

Principal Examiners' Report

November 2016

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 an letter to the editor of the Estrick Echo article giving views on the 5 pence charge on bags in shops and an e-mail to the organisers of a music festival volunteering to help at the event. 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 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.

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 comment in the Estrick Echo. Many read the whole material and clearly focused the issues involved in having a 5p charge for bags in shops. Some learners only focused on one side of the argument, but the majority considered both sides.

A large number of responses were successful with some clear, developed letters that gave strong opinions. 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 on the examination paper.

Learners often wrote in a lively, engaging style, writing in detail and detailing their arguments clearly. Many found reasons to criticise the 5p plan, others could see that there were many benefits to this. Some were written a little too forcefully and others were too informal in style. The best adopted a formal tone, whilst keeping their views forthright and polite. 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.

Sentence structure was 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 letter, followed by a variety of paragraphs, depending on the nature of their argument and what they had to say. There was also some evidence of 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.

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. Less successful responses began: 'My name is ... and I am writing this letter to give my views....' 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 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 they should be considered as volunteers for the festival. Many learners were able to present clear and appropriate reasons for being considered.

Almost all learners correctly wrote this as a formal e-mail although some were a little too informal.

More successfully written e-mails followed the bulleted instructions clearly and used the source material to develop ideas. The better responses picked one or two main areas where they could help, such as litter picking or crowd control, and then explained, in detail, why they were suitable candidates for these roles.

Less developed answers often were very vague, too short and did not really convince the reader that they were suitable to help at the music festival. Some of these comprised 'listed' answers without really persuading the reader that they were going to be helpful at the event.

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 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 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 November 2016

Maximum mark	30
Pass mark	18
UMS mark	6

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