

Curriculum and Assessment in English 3 to 19: A Better Plan

The Essentials of English

This is one of a group of six documents which together form the statement *Curriculum and Assessment in English 3 to 19: A Better Plan*. The others are: *Summary and Introduction*; *The Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework*; *The National Curriculum for English from 2015*; *An Alternative Curriculum for English 3 to 16*; *Assessment and Examinations in English 3 to 19*.

This statement sets out an alternative to current statutory requirements for the teaching and assessment of English 3 to 19. It represents the views of the National Association of Advisers in English, the National Association for the Teaching of English and the United Kingdom Literacy Association. It has been written by John Richmond, with contributions from Andrew Burn, Peter Dougill, Angela Goddard, Mike Raleigh and Peter Traves. The statement is produced with support from the organisations just named and from the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education.

The National Association of Advisers in English works to promote the highest standards of English teaching through the involvement of its members as advisers, inspectors, consultants, ITE lecturers and subject leaders in UK schools.

The National Association for the Teaching of English works to promote standards of excellence in the teaching of English from Early Years to University.

The United Kingdom Literacy Association aims to support and inform all those concerned with the development of language, literacy and communication.

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Introduction

This document attempts, in brief terms, to describe the characteristics of effective teaching in each of the major areas of English, a 'boiling down' of the argument to its essentials. The paragraph in bold type at the beginning of each set of points is a further compression, a 'boiling down of the boiling down'.

The sets of points include some comment on the government's recent legislation, comment which is developed in more detail in *The National Curriculum for English from 2015*. Because there are particular things to be said about the acquisition of literacy by young children, reading and writing are each divided into two age-ranges: 3 to 7 and 7 to 16.

Readers will notice some repetition across the sets of points, since some essentials hold true in more than one mode of language.

Talk

Talk has always had to struggle to gain equivalent esteem with reading and writing as an essential means of learning. Nonetheless, exploratory talk is a bridge by which learners' new knowledge or grasp of a new concept can be securely connected to knowledge or conceptual understandings they already have.

The spoken language is the mode of language from which competence in all the other modes springs. Speech, and attention to speech through listening, are key media through which children and young people learn.

The teacher has a crucial role in guiding learners' use of the spoken language, and in setting contexts in which learners can practise and extend their competence in spoken language through acts of learning.

To be productive, group talk – in groups of whatever size – needs a clear structure and purpose, which it is the teacher's responsibility to provide. That structure and that purpose may be very simple: one open question and a time limit. Or it may be more complex, involving a series of tasks to be undertaken. Sometimes the teacher will be an active participant in learners' talk, sometimes not.

Group talk may well involve the other modes of language: reading and writing. But it should not become an automatic preliminary to writing. Talk should be regarded as work of equivalent status and seriousness to other kinds of work.

A key aspect of the teacher's skill is in setting tasks for learners which make demands at the edge of but not beyond the reach of students' existing state of knowledge or grasp of concepts. When that happens, the value of collaborative talk, in terms of insights gained and difficulties overcome, may most clearly be seen.

Pupil talk should, over time, embrace a range of purposes and take a range of forms, from the more exploratory through to the more presentational, from the more tentative to the more declaratory, from the more collaborative to the more individual.

Some 17% of the UK school population now speak English as an additional language. These speakers range from new arrivals speaking no or very little English to advanced bi- or multilingual speakers who outperform their monolingual English peers. Support for these learners should take the form of an adapted version of the means by which teachers support the development of monolingual English speakers, not a different kind of pedagogy.

The teacher's approach to learners who have access to a variety or varieties of English other than Standard English must be based on respect for the language of the learner's culture and community. In the secondary school, it is also possible and quite legitimate for teachers to introduce students to the

standard equivalents of non-standard forms they use in their everyday speech. This is best done in the context of the study of language variety itself.

The government's new legal requirements on the spoken language are insufficiently detailed in the primary years, and over-preoccupied with formal and presentational uses of the spoken language in the secondary years. *An Alternative Curriculum for English 3 to 16* proposes more detail at Key Stages 1 and 2, and a better balance at Key Stages 3 and 4 between the more individual and formal and the more collaborative and exploratory uses of the spoken language.

