AQA

Functional Skills
ENGLISH
8720/S/W/R
Report on the Examination

8720
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Please note that this report covers Functional Skills English for Level 1 (8720)

8720/S – Speaking

Introduction

A large number of centres took the opportunity to enter this first round of submissions. For many it was straightforward to verify their work. They had assimilated the standard by looking at the AQA standardising materials.

The nature of the component

The spoken component is an integral part of the Functional Skills package called English. Along with Reading and Writing it is a required element, and the subject as a whole cannot be passed without it. As part of the component there are two activities that must be completed. These involve giving a presentation and taking part in a discussion. If both tasks are not completed and if no evidence is provided, a pass cannot be awarded to the student.

For a presentation there must be a recording, plus a completion of the presentation part of the record form. For a discussion there must be a completion of the discussion part of the record form.

Each of the activities has a sub set of skills that must be delivered for a pass. These are listed on the candidate record form, and all of them must be achieved. This is called a mastery model of assessment, so even one cross in the 'no' column means that the student has not passed and should probably be entered at a later date. For example, if a student is not asked any questions after their presentation, or does not answer them, then they cannot be awarded a pass.

The standards

For each of Level 1 and Level 2 there is a set of standardising material which teachers must access via Secure Key Materials on e-AQA. If you do not have an e-AQA account you can request access via your Exams Officer.

Before each submission of work for these components, teachers should review these materials and match their own students' work to the work exemplified. Making some occasional comparative reference to these examples can help the verifier see that teachers have done this.

Submitting the entry

Please note the very important points below:

*Submissions must be made by the due date. If this cannot be done then centres should enter at the next opportunity

*For each student in the sample you must send recorded evidence of the presentation plus a fully completed record form.

*No passwords should be used to encrypt the work. The point of sending evidence to the verifier is so that it can be reviewed. Using passwords creates unnecessary delay.

*The sample should be posted to the verifier using first class post (fully paid) and without the need for a signature. Although sending by signed for delivery may seem more secure it is not, because inevitably the packages are frequently returned to the sorting office.

Conclusion

In this first submission some very interesting work was delivered by students for whom these qualifications are ideally suited.

There were also some teething problems which have been alluded to above. Where this is the case AQA will contact the centres to help them with their next submissions.

8720/W- Writing

Overview

This is the first series under the reformed Functional Skills in English specification, Level 1 Writing (8720W). The 2011 standards have now been superseded by 'scope of study' descriptors which apply to Writing Composition and Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPG). These can now be found on page 9 of the AQA Specification
https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/resources/english/specifications/AQA-8720-8725-SP-2019.PDF.

At Level 1 learners are required to produce straightforward texts such as narratives, instructions, explanations and reports of varying lengths. Each writing task will require learners to address one of the above categories although it is important to note that narratives and explanations can be embedded within different formats such as emails, blogs, letters, reviews etc

The reformed qualification is intended to maintain very high standards and a pass at this level will be a strong indicator of ability in writing Standard English. It is consistent in its standard as a test of basic English writing skills and will be the foundation for secure progression. With the current demands of GCSE English, many centres and colleges are considering alternative routes for students. This qualification would also serve as a suitable alternative and an excellent progression route from The Entry Level Certificate (Step Up to English). It is important that centres and colleges enable students to have a realistic chance of acquiring valuable qualifications by mapping abilities against available qualifications. In this way, the reformed Functional English wil provide important opportunities for both centres and students.

To ensure continuity under the reformed specification the writing papers have retained two questions. Each contains stimulus material leading into a task which is supported by bullet points, enabling students to use some of the information in the question. There is an element of problem solving and functional thinking in completing each task. A significant innovation is that there are word limits established for Question 1, which will have an impact on the achievement of students and this is looked at in more detail below. The time allocated for the paper is now 1 hour with an advisory 20 minutes for the 1st question. The total mark available for the paper has been increased to 27, with 9 marks for Question 1 (6 for composition, 3 for SPG) and 18 marks for Question 2 (9 for composition, 9 for SPG). An important point to note is that SPG comprises 44% of total marks, an increase of 4% over the previous specification, reflecting its importance at this level. Mark schemes for both questions are now skill based and will remain unchanged for the lifetime of the specification and can be found at: https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/resources/english/AQA-87202-SMS.PDF

At this level, centres now very rarely enter students who have little or no chance of getting inside the middle level of Mark Scheme descriptors. Students seemed generally confident and able to meet the requirements of the questions with 90% of students gaining a mark of 10 or more while over 50% gained a mark of 18 or more. Students achieving a mark of 18 are well suited to the demands of Level 2 and should be encouraged to progress. Students whose marks fall below a total of 18 need a little more in the way of skill development before they progress on to Level 2. Close examination of the centre's mark profile would be very useful in establishing appropriate progression routes for students.

