Functional Skills English Level 2

Complete Study Guide

1. Inference & Implied Meaning

Inference means reading between the lines — understanding what a writer suggests without saying it directly.

Key Rules

Rule: Look for what is implied, not just stated. Writers convey meaning through word choice, actions, body language, and what they leave out.

Rule: Physical descriptions signal emotions: 'jaw tightened' = anger, 'stared at shoes' = discomfort, 'smiled thinly' = insincerity.

Rule: Euphemisms soften reality: 'ideal for those with vision' = needs work, 'cosy' = small, 'character property' = old and crumbling.

Rule: What a writer omits can be as revealing as what they include. Deliberate exclusions suggest tension or conflict.

Worked Examples

Example: 'He glanced at the price tag, then carefully returned the jacket.' → He can't afford it. The careful return suggests regret, not disinterest.

Example: 'Despite record profits, the CEO announced a pay freeze for staff.' → The company prioritises executives. 'Despite' signals the contradiction.

Tip: In the exam, 'suggest' or 'imply' signals an inference question. Don't repeat what the text says — explain the hidden meaning.

Practice: A review says 'portions were generous — perhaps too generous.' What is implied?

Answer: The portions are excessive. 'Perhaps too generous' is polite criticism disguised as a compliment.

2. Writer's Methods & Language

How writers use techniques to create effects on the reader.

Key Techniques

Rule: Metaphor: Direct comparison (no like/as). 'Her smile was a mask' — implies deliberate concealment.

Rule: Simile: Comparison using like/as. 'Like a moth drawn to a flame' — attracted to something harmful.

Rule: Personification: Non-human things given human qualities. 'The factory belched smoke' — makes pollution seem disgusting.

Rule: Hyperbole: Deliberate exaggeration. 'The queue stretched on forever' — emphasises frustration.

Rule: Rhetorical question: Question not needing an answer. 'Is it too much to ask?' — implies the answer is obvious.

Rule: Rule of three: Three items for rhythm. 'Conversation, connection, community' — sounds complete and powerful.

Rule: Short sentences: Create impact or finality. 'I wasn't. I was destroying myself.' — contrast creates shock.

Rule: Antithesis: Contrasting ideas side by side. 'She doesn't need pity. She needs your £3.'

How to Answer

Tip: Always use PEE: identify the technique (Point), quote it (Evidence), explain the effect on the reader (Explanation).

Watch out: 'It makes the reader want to read on' is NOT valid analysis. Explain HOW the technique affects emotion or understanding.

Practice: What technique is 'Every. Single. Day.' and its effect?

Answer: Full stops between words create staccato emphasis, forcing pauses. This stresses relentless frequency and conveys frustration.

3. Comparing Texts

L2 requires you to compare how different texts present the same topic.

Key Rules

Rule: Compare purpose, audience, tone, evidence, language, and structure — explain HOW differences serve each text's goals.

Rule: Look for both similarities AND differences. 'Both acknowledge X, but Text A does Y while Text B does Z.'

Rule: Consider source type: newspapers inform objectively; policies instruct; letters/blogs persuade personally.

Rule: Same data, different framing: 'a clear majority' vs 'only 60%' reveals bias with identical statistics.

Comparison Framework

Example: Purpose: Inform, persuade, instruct, or entertain? Same topic may have different purposes.

Example: Audience: General public, employees, teenagers? Audience shapes vocabulary and tone.

Example: Evidence: Statistics = objective, establishing scale. Anecdotes = subjective, creating empathy.

Tip: Use comparative connectives: 'whereas,' 'while,' 'in contrast,' 'similarly,' 'both... however.'

Practice: Compare a newspaper (statistics + experts) with a blog (personal experience).

Answer: The newspaper uses quantitative evidence for scale and authority. The blog uses first-person narrative for emotional connection. One convinces through credibility; the other through relatability.

4. Synthesising Information

Combining information from multiple sources into a connected, coherent answer.

Key Rules

Rule: Don't summarise each text separately. Show how they connect: support, contradict, or complement each other.

Rule: Look for cause-effect chains across texts, one providing evidence for another's claim, complementary perspectives.

Rule: Organise by theme, not by source. 'Both texts agree that X' beats 'Text A says... Text B says...'

Rule: Acknowledge limitations: different dates, contexts, potential bias in sources.

Worked Examples

Example: Text A: 'rural buses cut by 40%.' Text B: 'elderly isolation increasing.' Synthesis: bus cuts may be causing isolation.