Reading 3 to 7

Effective reading teaching involves attention both to meaning and to the structures of words. Teachers of early reading have been distracted by misguided efforts – in England mandated by statute and supported by government funding – to divide reading for meaning from the decoding of written words, and to insist on only one method by which the decoding of written words should take place.

Successful entry into literacy depends on an existing competence in spoken language. The beginning reader, to be successful, must employ all the resources of her or his retentive memory, generalising brain and propensity to make meaning.

Much of a beginning reader's learning takes place unconsciously, just as does virtually all of a beginning speaker's learning. However, while allowing full play to the powerful forces of children's unconscious literacy learning, the teacher has a vital part to play through appropriately pitched conscious instruction.

Pleasure in reading is an essential prerequisite for success in reading. This principle applies at all levels of encounters with writing, from word recognition up to full-scale comprehension of continuous texts.

Learning to read is learning to infer and construct meaning from writing. To do this effectively, beginning readers need a range of ways of grasping meaning. This range includes the recognition and retention of whole words, to which beginning readers have been introduced by the teacher or other experienced reader. It includes the making of links between the semantic and syntactic patterns and structures of spoken language, of which most beginning readers already have substantial experience, and their equivalents in written language. It includes the recognition of grapho-phonetic correspondences in written English in the many contexts where they exist.

Beginning readers need full access to a wide range of books, crucially including books which have been composed using the natural patterns, usages and rhythms of English.

The support of parents and other experienced readers at home is of enormous importance in the development of successful young readers.

Successful teaching of reading does not depend on allegiance to a particular method, but on an overall understanding of what it is that the beginning reader does in successfully encountering a text.

These principles apply with equal force to learners of English as an additional language. EAL learners are engaged in the complex process of sorting differences and recognising equivalences between their first and additional language(s). The appropriately pitched conscious instruction by the teacher to which we refer above will have a particular application to EAL learners who have some level of literacy in their first language, where there is likely to be a conscious transfer of knowledge and skill from one written form to another. Appropriate books in the first language and in bilingual editions should be provided, so that the writing systems of English and the other language(s) can be compared.

Current government policy and statutory requirements in the area of early reading are based on a simplistic view of the reading process, which fails to do justice to the diversity of strategies which young children in fact use to become successful readers.

Reading 7 to 16

Creating capable and keen readers is the most important job that schools can do. The high-value benefits that skilled independent reading can bring are pleasure, personal enrichment, practical value and power as a citizen. Since reading is a major strategy for learning in virtually every aspect of education, it is the responsibility of every teacher to develop it.

The demands on and expectations of readers are increasing. These need to be reflected in the absolute priority given to reading as part of the curriculum from 7 to 16 and in the resources allocated to support it.

The teaching of reading requires an understanding of the different purposes for which we read, the complexity of the task of reading and the range of reading skills needed to support learning. The varied purposes and types of text, and the different means through which text is now carried, call for different skills on the part of the reader. These skills need to be taught systematically, but not mechanically.

Effective reading is needed for success in all subjects and ought to be encouraged, taught and reinforced across the curriculum. This calls for a coherent whole-school approach to literacy. One feature of this approach is that productive use of the school library should be at the heart of the school's life. Another is that teachers and other adults in school should show students that they read too.

Reading is inextricably linked to the other modes of language: writing, speaking and listening. These links should be recognised in students' experiences of reading across the curriculum.

Pleasure in reading is the key. Research confirms a direct link between the commitment to reading for pleasure and wider educational success.

The interests and experiences learners bring to the classroom are one starting point for the encouragement of reading. But teachers have a responsibility to make sure that children and young people become ambitious readers, able to take on a wider range of texts outside their own immediate experience and at increasing levels of complexity and demand.

Reading for information is a basic tool across the curriculum and in life. Students need frequent, wide and deliberate experience of it and encouragement to take on ever more challenging tasks and material.

Students should be shown how literature and other texts achieve their effects. They also need opportunities to explore how their own perspectives, values and assumptions compare with those in the texts they encounter.

