Everything you need to know about functional skills
There have been changes to the way English and maths for adult learners are being assessed in England. A new framework, functional skills, is leading to changes in teaching and learning programmes. In an increasing number of union learning centres, functional skills are replacing, or are used alongside, the Skills for Life Adult Literacy and Numeracy qualifications.

This guide aims to help ULRs understand these changes, and answer the questions that learners and employers will have. Working through this guide will help you to work out which courses and qualifications in English and maths are appropriate for individual learners. It will also give you the information you need to negotiate and agree functional skills courses with colleges and other providers.

This guide focuses on functional English and functional maths, with a brief overview of functional ICT. Note that all three of these subject areas are included in Apprenticeships.

There are ‘Need to know’ sections with key information for ULRs, employers and learners. ‘Find out more’ sections point you in the direction of further, more detailed information about functional skills.

To check for changes to functional skills, please go to the functional skills pages on the unionlearn website at: www.unionlearn.org.uk/our-work-and-projects/maths-english-ict/functional-skills
Contents

What are functional skills?  2
  • Functional skills and adult learners  3
  • Why functional skills may be the right option for learners  3
  • Stepping stones  3

In what ways are functional skills different to key skills or Skills for Life?  5
  • What are the end assessments like?  7
  • What’s the difference?  8
  • Points to note  9
  • So what difference does all this make to learning?
    • Initial and diagnostic assessment  11
    • Type of teaching  12
    • Resources  13
    • Qualification options (summative assessment)  13
  • Access to sample functional skills assessment questions  14
  • Progression  15
  • How can you help?  15

Funding  18
  • Funding for functional skills  18
  • Funding for the bite-sized English and maths qualifications  19

Union case studies  20
  • Fire Brigades Union  20
  • Denby Pottery  21

Useful links  22
  • General information  22
  • Awarding organisations  22
  • Resources for teachers and learners  23
What are functional skills?

“Functional skills are the fundamental, applied skills in English, mathematics, and information and communication technology (ICT) which help people to gain the most from life, learning and work.”


In other words, they are the skills that were previously called Skills for Life. The functional skills programmes are based on the same standards and curriculum documents that have been used for Skills for Life awards. This is important – it means that learners are using and improving the same skills that have been taught before. So what adults are learning has not changed; it is rather how they apply what they have learned, and how they are tested on this.

Functional skills are the skills we all need in our lives and at work. Unions have been active for over 20 years in helping members and others to improve these skills, and will continue to do this. Adult learners are well-placed to engage with functional skills as applying problem solving in everyday contexts is at the heart of the qualifications. This is exactly what adults have learned to do in their daily lives.

Functional skills develop skills in maths, English and ICT, but also focus on teaching learners how to apply these skills in everyday contexts and situations. For example, there is more emphasis on problem-solving in functional maths problem-solving, and supporting learners in applying and transferring those skills in everyday situations.
Functional skills in English

Functional skills qualifications in English assess three components:
- speaking, listening and communication
- reading
- writing.

Functional skills in mathematics

Functional skills qualifications in mathematics assess three interrelated process skills:
- representing – selecting the mathematics and information to model a situation
- analysing – processing and using mathematics
- interpreting – interpreting and communicating the results of the analysis.

Remember the skills that are covered in functional skills are the same as for the skills for life qualification. This ‘process’ approach gives learners the chance to apply those skills, both in their learning and in the end test.

Functional skills in ICT

Functional skills qualifications in information and communication technology (ICT) assess three interrelated skill areas:
- using ICT systems
- finding and selecting information
- developing, presenting and communicating information.

Fact: functional skills are one of the achievement measures for the 2020 World Class Skills English and maths targets (successor to the 2010 Skills for Life targets). See Ambition 2020: World class skills and jobs for the UK, UKCES, 2009

www.ukces.org.uk/publications/ambition2020

Find out more

To look in detail at the subject criteria for functional skills, go to the Ofqual site: www2.ofqual.gov.uk/downloads/category/68-functional-skills-subject-criteria
Functional skills and adult learners

Functional skills are free-standing English and maths qualifications for adult learners, putting them on a par with GCSE. They are used in schools and colleges as a fixed part of the 14–19 Diploma courses and as a component of the Foundation Learning suite of qualifications.

Importantly they are also a mandatory part of the Apprenticeship frameworks. This means that all apprentices, including adult apprentices, have to achieve functional skills qualifications.

Functional skills may well be a better option than GCSE as a free-standing qualification for adult learners. The applied skills approach better matches those used and needed in the workplace and society in general.

Further options are available to learners in the section on Stepping Stones.

Why functional skills may be the right option for learners

A functional skills qualification may be a good choice for learners because:

• It covers more of the key English skills, with a greater focus on writing, and a better approach to speaking and listening. This is a broader coverage of skills than the national tests. Speaking, listening and communication skills are highly valued in the workplace and in society and the community. Good writing skills are valued by employers and are also necessary for further study.

• It enhances the learner’s ability to apply maths skills to real-life problems. This is very useful and could make them more efficient at work and more likely to benefit from promotion.

