



International Certificate in Financial English

Examination Report

Test of Writing

May 2008

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Test of Writing

Examination Report

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INTRODUCTION

This report provides a general view of how candidates performed on the examination overall and on the Test of Writing paper in the May 2008 session, and offers guidance on the preparation of candidates.

Grading

Grading took place during June 2008, approximately four weeks after the examination was taken.

The four ICFE papers total 200 marks, after weighting. Each paper (Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking) represents 25% of the total marks available. It is important to note that candidates do not 'pass' or 'fail' in a particular paper or component, but rather in the examination as a whole. A candidate's overall ICFE grade is based on the aggregate score gained by the candidate across all four papers.

The overall grades are set using the following information:

- statistics on the candidature
- statistics on the overall candidate performance
- statistics on individual questions, for those parts of the examination for which this is appropriate (Papers 1 and 3)
- the advice of the Principal Examiner based on the performance of candidates, and on the recommendation of examiners where this is relevant (Papers 2 and 4).

ICFE has three passing grades: 'C1 Pass with Merit', 'C1 Pass' and 'B2 Pass', and two failing grades: 'Narrow Fail' and 'Fail'. The overall pass rate for the May 2008 examination was 86.88%. In total, 21.25% of candidates were awarded a grade 'C1 Pass with Merit', 22.50% were awarded a grade 'C1 Pass' and 43.18% were awarded a 'B2 Pass'.

Statements of Results contain a graphical display of a candidate's performance in each paper. These are shown against a scale of Exceptional – Good – Borderline – Weak and indicate the candidate's relative performance on each paper.

Online teaching resources for ICFE are available (visit the website: www.cambridgeesol.org/teach/icfe). Included are sample tasks, tips for teachers and students, and a range of familiarisation and practice activities.

Feedback on this report is very welcome and should be sent to the ICFE Subject Manager, Cambridge ESOL, at the address below. Please use the feedback form at the end of this report.

ICFE Subject Manager

Cambridge ESOL, 1 Hills Road,
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Candidate Background

ICFE Test of Writing – Test Overview

PART	Functions/Communicative Task	Input	Response	Register
1	Explaining, refuting, presenting and developing arguments, suggesting, etc.	A rubric, input letter and five content points	A letter (120 – 180 words)	Neutral/formal
2	Presenting and developing arguments, expressing and supporting opinions, evaluating ideas, describing, summarising, recommending, persuading, explaining, summarising, etc.	A rubric and four content points	A report (200 – 250 words)	Neutral/formal

For ICFE, candidates are required to produce two pieces of writing related to finance and accounting. The questions supply candidates with sufficient information to enable them to use an appropriate style and register, and to address all the content points.

Both Part 1 and Part 2 tasks are compulsory. Part 1 requires candidates to produce a short letter of between 120 and 180 words based on an input letter and five content points. In Part 2, candidates are asked to produce a report of between 200 and 250 words.

Each Writing task is marked by a trained examiner. Examiners mark in teams, monitored by Team Leaders. Each marking session is led by a Principal Examiner. Examiners refer to a General Mark Scheme which provides detailed descriptions of performance at each of six levels of proficiency, with scores converted to provide a mark out of 20 for Part 1 and out of 30 for Part 2 (making a total of 50 marks, i.e. 25% of the candidate's overall score). In addition to this, a Task-specific Mark Scheme for each question gives guidance on the features an answer should contain.

In Part 1, the test focus is on the candidate's ability to produce a letter in response to an input text. Candidates must read all of the input material carefully. Candidates need to adopt an appropriate style, layout and register for the task: the overall aim of the task being to have a positive effect on the target reader. Listing information in simple sentences is not enough: organisation and cohesion, clear layout, balance, appropriate register, control and accuracy of language are all important features of task achievement. Evidence of range of language is also required, which means building on key words from the input rather than lifting whole segments. Part 1 tasks offer candidates the opportunity to expand on the information given and this enables them to demonstrate their range of language. In Part 2, the test focus is on the

candidate's ability to produce a report in response to input. Attention to every element in the rubric is essential for effective task achievement and candidates will be expected to develop finance-related topics and discuss finance-related issues in their answers. As the task is longer than Part 1, candidates have more scope to demonstrate a range of structure and vocabulary.

Comments on candidate performance

The Part 1 task required candidates to write a formal letter on behalf of their client, EXP, to a company interested in purchasing part of EXP, answering questions and giving information about the client company. For Part 2, candidates had to write a report for a client providing information and giving advice about exporting products and dealing with foreign currency transactions.

Part 1

This question proved to be very accessible in terms of topic and candidates were generally well prepared in terms of understanding the type of response required. Most candidates understood who the target reader was and included all five content points in their answers, ensuring that the target reader was fully informed. Some candidates failed to include all five points and were penalised. Some candidates misinterpreted the context of the task and wrote from the perspective of the company wishing to buy the candidate's client company; these answers were also penalised.

It is very important for candidates to read through the task carefully and establish their role as writer. It is useful to train candidates to refer to their role at the start of the letter (e.g. 'I am writing to you on behalf of my client', 'your letter to my client has been passed to me for attention').

