

Principal Examiners' Report

March 2017

Functional Skills English
Writing Level 2 (E203)

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Publications Code E203_01_1703_ER

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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 on the issue of banning computers in classrooms and a review of a film, band, book, some music, a computer game or an app. 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 continuing 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 letter in the Dintone News on the issue of Computers and Schools. Learners then had to write a letter to the editor, expressing their own views on the issue of whether computers should be banned in classrooms. The 'letter of the day' argued that computers should be banned from classrooms so that learners could actually benefit from more teacher directed learning. A secondary argument in the letter comprised the common belief that young people are better versed in ICT than their teachers and can therefore learn nothing from them.

Most learners read the whole material and clearly constructed their letters using the bullets as guidance.

A good number of learners argued that any distraction to students from computer games or watching videos could be offset by education institutions simply blocking the sites. There were arguments in favour of computer based classroom learning on the grounds that those learners with special educational needs, such as writing problems or reading problems, would benefit from it. These arguments were usually well presented, although the learner who argued that 'kids with broken arms were being made to write ...' was, hopefully, rather overstating the case. These 'educational' letters in favour of computers also covered areas related to ease of research and storage of coursework because of computers, applying the benefits to both learners and teachers.

There were relatively few letters supporting David's viewpoint and those which did often gave a nightmarish vision of copied coursework, non-stop gaming, and general misbehaviour by learners in a chaotic classroom, with the helpless teacher impotently looking on, or not quite understanding the surreptitious engagement with YouTube, for example, before their very eyes.

In general, responses were better when they were more personal than discursive about the given topic.

The most successful 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 a paragraph 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. There were also some 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. 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 many 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. Some learners would do better to couple their enthusiasm with more control and checking of language accuracy. Common grammatical errors included: 'To do they work' instead of 'to do their work' and 'don't have computer at home' instead of 'don't have a computer'. These are examples of grammar which clearly is not of a level 2 standard.

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 given my views...' This is not appropriate letter-writing style and suggests a learner working below level 2. It was noticeable that more letters were addressed to the Editor as opposed to David, and that fewer learners attributed the views expressed in Letter of the Day to Mr Chandra.

Many learners wrote a large amount, but this often resulted in over-long, error-filled writing that was not of the appropriate standard to pass at this level. It is advisable for learners to write succinctly and accurately.

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 review for the website myreviews.web. Learners were, on the whole, able to engage with the topic and there were a good number of well written reviews that were fully functional. Learners often wrote with a clear sense of purpose and followed the bullets clearly.

Some learners chose to write a review of their own town or a local restaurant. The task was not specific about what the review had to be about, so these reviews were acceptable. A small number of learners were a little more confused and wrote a review of the website myreviews.web, which was not penalised, but was not really what the task was asking learners to do.

Reviews focused mainly on the examples given in the question rubric including books, films, music, computer games and apps. They were often well argued and covered at the very least the four bullet point guidelines given in the question.

What was made clear by a range of reviews is that learners were very knowledgeable about their chosen topics and also very aware of any shortcomings, such as value for money or misrepresentation. It was pleasing to read reviews which provided genuine reasons as to why the chosen topics were liked, as opposed to simple assertions, often circular, that they were liked because they were likeable or 'good'.

Learners, on the whole, wrote more for this, more successfully and the content was generally more sincere; this appeared to be a task which learners enjoyed doing.

More successfully written reviews followed the bulleted instructions clearly, although some were a little too formulaic. Less successful reviews produced a detailed description of the item reviewed (such as a mobile phone or ipad) or an in-depth plot summary of a book or film. These often were just summaries of the story and did not review the item, giving an opinion, ignoring the four bullet guidance contained on the examination paper. Learners are strongly advised to follow the instructions given, as this will enable them to have a better chance of writing a relevant, functional response at level 2.

Less developed reviews often were very vague, too short and did not really convince the reader that what they were reviewing was worth reading about.

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.

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 a review 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 March 2017

Maximum mark	30
Pass mark	18
UMS mark	6

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