• It gives an opportunity to learn and apply English and maths skills in real-life situations and everyday life and work practice.

For example, using maths and English skills to write a leaflet for colleagues about holiday entitlement, or work out the planning for a Learning Day.

• The test is different, the way in which programmes focus more on using (Applying) the skills than just preparing people for tests. This difference is important as it makes the learner’s skills development more useful at work, in the community or at home.

Need to know – ULRs

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeship awards must include functional skills in English and maths unless the apprentices have a good GCSE in both GCSE English and maths. So if your workplace has an Apprenticeship programme, you need to make sure that functional skills are included, and are being properly assessed and taught, by the employer and providers. You will have a key role as a ULR in supporting learners and ensuring high quality of provision and learners get the support and encouragement they need. Many unions are already working to ensure high quality functional skills programmes are delivered by employers as part of their Apprenticeship schemes.

Stepping stones

Several awarding organisations have developed ‘stepping stone’, ‘bite-sized’ or ‘progression’ qualifications, where learners focus on smaller parts of the component skills involved in functional skills, such as

• Reading – using reading skills
• Writing – writing and spelling
• Number – calculations with whole numbers
• Measures – time and date formats
These qualifications are usually linked to the English and maths skills defined in the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Core Curriculum, and are available for learners aged 19 or above.

The advantage of these awards is that they provide adult learners with the opportunity to brush up in specific aspects of their skills and gain credit for doing so. They are good for learners with spiky profiles. Although stepping stones do not count towards a functional skills qualification, they may be used:

- to encourage learners low on confidence to achieve and then move on to functional skills courses
- to provide additional support for learners on functional skills programmes in specific areas where they may need this
- to tackle specific gaps in English or maths that may be identified by learners, or more widely among employees in the workplace
- as an interim solution, where there is difficulty in getting employer agreement to full functional skills programmes, but where success in stepping stones qualifications may make the case for functional skills.

The following organisations have already announced new bite-sized qualifications in English and maths. Other awarding organisations may well release plans later. See the Useful Contacts list on page 24 for details.

City & Guilds English and Maths Skills (3847)

OCR Cambridge Progression
www.ocr.org.uk/qualifications/by-type/cambridge-progression

Ascentis English and Maths Awards
www.ascentis.co.uk/provision.asp?qualcats_id=45

NOCN English and Maths Skills
www.nocn.org.uk/Homepage

Need to know – learners

Three important facts

- Anyone who already has a national literacy or numeracy qualification can be confident that the qualifications they have gained will remain valid. You can reassure colleagues that the national tests were not a waste of time and effort, but instead are a valuable preparation and useful basis for further skills’ development.

- Functional skills qualifications are a good progression route for national literacy and numeracy qualifications. So they are a good recommendation for someone who is ambitious and wanting to gain, for example, an Apprenticeship, or further qualifications.

- The ‘bite-sized’, first step qualifications are a good recommendation for anyone wanting to focus on a particular aspect of English or maths. For instance if someone with the national literacy qualification wants to work on functional English, they might be recommended to look first at one of the bite-sized qualifications in writing, or speaking and listening.

As ULRs, perhaps working with partner providers, you will be advising members that there are different options that will suit them best. Often this will be functional skills. But keep the other options in mind – they will be best for particular learners.
Need to know – employers

Functional skills facts

• Good English and maths skills are fundamental to effective performance in the workplace. In response to the demand for better English and maths, a new programme of functional skills training has been introduced by government, employer and awarding bodies, and training organisations. You can reassure employers that the need for better English and maths is greater than ever—and that functional skills are a very good option for all workers.

• Many employers do not realise how problems with English and maths are holding back their businesses. Some people hide their difficulties. But poor English and maths skills can lead to poor communication within the company and with customers, a high rate of wastage, or resistance to change. You can reinforce your role as the mediator between workers and management, stressing the need to approach colleagues carefully.

• Many workers are keen to do something to improve their skills. Working together, management and unions can help them achieve their goals, and at the same time improve workplace performance. In practice, most workers understand the need for improved skills, welcome support and are keen to be accredited for their effort.

• New functional skills programmes provide the basic skills employees need and gives them opportunities to practise the practical application of those skills. Functional skills are very well suited to the needs of the workplace, with their emphasis on the ability to apply knowledge and understanding to practical situations.

• The focus of functional skills is on practical problem-solving – learning is tailored to each sector of industry, and can be further customised to your organisation. Work on problem-solving in functional skills training sessions will repay itself in increased confidence and accuracy at work.

• Providing time off for learning will bring business benefits very quickly as employees will be able to apply their improved skills doing the jobs they need to do at work. Time spent on this type of training will repay itself very quickly and should bring obvious business benefits (less wastage, better communication, better awareness of the need for accuracy).

• Some employers are finding that the new ‘bite-size’ English and maths qualifications are a useful first step for workers. These qualifications may help unions push open the door to full functional skills programmes, by demonstrating the benefits of employees gaining these skills.
In what ways are functional skills different to key skills or Skills for Life?