All learners can experience the pleasure and satisfaction that reading can bring. Those who initially fail to gain the benefits or those whose interest in reading has faded need particular help, tailored to their different histories and characteristics. Underachievement in and underuse of reading by boys are by no means inevitable.

All these principles apply with equal force to learners of English as an additional language. However, students who have begun to read in another language and are learning to read in English are additionally engaged in the complex process of making comparisons between writing systems. Appropriate books in the first language and in bilingual editions can help the comparison of the writing systems of English and the other language(s), in addition to the other benefits they bring. More advanced bilingual learners

can derive especial benefit from paying attention to the structures and styles of the more academic forms of writing with which their previous reading in English has not made them familiar.

The coverage of reading for pupils aged 7 to 16 in the current National Curriculum for England is uneven. The proposals for reading at Key Stages 2 to 4 in *An Alternative Curriculum for English 3 to 16* are based on a broader, better integrated understanding of reading across the phases.

Writing 3 to 7

The purpose of the early teaching of writing is to enable young writers to create meaning using text. Effective teachers of writing at this age-range teach about the technicalities and conventions of the English writing system, and teach the physical mastery of handwriting, as essential aids to the achievement of this larger purpose.

Successful entry into literacy depends on a developing competence in spoken language. In the first years of their lives, children are learning to talk, and concurrently learning to recognise and use graphic systems: drawing, writing and number. They experiment with these systems while learning to talk.

A great deal of informal, unconscious learning about writing comes from reading and being read to. Oral and written stories, poems, songs and rhymes have a key role to play in this learning.

While recognising the powerful forces at work in children's unconscious literacy learning, the teacher has a vital part to play through appropriately pitched conscious instruction.

The teaching of writing requires an understanding of all the characteristics and needs of a writer at work, and an understanding of the multiple demands that adults make on children when we ask them to write.

Teachers should encourage the confident voices of early writers.

Teachers should provide the supports and the direct teaching necessary to bring children, without undue haste and without creating undue anxiety, to an understanding of the conventions of the writing system appropriate for their age, and to a relaxed control of the physical act of handwriting.

The premature introduction of instruction in some of the abstract categories in which adults discuss writing (for example grammatical categories and spelling rules) can be harmful to the confidence of the young writer, and counter-productive even to the purpose – to lead the child to correctness – for which those categories have been introduced.

Young children should have experience of writing which is active, participatory, social and collaborative. There should also be occasions for writing when quiet, reflective individual effort is required.

Young children should be introduced to an appropriate range of the kinds of writing which exist in the world, and be encouraged to try out some of that range for themselves. The range should both confirm and represent the linguistic, social and cultural diversity of the classroom, and allow for exploration of real contexts and imaginary worlds beyond the classroom.

The range of children's writing, and the means by which the writing is displayed and distributed, should employ digital and electronic equipment and media as well as traditional physical equipment and media.

All these principles apply with equal force to learners of English as an additional language. However, children who have begun to write in another language and are learning to write in English are additionally engaged in the complex process of making comparisons between writing systems. There is likely to be a conscious transfer of knowledge and skill from one written form to another.

Appropriate books in the first language and in bilingual editions can help the comparison of the writing systems of English and the other language(s), as well as the other benefits they bring.

Writing 7 to 16

The purpose of the teaching of writing at Key Stages 2 to 4 is to continue to develop in children and young people a confident control of the medium, in all the diversity of its forms and purposes, and a sense of the pleasure that writing can bring.

When children and young people develop as writers, their development happens most effectively on a broad front, in several areas at once, and development in one area is often supportive of development in another. There is no dichotomy between content and correctness in the effective teaching of writing.

The teaching of writing requires an understanding of all the characteristics and needs of a writer at work, and of the multiple demands that teachers make on learners when they ask them to write.

Competence in writing – at whatever level – precedes analysis of writing, not the other way round. This is true of language generally. Analysis of or specific attention to conventions of the writing system should take place in the context of the examination of whole, meaningful texts, whether these are texts produced by the student as a writer or those encountered by the student as a reader.

