

Principal Examiner's Report

Functional Skills
English Level 1

Writing | July 2024



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Overview

The Writing L1 exam can be taken either onscreen or paper based. The structure of the papers is identical and so the following advice applies to all learners, however they take their exam. The exam always consists of two tasks:

- The first task is longer and is allocated more marks. Learners are given three bullet points to support them in structuring their response.
- The second task is shorter, and learners are given two bullet points to support them in structuring their response.

Composition

When looking at composition, there are four content statements against which markers assess learners' responses.

- Communication of information, ideas and opinions for audience and purpose
- Format and structure for audience and purpose
- Use of sentences
- Use of vocabulary

The most important of these is communication. After the first read of a response, markers make an initial judgement as to whether the learner has the basic skills to communicate and express themselves clearly and coherently. If they don't, they will be placed into the bottom band. If they do, then the question is, do they communicate with 'reasonable' clarity (middle band) or 'effective' clarity (top band). Once a decision has been made, the other three content statements are then used to decide where in the band the learner sits.

In order to achieve a mark in the middle or top bands, learners must read the task information and instructions very carefully to ensure that their responses are relevant; a few learners write with little reference to what they have been asked to do. Each of the bullet points in the Writing Task section should be addressed and there needs to be evidence of complex as well as correctly constructed simple sentences. Syntax plays a significant part in marking decisions. A learner with a number of grammatical errors but with good syntactical ability can still be awarded marks at the top of the middle band and possibly higher, depending on the accuracy of spelling and punctuation. If syntax is good, this improves the clarity of the response. It is still coherent even with the other grammatical errors. Word counts are suggestions, no more than that, though learners who write very short or very long responses will usually be self-penalising. There is adequate time for this test. Learners should use some of this time to plan their responses.

Bottom Band Decisions

Information, ideas and opinions will be communicated with only 'some' clarity – normally down to weak grammatical skills and ability. Responses in this band tend to fall into one of two categories:

Short and/or illegible responses with only 'some' clarity'. Incorrect format is frequently used, there will be no clear structure/sequencing of ideas and very simple vocabulary. Coherent, simple sentences will also be a struggle and there will be a lack of sentence demarcation. The bullets may have been mentioned but there is little to no detail and the response is littered with spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors. Vocabulary may have some relevance but be very simple and often used incorrectly. These errors, on the whole, render the response incoherent and not fit for audience and purpose.

Appropriately lengthy and detailed responses with only 'some' clarity. These responses look correct in terms of format and structure and very often contain paragraphs. However, from start to finish they are extremely difficult to read and understand. Errors with grammar, in particular, syntax, are to such an extent that large chunks of the response become incoherent. It is clear that the learner has understood the task; the relevant detail and correct tone indicate a clear understanding of audience and purpose. However, the learner struggles to express themselves. Sentence construction suffers and vocabulary, although sometimes ambitious, is used incorrectly. They know what they want to say, they just don't have the grammatical skills and ability to say it coherently.

NB. Learners offering back a full copy of what is provided in the information, will also be placed in the bottom band for both composition and SPaG. Learners should always be encouraged to develop their responses and add some level of appropriate detail.

Middle band decisions

Information, ideas and opinions are communicated with 'reasonable' clarity. There will be lapses but responses are largely coherent and there is enough appropriate detail and development of independent ideas to answer the question without copying or being over reliant on the stimulus material. There will also be an understanding of audience and purpose – generally indicated by the tone adopted. These responses aren't ambitious but rather provide just enough detail to 'get the job done'.

Top middle band responses address all bullets and use an introduction to start their response. They also use things like personal experience to start a debate (when appropriate). There is enough coherent detail to answer the question as it was intended. The correct tone is used showing awareness of audience: enthusiastic and chatty when appropriate (some reviews, web forums), formal when appropriate (letters, emails, some reviews). Correct format will be used: introduction, middle, conclusion (opening and closing salutations and valedictions on letters and emails improve overall success but are not compulsory). Correct report format – main heading, sections with sub-headings (not compulsory but improve overall success). Bullets are often used as scaffolding to structure the main part of the response using paragraphs. It is important to note that paragraphs are not essential to achieve marks at the top of the middle band. Some responses that don't use paragraphs are still clearly organised using discourse markers such as firstly, secondly, etc. A range of simple sentences with a reasonable amount of correct punctuation (commas and full stops in the right places) are also evident and there will be some examples of complex sentences containing reasonably accurate arrangement of words, phrases and clauses. A range of vocabulary appropriate to task is used to help develop ideas with reasonable clarity.