Key skills, Skills for Life and functional skills all cover the same skills: English and maths. The most important thing they have in common is that they all use the Adult Core Curriculum for Literacy and Numeracy as the building blocks for planning and defining the content of what is taught (see www.excellencegateway.org.uk/sflcurriculum). The core curriculum describes in detail the skills people need at each level.

However, functional skills place much more emphasis on how learners actually use skills to solve problems. English and maths skills are described as ‘process skills’ – in other words the underpinning skills (such as spelling or adding up) that you use to solve everyday or workplace problems. Learners are required to apply their knowledge, skills and understanding (of English and maths) to solve problems.

Look at the examples on pages 8 and 9 of typical questions. The first is a typical Entry 3 question from the national numeracy test and the second one is part of a functional maths test at Entry 3. Both of these sample questions have similar contexts – money calculations based on a trip.

What are the end assessments like?

In place of the multiple choice questions that were the basis of the adult literacy and numeracy tests, functional skills assessments must:

- provide realistic contexts, scenarios and problems
- specify tasks that are relevant to the context
- require application of knowledge, skills and understanding for a purpose
- require problem-solving
- assess process skills* and the outcome of their application in different contexts
- consist entirely or predominantly of open response questions.

*Process skills can be defined as the underpinning English and maths skills, for example spelling accurately or calculating percentages.

Need to know – ULRs, employers and learners

Functional skills and Skills for Life

- The skills needed for functional skills are the same as those needed for key skills and Skills for Life, at the same levels.
- The national tests in literacy and numeracy are and have been an excellent preparation for functional skills.
- Functional skills require learners to use their knowledge and understanding to solve practical problems.
- Functional skills develop those practical skills needed in the workplace because they are about developing and applying the skills.
The national numeracy test has the following features:

- The question is set in a strong, adult context. In practice, there would be at least two or three questions using this same context. The test would also have questions using a range of contexts (e.g. going out for a meal, working out a ‘best buy’, holiday weather). Some of these contexts might be more work-based.
- The question requires the learner to understand that in order to do the calculation, you have to add up the numbers for the train fare and popcorn and then subtract from the 'total' figure.
- You have to pick one of the four options as the correct answer. You don’t have to show how you arrived at the answer.
- There would be 40 multiple-choice questions in total in the test, with one hour to complete the test and a pass mark which would vary from year-to-year but was often between 60–75 per cent.

### National numeracy test – Entry 3

These questions are about a trip to the cinema.

The train fare is £3.50

The popcorn plus drink is £6.95

The total cost is £21.80

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Train fare</th>
<th>£3.50</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Popcorn + drink</td>
<td>£6.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ticket +3D upgrade</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total price</strong></td>
<td><strong>£21.80</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is the cost of the ticket plus 3D upgrade?

a) £14.85  b) £11.35  c) £33.25  d) £21.80

*This would be one question from 30–40 multiple-choice questions, covering all elements of the curriculum. The intended pass mark is around 50 per cent though this is likely to vary.*
The functional maths question has the following features:

- Again, the context is strong and adult. In the functional skill assessment there would be several questions using the same context (maybe all of the questions), but using a wide range of the skills and problem-solving assessed.
- You are required to show your working out and be able to show evidence of how you have tackled the problem – this is not the case for the numeracy test – and you can be given marks for this (even if you get the answer wrong).
- The skills needed for the assessment are the same as those for the adult numeracy test, but there is more of a focus on solving a maths problem.
- The time allowed for each separate component (maths; English reading; English writing; English speaking and listening) varies from 30–90 minutes (depending on level and component). The number of questions also varies, but each question is problem-based. The mark scheme is shown on the exam papers (i.e. how many marks allotted to each answer). Learners will be told by teachers that the number of marks gives a good indication of the level of difficulty or complexity of the question. Pass marks vary from year to year, but may be around 50 per cent.

### Functional maths – Entry 3

The George family, mum, dad and 11-year-old Emmy, are planning to visit a well-known theme park. They can buy tickets when they get there or online.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Price of tickets at the theme park</th>
<th>Online prices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult ticket</td>
<td>£43.00</td>
<td>£31.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child ticket (under 12)</td>
<td>£33.00</td>
<td>£24.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family ticket (2 adults, 2 children)</td>
<td>£135.00</td>
<td>£95.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family tickets (2 adults, 3 children)</td>
<td>£155.00</td>
<td>£115.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mum looks up the costs on the website and says, “I am going to buy the tickets online. I’ll save over £20.”

**Is she correct? Show the working out that helped you to decide this.** [4 marks]

Emmy says, “It won’t cost much more for a family ticket if we take my friends Beth and Alana along as well.”