Example: Text A (2019): 20% support. Text B (2024): 55% support. Synthesis: attitudes have shifted — the trend matters.

Tip: Signal synthesis: 'Taken together...' / 'Text B's data supports Text A's claim...' / 'While Text A shows X, Text C explains why...'

Practice: Text A: exercise helps mental health. Text B: green spaces help. Text C: social connection helps. Synthesise.

Answer: Multiple factors support mental health simultaneously. Ideal solutions combine all three (e.g., group walks in parks). No single text gives the full picture.

5. Evaluating Arguments

Assessing how strong or weak an argument is — not what it says, but how convincing it is.

Common Weaknesses

Rule: Anecdotal evidence: 'Everyone I know thinks...' — small, unrepresentative sample.

Rule: False dilemma: 'Either we do X or disaster happens' — only two options presented when more exist.

Rule: Ad hominem: Attacking the person not the argument. Credentials don't determine argument validity.

Rule: Correlation ≠ causation: 'After X, Y happened' doesn't prove X caused Y.

Rule: Cherry-picking: Only selecting evidence that supports your point, ignoring counterexamples.

Rule: Appeal to popularity: '100,000 agree' — popularity doesn't equal truth.

Rule: Unsupported assertions: 'It is well known...' — no source = no evidence.

How to Evaluate

Tip: Ask: Does the evidence support the conclusion? Could it support a different conclusion? Is the sample representative?

Example: Strong: Named expert + data + counterarguments addressed + clear logic.

Example: Weak: Unnamed sources + emotion replacing evidence + fallacies + no other perspectives.

Practice: 'My grandad smoked and lived to 95, so smoking can't be dangerous.' What's wrong?

Answer: One exception doesn't disprove statistical evidence. Anecdotal exceptions don't override population-level trends.

6. Formal Writing (Reports & Articles)

The formal writing task is worth 24 marks. Format, tone, and structure all matter.

Key Rules

Rule: Format: Reports: Title → Introduction → Findings → Conclusion → Recommendations. Letters: Dear Sir/Madam → Yours faithfully. Articles: headline + clear paragraphs.

Rule: Tone: Third person, objective. Avoid contractions, slang, emotion. 'The investigation found...' not 'I think...'

Rule: Structure: Topic sentence per paragraph. Discourse markers (Furthermore, However, Consequently). Clear introduction + conclusion.

Rule: Evidence: Use statistics, examples, reasoned argument — not personal opinion alone.

Vocabulary Upgrades

Example: 'a lot of' → significant/considerable | 'good' → beneficial | 'bad' → detrimental | 'shows' → demonstrates | 'but' → however

Sign-off Rules

Example: Dear Sir/Madam → Yours faithfully (don't know name). Dear Mr/Ms Smith → Yours sincerely (know name).

Watch out: Don't sacrifice clarity for complexity. Clear, well-structured writing with accurate vocabulary beats confused writing with long words.

Tip: Spend 5 minutes planning. Identify 3-4 key points, put in logical order, note your conclusion. This prevents rambling.

Practice: Rewrite informally: 'This will cause massive problems for loads of people.'

Answer: 'This proposal is likely to have a significant negative impact on a considerable number of residents.' Specific, hedged, formal.

7. Informal Writing (Emails & Messages)

Worth 16 marks. Informal doesn't mean careless — it means conversational with clear purpose.

Key Rules

Rule: Tone: Warm, supportive, honest. Contractions fine (don't, won't). Direct 'you' creates connection.

Rule: Structure: Friendly opening → acknowledge situation → advice with reasons → encouragement → warm close.

Rule: Balance: Give clear opinion/recommendation but acknowledge the other side.

Rule: Avoid: Text-speak (ur, lol). Offensive language. Being unclear. Ignoring the reader's feelings.

Effective Techniques

Example: Rhetorical questions: 'What's the worst that could happen?' — engages naturally.

Example: Gentle humour: 'I'm no expert (as you well know!)' — builds rapport.

Example: Direct address: 'You know what you're like — once you commit, you follow through.'

Watch out: Informal ≠ sloppy. You still need correct spelling, punctuation, and clear expression. SPAG marks still apply.

Tip: Even informally, use paragraphs. Group related ideas. One block of text = poor organisation.

Practice: Write an informal opening to a nervous friend before their interview.

Answer: 'Hey! I know you're probably dreading tomorrow, but seriously — you've got this. Here's what I reckon...' Natural, warm, supportive.

