

Principal Examiner Report

May 2011

FS English Writing Level 1

E103

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General comments

This paper worked well in testing Level 1 writing skills. The tasks set were writing a letter to apply for a job in a charity shop and emailing to complain about issues with a bus service. Learners found these tasks accessible and there were very few examples of misinterpretation.

Task 1

The context of applying for a job was clearly a familiar one to most learners and there were many strong responses. The large majority of learners addressed all three bullet points, giving a logical sequence to what they wrote. The stronger answers showed development of ideas, e.g. in outlining their skills and experience and in explaining why they were the right person for the job.

Strong answers also included an appropriate opening such as 'I am writing to apply for the job that was advertised in your window.' They went on to finish with an appropriate close, such as 'Thank you for reading my application and I hope to hear from you soon.' Weaker answers often started and ended very abruptly and sometimes did not even contain the learner's name, meaning that they were not fit for purpose as a letter of application.

Most learners made some attempt at letter layout, but comparatively few managed a completely correct layout. Some learners did not provide a sender address, which is an important feature of a letter of application. A number of learners had difficulty with writing a letter to an addressee known by position rather than name and many closed with 'yours sincerely,' rather than 'yours faithfully.'

Stronger answers grasped the importance of writing in a formal tone, but there were a number that were too informal for a letter of application, eg starting with 'Hi,' rather than the more appropriate 'Dear Sir/Madam.'

The full range of spelling, punctuation and grammar marks was awarded. Some responses were written to a very high degree of accuracy, whereas others contained too many errors for meaning to be supported. Common errors included confusion between their/there and its/it's and a number of the words given in the prompt were also misspelt, eg "chairty." There were also issues with non-capitalisation of proper nouns and the personal pronoun 'I' was often written in lower case. The most common punctuation error was that sentence control was often weak, due to comma splicing.

Only a small number of learners showed evidence of having planned their responses, before they started writing them. It was clear that writing a plan had helped these learners to develop their ideas logically.

Task 2

The context of problems with public transport was familiar to learners, all of whom found this task accessible, with many producing strong responses. Misinterpretation only occurred where learners had not read the prompt material carefully and so included material not relevant to the task. A variety of different formats were used, but there is no set format requirement for an email and so this wasn't an issue.

Most learners were able to state what the problems were with the bus service and the stronger answers went on to clearly outline the problems this had caused them and to state the action they wanted taken. Many learners were able to do this very successfully giving clear action points and stating when they wanted these addressed by.

Development was an issue in a number of responses seen, where learners did little more than to reword the prompt material. This prevented some otherwise able learners from accessing the higher mark band. Conversely, there were other responses which were overlong and so began to lose structure and coherence.

Use of an appropriate tone was an important aspect of this task; most learners managed to maintain a polite tone when making their complaint, but some did get too worked up by the subject and became rude and even threatening. Lapses into informality were also common with learners telling the bus company manager to "get it sorted" before they "got kicked out of college." These kinds of expressions are fine in conversations between friends, but are unlikely to be effective in a complaint letter.

The full range of marks was awarded for spelling, punctuation and grammar. Again, it was the case that a number of words given in the prompt were misspelt, "e.g. manger" and "busses."

Recommendations for Centres

Centres should continue to reinforce the fact that this is a test of functional writing skills. Learners need to write responses that contain relevant information and remain focused on the bullet points given in the task. In order to be able to do this they must read the task and stimulus material very carefully, before they start to write their response.

Prior to the test, all learners should be given opportunities to practice writing in various formats (eg letters, emails, leaflets, etc) for different audiences and purposes. This should include formal and informal tasks, to help learners understand the different requirements of these types of writing. Work on effective ways of opening and closing different types of writing would also be of benefit.

Centres should continue to work on ensuring that learners are able to correctly format a formal letter, prior to taking this exam. It is clear that centres have been addressing this issue, but further reinforcement before the test is advisable. Revision on when to use 'yours sincerely' and when to use 'yours faithfully' would also be useful.

Centres should also reinforce the fact that 40% of the marks are for spelling, punctuation and grammar. It is important to remind learners that they are allowed to use a dictionary and also that they should spend a few minutes checking through their work, after they have finished. This is also true where learners have word processed their test papers, as many of these responses contain a large number of typographical errors.

Common errors include misspellings of homophones, non-capitalisation of proper nouns and the use of commas where full stops are needed. The personal pronoun, 'I', is also frequently written in lower case throughout responses. Revision on these areas prior to the test would be of considerable benefit to learners.

Finally it is also recommended that centres tell learners that they can plan their work on the exam paper. They will help them to structure their responses and to avoid just rewording the prompt material.

Pass mark for E103 in May 2011

Maximum mark	25
Pass mark	16
UMS mark	6

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