

Principal Examiners' Report

February 2018

Functional Skills English
Writing Level 2 (E203)

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Publications Code E203_01_1802_ER

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General Comments

This paper offered learners good opportunities to demonstrate Level 2 Writing Skills. The two tasks set were: writing an email persuading a friend to help them clean up the local park, as part of a community group scheme and an article thanking someone who has helped them in their life. 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 strong in both tasks and there was clear evidence of good preparation for candidates writing articles and using the correct tone for an email of persuasion. However, there was, as ever, a large variation in how clearly ideas were expressed and the full range of marks was awarded.

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 some brief notes giving them information about the community group's plan to clean up the local park. This gave candidates some idea of the areas to focus on in their email.

A large number of responses were successful with some strong, persuasive emails that were interesting to read. There were, however, a number of very short, list-like or repetitive pieces which were written in a very simple style and had no sense of being an email to a friend.

Learners often wrote in a lively, engagingly persuasive style, writing in detail and developing comments on why their friend should join them to help clean up the local park.

The better responses 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 candidates lost the focus of the task and wrote articles about the park and its run-down state.

Paragraphing was often successfully achieved as many learners had an introductory paragraph stating the purpose of the email, followed by a variety of paragraphs. Many learners were able to write using an appropriate range of simple and complex sentences and paragraphing structures were varied to positively impact on the meaning of their writing. There was also the over-use of simple sentences and one sentence paragraphs, showing learners working below level 2. There were some issues with sentence demarcation and missing commas from around clauses in sentences in less functional responses.

Those learners who established a genuine concern for the state of the park owing to playing there in childhood or its importance to the community, both young and old, usually gained higher marks for FCP than those who merely stated the park needed some care. Similarly, responses which described in some detail the possible contributions of the writer and friend and their respective skills were far more convincing than responses which simply glossed over how they could help.

Quite a few emails used flattery or even emotional blackmail to persuade the friend to help restore the park 'to its former glory'. The key to gaining higher marks on this task was convincing the friend that the clean-up was important in itself and that it was also important to them as young people that they took part in it. The added bonus of free food and drink at the end of each day was frequently used with some humour in the 'you're a glutton for punishment' ilk.

The language of quite a number of emails was often full of errors with missing articles – both direct and indirect – weak spelling of basic monosyllabic words, poor subject/verb agreement, verb tense errors, comma splicing and poor punctuation. Some learners would do better if they coupled their enthusiasm for the task with more control and checking of language accuracy.

As usual, there were some amusing typos such as 'I will do my best to make this park gloom' and 'Pearsonally, I think volunteering is important'. The benefits of volunteering usually related to the friend's CV and employability, although one learner rather oddly told his friend that clearing the overgrown paths would help him to become a lumberjack. Obviously Wardfield Park was a wilderness. I did enjoy the response which urged the friend to 'stop our football team being harassed by lurking litter'.

Task 2

Learners were able to fully engage with the topic of thanking a friend who had helped them and there were a good number of well written articles that were functional at level 2. Learners often wrote with a clear sense of purpose and had many comments to make on the person who they wished to thank.

Many learners correctly wrote this as an article, but some had little sense of an article and were written as emails or letters. Article conventions, such as a headline and subheadings, were used by more successful writers.

Learners often produced moving tributes to their respective heroes. 'Mum' was number one favourite followed by TAs and teachers, and close school friends. Reading the responses reveals the number of young people who have suffered from anxiety, depression, and panic attacks at some stage of their lives often stemming, according to their accounts, from the pressure to do well in examinations. It's worth noting that some learners wrote narratives as opposed to eulogies, where the story was far more important than the person being thanked. For example, there was the detailed account of a house fire where the occupant was eventually rescued by a fireman, only briefly mentioned in the last sentence. And there was a rather bizarre story about a dog escaping its lead and squeezing through a wire fence into a mine field. In contrast, there was a moving thank you to this country from a Syrian refugee, as well as a sincere and convincing thank you from a veteran of the war in Afghanistan who had lost a limb in the fighting. Some learners might well have been flippant about their chosen heroes, especially the person who chose 'Bob the goldfish'. I'm not sure, either, if 'Logan is like a parasite, he never leaves me' was intended to be complimentary?

There were a number of candidates who wrote extensively but made too many errors, as they had clearly concentrated their efforts on quantity, not quality. Over-long responses are often not functional as readers lose interest or the errors become so serious as to impact the meaning.

Other responses were fit for purpose, but did not get out of the middle level as they were quite simple, not fully developed and were repetitive.

As with Task 1 some learners 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.

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 an article or an email 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'.

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 2018

Maximum mark	30
Pass mark	18
UMS mark	6



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