Bottom middle band responses will have a few more basic errors and communicate with less clarity. There is less detail, and the incorrect tone/level of formality is often adopted. Elements of confusion/contradiction also start to appear, and the response doesn't flow as well. The learner often jumps from one idea to another, and structure becomes disjointed. Those not as keen on paragraphing tend to either concentrate on one or two issues at the expense of others and/or omit one or more of the bullets. Occasionally, format just becomes a list of bullets without any real discussion/explanation. Learners tend to use these lists rather than incorporating complex sentencing. Bulleted lists are entirely acceptable and really can enhance a well-structured, detailed response with separate, non-bulleted sections. However, they don't work used on their own. Sentences at the bottom end of the middle band will have less range, complexity and accuracy, word arrangement won't be as secure and there will be some awkward phrasing. There will also be some incorrect use of punctuation when building sentences

Grammatical errors may also start to affect clarity on occasions although this won't be evident all the way through. Even with these errors, the response is still largely coherent (unlike lower band responses). There is reasonable clarity and there is enough detail to partially answer the question reasonably clearly, but not fully.

What stops a response moving into the top band?

A lower level of detail, narrower range and less effective use of vocabulary/technical language appropriate to task and less complex sentences.

Top band decisions

Information, ideas and opinions are communicated clearly using detail effectively for purpose and audience to an appropriate length. Learners are able to develop points well, using technical language/vocabulary effectively. There is a good level of detail and use of descriptive language/adjectives to enhance these responses. Learners show an understanding of contentious arguments - particularly in web forum discussions - and have the control of language to do so coherently. Evidential material is used to support one or other side of an argument and personal experience is often used to form the introduction and extend/enhance the response.

Correct format and tone are adopted and there is an effective opening and closing with structured paragraphs in-between. Bullets from the question will have been used as scaffolding to form a clear structure. Where paragraphs aren't used, there will be clear sections using discourse markers. This clear structure leads to a more logical piece of writing which better fits the task and is much easier to read/follow. Sentences, both simple and complex will be consistently accurate, and written using a high degree of syntactical ability. Full stops and commas will also be used consistently accurately to build effective sentences (both simple and complex).

At the bottom end of the top band we may see a few lapses with spelling, punctuation and grammar, but it will still be a very detailed response with well-developed ideas and a good degree of complexity and accuracy.

Spelling, punctuation, and grammar

When awarding a mark for spelling, punctuation and grammar, markers make a 'best fit' judgment using the descriptors so that weakness in one area can be balanced against strengths in another.

Common Issues

- Grammar: errors in syntax control is evident in many responses. This results in a lot of words in the wrong order, missing words, incorrect verb patterns, inconsistent use of tenses and a lack of control over articles.
- Lack of full stops
- Insecurity about when to use full stops or commas
- A lot of comma splicing
- Use of possessive apostrophes is weak
- No capitals or in the wrong place in the middle of sentences
- Was/were confusion
- Them/those confusion
- Misuse of you/your/you're
- Uncapitalised first person 'I's, especially on on-screen papers.
- Mis-use/spelling of common homophones
- Confusion with they/there eg. they are some people who...
- Text language being used eg. u, bc (because)

It is important that candidates allocate some time to proof-reading their responses after they complete them. This is very important when candidates are typing their responses as this can lead to typographical errors as well as standard spelling mistakes.

Key messages for centres

Centres should encourage learners to:

- Address all the bullet points. Task 1 has three bullet points and Task 2 has two bullet points. All need to be addressed.
- Amplify the bullet points, including ideas that are relevant and expressed in their own words. Learners should be encouraged to develop their responses and add some level of appropriate detail.
- Plan how to structure a task. For instance, a three-bullet point task can typically be addressed in five paragraphs: an introductory paragraph followed by a paragraph for each bullet point and then a concluding paragraph. Deciding on this structure in advance and sticking to it ensures that all bullet points are covered, and material is structured logically and coherently.
- Proofread. Whilst candidates do not always recognise their own SPaG errors, some common slips can be spotted and corrected, such as:
 - the misuse of lower case i for the first person
 - a complete lack of full stops
 - a missing bullet – it is entirely acceptable for them to insert an asterisk at the point where they have spotted the omission and write the additional information at the end.

- Have a sufficiently sound grasp of grammar to allow them to communicate clearly. Some learners would benefit from additional grammar teaching.

Final Thought

There seems to be a strong disconnect between learners and the exam criteria. Teaching exam technique can be the difference between good results and not so good. Running sessions around what examiners are looking for could really benefit a lot of learners who end up with lower middle band marks. Using bullets to form paragraphs and adding correctly placed capital letters, full stops and commas can be the difference between a pass and a fail.