

Chief Examiner's Report – January 2016

Functional Skills English: Writing Level 1

Section 1 – General comments

Following the review of Functional Skills English by Ofqual in 2014, awarding organisations were asked to ensure sufficient emphasis was placed on accuracy of spelling, punctuation and grammar in determining a pass mark. Prior to this review, pass marks for different papers were set at a mark typically between 26 and 28 out of 50. Marks available across all categories other than spelling, punctuation and grammar totalled 27, meaning a candidate could achieve a pass with very low levels of accuracy. Therefore, in order to ensure candidates could not pass with low levels of accuracy, pass marks for current papers have had to be raised and now sit between 29 and 31 marks out of 50.

As a result, and as would be expected with any significant change, pass rates are slightly lower this academic year than in the previous academic year.

Candidates seem to engage sufficiently with the topics presented and to understand the type of document they are being asked to write. Some candidates are adversely affected by submitting very short answers to one or both questions. At level 1, candidates should aim to write between one hundred and fifty and two hundred words per response. Candidates who write fewer than one hundred words in a response are penalised accordingly; candidates who write more than two hundred and fifty words in a response are given extra tolerance in some marking categories, such as spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Section 2 – Performance relating to specific assessment criteria

1. Spelling

Poor spelling is a typical feature of weaker candidates. As all lower levels of Functional Skills English are subsumed into level 1, any errors in words associated with lower levels of Functional Skills English are penalised, in addition to words that are more demanding. It is evident that proof-reading and the use of spell-checkers and dictionaries would be hugely beneficial to many candidates. Candidates who attempt to use more sophisticated language are not necessarily penalised for every spelling error, as spelling abilities are judged on what is deemed appropriate for level 1 only.

2. Punctuation

Level 1 requires a relatively small number of punctuation conventions to be used accurately: full stops; question marks; upper and lower case letters; initial capital letters to start sentences. However, weaker candidates can be seen to have a poor command of these requirements and can lose significant marks. Typical errors include the failure to capitalise letters for proper nouns and the failure to use a capital letter for the first person personal pronoun. Centres are reminded that correct punctuation is required irrespective of the type of document a candidate is being asked to write. The omission or incorrect use of commas, apostrophes and inverted commas is not penalised at level 1.

3. Grammar

Many candidates demonstrate a sound knowledge of grammar, specifically verb-tense agreement and subject-verb agreement. However, significant numbers lose marks through poor grammar. Poor grammar can also affect the clarity and cohesion of what is being written, resulting in further marks being deducted. Many weaker candidates display confusion when using common homophones such as there/their/they're and two/too/to; these are penalised under grammar. It is also apparent that many candidates for whom English is a second language are being entered into the exam. Often, grammar presents significant problems for these candidates, especially if they have been entered too early in their learning journey.

4. Language

The use of language is problematic for many candidates. Both expression and tone are judged when awarding marks against this particular assessment criterion, and many weaker candidates lose significant marks. Poor language skills can also impact upon marks awarded for grammar, clarity and cohesion, so it is important that candidates understand the need for formal language and how to judge the correct tone when writing to different audiences. Proof-reading is essential.

5. Format and Structure

In general, performance is strong in this area, even for weaker candidates. However, where marks are lost, it is often through not knowing how to lay out and structure a formal letter, not starting an article with a headline or title, or not starting a speech with a customary greeting of the audience. A common error when writing a formal letter is to not correctly match the salutation and valediction.

6. Include appropriate detail

This is generally an area where candidates achieve good marks. At level 1, a bullet pointed list of detail to expand upon is included with both questions, so it is relatively simple for a candidate to check whether or not they have expanded upon each point listed. Those who lose marks either omit at least one bullet point completely or fail to expand upon one or more points.

7. Writing clearly and coherently

Stronger candidates can maintain clarity and coherence throughout the responses. Weaker candidates, however, often struggle to do so, with a lack of clarity often compounded by poor grammar and language.

Section 3 – Areas of good performance

Logical sequencing of responses is a category in which most candidates achieve full marks.

Inclusion of relevant detail is generally well addressed, although some candidates do not expand upon some of the bullet points, making only a perfunctory attempt at coverage or omitting some points all together.

Section 4 – Areas for development

As a result of the Ofqual review, it is now not possible for a candidate to pass with very low levels of accuracy in spelling, punctuation and grammar. However, moderate performance across all three, coupled with a strong performance across the majority of other categories, should ensure success.

1. Spelling

Significant marks are lost through poor spelling. Access to dictionaries is essential for candidates, and the use of spell-checkers for those candidates word-processing responses for the paper-based route is to be encouraged.

2. Punctuation

Level one punctuation demands are limited to the correct use of upper and lower case letters, the correct use of capital letters to start a sentence, and the correct use of full stops and question marks. The presence or absence of other forms of punctuation is not penalised. Centres are advised to concentrate, therefore, on ensuring candidates can at least demonstrate moderate command of these requirements before entering candidates for the exam.

It is surprising how often candidates fail to use upper case when writing the first person personal pronoun. Similarly, many candidates fail to use a capital letter when writing proper nouns or a post code as part of an address.

3. Grammar

Candidates should be secure in their knowledge of verb-tense agreement and subject-verb agreement. In many areas of England, incorrect subject-verb agreement is a feature of the vernacular, but it is important that candidates understand that all documents they are being asked to write are formal in nature and, as such, should be grammatically correct.

Section 5 – Recommendations/Advice for centres

- The Adult Literacy Core Curriculum and the Functional Skills English Standards should be used to underpin all teaching.
- Although there have been changes in the pass marks, and the levels of accuracy required in spelling, punctuation and grammar are greater, the typical errors and reasons for not achieving pass marks remain the same, and centres are urged to make use of not only this report but all previous Chief Examiner reports for Functional Skills English Writing exams.
- Functional Skills English is a summative exam and should only be sat once a candidate has demonstrated sufficiently high skill levels when sitting practice papers or centre-devised equivalents.
- Tutors should be familiar with the demands of all five levels of Functional Skills English, as all lower levels are subsumed into the level above. It is important that, whilst differentiated, teaching should be incremental in nature. Candidates should be secure in their knowledge of the lower levels before being entered for a level 1 Functional Skills English exam.
- Centres are advised to make use of the worked examples available on the City and Guilds website.
- Candidates should be given the opportunity to become familiar with the online platform through practice papers before summative assessment.
- Candidates who handwrite their responses should be reminded of the importance of the correct formation of individual letters so text is as legible as possible and that they are unequivocally upper or lower case, as determined by what is being written. Although legibility per se is not marked, illegibility can affect marks awarded across several categories. To this end, centres should ensure that candidates are entered for the platform which will maximise their chances of success.
- Review the Centre Guidance document to ensure complete understanding of the types of documents candidates are likely to be asked to write and the inherent structuring and formatting requirements of each.

- No matter what type of document candidates are asked to write, correct punctuation is required.
- Centres are reminded that candidates who opt for the paper-based examination are entitled to word process their answers, and to make use of spell-checkers and grammar-checkers in the software being used.
- Planning and drafting of responses are not marked. It is always recommended that candidates do plan and draft responses if they need to, but candidates should also be aware of the time constraints in the examination and should not spend inordinate amounts of time doing so.
- Candidates should always aim to write between one hundred and fifty and two hundred words per response.