Learners' developing competence and confidence in handling forms of and purposes for writing will come about as a result of copious reading of high-quality texts – factual, instructional, persuasive and imaginative – which teachers should provide.

Preparation for writing should often involve oral work in various forms: paired, group and whole-class talk; role-play, improvisation and drama. Oral work in any of these forms can also be an outcome of writing.

Writers should have opportunities to write for a range of different purposes and in a range of different forms, sometimes individually and sometimes in collaboration with other writers.

Writers should become familiar with the process of redrafting in order to bring about a better and more satisfying final product.

Writers should write for readerships which, while including the teacher as a most important reader, are not confined to the teacher.

Teachers should show learners that they write too.

The modelling of writing, including the study of how other writers have made successful and pleasure-giving texts, should be a feature of the teaching of writing.

Recent, fast-moving advances in digital technology have transformed and will continue to transform the possibilities for the production and exchange of writing, and for the combination of writing with other modes, for example images and sound.

Teachers' interventions in students' writing should be concerned, first, with what the student has written: with the content and the overall structure of a piece.

Teachers' interventions in students' writing should be concerned, next, with the degree of correctness shown in the writer's handling of the writing system: with spelling, punctuation, layout and the grammatical order and forms of words in sentences.

There is always pattern in error. Teachers' attention to error in students' writing should have the principal aim of developing in writers the self-critical awareness which will enable them increasingly to attend to error themselves. That is, writers should be shown how to make their implicit knowledge of the writing system active in the critical examination of their writing.

Children at Key Stage 2 should be helped to develop a clear, relaxed handwriting style, if they have not already done so by the age of 7. From Key Stage 2 onwards, students should learn keyboard skills so that they can type on a computer at least as fast as they can handwrite.

All these principles apply with equal force to learners of English as an additional language. However, students who have begun to write in another language and are learning to write in English are additionally engaged in the complex process of making comparisons between writing systems. There is likely to be a conscious transfer of knowledge and skill from one written form to another, and sometimes features originating in the first language will appear in EAL learners' English writing. Appropriate books in the first language and in bilingual editions can help the comparison of the writing systems of English and the other language(s), in addition to the other benefits they bring.

Grammar and knowledge about language

Metalinguistic understanding, of which understanding of grammar is a part, is a potentially worthwhile outcome, not an essential generator, of implicit productive and receptive competence in language itself. This truth has been obscured by debates and disputes about grammar teaching which have occupied politicians, the media and professionals for many years, and which have often been a proxy for crude stereotypes of 'progressive' and 'traditional' teaching.

Competence in language precedes analysis of language, not the other way round. Competence in language is implicit knowledge of language, brought about by a host of influences which affect the learner, consciously and unconsciously, and by a range of kinds of instruction and intervention by the teacher.

The teaching of grammar is a valuable and interesting activity, so long as it is pitched at an appropriate level of difficulty for the learners in a class, so long as it occurs in the context of the study of worthwhile texts, and so long as it engages learners actively in investigating language in use. Grammar teaching out of the context of pupils' broader language learning is useless.

The principal benefit of grammar teaching is on learners as readers and as people who discuss texts, including their own.

There is now some evidence that appropriately pitched grammar teaching, involving the study of worthwhile texts and engaging learners actively in investigating language in use, can have a beneficial influence on writers' developing competence (especially in the case of writers who are already more able), in that appropriately pitched reflection on language can feed back into competence.

The teaching of grammar sits best within the overall study of language as a phenomenon. To understand grammatical concepts and terminology is to understand one aspect of language as a system shared by its users. The knowledge about language which children and young people should acquire is broader than that, however, especially in the secondary years. This broader knowledge could be categorised in five ways, each of which interacts with the others:

- variety in and between languages
- history of languages
- language and power in society
- acquisition and development of language
- language as a system shared by its users.

The government's new legal requirements on grammar teaching will at some point need to be changed to make their demands on primary-school pupils more modest and realistic, and to shift some of these demands to teaching post-11, where requirements should be greater and more explicit than they currently are in the new orders for Key Stages 3 and 4.