The first point was dealt with in a straightforward way, most candidates simply stating the fact that a new competitor had emerged. Some stronger candidates explained the previous year's fall in profits by giving a summary of market position ('EXP is witnessing extremely high levels of competition', 'a new rival company whose aggressive advertising campaign turned out to be more effective than our analysts predicted'). Weaker candidates demonstrated poor language control ('a new competitor grows fast, which products occupy a large part of market quickly').

The second point, requiring the writer to explain why the sales projections were realistic, generated a good range of relevant responses. These included mention of new contracts, more efficient production, reduced costs, rebuilding customer loyalty and reputation and good marketing strategy. Some stronger answers were able to demonstrate an excellent range of complex language ('EXP was forced to intensify its new product development efforts, which the company has managed to do successfully ... leading to encouraging sales projections'). Others linked point two to point one ('after operating for a number of years we have been able to win back customers from our new competitor'), showing effective understanding of the scenario in the task.

The third content point was a further opportunity for candidates to develop their answers, providing information about the new credit control system. Candidates gave details relating to, for example, the name/date of implementation of the system, penalties for defaulting customers, identifying customers with poor credit records and electronic payment in local currency. Some suggested this new credit system was for future implementation, which was acceptable. Stronger candidates earned credit for using appropriate financial terminology ('a variety of credit options will be available based on the credit worthiness of customers'). Weaker candidates struggled to use such terms and made mistakes using terminology from the question

itself ('no any monies overdues ... aging longer than one month appears'). It is clearly an advantage to use financial terminology, but the language structures in which such terminology is used must also be learnt.

Point four, requiring details of the management team, was sometimes omitted. Some candidates gave only names and length of service, which was acceptable. Others outlined job responsibilities and specific skills and summarised using appropriate expressions ('our firm takes special pride in our management team as they are capable and multi-skilled').

Most candidates were able to balance the content points requiring expansion with those which could be dealt with more concisely. Point five called for little expansion and generally candidates confirmed the point simply ('I can confirm that the buildings are leased for 5 years'). Weaker candidates made errors with tense control ('I confirm you the lease was 5 years'). Point five was sometimes omitted. It is very important for candidates to read through their work at the end and check carefully that they have addressed all five content points and that their answer is complete.

Part 2

The topic area of this report task, exports, proved very accessible to candidates at both B2 and C1 levels; they were able to write at some length on the subject of the risks involved with exporting. There was no specific requirement to address issues relating to companies who manufacture medical equipment, although answers that did consider this issue were more focused on the task and were credited for this. Many answers were significantly overlength. Candidates need practice in keeping their answers close to the word limit, avoiding any irrelevant material and leaving themselves time at the end to check their work carefully to correct careless errors.

Most candidates worked through the four points systematically, organising their ideas well, even though most answers did not attempt formal report format. Where appropriate report format was used successfully, this was credited. However, most answers addressed point one immediately, with no contextualising introduction. It is useful to train candidates to consider the need of the target reader for an introduction to the reason for the report. Candidates wrote in a generally consistently neutral tone.

Point one generated some very good financial English as candidates explained, for example, the role of exchange rate fluctuations, appreciating/depreciating currencies, stability of economic/political environments and the willingness of consumers to pay in different markets. Some excellent answers included good control of complex language ('should your equipment be overpriced, the expense of the implementation of a new distribution channel might never be recovered').

For point two, candidates were able to summarise the main risks with reference to issues such as time delay in payments and taxes/laws in other countries ('when entering the international market, the exporter is exposed to the risks associated with currency fluctuations', 'we all know how volatile our currency is'). Some candidates went into detail defining terms such as 'depreciating currency', which was inappropriate for the target reader.

Point three produced some good range in terms of subject knowledge and language. Responses included hedging, buying futures, employing a risk assessor, requiring payment in advance and protection clauses in contracts. Weaker candidates again found it difficult to express these ideas in correct language ('we can ajust a change rates about the contract price').

Responses to point four were varied with some answers focusing specifically on recording transactions and bookkeeping, while others were more general. Both approaches were acceptable. C1 candidates explained precisely and accurately specific outcomes ('any losses incurred are reported on the income statement as sundry expenses of the current accounting period').

Recommendations for candidate preparation

In general, the message for candidates is to read each question carefully and carry out exactly the task required. Candidates should be familiar with the number of content points that each question has, and should check whether or not there is a second part to a bullet point. They should then address each of these points. It is also important to make sure they are familiar with the task types and topics. Students will need guidance on the particular features of each task type and the appropriate style and tone. An inappropriate style is not specifically penalised but may mean that the overall impression mark is adjusted. Train your students to read the questions carefully, underlining the most important parts. They then need to plan an answer which addresses all the points required by the task. This will help them balance their answers so that a range of language can be demonstrated.

The time allowed for the Writing paper (1 hour 15 minutes) is designed to be sufficient for students to make brief plans and then write their two answers as clearly as possible. They should not worry if they make mistakes but they should make clear corrections so that the examiner can follow and mark what they have written. Students will need practice in writing tasks at this level within the word limit so that they know when they have written enough in their own handwriting.