8. Spelling & Vocabulary

Spelling counts across both reading and writing. These are the most commonly tested words.

Most Confused Pairs

Rule: their/there/they're: Their = belonging. There = place. They're = they are.

Rule: affect/effect: Affect = verb (influence). Effect = noun (result). 'The policy will affect staff. The effect will be significant.'

Rule: practice/practise: Practice = noun. Practise = verb. ICE = noun, ISE = verb.

Rule: advice/advise: Advice = noun. Advise = verb. Same ice/ise pattern.

Rule: its/it's: Its = belonging (like his/hers — no apostrophe). It's = it is.

Rule: who's/whose: Who's = who is. Whose = belonging to whom.

Rule: principal/principle: Principal = main/head. Principle = rule/belief.

Rule: stationary/stationery: Stationary = not moving (a=at rest). Stationery = paper (e=envelopes).

Most Misspelled Words

Example: accommodation (cc, mm) | necessary (one c, two s) | separate (A RAT in separate) | definitely (de-FINITE-ly) | occurrence (cc, rr) | independent (-ent) | immediately (immediate+ly)

Tip: If unsure, write it two ways in the margin. Your visual memory is often more reliable than sounding out.

Practice: Fix: 'There definately going to except the advise.'

Answer: 'They're definitely going to accept the advice.' (They're, definitely, accept=receive, advice=noun)

9. Grammar & Sentence Structure

Good grammar underpins both reading comprehension and writing quality.

Key Rules

Rule: Subject-verb agreement: 'The team has...' (singular). With neither/nor, verb agrees with nearest subject.

Rule: Semicolons: Join two related complete sentences. 'The project succeeded; however, issues remain.'

Rule: Colons: After a complete clause, introduce a list or explanation. 'She had one goal: to finish.'

Rule: Apostrophes: Singular possession = 's. Plural = s'. Irregular = 's (children's). NEVER for plurals.

Rule: Commas: After fronted adverbials, around non-essential clauses, in lists, after introductory phrases.

Rule: Parallel structure: Lists must match: 'communication, teamwork, and attention' NOT 'communication, to work, and being detailed.'

Sentence Variety

Example: Simple: 'They changed nothing.' — short for impact.

Example: Compound: 'The team worked hard, but results disappointed.' — balancing ideas.

Example: Complex: 'Although the company performed well, it restructured.' — showing cause/contrast.

Tip: Vary sentence lengths and openings. Short after long = impact. Don't start every sentence with 'The' or 'It.'

Watch out: Comma splice: 'The deadline is tomorrow, we need to finish' — WRONG. Fix with semicolon, full stop, or conjunction.

Practice: Fix: 'After reviewing the evidence, a decision was reached.'

Answer: 'After reviewing the evidence, the committee reached a decision.' The modifier must attach to whoever did the reviewing.

10. Planning & Organisation

Good planning is the difference between a pass and a strong pass.

Before You Write

Rule: Step 1: Identify PAF — Purpose (inform/persuade/advise), Audience (who?), Format (report/letter/article/email).

Rule: Step 2: Read bullet points carefully. Each one = at least one paragraph. Missing any = lost marks.

Rule: Step 3: Plan 3-4 key points in logical order. Note your conclusion before starting.

Rule: Step 4: Allow 5 minutes planning and 3-5 minutes proofreading at the end.

During Writing

Rule: New point = new paragraph. Each paragraph needs a topic sentence at the start.

Rule: Use discourse markers: Furthermore, However, Consequently, In contrast, For example, In conclusion.

Rule: Open with a striking fact or clear purpose statement — NOT 'In this article I am going to write about...'

Rule: Conclude by summarising, restating position, suggesting action. NEVER introduce new arguments here.

Time Management (2-hour exam)

Example: Reading: ~50 mins | Writing Task 1 (24 marks): ~40 mins | Writing Task 2 (16 marks): ~25 mins | Buffer: ~5 mins

Tip: Writing tasks = 40 marks total vs reading = 24 marks. Don't spend so long on reading that you rush the writing.

Watch out: The single most important factor: directly address everything the question asks. Off-topic writing scores poorly regardless of quality.

Practice: Plan a formal report about improving a local park.

Answer: Title → Intro (purpose, current state) → Problems (litter, equipment, lighting) → Solutions (play area, CCTV, maintenance) → Benefits (health, safety, values) → Conclusion + numbered recommendations.