

English for Business Communications (8959)

Chief Examiner Report 2020



General Observations

It was disappointing to see another drop this year in the number of First Class Passes, especially at Level 3, where no FCPs were awarded, and a lack of fluency was evident. There was also again a noticeable increase in the number of candidates, across all three levels, who failed to gain a Pass. Most candidates seem to understand the format of the examination, and at Levels 1 and 2 most candidates produce relevant, if often incomplete, answers, but at Level 3 more complex correspondence is required. Centres should bear in mind that in addition to a high level of fluency in English, a high level of understanding of the requirements of business communication is also expected at this level and so they should prepare candidates accordingly.



Areas of good performance

At all three levels, the letters and memoranda achieve high marks and the layout of these is handled with confidence by most candidates, although many omit a reference and/or heading. Checking that the salutations and complimentary closes are consistent would also often increase layout marks even more. At Level 1, the majority of candidates use the standard letter form provided for Task 4 in a competent manner and high marks are often achieved on this task.

Spelling tends to be good across all three levels. Most candidates include the majority of the information requested, although not always in a logical order.

At Level 1, most candidates complete the whole paper and an increasing number of Level 2 and 3 candidates do likewise, although in some cases the final two tasks appeared to have been rushed. Greater attention to word limits and time management could improve the grades of a considerable number of candidates.

Areas for development

It was disappointing to note fewer word-processed entries this year. As this is a business exam, candidates should be encouraged to use as much information technology as is available to them. Candidates are permitted to use Spellcheck and online dictionaries etc, which could help them present better pieces of business communication.

These examinations test reading (as well as writing) skills but the vast majority of candidates who fail, do so because they have not followed the instructions they have been given carefully enough. Candidates should check any vocabulary they do not know and make sure that they are very clear about what is required before they start to write anything. It is also essential that candidates understand their 'role' within the company and bear this mind throughout the examination. Candidates should note that it is not possible to pass by simply copying out the information in the prompts without changing it. At all levels, the information given in the prompts will need to be modified in an appropriate manner (in accordance with the instructions given). This is especially true of the 'Minutes' questions at Level 3, where many candidates still copy out the notes made on an agenda, although they are asked to change the notes into grammatical English. At Level 1, there are still some candidates who 'fill in the gaps' on the standard letter form without checking that they are completing sentences grammatically. Some candidates also fail to consider which pieces of information should go in which gap or include unnecessary and/or irrelevant information, generally because the prompts have not been read carefully enough. Some candidates are not paying sufficient attention to the word limits at Levels 2 and 3 and so are losing marks unnecessarily. Generally, candidates should try to be as concise as possible when writing business communication. Many letters and memoranda are far too long, and the result tends to be insufficient time to devote

to later tasks on the papers, with a significant number of candidates at Levels 2 and 3 submitting weak answers for the final task/s.

At Levels 2 and 3, it is expected that consideration to be given to tone, especially in a Press Release, Article or Speech. Candidates must show an awareness of the intended audience and tailor the information they are using appropriately. For example, it would not be sensible to give out long, complicated contact details in a speech whereas contact details may well be highly desirable in a Press Release, although giving the Managing Director as the first point of contact would not be appropriate. Too many candidates seem to copy out the prompts given without first deciding on the precise information that is required, and then presenting only this in a logical order, and in the correct tone for the intended audience. It should be noted that at Level 3, it is necessary to glean information from previous tasks. Invitations frequently omit a venue, time or date, although these are readily available in other parts of the paper and candidates are expected to accumulate information as they work through the tasks and include relevant information where appropriate. Candidates should also be aware of the conventions for writing formal invitations, agenda and minutes. Candidates are permitted to use calendars in the examination and should ensure that they give correct dates, e.g. 'next Thursday' is not acceptable as a date.

The weakest task at Levels 2 and 3 is the Report. In both cases, an Informal Report is requested, and these should be concise and very careful attention should be paid to the instructions given. At neither level is it acceptable to simply copy out the prompts or data, yet many candidates still persist in doing this. Explicit instructions are given regarding the information to be included and these need to be followed precisely, especially if a word limit is given. At Level 3, an Analytical Report is expected, and this may well require certain calculations before the necessary information can be obtained from the prompts. This is why candidates are allowed the use of a calculator, and they should take full advantage of this. Analytical skills are being tested in this Level 3 task, and candidates are therefore expected to demonstrate their analytical, in addition to their language skills by commenting on the figures, as requested by the prompts.

Punctuation is an area of weakness across all three levels, which again could easily be remedied were candidates able to word process and use a Grammar checker effectively. Candidates should ensure they allow sufficient time to read through each task after completing it and correct any errors they have made

Recommendations

Centres should check their candidates' abilities against the descriptors below to ensure that they are being entered for the correct level of exam. For example, at Level 3, candidates need to be able to understand with ease virtually everything read, summarise information from different sources to reconstruct arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation and express themselves spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.

