses, a date and a complementary salutation and close. If they have a name to write to 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 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.

In addition to Level 1 learners, some Level 2 learners waste time using the space bar for online assessments to try to add structure to addresses and dates. They should be advised that they don't need to do this, examiners will give the marks for addresses if they are present and functional, they don't have to be aligned.





Accurate and sufficient response

Many failing learners produced answers were far too brief. 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 250-350 words.

Generic Overview:

Reading

Most learners continue to be able to answer straightforward 'comprehension' identification type questions well. Below are my comments on how learners have performed against the coverage and range statements for reading.

Level 1 Reading

- 1.2.1 Identify the main points and ideas and how they are presented in a variety of texts – most learners could identify the main points, though there are some that were unable to do this, even from a multiple choice. A significant proportion of learners struggled with understanding what presentation and language features were. Some learners are simply putting in presentation features that they know of, even when they don't appear in the document in question. See below for specific advice on this
- 1.2.2 Understand different texts in detail – all but the poorest learners coped well with this criteria
- 1.2.3 Utilise information contained in texts – struggling learners found this higher order skill problematic
- 1.2.4 Identify suitable responses to texts – struggling learners found this higher order skill problematic.

Level 2 Reading

- 2.2.1 Select and use different types of texts to obtain and utilise relevant information – most learners achieved against this criteria
- 2.2.2 Summarise information/ideas from different sources – poor and borderline learners found this criteria difficult. See my December 2017 report for specific advice on this
- 2.2.3 Identify the purposes of texts and comment on how meaning is conveyed – most learners could identify the purpose of a text. Some struggled to express how meaning was conveyed – these could be questions about language or presentation features. At Level 2 learners must be able to explain why a particular presentation feature may be used by the writer. These explanations should relate to text they have read. Some learners don't understand terms such as bias, irony, sarcasm or rhetorical questions. They need to know these and should be able to find examples of how such techniques may have been used in a text.





- 2.2.4 Detect point of view, implicit meaning and/or bias – poorer candidates still struggled with this criteria
- 2.2.5 Analyse texts in relation to audience needs and consider suitable responses – again, poorer candidates struggled with this criteria.

Writing

As with my last report, the two main reasons why learners fail are either failing to read the question properly or not showing adequate spelling, punctuation and grammar skills. Learners must answer both questions and spread their time equally between them. Below are my comments on how candidates have performed against the coverage and range statements for writing.

Level 1 Writing

- 1.3.1 Write clearly and coherently, including an appropriate level of detail – many candidates who failed this test didn't write a sufficient response. Some learners persist in completing only one of the tasks set. They will not be able to achieve a pass if they only answer one of the questions
- 1.3.2 Present information in a logical sequence – this was an issue for many candidates. Learners should be taught to write a text with a clear beginning, middle and end
- 1.3.3 Use language, format and structure suitable for purpose and audience – some learners don't know how to format documents appropriately
- 1.3.4 Use correct grammar, including correct and consistent use of tense – as mentioned above, this was an issue with many learners
- 1.3.5 Ensure written work includes generally accurate punctuation and spelling and that meaning is clear – as mentioned above, this again was an issue with many learners who fail this test.

Level 2 Writing

- 2.3.1 Present information/ideas concisely, logically and persuasively – strong learners could do this with ease. Poorer candidates tended to provide less, or even scant detail. Some learners persist in completing only one of the tasks set. They will not be able to achieve a pass if they only answer one of the questions
- 2.3.2 Present information on complex subjects clearly and concisely – once again, strong learners could do this with ease. Poorer candidates tended to provide less, or even scant detail
- 2.3.3 Use a range of writing styles for different purposes – most learners were able to adopt an appropriately formal or informal style and register depending on the demands of the tasks set. Some poorer learners tended to use inappropriately informal language in workplace settings.





- 2.3.4 Use a range of sentence structures, including complex sentences, and paragraphs to organise written communication effectively – writing secure paragraphs was a real area of weakness for many learners. Similarly, few learners demonstrate the ability to write complex sentences.
- 2.3.5 Punctuate written text using commas, apostrophes and inverted commas accurately – as with Level 1, punctuation remains one of the weakest criteria. Many failing learners had punctuation skills well below Level 1. This is a particular concern as when the new Functional Skills standards come in, the level of demand will be greater
- 2.3.6 Ensure written work is fit for purpose and audience, with accurate spelling and grammar that support clear meaning in a range of text types – again learners are expected to demonstrate Level 2 skills for this criteria. Those candidates scoring low marks here often had exceptionally poor skills that were below Level 1. This is a particular concern as when the new Functional Skills standards come in, the level of demand will be greater.

Generic

I have said this in previous reports, but it is still the case that centres are not entering some candidates at an appropriate level. They must ensure that learners are being entered for examination at an appropriate level.

Overcoming an area: Understanding how main points and ideas are presented for Level 1 Reading

Main points and ideas in texts can be expressed using language features and presentation (sometimes called layout) features.

Presentation features depend on the text in question (be it an article, letter, report, advertisement, leaflet, email, webpage and so on), but might include:

- Heading/title and subheadings
- Pictures, graphs, diagrams, or illustrations
- Bullet points
- Numbered lists
- Columns
- Text boxes
- Use of bold and colour
- Menus.

Language features might include:

- Knowing the difference between facts and opinions
- Use of adjectives
- Repetition.

These features tend to match the type of text.

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