Drama

Drama's potential contribution to learning and to the life of schools is diverse and enriching. It is a means of enhancing learning in a range of curriculum subjects and areas. It has close links with literature and with narrative generally, and therefore has a special significance within English, language and literacy teaching. It is also a practical art form, with its own techniques, conventions, vocabulary and technology. It has the potential to develop qualities of empathy and respect for difference in children and young people. It enables active and collaborative learning.

Drama is often a separate curriculum subject in secondary schools – sometimes organised as part of an arts 'cluster' – and is a popular examined subject at GCSE and A-level. It is also a prominent feature of a school's extra-curricular cultural life.

There is a weakness at the heart of drama's official relationship with the statutory curriculum in England. This stems from the failure of the UK government, when the National Curriculum for England and Wales was introduced in 1989 and 1990, to grant drama the same status as was accorded to art and music: that of foundation subject. The situation today remains as it was then, despite strenuous efforts by organisations and individuals representing drama teaching to persuade successive governments to grant drama foundation-subject status.

Statutorily, drama sits within English. The references to drama within successive versions of the National Curriculum for English since 1989 have never amounted to a coherent and rigorous description of the subject. They offer no sense of progression and development. The references in the new National Curriculum for English are no more adequate than those in previous versions.

During the second half of the 20th century, expert thinkers on educational drama extended our understanding of it as a mode of learning, and showed how this understanding can bear fruit in effective classroom work. A debate (and sometimes a dispute) developed between those who preferred to emphasise learning *through* drama and those who preferred to emphasise learning *about* drama. The former were less concerned with drama as *product* than with the multiple benefits of drama as *process*. The latter, while not denying the value of drama as process, wished to assert that drama is an art form which can be taught, and that drama activity will and should often have an outcome in performance. There is no need to decide in favour of drama as process or as product. It is both.

Like all other forms of learning, drama is affected by and may be realised via digital and electronic technologies and media.

The outline curriculum for drama offered in *An Alternative Curriculum for English 3 to 16* could be seen as an alternative to the collection of references to drama in the new National Curriculum for English, as guidance on the use of drama as a learning tool in any area of the curriculum, or as a basis for a curriculum for drama as a free-standing subject.

Media

Media education involves the study and production of a selection of the wide range of media texts, technologies and institutions which characterise and form our society. Equally important, it involves learners in the creation of media products themselves.

In the past, media education has often been seen as a form of 'inoculation': of protection against the cultural, moral and ideological ill effects of the mass media.

More recently, media education has struck a more positive note. Its emphasis is on the value of popular culture, on the importance of media forms such as cinema, television, comic books, video games, animation, advertising, news media and social media in representing our world.

Media education in the National Curriculum in England has been contained within English. This has provided positive opportunities for teachers and learners, raising the profile of moving-image texts, introducing the idea of multimodal texts, and emphasising the importance of digital media. However, media education's place within English has also caused problems: emphasising factual media at the expense of fiction; suggesting a 'suspicious' mode of reading media texts (in contrast to the 'appreciative' mode expected for literary texts); and restricting media education to the reading section of the curriculum, thus making it mandatory to 'read' media texts, but not to 'write' them.

In the most recent version of the National Curriculum for English, media education has effectively been expunged. It should be fully reinstated. Any adequate media curriculum should equally emphasise 'reading' (analysis of media) and 'writing' (production of media).

Media education can be a separate subject in the curriculum. That is how it is most strongly represented in the UK in post-14 education, in the form of specialist Media Studies and Film Studies syllabuses. While the popularity of these post-14 courses is welcome, media education 3 to 16 is best located within English. This arrangement allows for a coherent approach to the study and making of texts and meanings across all media, which can extend and strengthen students' understanding of textual structures, contexts and functions. It is the arrangement most likely to provide entitlement to media education for all young people in the school system.

The study of media, drama and literature together within English allows teachers and students to explore the spectrum of cultural taste, from elite canonical texts through to popular cultural forms, and the increasing tendency for these to collapse into one another. The contrasting modes of engagement with texts characteristic of media and literary studies in schools, 'rhetorical' and 'poetic' stances respectively, are stronger if united.

