

Principal Examiners' Report

January 2018

Functional Skills English
Writing Level 2 (E203)

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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 article for a local magazine about the pros and cons of taking holidays in the UK rather than abroad and writing an email of complaint about a houseboat not living up to expectations. 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 complaint. 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 ideas on potential pros and cons of taking holidays in the UK rather than abroad. This gave the vast majority of candidates some idea of the areas to focus on in their article.

A large number of responses were successful with some lively, developed articles 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 article.

Learners often wrote in a lively, engaging style, writing in detail and developing comments on what makes a holiday in the UK a positive thing. To some, the UK is a dreadful place to go on holiday, with a number giving a vast number of reasons to avoid it; some believable and some rather far-fetched. There were some sweeping generalisations, such as the weather being always terrible, the presence of no good hotels or places to eat and a complete absence of entertainment in the whole of the UK. Some saw the benefits of staying in the UK, as holidays abroad can be expensive, you may not like the food and there could be problems with health and safety and illness.

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 such as: 'The advantages and disadvantages of taking holidays in the UK are...'; 'my own views on holidays in the UK are...' and 'my ideal holiday is...'. These responses were too formulaic and did not read fluently.

More successful learners were able to use the material as starting points to help structure their article, developing their own detailed comments on holidays in the UK or abroad. Sentence structure appeared to be varied and accurate in many responses and was mainly supported by effective use of punctuation. There were issues with sentence demarcation and missing commas from around clauses in sentences in less functional responses.

Paragraphing was often successfully achieved as many learners had an introductory paragraph stating the purpose of the article, followed by a variety of paragraphs, depending on their views on holidays and what they had to write about. 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. Some learners relied on a very repetitive, simple structure, with 'I also think that...' repeated many times. There was also the over-use of simple sentences and one sentence paragraphs, showing learners working below level 2.

Learners with English as an additional language often gained lower SPAG marks as their grammar, in particular, lacked accuracy. In the better responses, however, there was a greater range of punctuation used – commas were often used appropriately.

The better responses demonstrated the ability to write using the format of an article, including a heading and suitable subheadings with the writer's name at the bottom or under the heading. Less successful responses began: 'My name is ... and I am writing this article to show you my views about holidays in the UK or abroad.' This is not appropriate article-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 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 had many areas to complain about. Many learners were able to produce developed reasons for being unhappy with the houseboat, rather than simply listing ideas. The information given was often used well to develop responses.

Almost all learners correctly wrote this as an email of complaint to Mick Brown some were a little too informal and some were too aggressive when making their views known. E-mail conventions are flexible and as long as there is a clear structure and appropriate tone, the email was appropriate. Sometimes a close was missed off, however.

More successfully written responses used original ideas/phrases rather than relying heavily on the prompt material. Learners often showed great restraint and fairness when complaining, reasonably putting across their views and explaining clearly what they wanted done about the situation. Overall there was a good standard of response, but less developed answers often were very vague.

Many produced a whole array of areas to complain about, which felt excessive. It would have been better to write about 2 or 3 problems in greater detail. Some aggressive responses were unnecessarily angry and there was the occasional instance of inappropriate vocabulary used – this was not appropriate for the task.

Many responses were fit for purpose but did not get out of the middle level 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 more for this task than for task 1, which showed they had engaged well with it. 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 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 January 2018

Maximum mark	30
Pass mark	18
UMS mark	6

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