**How much more will it cost?** [2 marks]

*This would be two questions out of about 20 questions covering the range of maths process skills, including time (bus trip), money (burger lunch), interpreting data (weather). Learners are required to show their working out. The intended pass mark is around 50 per cent though this is likely to vary.*
What’s the difference?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Functional skills</th>
<th>Skills for Life (literacy and numeracy)</th>
<th>Key Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Skills covered** | **English**: reading; writing; speaking, listening and communication  
**Maths**: representing, analysing and interpreting data  
**Literacy**: reading; writing; speaking and listening  
**Numeracy**: number; measures, shape and space; handling data | **Literacy**: reading; writing; speaking and listening  
**Numeracy**: number; measures, shape and space; handling data  
**Communication skills**: discuss (and give a short talk at L2); read and obtain information (read and summarise information at L2); write documents  
**Application of number**: interpret information; carry out calculations; interpret results and present your findings | **Key Skills**: comprises two assessment components:  
- a generic multiple choice test which can be taken online and on demand with quick turnaround of results  
- a portfolio of evidence which the learner develops in the context of the sector throughout their time on the programme  
(DfE, April 2012) |
| **Levels**     | Entry 1  
Entry 2  
Entry 3  
Level 1  
Level 2 | Entry 1  
Entry 2  
Entry 3  
Level 1  
Level 2 | Level 1  
Level 2  
(also available Levels 3 and 4) |
| **Assessment** | Functional skills assessments are open-response, task-based assessments which require problem-solving and transferable skills. Functional skills do not include a portfolio element. Most assessment for Levels 1 and 2 is externally set* and externally marked**, though Speaking, listening and communication is internally assessed*** (by the centre). Entry levels are externally set but internally assessed. | National literacy tests are one-hour multiple-choice tests and could be taken several times a year, often on demand. Entry level tests will still be available for registration up to 31 August 2013.  
**Numeracy**: all skills are tested (Number; Measures; Shape and space; Handling data).  
**Literacy**: reading and some aspects of writing are tested, but not writing composition (creating text) or speaking and listening | * Externally set means that the questions are set by the awarding organisation (such as City & Guilds, OCR or Edexcel).  
** Externally assessed means that the learner’s answer papers are sent off to be marked by an examiner employed by the awarding organisation.  
*** Internally assessed means that the learner’s work is assessed within the centre (e.g. by the teacher) and that the centre’s own quality systems ensure this is done fairly. |
Points to note

Skills covered

When you look at the detail of these standards and curriculum, it is clear that the Skills for Life curriculum defines a set of skills, whereas both key skills and functional skills are about how you apply these skills in practical situations.

Levels

Both functional skills and Skills for Life cover a full range of levels from Entry 1 to Level 2, recognising that adult learners may have ‘spiky profiles’ with skills at several levels. Key Skills, on the other hand, only covered Levels 1 and 2 (or higher levels).

Assessment

This is where the big differences occur.

- **Key Skills** were assessed by a **test** plus a **portfolio** of evidence developed by the learner and reflecting their vocational experience. The portfolio ensured that all skill areas were covered. The test ensured that the learner was able to work independently.

- **Skills for Life** (literacy and numeracy) are assessed by **tests**. These cover all maths but not all English skills. Nevertheless they are a valuable element of a learner’s progression.

- **Functional skills** are mostly assessed by **tests** that are externally set and externally marked (like GCSE exams). This applies to English (reading and writing) at Levels 1 and 2, and all aspects of maths at Levels 1 and 2. However entry level qualifications are internally assessed (i.e. by the centre/provider).

Length

Unions are also finding that learning programmes for functional skills appear to take longer than Skills for Life learning. This may be as a result of a number of factors:

- Learners on functional skills programmes may need to work on aspects of their basic English and maths skills before tackling the more complex problems that need to be solved in functional skills. This will require a deep understanding of the skills involved in English and maths.

- Learners will need to focus on applying their skills to solve problems; for some this may be a new way of tackling learning.

- There may be more time needed for learners to prepare for assessments, for example understanding how questions/problems are framed and what the expectations are when answering the questions.
Need to know – employers

Functional skills assessment

- Functional skills learning and assessment requires learners to apply English and maths skills to solve problems. This means that the learner has to have secure and confident English and maths skills at or above the functional skills level. So a learner with Level 1 English or maths skills might need to tackle an Entry 3 functional skills assessment.

- Functional skills assessment is usually conducted by an exam-type assessment that covers more aspects of English and maths. Speaking, listening and communication are assessed at the learner’s centre; others aspects of English and maths are assessed by an exam that is marked by the awarding organisation. Note that entry level assessment is conducted by the centre, and carefully checked by the awarding organisation.

- In a functional skills assessment, the questions are ‘open response’. This means that learners are not given a selection of possible correct answers, but must supply their own answer.

- The problems set in the assessments are based in work or real life. However they are not specific to the learner’s work, so learners of all ages will need to be able to apply their skills in what may be slightly unfamiliar settings.

- Functional skills accreditation can be done in separate components, for example English: Reading; English: Writing. This means that learners can tackle components at different levels and at different times.

CBI

Susan Anderson, the CBI director for education and skills, says: “Many students have only been entered for the test, rather than specifically taught these [functional] skills. Teachers need the support and time needed to teach these new modules — assessment only isn’t good enough.”

The Times, April 2010
So what difference does all this make to learning?