Question 1

This question required students to write a brief report to the police about an accident at a bus stop. The stimulus material provided some basic information and outlined the type of brief report that the police were looking for. Bullet points enabled students to develop a clear structure for the report with helpful suggestions including an contextual introduction. Students were asked to write between 80 and 120 words. It is important to understand that the length of answers is clearly addressed in the mark scheme and that marginal infringements of this aspect of the question would not deny a student access the the highest band provided the standard of writing composition justified it. As the time advised for this question is only 20 minutes, students who spent too long and wrote too much may have been doubly disadvantaged. A number of students showed real commitment to meeting the word limits as there was clear evidence of editing the answer to reduce the number of words. Overall, although it is not possible to provide clear figures, approximately 75% of students met the requirements of word length for this question.

Generally, most students provided some information that was relevant, usually concentrating on the key details involving the main agents in the accident and the student's own role. Many answers made quite detailed responses given the word limits.

Stronger answers clearly indicated when and where the accident took place as well as outlining the role of the writer in the events. Many students indicated that they were involved in calling emergency services and some described the injuries to the victim or victims. In one or two cases what was described involved conflict of some sort between individuals, for example between the driver of the bus and the injured passenger. In those answers that reached the top level, sentences conveyed meaning clearly and the level of detail was appropriate to the task although answers which were well written but contained irrelevant or imprecise detail did not achieve maximum marks. Vocabulary was very effective in the best answers with specialised words like 'witnessed', 'victim', 'collision', 'ambulance' used effectively.

Many weaker answers did not provide enough clear detail to meet the requirements of the audience and a number were of inappropriate length, usually too short. Although the word limits are modest, some planning is called for to enable sufficient information to be provided. Also, many weaker answers provided information that was not particularly helpful, such as detailed descriptions of what the student was doing at the time of the accident, the clothes they were wearing or the appearance of the individuals described. Whilst there is some jusfication for clarity of detail, the issue in this shorter answer is how relevant that detail is to the task. This means that a clear description of one of the passengers, taking up two or three sentences might eat into the word limit and distract the writer from providing the straightforward facts as requested. In shorter answers, when irrelevant material was present, there were very few salient points made. Some very long answers offered disorganised narrative which seemed unplanned. In some cases, very long answers were in the form of a crime story, in which the accident played a minor role.

Answers at the bottom level were almost invariably too short, with students unable to provide clear information through poorly structured sentences. These were attempts, with little sense of purpose or audience. However, achievement at this level is limited to a minority, with only around 15% of students not gaining more than 2 marks for composition.

One important point is that Question 1 is worth a maximum of only 9 marks (including SPG) and it is recommended that students spend no more than 20 minutes answering it. Students who spend too long on this question are putting themselves at a disadvantage because they are losing time on Question 2 which is worth twice as many marks.

Question 2

This question asked students to provide a review of a visit to Bramby Sports Centre, incorporating an account of the student's visit alongside reasons for why the student would recommend the centre or not. The question is in familiar territory and students are likely to have addressed similar tasks in their preparation for the examination.

Most students wrote about a visit to the sports centre and the range of attainment tended to match the level of detail and how effectively the response met the needs of purpose and audience.

The best answers, clearly in the top level for composition (7-9 marks) showed an understanding of the need to address the nature of the review in terms of making judgments and recommendations. Phrases such as 'I really liked…', 'how fantastic..' and 'at ease…' carried a convincing sense of personal involvement with the task. Students at this level who chose to criticise the centre used equally effective formulations such as 'I was really disappointed..' or 'found wanting…' although the the majority of students recommended the centre very strongly. Top level answers made specific observations, sometimes linked to the stimulus material, but providing a credible account. There was mention, for instance of the 'inspiring' fitness sessions that Jennie provided alongside detailed itemisation of menu items in the restaurant and the state of cleanliness in the pool and changing rooms.

Sentence structure and logical sequence play a significant role in the mark scheme for composition and the best answers used clear expression with well composed sentences. Logical structure was often identified through the narrative sequence of a contextual introduction followed by discussion of a number of aspects of the centre (the gym, the pool, staff attitudes, the restaurant etc) leading to a sense of closure in the final recommendation.

