

Principal Examiners' Report

February 2017

Functional Skills English
Writing Level 2 (E203)

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E203 - Functional Skills English, Writing Level 2

General Comments

This paper offered learners good opportunities to demonstrate Level 2 Writing Skills. The two tasks set were: writing a letter applying for money from the Kindon Career Fund and an e-mail to Fine Food Canteen Services, complaining about the quality of service received. These subjects proved accessible to learners and a good number produced appropriate ideas for each task.

There was clear evidence that the learners had been fully prepared to write personal responses. The use of paragraphing was reasonably strong in both tasks and there was clear evidence of good preparation for candidates writing formal letters, with address formatting correct in many responses. However, there was, as ever, a large variation in how clearly ideas were expressed and the full range of marks was awarded. There is increasing evidence of learners who are not yet at level 2 being entered for this examination. This is often indicated by the inability of learners to construct sentences in a grammatically correct manner.

Learners are encouraged to keep their responses within the pages of the answer booklet as over-long responses are often just as un-functional as ones that are too short.

Task 1

Learners were required to read a notice in the local paper about the Kindon Career Fund, detailing that £1000 was available to be won by the best applicant for the fund. Learners were required to apply for the fund, saying why they deserved the money, describing how they would spend it and explaining how this would benefit their career. Many read the whole material and clearly constructed their letters using the bullets as guidance.

A large number of responses were successful with some clear, developed letters that strongly argued their case for the money. There were, however, a number of very short, list-like or repetitive pieces which were written in a very simple style and did not develop much beyond the material presented in the source material.

A number of learners wrote in a lively, engaging style, writing in detail and presenting clear, personal reasons why they deserved the fund and what they would do with it. Some confused the task and thought they were helping the charity raise more money for future funds.

Many learners wrote their letters from the point of view of deserving the money for altruistic reasons such as helping the community, their employees, their school, their animal shelter. Many of these letters were quite persuasive often employing some effective emotional blackmail techniques.

Some responses became general and lacked specific detail about how and why the money would be used. In some there was simply a plea to 'win' the money. A number of responses were written in a style which was too pleading, making the writer sound desperate for the money, which was excessive as an approach.

A few very honest letters simply asked for the money because they had had a hard life or just wanted a holiday.

In general, the letters were often quite persuasive, rhetorical, and structured with an appropriate format or partial format.

The best letters adopted a formal tone and were able to follow the bullet points clearly, but not in an overtly obvious manner. Less successful responses had three paragraphs, one for each bullet in the prompt, using the words of the prompt as the first sentence. These responses were too formulaic and did not read fluently. Some learners wrote using either just one paragraph or used a succession of single sentence paragraphs. Learners need to demonstrate that they can use a range of paragraphing structures successfully to pass at level 2.

Sentence structure was varied and accurate in many responses and was mainly supported by effective use of punctuation. There were problems with sentence demarcation and missing commas from around clauses within sentences in less functional responses.

The language of quite a number of letters was often full of errors with missing 'articles' – both direct and indirect – weak spelling of basic monosyllabic words, poor subject/verb agreement, comma splicing and poor punctuation and constant tense changes. It's as though some learners are so carried away by their enthusiasm to complete the task that they fail to exercise more control or check their language, although some learners were obviously EAL learners

The better responses demonstrated the ability to write using the format of a letter, including appropriate letter writing conventions, with the salutation matching the close, the date evident and both sender and receiver's addresses included. Less successful responses began: 'My name is ... and I am writing this letter to apply for...' This is not appropriate letter-writing style and suggests a learner working below level 2.

Another common issue is learners who write very little. This gives the examiner little to reward as a variety of sentence types and structural devices are unlikely to be evident in a very brief, undeveloped piece of writing.

Task 2

Learners were required to write a letter of complaint Fine Food Canteen Services for the poor quality of their services. Learners were, on the whole, able to engage with the topic and there were a good number of well written e-mails that were fully functional. Learners often wrote with a clear sense of purpose and wrote detailed reasons why the service was poor and said what could be done to rectify the situation.

Many learners correctly wrote this as a formal e-mail although some were a little too informal and a good number were written too forcefully, including sarcasm and insulting terminology.

More successfully written e-mails followed the bulleted instructions clearly and came up with some realistic and appropriate scenarios. Less successful responses consisted of a list of extreme problems with the service and several contained overly aggressive vocabulary. This is not an appropriate style and tone for an effective e-mail of complaint.

Less developed answers often were very vague, too short and did not really convince the reader that there were problems with the service. Some reflected badly on the learner, indicating they had excessive demands for what constitutes good service.

Many responses were fit for purpose but did not get out of the middle band as they were quite simple, not fully developed, relied heavily on the source material and were repetitive.

As with Task 1, learners with English as a second language, wrote some thoughtful responses, but generally omitted both the indirect and direct article throughout and mixed up prepositions. Common grammatical errors tended to be regarding tense or omission of words such as definite articles. In more severe cases the errors related to weak syntax. A lot of errors could have been corrected with proof reading.

Many learners wrote less for this task than for task 1, which showed they had engaged less well with it or had run out of things to say. Others may not have spent enough time on this response, writing very briefly; learners should allow enough time to complete both tasks equally as they are equally weighted.

Sometimes the quality of the handwriting was poor with legibility difficult and basic technical accuracy needs much attention.

Recommendations for Centres

This is a Functional Skills test, so learners will only be rewarded for writing responses that are fit for purpose, i.e. relevant to the task. This means that they must read the task and stimulus material with great care, before they start to write their response. Responses that are well written but of limited relevance to the task set will not receive a high mark for form, communication and purpose. A number of responses are written using only one paragraph and it is difficult to access the full range of marks if only one paragraph has been used, so learners should be encouraged to use a variety of paragraphs in their writing.

Prior to the test all learners should be given opportunities to practice writing in various formats, for different audiences and purposes. They should be clear about the particular purpose of a letter or an e-mail in a given context. This is also true for other functional writing tasks which require a good understanding of the nature of different audiences. This experience will be of great help to them in tackling a future L2 Writing paper.

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. It is also important that learners understand where and when different punctuation marks should be used. The frequent use of the small 'i', when a larger one is required, is still a common error, as is the misspelling of 'receive' and 'sincerely'.

Finally, it is also recommended that centres tell learners that they can plan their work on the exam paper. They will just need to rule through this if they do not want it to be marked.

Pass mark for E203 in February 2017

Maximum mark	30
Pass mark	18
UMS mark	6

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