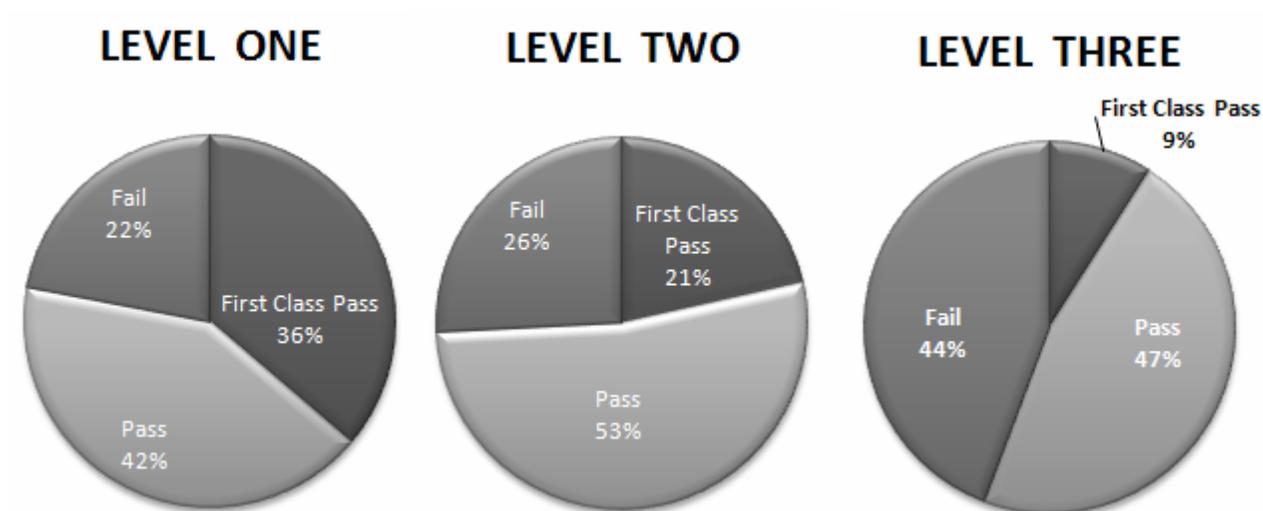


8959 English for Business Communications

General Observations

It was disappointing to see a slight drop in the percentages of candidates achieving a Pass and First Class Pass this year at Levels 1 and 3 but pleasing to see an increasing Pass rate at Level 2. The majority of candidates seem to understand the format of the examination and produce relevant answers, especially at Levels 1 and 2, but there is still a high number of candidates who do not pass at Level 3, where more complex correspondence is required. Centres should bear in mind that a high level of understanding of the requirements of business communication, and an excellent command of the English language, is expected at this level.



Areas of good performance

At all three levels, the letters and memoranda achieve high marks and the layout of these is handled with confidence by most candidates, although many omit a reference and/or heading and a considerable number omit either/both the name of the company sending and/or receiving the letter. Checking that the salutations and complementary closes are consistent would also often improve layout even further. At Level 1, the majority of candidates use the WP template provided for Task 4 in a competent manner and high marks are often achieved on this task.

Spelling tends to be good across all three levels. Most candidates include the majority of the information requested, although not always in a logical order.

Most candidates complete the whole paper, although in many cases the final two tasks at Levels 2 and 3 appear to have been rushed. Greater attention to word limits and time management could improve the grades of a considerable number of candidates.

At Level 3, the Minutes task has shown considerable improvement this year, with most candidates demonstrating an understanding of the purpose of Minutes, although some continue to reproduce the notes in the prompt, instead of writing these out in grammatical English, using full sentences. It must be remembered that a high degree of grammatical accuracy is expected at Level 3.

Areas for development

Many candidates lose marks simply because they fail to read the prompts carefully enough. These examinations test reading (as well as writing) skills but the vast majority of candidates who fail, do so because they have not followed the instructions they have been given. It is permitted to use a dictionary at all levels and candidates should check any vocabulary they don't know and make sure they are very clear about what is required before they start to write anything. It is also essential that candidates understand their 'role' within the company and bear this in mind throughout the examination. Frequently, for example, memoranda are sent by the wrong person – if a candidate is asked to send a memo in his/her own name, then this is what they should do. This will often make it impossible to simply copy out the information in the prompt without changing it, yet many weak candidates do this, resulting in an incomprehensible piece of correspondence. It should be noted that, at all levels, the information given in the prompts will need to be modified in an appropriate manner (in accordance with the instructions given) and cannot simply be copied out. At Level 1 there are still some candidates who 'fill in the gaps' on the WP template without checking that they are completing sentences grammatically. Some candidates also fail to consider which pieces of information should go in which gap or include unnecessary information. Some candidates fail to use the form provided and use a plain sheet of paper instead. Many answers at all levels are still too long and contain unnecessary and/or irrelevant information, generally because the prompts have not been read carefully enough. There are word limits for some tasks at Levels 2 and 3, which should be adhered to. Candidates should try to be as concise as possible when writing business communications. Many letters and memoranda are far too long and the result tends to be insufficient time to devote to later tasks on the papers, with a significant number of candidates at Levels 2 and 3 submitting weak answers for the final task/s.