Answers in middle level (marks 4-6) offered some relevant material, often clearly linked to the stimulus material. These answers tended to address points in a rather formulaic way to ensure that all points were covered. They often lacked a sense of a reported personal experience, which the best answers displayed. For instance, rather than looking at details in the restaurant, students in this band tended to make very generic statements as in 'I liked the restaurant. It was really good'. Nevertheless the students in this band were able to convey basic meaning and there was often an attempt at logical sequencing.

The weakest answers, in the 1-3 level were often extremely difficult to follow and the phrase 'meaning is unclear' from the mark scheme applied almost universally. At this level there was little vocabulary outside of that found in the stimulus material and some answers were extremely short. Whilst there are no advisory word limits for this question, it is very clear in most of these answers that 'length is inappropriate' (from the mark scheme).

Students must be advised that this question carries 18 marks and should therefore be given enough time to gain as many of these marks as possible. There was clear evidence, in a large number of answers, that the students had not spent sufficient time on this answer in either planning or writing.

SPG

Spelling: at the top level students used specialist language effectively, not only to depict sports centre itself but also to present feelings. At the top level words such as 'creche', 'knowledgeable', 'facilities', 'inspiring', 'expectations' were spelt correctly. When ascribing a level to spelling it is not

simply the correctness of the spelling that matters but the range and ambition of the vocabulary. At the bottom level, 'few examples of conventional spelling' is a key descriptor in the mark scheme.

Punctuation: sentence demarcation is the most significant issue in punctuation and answers in the top level displayed accuracy throughout. Occasionally, more complex punctuation is used but not always accurately. In the middle level, sentence punctuation is accurate when sentences are straightforward. At the bottom level, sentence punctuation is either inaccurate, barely present or not present at all.

Grammar: At the bottom level a range of grammatical errors are found which makes reading very difficult. The main problems were:

issues around tense;
subject/verb agreement;
the use of definite and indefinite articles;
the use of conjunctions or coherence markers.

In middle and top levels the scale of grammatical inaccuracy varied considerably but the crucial indicator was the ability to follow what was written.

The final mark for spelling, punctuation and grammar takes into account achievement across the three elements.

8720/R- Reading

This was the first entry point for the reformed Functional Skills specification and the paper incorporated several new elements and question types. Overall, the responses demonstrated a high level of engagement and good understanding in several areas, which is very pleasing to see.

The three sources were based on the theme of cats:
Source A - a letter to the council complaining about cats as a nuisance
Source B – a factsheet for someone considering getting a cat
Source C – an advertisement for the services of a cattery

The material appeared to be largely interesting, accessible and appropriate for the students.

Questions 1, 4, and 15 were all in tick-box format, each offering four statements which students needed to decide were true or false and tick the appropriate box in each case. These were generally well done with over 70% achieving one or two marks on each. Two marks are awarded for all four correct and one mark for three correct. Responses which identify only one or two correctly will not be awarded a mark. Therefore it is important that students are aware that **they must attempt every statement**: a small number of students ticked only one or two boxes, thereby instantly denying themselves any marks. A significant number of students seemed to think that if they were identifying a statement as "False" they needed to use a cross rather than a tick; others used a sort of blob or a dash. Regardless of what symbol was employed, marks were awarded for the correct box; however, the instructions clearly say "tick" so students should be encouraged to read and respond appropriately to instructions in the question.

Question 16 was also in tick-box style but testing students' ability to identify which statements were fact and which, opinion. This was equally successful, with 80% achieving one or two marks.

Question 2, 5 and 13 focus on definitions of words and the questions invited students to use a dictionary. Were this suggestion complied with, one would expect close to 100% success rate, but this was not the case: a mark was achieved by 86% on Q2 and 63% on each of Q5 and Q13. It may be that many students simply guessed at the meaning rather than use a dictionary but it may also suggest that students were either not provided with a dictionary during the examination or were unfamiliar with how to use one.
Question 8 also tested understanding of meaning but based on a phrase rather than a single word and focused on the Scope of Study descriptor "*Read and understand a range of specialist words in context*". This proved somewhat more challenging, a little more than half of students correctly identifying the meaning of "*stimulating environment*".

Question 3 was the new picture question. The Scope of Study descriptor for this requires students to "*Infer from images meanings not explicit in the accompanying text*". It is therefore important for entrants to this examination to be aware that the correct answer option will be something which the written text does not contain and can therefore be identified by a process of elimination. In this series, over 70% were successful on this question.