Students need to think carefully about who the target reader is for each task and try to write in an appropriate style and tone. Is the target reader, for example, a client, a colleague or someone in a position of authority? Do they need to present difficult information politely (as in a complaint) or are they trying to persuade somebody to do something? The balance between the function(s) required by the task and the relationship with the target reader is important.

When planning their writing, it is important that students use effective paragraphing and they should be encouraged to develop each of the required points in a separate paragraph. Headings in the Part 2 report also often make the text easier for the target reader to follow. Using a variety of linking words is important, as is ensuring that the flow of ideas in the writing is logical and easy for the reader to follow. At levels B2 and C1, it is particularly important that students can demonstrate an overall cohesion to the whole task as well as at sentence level. Students should also be encouraged to use a range of complex language. If, in doing so, they make mistakes, the examiner will always give credit for the complex language attempted as long as the mistakes do not impede communication. Students will need practice in developing points as fully as possible in order to demonstrate a range of language and in using as wide a variety of vocabulary as possible by, for example, using synonyms. Credit will also be given for the appropriate use of finance terminology.

Errors which do not impede communication may, nonetheless, affect the overall success of the communication and students need regular practice in checking their work for errors and inaccuracies. Encouraging students to make systematic checks of their work – verb tenses or singular/plural agreements, for example – is useful. In addition, candidates need to be aware of the importance of spelling and punctuation. Although spelling errors and faulty punctuation are not specifically penalised, they can sometimes impede communication. If so, the overall impression mark may be adjusted. American usage and spelling are as valid as British usage and spelling.

Part 2 on the Test of Writing carries more marks than Part 1 so candidates should practise planning the time they spend on each question carefully.

Part 1

Candidates need to be trained to read the opening paragraphs and instructions and to think carefully about what their role is and the purpose of the task, who they are writing to and why and what they are trying to achieve in the task.

Students can use key words from the question but should not lift whole segments of the input. No credit is given for language which has been obviously lifted from the question. Students should therefore be given practice in using their own words when using information from the input.

The task is made up of an input letter with notes. Students, therefore, need practice in reformulating the language used in note forms into full sentences, paying particular attention to verb tenses and the use of definite/indefinite articles.

Part 2

Good answers will contain detailed and specific information and it is, therefore, useful practice for students to brainstorm their ideas in class in order to generate appropriate content. Once ideas have been generated, students need guidance in how to organise the content of their answers. It is useful to consider what knowledge can be assumed and what should be included and to what extent factual points need illustration.

Part 2 questions have four content points to address. Students need to be trained not only to address all four points, but also to consider the balance of their answers. The points do not necessarily require equal amounts of writing and it is important when reading the question to notice whether, for example, the question asks for a **brief** consideration of something.

Remind your students that they should not reproduce a task that they have done in class on a similar topic as such answers rarely address the task set. It is essential that they address the points in the rubric and not simply write 250 words on the topic.

DOs AND DON'Ts FOR ICFE WRITING

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| DO | read each question carefully. |
| DO | decide exactly what information you are being asked to give. |
| DO | identify the person you are writing to and the overall purpose of what you have to write. |
| DO | organise your ideas and make a plan before you write. |
| DO | for Part 1 tasks, think carefully about how to link the five notes. |
| DO | for Part 2 tasks, think carefully about the balance of the content points – those which can be expanded and those which can be dealt with more concisely. |
| DO | write your answers in the question booklet provided. |
| DO | write in a formal / neutral style. |
| DO | organise your ideas into clear paragraphs. |
| DO | follow your plan and remember the overall purpose of what you are writing. |
| DO | use as wide a range of structures and vocabulary as you can. |
| DO | allow time for checking and revising what you have written. |
| DO | check that you have covered all the content points. |
| DO | check for spelling and punctuation errors. |
| DO | make sure that you have crossed out any errors and that the final version is easy to read. |
| DON'T | start writing before you have finished your planning. |
| DON'T | 'lift' too much language from the question. |
| DON'T | write much more than the word limit in each part – you shouldn't include irrelevant material. |

FEEDBACK FORM

ICFE Writing Examination Report – May 2008

We are interested in hearing your views on how useful this report has been.

We would be most grateful if you could briefly answer the following questions and return a photocopy of this page to the following address:

ICFE Subject Manager

Cambridge ESOL, 1 Hills Road,
Cambridge, CB1 2EU

e-mail: ESOLhelpdesk@CambridgeESOL.org

1. Please describe your situation (e.g. EFL/ESOL teacher, Director of Studies, Examinations Officer, Local Secretary).

2. Have you prepared candidates for ICFE? YES/NO

3. Do you plan to prepare candidates for ICFE in the future? YES/NO

4. How have you used this report (e.g. for examination practice, etc.)?

5. Which parts of this report did you find most useful?

6. Which parts are not so useful?

7. What extra information would you like to see included in this report?

8. Your name (Optional)
- Centre/School

Thank you.