At Levels 2 and 3, it is expected that consideration be given to tone, especially in a Press Release, Article or Speech. Candidates must show an awareness of the intended audience and tailor the information they are using accordingly, eg it would not be sensible to give out long, complicated contact details in a speech, whereas contact details may well be highly desirable in a Press Release, although giving the Managing Director as the first point of contact would not be appropriate. The prompts for the Press Release/Article/Speech contain a lot of unnecessary/irrelevant information and so candidates need to learn to skim read, select the information signposted in the instructions, and include only that, in a logical order, in the correct tone for the intended audience. Frequently inappropriate or unnecessary information is given and relevant information left out. It should be noted that at Level 3, it is sometimes necessary to glean information from previous tasks. Invitations frequently omit a venue, time or date although these are readily available in other parts of the paper. Candidates should also be aware of the conventions for writing Formal Invitations and Minutes. Candidates are permitted to use calendars in the examination and should ensure that they give correct dates, eg 'next Thursday' is not acceptable as a date.

The weakest task at Levels 2 and 3 is the Report. In both cases, an Informal Report is requested, yet some candidates still insist on inserting numerous unnecessary headings (eg Terms of Reference, Procedures etc). Reports should be concise and very careful attention should be paid to the explicit instructions given regarding the information to be included. Candidates must ensure they are able to read and extract information from graphs/numerical data and present this in clear English. At Level 3, an Analytical Report is expected, and this may well require certain calculations before the information required can be obtained from the prompts. This is why candidates are allowed the use of a calculator, and they should take full advantage of this. Marks are **not** awarded for repeating the information given in the prompts. Analytical skills are being tested in this task at Level 3 and candidates are therefore expected to demonstrate their analytical and language skills by commenting on the figures, as requested by the prompts. It is especially important in this task, although obviously also important throughout all tasks and levels, to state the unit of the figures given, eg pounds sterling, US dollars, tonnes, etc..

Candidates should ensure they allow sufficient time to read through each task after completing it and

correct any punctuation/spelling errors they have made. The use of shorter sentences, written in modern (rather than archaic) business language, would help improve many candidates' papers, as would more careful copying of the vocabulary given in the prompts eg common business words such as 'brochure' are frequently written incorrectly.

Recommendations

Candidates should use the reading time at the beginning to full advantage and ensure they understand the scenario and are fully aware of their 'role' in the company. They should also take time to read each task before starting to write. It is important to understand who is sending each piece of communication, to whom it is being sent, and why, and then to write what is required, bearing in mind any word restrictions and adopting an appropriate tone. These examinations test comprehension, as well as writing, and it is imperative that candidates understand the purpose and intended audience of each piece of communication. Candidates should make a note of all relevant points to be included and put them into a sensible order before attempting a task and not be tempted to include additional, unnecessary information.

When candidates are practising for these examinations it would be helpful to use similar 'Situations'. It may also be beneficial to teach some typical business phrases e.g. 'In response to your letter of.....', 'We await your early reply...' etc and discuss when phrases are appropriate and how to decide on the tone of a piece of communication before starting to write. Short, simple, concise sentences are ideal for business correspondence and avoid candidates making unnecessary grammatical errors. It would also be helpful to candidates if, when practising, they were given a maximum number of words to use. This might help them concentrate on being precise and including only necessary, relevant information in a logical order. It would also be helpful to ensure candidates can use calendars, calculators and dictionaries.

Time management is an important element of these examinations and so candidates should ensure they allow sufficient time for each task. Learning to write concisely is also useful in this respect. Unless a candidate has very large writing, each task should fit on one side of A4 and candidates should aim to achieve this.

Obviously, all candidates should allow sufficient time to read over each task to ensure it makes sense, is grammatically correct and to correct any spelling and/or punctuation errors.

Tips

Take the following into the examination room with you:

- Calendar
 - Dictionary
 - Calculator
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- Read the whole paper very carefully before you start to write anything.
 - Make yourself a 'name plate' before starting to write, to remind yourself of your position within the company, the name of the company, what the company does, and who your 'boss' is. Keep this in front of you throughout the examination and keep referring to it.
 - Read each question very carefully, and then write your answer as concisely as possible.
 - Use your dictionary to check any vocabulary of which you are unsure.

- Keep to word limits.
- Write full sentences and check tenses are consistent.
- Try to use phrases you know are up-to-date and appropriate in modern business correspondence and also appropriate to the tone of the task.
- Be courteous but don't pay unnecessary compliments or be too familiar.
- Check spellings and punctuation. Use a dictionary and check difficult words in the paper have been copied correctly. Remember 'faithfully' and 'sincerely' do not have initial capitalisation in the complementary close.
- Start each task on a new sheet of paper and leave a clear left- and right-hand margin.
- Check that you have included a date and reference where required. Also check that you have stated a recipient's name in the first line of their address, if this is required/given.
- It is not necessary to leave more than two or three lines between the complementary close and the designation – try to keep to one sheet of paper for each task.
- It is not necessary to draw the company's logo, or decorate correspondence in any way.
- Write clearly, so that your answer can be understood by the person marking it. If possible, use a word processor and take full advantage of the grammar and spell check facilities.
- Improve your knowledge of the business world and the types of communication used.
- Make sure you understand different types of business correspondence (eg orders, quotations, delivery notes, graphs and charts) and cannot only read the information they contain but also, at Level 3, analyse and comment on it. Practise doing this before the exam.
- Check all numbers and monetary values, eg do not confuse £ with \$. Also check the axes labels on graphs, eg if values given in thousands, make sure you take this into account.
- Do the tasks in order and make sure you allow sufficient time to finish the paper.
- Read over all work at the end of the examination and check that it makes sense.
- Put the tasks in order at the end of the exam and make sure the examiner can access them, eg do not staple at both left and right hand corners making them impossible to read.
- Practise doing sample papers within the time limits set.

Additional comments

The candidates who obtain the highest marks are often those who write the least but include all the necessary information in a concise and business like manner.

Sample papers are available on the City & Guilds website and should be used for practice before the examinations. The Qualifications' Handbook also includes sample 'answers' which provide guidance on what is expected for each task.