Questions 6 and 12 both relate to the purpose of different texts and neither presented any problem to the majority of students, both having over 70% success rates.

Question 9 assesses punctuation and is one of the new elements in the reformed specification. Almost 70% of students successfully recognised the use of the speech marks in the subheadings on Source B.

Question 7.1 asked for one positive aspect of owning a cat and **Question 7.2** for the opposite. 82% achieved the mark in Q7.1 with Q7.2 being somewhat less successful at 66%. Not attempted rates were just over 2% on both parts of this question. A variety of responses could be accepted, the most popular positive aspect being *keep rodents away*" with its corollary for 7.2 – "*the cat might bring in a dead mouse/rat".*

Question 10 & Question 11 required some comparison of Sources A and B, Q10 asking for two similarities and Q11 for two differences. It was apparent that a number of students were unclear as to what was meant by "similarities". Only 11% attained the full 2 marks on Q10; 16% on Q11. The numbers not achieving any marks on these questions were relatively high at 26% and 33% respectively.
Of more concern were the relatively high numbers not attempting these questions, both above 3%.

Important guidance on these questions would be to avoid generic responses such as "*Both contain a picture*" as these give no indication that they are based on the texts in question. More specific responses identifying images of cats would gain the mark. "*Both contain paragraphs*" is also unlikely to be rewarded. Good advice would be to state the subject content of both texts: "*Both are about cats*", followed by finding something specific about the content eg "*Both talk about cats hunting".*

When identifying differences, it is not sufficient to pinpoint an aspect of one text then say the other one does not have this feature: "*Source A is angry about cats and Source B isn't*". All this tells us is that the sources are not the same, which is already indicated by the question, so specific differences need to be offered by students: "*Source A is angry about cats but Source B loves them*". Marks would also be given without the actual source being identified – thus "*One is angry about cats and the other loves them*" would be equally be valid.

Marks cannot be awarded where responses compare apples and pears. Thus "*Source A is a letter to the council but Source B is about getting a cat*" would not gain the marks. Another element of uncertainty in Q11 was how to use the answer space. A significant number of students wrote a point about Source in the "Difference 1" space then the opposite point about Source B in the "Difference 2" space. Such answers could only be awarded a maximum of one mark as they were offering only one difference which straddled both spaces. For series from November onwards, the layout of the answer space will be reviewed.

The final question – **Question 17** – was worth three marks and was generally very well attempted. Students were presented with the context of an elderly relative needing to find accommodation for her cat while on holiday for a week. The task was to review the details about Cranborne Cattery in Source C and "*list the important points the relative would need to know".* 40% attained the full three marks while 14% achieved no marks. It was also disappointing to see that 5% did not attempt this final question, possibly because they ran out of time.

The key to success in this question was to select the **important details** as required by the question. These included accurate information about price, location and the quality of the accommodation. Not everything in the source could be classed as important, such as the owner's name or the fact that the cat could bring its own toys. Irrelevant information also risked undermining full marks, such as the cost for three cats, or information lacking in context, such as "*the pens measure 2.1m x 1.8m*" without the addition of "*licensed to hold a maximum of three*

cats". A further error which appeared often was a list of information the relative would need expressed in general terms, such as "*She would need to know how much it costs, where it is and what the accommodation is like*". Such answers regrettably could not be awarded anything.

In summary, this first examination of the new specification was largely successful, generating a mean mark of 16/26 and 88% of entrants achieving a pass, which is very commendable. It was particularly gratifying to see the level of engagement and enthusiasm with which the vast majority of students approached the paper. The tick box questions performed extremely well and the students should be congratulated for coping admirably with the increased demand in the form of an additional 15 minutes' duration and a third source. It was apparent that some students' stamina declined in the later questions and it is hoped that more experience with the format of the paper will alleviate this in future series.

I would urge teachers to familiarise themselves with the Scope of Study descriptors in the specification and access the exemplar responses which will be available following the March series. Dictionary practice would be an invaluable classroom strategy as there are at least three marks to be gained by enhanced skill in this area. Continued practice in reading and selecting specific types of information should continue to be the bedrock of preparation for Level 1 Functional English.

This has been a very encouraging inaugural series and the students who have worked so hard in readiness and the teachers who have prepared them so efectively are all to be congratulated on their success.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the Results Statistics page of the AQA Website.