Candidates should be encouraged to make use of computers to word process their answers, and should ensure that they are competent typists and also can use the Spell Check and Grammar Check facilities effectively, in addition to online calendars, calculators, dictionaries etc.

Candidates need to understand some basic business conventions e.g. if asking for a quotation for printer paper, it would be poor business practice to state what the company is currently paying for printer paper. Candidates for these exams do need to have a basic understanding of business procedures and practices, in addition to being able to write in an appropriate style, varying this to suit different pieces of correspondence.

Candidates should use the reading time at the beginning to full advantage and ensure that they understand the scenario and are fully aware of their 'role' in the company. They should also take time to read each task before starting to write. It is important to understand who is sending each piece of communication, to whom it is being sent, and why, and then to write what is required, bearing in mind any word restrictions and adopting an appropriate tone. These examinations test comprehension, as well as writing, and it is imperative that candidates understand the purpose and intended audience of each piece of communication. Candidates should make a note of all relevant points to be included and put them into a sensible order before attempting a task.

When candidates are practising for these examinations, it would be helpful to use similar 'scenarios'. It may also be beneficial to teach some typical business phrases e.g. 'In response to your letter of...', 'We await your early reply...' etc, and discuss when phrases are appropriate, and how to decide on the tone of a piece of communication before starting to write. Short, simple, concise sentences are ideal for business correspondence and avoid candidates making unnecessary grammatical errors. It would also be helpful to candidates if, when practising, they were given a maximum number of words to use. This might help them concentrate on being precise and including only necessary, relevant information in a logical order. It would also be helpful to ensure candidates can use either physical or online calendars, calculators and dictionaries.

Time management is an important element of these examinations and so candidates should ensure they allow sufficient time for each task. Learning to write concisely is also useful in this respect.

Obviously, all candidates should allow sufficient time to read over each task to ensure it makes sense, is grammatically correct and to correct any spelling and/or punctuation errors.

Tips

- Ensure that you have access (either physical or online) to a:
 - calendar
 - dictionary
 - calculator
- Read the whole paper very carefully before starting to write.
- Use your dictionary to check any vocabulary of which you are unsure.
- Make yourself a rough 'name plate' before starting to write, to remind yourself of your position within the company, the name of the company, what the company does, and who your 'boss' is. Keep this in front of you throughout the examination and keep referring to it, bearing in mind how it will affect the tone you adopt, especially at Levels 2 and 3.
- Read each question very carefully and then write your answer as concisely as possible, keeping to any word limits.
- Write full sentences and check tenses are consistent.
- Try to use phrases you know are up-to-date and appropriate in modern business correspondence and are also appropriate to the tone of the task.
- Check spellings and punctuation.
- Do the tasks in order and make sure you allow sufficient time to finish the paper.
- Start each task on a new page of the answer booklet and leave a clear left-hand margin.
- It is not necessary to leave more than two or three lines between the complimentary close and designation.
- It is not necessary to draw the company's logo or decorate correspondence in any way.
- Write clearly so that your answer can be understood by the person marking it. Leave left and right-hand margins
- If possible, use a word processor and take full advantage of the grammar and spell check facilities.
- Improve your knowledge of the business world and the types of communication used. Make sure you understand different types of business correspondence (e.g. orders, quotations, delivery notes, graphs and charts) and cannot only read the information they contain but also, at Level 3, analyse and comment on it. Practise doing this before the exam.
- Check all numbers and monetary values e.g. do not confuse £ with \$. Also check the axis labels on graphs e.g. if values are given in thousands, make sure you take this into account.
- Read over all work at the end of the examination and check that it makes sense

Additional comments

The candidates who obtain the highest marks are often those who write the least but include all the necessary information in a concise and business-like manner.

Sample papers are available on the City & Guilds website and should be used for practice before the examinations. The Qualifications' Handbook also includes sample 'answers' which provide guidance on what is expected for each task:

www.cityandguilds.com/qualifications-and-apprenticeships/international-english/business-english/8959-english-for-business-communications-ebc#tab=documents

Please see overall descriptors for each level below.

<p>Level 1</p>	<p>Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance such as basic personal and business information, shopping, local geography, employment, education, training and social roles.</p> <p>Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a direct exchange of information, feelings and opinions on familiar and routine matters.</p> <p>Can engage in discussion to establish shared understanding about familiar topics.</p> <p>Can read, understand and obtain information from short documents, familiar sources, signs and symbols.</p> <p>Can write to communicate with some awareness of the intended audience.</p>
<p>Level 2</p>	<p>Can understand the main ideas of complex communication on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation.</p> <p>Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party.</p> <p>Can adapt to take account of the reader(s), the context and the medium.</p> <p>Can engage in discussion in familiar and unfamiliar situations making clear and relevant contributions.</p> <p>Can obtain information from different sources.</p> <p>Can communicate clearly and in detail on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options, varying length, format and style appropriate to purpose and audience.</p>

Level 3	<p>Can understand with ease virtually everything read.</p> <p>Can summarise information from different sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation.</p> <p>Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.</p>
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