Unions have been working with their centres and partner college providers to adapt current English and maths courses to the new awards. ULRs can support this, by increased understanding of the demands of functional skills. Unionlearn is helping by producing new resources for English and maths, some information material for ULRs and funding support for unions on how to get functional skills working.

Summarised here are some of the headline issues affecting the various stages of the learning journey.

**Initial and diagnostic assessment**

The move to functional skills places an even greater emphasis on initial and diagnostic assessment. Teachers will assess the learner’s English and maths and in addition, will assess the learner’s functionality or how well can the learner apply their skills, knowledge and understanding to problem-solving.

Two decisions need to be made at this stage:

1. **Does the learner have a spiky profile?** With many adult learners there are likely to be one or more gaps in skills, where the learner has not experienced a particular aspect of a skill (e.g. grammar) or feels insecure in their knowledge (e.g. fractions). Understanding the spiky profile will lead to a learning plan or completed Climbing Frame that should address these skill areas, and may include recommendations about ‘stepping stone’ qualifications. See the information about stepping stones in the previous section **What are functional skills?** on page 4.

2. **What level of functional skills should the learner aim for?** Generally experience seems to suggest that learners may need to look at starting at a lower level of functional skills than their overall English or maths level, to take account of the need for confidence in their skills when tackling problems. So someone with broadly Level 1 English skills might be advised to tackle Entry 3 English functional skills.

**Are functional skills harder?**

Some centres have found that they are starting learners at a level of functional skills that is lower than they would have done for Skills for Life. This has led some tutors to suggest that functional skills are ‘harder’. But, if they are based on the same standards as the Skills for Life qualifications, how can this be?

One expert has suggested that the reasons may be to do with how much learning and preparation are required. The application of a skill in an unfamiliar context or setting is generally acknowledged as demanding on learners Some assessment experts suggest that the increase in demand can be as great as one level. For those who have only ever taken a Skills for Life Test at Level 1 and never moved on to apply these in the Key Skills portfolio a functional skill at the same level will be more demanding.
Everything you need to know about functional skills

Need to know – ULRs

Stepping stone qualifications
- ‘Stepping stone’ or ‘bite-sized qualifications may be a good first step for learners whose initial assessment indicates that there are some aspects of their skills that need work. Find out if your provider is recommending these.
- These qualifications are funded (see the Funding section on page 20), so there is no barrier to offering them.
- Many awarding organisations are developing these qualifications. See the list in the Useful links section on page 24.
- Employers can be reassured that these qualifications are an excellent first step for learners, tackle critical gaps in learners’ knowledge and understanding and should ensure that learners are successful in their functional skills assessment.
- Some union negotiators have used stepping stones qualifications as an interim solution, where there are issues with agreeing the length of time on programme that functional skills needs.

Type of teaching
Broadly teachers who are trained and experienced in teaching English and maths will have all the skills needed to work on functional skills. So the people from colleges or other providers that you have been working with on Skills for Life will be able to support your learners with functional skills. However the approach to teaching, and perhaps the resources used, will need to change a little to reflect the increased emphasis on the practical application of these skills.

Functional skills rely on these three stages of learning:

- **Build – practice – apply**
  - Learners build specific aspects of their skills
  - Learners practise by selecting and applying skills in a range of contexts
  - Learners apply skills in order to solve problems.

The learner will now be able to demonstrate competence with confidence, transferring their skills to real-life situations. What is termed as ‘mastery’ is achieved when an employee can select, combine and apply their skills to tackle problems in unfamiliar contexts.

The teacher will need to set up learning situations where learners, or groups of learners, can solve problems using their skills.
- Learners will look at a range of real-life ‘problems’, such as organising an event and work out what they need to do, what they need to find out, how to go about the task.
- Everything they discuss and decide is written down, stating the reasons for their choices.
- This type of activity lends itself very well to collaborative work: groups of learners, possibly with mixed levels of skill, working to solve the problem as a team. Lots of good opportunities to practise speaking and listening skills!
- The problems chosen should be real-life and can be based on learners’ experience or interests. However it’s a good idea to practise
and apply skills in more unfamiliar contexts as well, in preparation for the assessment.

- Alongside this work, the teacher will give learners the opportunity to develop and practice new skills, or areas where they are not so confident. This is not really any different to how learning will have happened before.

**Resources**

Most centres will want to review the resources they use to ensure they are appropriate for functional skills. Resources aimed at developing the process skills should continue to be useful. Materials for embedded learning will also be useful.

Some centres are putting time into developing and using blended learning approaches. These can help to make the most of limited guided learning hours (GLH) — see the [Funding](#) section on page 20 for more information. So it can be a good option to consider using blended learning to bolster the 45 GLH funding limit, for example:

- online interactive learning and practice resources
- social media (e.g. Facebook) to encourage collaborative working
- using YouTube for videos of particular teaching points or for collaborative learning
- using Skype or other video conferencing facilities for group discussions
- paper-based assignments
- video and email contacts with teachers.

**Qualification options (summative assessment)**

Contact your awarding organisation for information about how assessment takes place. Links to a selection of awarding organisations are in the [Useful links](#) section on page 24.