A media education curriculum from 3 to 16, involving 'reading' the media, 'writing' the media, and engaging with the contexts in which media practices occur, must be recursive. It cannot artificially distribute certain kinds of work across 'ages and stages', but should suggest how the same work (for example, editing a film) might change, expand, become more challenging and diverse, as students get older, gain more experience, become more autonomous.

English 16 to 19

The principal aim of English post-16, whatever the name and the content of the course a student is following, should be to foster an enjoyable understanding of the texts and/or aspects of language being studied, and a desire in the student to develop that enjoyable understanding throughout later life.

The history of the study of English post-16 can be traced back to debates in the universities in the late 19th century which eventually led to the establishment of schools and departments of English there. The subject was seen at the time as less rigorous than classics or mathematics, and was associated with the need for many more teachers, especially women, after the introduction in 1870 of compulsory state education.

For the majority of the 20th century, until the 1980s, 'English' meant 'English Literature' post-16.

At 16 to 19 there is now no single subject called 'English'. At A-level, three different 'Englishes' have developed: English Language; English Literature; English Language and Literature.

Reform of AS-/A-levels (for courses beginning in 2015) has involved changes to both structure and content, with the aim of ensuring smoother transition for students going on to university.

Although one of the main original aims of the reforms was to free up teaching time in order to deepen and enrich learning, the continuation of AS-level as a 'de-coupled' qualification has faced teachers with new constraints and presented learners with difficult choices.

Curriculum content for each of the 'Englishes' reveals some significant differences in ideologies and approaches, and in how the subjects connect with pre-16 curricula. There are missed opportunities to link with secondary-school English; and the reduction of coursework from 40% to 20% of the overall A-level does not reflect the high value that universities place on students' ability to work independently.

Creative Writing A-level, introduced in 2013, has proved very popular in its short lifetime. It is entirely regrettable that the government has decided to abolish it. The decision should be reconsidered.

There are fundamental principles that underlie positive practice across the English subjects. These are essentially to do with promoting active, creative approaches to the study of language and texts.

Assessment at A-level should reflect the literacy practices of modern life and embrace new technologies. It currently does neither of these things.

There are key aspects of English study at AS- and A-level that support employability and life skills: for example, to read for pleasure and for information; to write fluently, plainly and correctly; to use the spoken language to state a point of view, to transmit information and to collaborate with others. These should be part of any post-16 course.

Qualifications involving English other than A-level at 16 to 19, long established or newly introduced, are Tech levels, Applied general qualifications, the Technical Baccalaureate, GCSE, Functional Skills English and Technical certificates. The first three of these represent a welcome attempt by the government to introduce qualifications of equivalent status to A-level, but requiring more applied study; however, it is not always easy to see where the study of English features on applied courses.

For students not operating at A-level or equivalent, the choice post-16 is often between repeating a GCSE course which they have recently failed or in which they have achieved very limited success, or taking Functional Skills English, which involves a narrow and instrumental approach to the language. In these circumstances, there is an urgent need for a course of equivalent value to GCSE, specifically designed for post-16 students. It would avoid the stereotype of language as mere functionality, would require continuous writing on topics appropriate to young people post-16 and to adults, and would include some study of appropriate literature.

English, Language and Literacy 3 to 19 – Principles and Proposals

Curriculum and Assessment in English 3 to 19: A Better Plan draws heavily on the series *English, Language and Literacy 3 to 19 – Principles and Proposals*, published in 2015 by Owen Education and the United Kingdom Literacy Association.

The ten booklets in the series are:

English, Language and Literacy 3 to 19 – Summary: John Richmond, Peter Dougill and Mike Raleigh

Talk: John Richmond

Reading 3 to 7: John Richmond

Reading 7 to 16: Peter Traves

Writing 3 to 7: John Richmond

Writing 7 to 16: John Richmond

Grammar and Knowledge about Language: John Richmond

Drama: John Richmond

Media: Andrew Burn

English 16 to 19: Angela Goddard.

All are available, price £12 each (£11 to UKLA members), from the United Kingdom Literacy Association at <http://www.ukla.org/publications/shop/>

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