Many offer assessments on set dates throughout the year, as paper-based exams. Some offer paper-based tests on-demand. Many also offer online assessment for those components that can be assessed in this way (i.e. all maths; reading and writing. Speaking, listening and communication are always assessed at the provider’s centre, using strict marking criteria).

Online assessment may also be ‘on-demand’. This means learners can take the assessment at any time to suit them. Some awarding organisations offer modular accreditation for English (though not maths). Check the functional skills page of unionlearn (see [www.unionlearn.org.uk/our-work-and-projects/maths-english-ict/functional-skills](http://www.unionlearn.org.uk)) for up-to-date advice.

Assessment, whether paper-based or online occurs under strict exam conditions.

**Need to know – ULRs**

**How functional skills assessments are marked**

- Entry level qualifications are internally marked (i.e. by the centre’s teachers) and externally verified (i.e. someone from the awarding organisation will check that the assessments have been conducted fairly and accurately).
- Levels 1 and 2 assessments are externally marked (i.e. marked by an examiner, not connected with the centre).
- Speaking, listening and communication at all levels are internally marked and externally verified.
**Looking at sample functional skills assessment questions**

It’s a good idea to take a look at some typical questions from functional skills assessment for English, maths and ICT. Most awarding organisations (see links to awarding organisations in the Useful links section on page 24) publish these questions on their functional skills menu pages. There may also be on-screen practice tests.

Note that teachers will use these questions for teaching, so that learners can experience what a functional skills assessment question looks like, as well as practising answering the questions.

**Tip:** if you decide to share sample questions with colleagues, choose carefully. It’s better to pick something at a lower level that is fairly straightforward, than to frighten people off with a level that’s too high!

**Need to know – learners**

**Key messages to make to learners about functional skills learning**

- Initial assessments find out your individual strengths and learning needs, as they have always done. They help to make sure that any learning is at the right level, and tackles the right skill areas.
- You may be recommended to consider working on some of the ‘bite-sized’ qualifications which help to prepare you for a full functional skills qualification.
- Centres and teachers will focus on helping you to develop the skills you will need in real life contexts and to tackle problem-solving. In practice, many of your workplace or home English and maths needs will be used to help you understand and improve your skills.
- Final assessments can be either on paper or using a computer. They will be about showing how you can apply your skills (and problem-solve in realistic situations).
- Results of final assessments are not always immediate but you will know when to expect results.
Progression

Recommendations about progression from functional skills will depend on the individual learner’s ambitions and other circumstances, but could include:

• a full functional skills qualification for those who have tackled ‘bite-sized’ qualifications
• a functional skills qualification at a higher level
• a GCSE in English or maths
• an Apprenticeship or other vocational qualification
• an A-level course
• an Access to HE course (for university entrance)
• or of course, other unionlearn qualifications and courses.

Some unions are reporting that the greater time needed for functional skills courses are leading them to look again at learning agreements, and whether they need to be revised to take account of this longer time requirement.

How can you help?

Make sure **initial assessment** is giving a clear view of learners’ skills across the range. Ideally there should be reports on the following component skills:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Maths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Reading and understanding words and text</td>
<td>• Number – add, subtract, multiply and divide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Using reading skills to find out about a subject</td>
<td>• Number – fractions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Writing – using correct grammar</td>
<td>• Number – decimals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Writing – using correct spelling;</td>
<td>• Number – percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Writing – using correct punctuation;</td>
<td>• Number – ratio and proportion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Writing continuous text for a purpose</td>
<td>• Number – using formulae</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Speaking and listening – to provide information</td>
<td>• Measures – money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Speaking and listening – to obtain information</td>
<td>• Measures – time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Speaking and listening in a conversation or discussion</td>
<td>• Measures – length, weight, capacity and temperature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Handling data – extract and sort data</td>
<td>• Shape and space – shapes and positional vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Handling data – collect and represent data</td>
<td>• Handling data – mean, range and probability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Handling data – simple statistics</td>
<td>• Handling data – calculate using shape and space (area, volume)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Advise learners that it is probably sensible to make sure they are confident and secure in all the skill components of functional English and maths at least at the level they plan to study. Ideally they might consider taking a qualification in functional skills at the level below their confidence level.

Note also that, in order to gain a pass mark at functional skills, you do not have to score 100 per cent in the test. Pass marks vary from year to year, but may be around 50 per cent. You can find information about pass marks by looking at examiners’ reports from your awarding organisation (you may need to log in). Also there are no grades in functional skills, so it’s either a pass or not.

---

**Merseytravel**

**How to get functional skills programmes under way**

Merseytravel has identified the steps in the functional skills process for its workplace:

- **Initial assessment**
  - Identifying skills levels E1-L2

- **Developing skills**
  - Individual learning plan
  - Potential accreditation
  - QCF Units

- **Applying skills**
  - Opportunities for workplace contextualisation

- **Preparation and entry**
  - Final assessment
  - Practice-sample assessments
  - On demand assessments
  - Functional skills L1 and 2

---

**Find out more about unionlearn and about functional skills**

Unionlearn main menu page: [www.unionlearn.org.uk/](http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/)


LSIS functional skills menu page: [www.excellencegateway.org.uk/node/21154](http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/node/21154)
Caterpillar, County Durham

Caterpillar, a major engineering firm in the North East, has an established Apprenticeship scheme; in 2011 alone there were 520 applications for ten positions. The Peterlee site has taken on 37 new apprentices in total across a variety of trades including welding, fabrication, paint, maintenance, tool room and business administration. The trade union on site, Unite, has been thoroughly supportive of the scheme and the apprentices themselves, taking an increasingly active role in both their practical and pastoral support, working in partnership with the employer throughout.

“The union at Peterlee has always actively promoted the return of apprentices in our business. Working together we have gradually improved our apprentice training process to where we are today and will maintain our continuous improvement strategy as we move forward. Already, rewards are evident from the Apprentice programme and the union, along with our MD, will continue to support initiatives to increase employment of apprentices at local and national levels.”

Rennie Simpson, Unite Convenor at Caterpillar

Caterpillar has supported four apprentices who have dyslexia, delivering key functional skills on a weekly basis to bring them up to the Level 2 qualification standards. More recently, Caterpillar has widened accessibility to the benefits of Apprenticeships and up-skilled their workforce at the same time by introducing Adult Apprenticeships for existing shop-floor staff.
Funding

Funding for functional skills

A full functional skills qualification currently attracts 45 guided learning hours (45 GLH) of funding. For 2012–2013 this means

16–18 Apprenticeships £471
19–24 Apprenticeships £362*
25+ Apprenticeships £290*
19+ standalone £724**

* excluding an expected contribution from employers
** only applies to certain learners – ask your learning provider for details

This information comes from the following SFA document: [http://readingroom.skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/sfa/funding_rates_for_english_and_maths_qualifications.pdf](http://readingroom.skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/sfa/funding_rates_for_english_and_maths_qualifications.pdf)

Forty-five hours may not seem sufficient but, if learners are fully ready and put on a programme at the right level, then it is practicable. Problems may arise if the learner has significant gaps in their skills. These gaps should be clearly identified at initial assessment and the learner advised to work first on making sure their skills are at the right level before tackling functional skills.

Update: In 2012, the government announced a doubling of the funding for functional skills, from 45 to 90 hours. However this has some provisos attached to it: employers are expected to contribute to increased funding levels. Although this funding has now doubled, budgets allocated centrally have stayed the same, for example, if you have a budget of £10,000, you'll only get 15 full qualifications at either Level 1 or 2 rather than the 30 or so available when the funding was half that amount. So training providers' overall contract values haven't changed but the funding for maths and English functional skills has doubled.

As changes in policy and funding are happening regularly, it is best to check the unionlearn website for the latest information.
Funding for bite-sized English and maths qualifications

The Skills Funding Agency will fund ‘bite-sized’ or ‘stepping stone’ qualifications:

“From January 2013 we will approve for funding all accredited QCF English and maths qualifications for funding across the Adult Skills Budget (including Awards at Level 2.”

http://qcf.skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/qcf-funding/confirmationfunding/

See also the note here which gives information about which awarding organisations are covered http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/SFA/SFA-QCF_Englishandmaths_interim_arrangementsExtens.pdf

Need more up-to-date information?

NOCN has a useful, regularly updated guide to funding: www.nocn.org.uk/learning-providers/funding-guides
This link takes you to a page about funding arrangements planned for 2012–2014. http://skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/providers/FundingSimplification/
FBU

Lorna Taylor, National Skills for Life advisor and tutor, has recently designed and developed an e-learning resource with the support of an associate of the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS). The use of the resource is in its initial stages but comments are favourable for its use as a national FBU teaching and learning tool. These can be accessed from the FBU education and lifelong learning website or by using the links below.

The resource was designed to assist with the transition from Skills for Life to functional skills learning, with the aim of transferring those skills to a practical task-related to ‘real life maths or English tasks embedded into workplace learning’. Its target audience is learners, teachers and trainers.

Learners are taken through the process of:

- introduction to functional skills maths and English
- induction and documentation
- individual learning plan process
- initial assessment
- diagnostic assessment
- individual skills plan or programme of learning
- current learning platform used by the learning centre
- functional skills preparation for testing
- functional skills support.

The resource is contextualised to include downloadable resources to engage firefighters, but can be used for any learner with an interest in ‘Fitness’ or ‘Flooding.’ The resources can be printed to complete and sample answers are included. They are not part of the programme of learning. The resource is designed to focus on Level 1 maths and English.

[http://www.summations.co.uk/functionalmathsFBU/player.html](http://www.summations.co.uk/functionalmathsFBU/player.html)
[http://www.summations.co.uk/functionalenglishFBU/player.html](http://www.summations.co.uk/functionalenglishFBU/player.html)
Breaking the mould: Denby Pottery

‘Celebration of Achievements’ learning event and certificate presentation

Staff at the historic site of Denby Pottery were out in force this week (July 2012) celebrating 22 learners achieving Level 1 in maths.

The joint effort between Denby, Unity and Axia Solutions produced an overwhelming response from employees who would like to brush up on their maths, English and IT.

Axia Solutions delivered the one-hour taught sessions, which ran over 10 weeks, with the company and the learners committing half an hour each (with the learners keen to progress by taking work home as well).

Unity’s Rhonda Chauntry spoke of how her role as ULR has helped her to develop her own learning and confidence, along with the organisational skills to support learning. The backing from Unity and the company has been vital to this success:

“It was David, the HR Manager, who along with my union encouraged me to be a ULR. It took me six months to take the leap, but I haven’t looked back since. I have gone from not being able to use a computer, through unionlearn recommending Go-On and other ICT courses. I am now attending the maths sessions, which has boosted my confidence, and also by doing the courses myself, I am able to act as a positive role model for others.”

David Ashton (Denby HR Manager) spoke about how proud he was of the learners for putting themselves forward.

“I was sceptical at first whether the staff would put themselves forward but with commitment from the individuals we got the courses up and running. As a company we are committed to training with Business Improvement Techniques NVQ Level 2, run in the past, and now with these maths and planned English programmes as part of an ongoing approach to development.”

When asked of the benefits to the organisation, he said, “These maths and English courses are mutually beneficial to all, they are skills essential in both work and at home.”

Tony Wilde (64-year-old 1st Inspection employee) said of the course: “I really enjoyed the social side of the course at work after the shift and it was a great refresher for what I used to know.”

With 24 signed up for the next classes in English, Rhonda is looking to incorporate Go-On and IT skills as part of learner progression, enabling them to practice skills online in between sessions and provide more opportunities for learners.

Another learner said, “This is the first learning I have done since leaving school and I really enjoyed it. I am doing English next and want to learn more.”

Well learn more they will – all down to the hard work of the learners, the ULR, provider and company working together in partnership.
Useful links

**General information**

*Department for Education*
General information about the government’s policies on functional skills [www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/youngpeople/qandlearning/skills](http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/youngpeople/qandlearning/skills)

*LSIS Excellence Gateway English, maths and ESOL hub*
LSIS information about English, maths and ESOL [www.excellencegateway.org.uk/node/18272](http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/node/18272)

*LSIS functional skills*
Links to the functional skills starter kit, moving from key skills to functional skills, the functional skills readiness tool, the ‘Being functional’ menu page and continuing professional development for functional skills [www.excellencegateway.org.uk/node/21154](http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/node/21154)

*LSIS functional skills starter kit*
A useful summary of information aimed at providers planning to implement functional skills [www.excellencegateway.org.uk/node/20280](http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/node/20280)

*National Apprenticeship Service*
The main source of information about Apprenticeships [www.apprenticeships.org.uk/About-Us/National-Apprenticeship-Service.aspx](http://www.apprenticeships.org.uk/About-Us/National-Apprenticeship-Service.aspx)

*National Apprenticeship Service*

*Ofqual functional skills qualifications criteria (2012)*

*Ofqual subject criteria*

*Skills Funding Agency Update (February 2012)*


*Unionlearn homepage: [www.unionlearn.org.uk](http://www.unionlearn.org.uk)*

**Awarding organisations**

*AQA*

*Ascentis English and Maths Awards*
[www.ascentis.co.uk/provision.asp?qualcats_id=45](http://www.ascentis.co.uk/provision.asp?qualcats_id=45)

*City & Guilds*
[www.cityandguilds.com/57605.html](http://www.cityandguilds.com/57605.html)

*Edexcel*
[www.edexcel.com/quals/func-skills/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.edexcel.com/quals/func-skills/Pages/default.aspx)

*EDI*
Resources for teachers and learners

The LSIS functional skills starter kit is a good resource for teachers and programme managers to start when setting up functional skills provision. www.excellencegateway.org.uk/node/20280

The starter kit section Resources to support effective practice has a good list of up to date resources
www.excellencegateway.org.uk/node/20284

The Skills Workshop has free functional skills and Skills for Life resources developed by teachers
www.skillworkshop.org

An internet search for ‘functional skills resources’ will come up with links to free resources and also to commercial resources.

Moving from Key Skills to Functional Skills: A step by step guide for independent training providers (AELP, 2012) guide offers practical help for preparing to deliver functional skills within Apprenticeships:

- actions you need to take
- advice, suggestions and tips
- signposts to further information and support.


NOCN
www.nocn.org.uk/learning-providers/functional-skills

NCFE
www.ncfe.org.uk/FunctionalSkills.aspx

This link is to the special NOCN menu for the TUC:
www.nocn.org.uk/learning-providers/tuc-education

OCR
www.ocr.org.uk/qualifications/type/fs_2010/

Awarding organisations currently (February 2013) developing bite-sized qualifications in English and maths

Ascentis English and Maths Awards
www.ascentis.co.uk/provision.asp?qualcats_id=45

City & Guilds English and Maths Skills (3847)

NOCN English and Maths Skills
www.nocn.org.uk/Homepage/

OCR Cambridge Progression
www.ocr.org.uk/qualifications/by-type/cambridge-progression/