

# HOW TO TEACH



*Novels, non-fiction and their artful navigation*

# English

CHRIS CURTIS

EDITED BY PHIL BEADLE

# PRAISE FOR *HOW TO TEACH: ENGLISH*

Chris Curtis is the ideal teacher-writer, and in *How to Teach: English* he effortlessly manages the artful balance of packing in sage insights alongside a range of very practical approaches.

Funny, wise and imminently useful, this is a book from which every teacher of English – from nervous newbies to seasoned veterans – can plunder a wealth of ideas. So, no matter if you are perennially busy: put down your pile of marking and gift yourself this readable gem.

**Alex Quigley, Senior Associate, Education Endowment Foundation and  
author of *Closing the Vocabulary Gap***

Chris' book is an excellent manual for new and experienced teachers alike. His mixture of wisdom and experience blends together to provide teachers of English with a number of ideas that they can use in the classroom. It is a timely text, one which encourages practitioners to love what they teach – and is ideal for dipping in and out of, allowing readers to turn their attention to the chapters which cover their teaching focus at the time of reading. It is also packed full of signposts to interesting works of literature, which are perfect for the busy English teacher looking for some inspiration with the texts and topics they're using in a lesson or during a unit of learning.

**Amy Forrester, English teacher and Head of Year, Cockermouth School**

Curtis' smart and shrewd guide to English teaching is a welcome reminder of the potent, and too often untapped, wisdom and expertise of those at the chalkface who have learned through many years of careful and thoughtful trial and error.

For me, the greatest strength of this book lies in its central message: that English teaching is about the communication, sharing and generation of ideas, and that what matters most is the quality of thinking that happens within an English classroom. To top it off, Curtis gifts us a dazzling array of simple approaches that will guide all English teachers – from the fresh-faced newcomer to the grizzled staffroom-cynic – towards nurturing and getting the very best out of their students.

*How to Teach: English* really is a fabulous read. I cannot remember the last time I took so many notes when reading an education book. Needless to say, I recommend it to all teachers of English.

**Andy Tharby, author of *Making Every English Lesson Count***

*How to Teach: English* is packed full of practical ideas for the English classroom. Chris' knowledge and experience shine through in his writing, as he shares what he demonstrably knows will work in practice and provides really sound advice for trickier areas of the curriculum.

This is a timely book – schools wanting a renewed focus on the application of the curriculum would do well to start here for their English faculties.

**Sarah Barker, English teacher and Assistant Head Teacher, Orchard School Bristol, and blogger**

Why, you might wonder, should I invest in yet another book on the teaching of English? This is a relatively crowded marketplace – and although there are many excellent books aimed at English teachers, none are so rooted in the subject as this one. Chris Curtis communicates not only his years of experience but also his infectious enthusiasm for a subject and an occupation he so clearly loves.

*How to Teach: English* is studded with an astonishing array of practical ways into the study, and the teaching, of all forms of literature as well as the nuts and bolts of language. Every page is illuminated by the gentle, guiding hand of someone who has been there, made all the mistakes you have made and survived to pass on the distilled wisdom and warmth of a true aficionado.

This is my new favourite book on English teaching – it will enhance the practice of any teacher of English, no matter what stage they are at in their career.

**David Didau, author of *Making Kids Cleverer***

*How to Teach: English* is clever, wise and highly practical. Awash with creative prompts and pragmatic advice, it is an accessible and entertaining read which deserves its place on the creaking bookshelves of any English teacher.

Dipping in, you'll find the kinds of ideas that make you think, 'I wish I'd thought of that.' At the same time, Chris' obsession with self-improvement shines through. Full of humility, honesty and mischievous humour, this is a book about getting better by – to paraphrase the title of Chris' hugely influential blog – learning from mistakes.

It includes an ambitious and comprehensive list of chapters – focusing on key areas such as writing, grammar, Shakespeare and poetry – and illustrates the necessity of building knowledge and questioning our assumptions about our students' prior learning. With his approach, Chris places a relentless focus on the writer's craft and the power of words, advocating a sensible balance of high challenge, accessibility and creativity.

Quite simply, *How to Teach: English* is a guide to what excellent English teaching looks like – so whether you're a trainee teacher or a battle-hardened veteran, this is an indispensable resource.

**Mark Roberts, English teacher, blogger and writer**

This is a magnificent book that really gets to the bones of teaching English. It manages the remarkable feat of scoping the panorama of the subject: its magic, its power and its potential to take students to other worlds. And set against the big picture are commentaries on, and brilliant examples of, how to bring English lessons to life in the classroom.

*How to Teach: English* should be essential reading for all engaged in teaching, not just of English but of other subjects too – everyone will take something from the precision, the wit and the humanity of this terrific book.

**Mary Myatt, author of *Hopeful Schools, High Challenge, Low Threat and The Curriculum: Gallimaufry to Coherence***

First published by  
Independent Thinking Press  
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK  
www.independentthinkingpress.com

and

Independent Thinking Press  
PO Box 2223, Williston, VT 05495, USA  
www.crownhousepublishing.com

Independent Thinking Press is an imprint of Crown House Publishing Ltd.

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First published 2019.

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Edited by Phil Beadle

British Library of Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978-178135312-7  
Mobi ISBN 978-178135330-1  
ePub ISBN 978-178135331-8  
ePDF ISBN 978-178135332-5

LCCN 2019932889

Printed and bound in the UK by  
TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

# FOREWORD BY PHIL BEADLE

English teaching can sometimes, and sadly, be the province of the unthinking trope: the thing the majority does that is both quite silly and very rubbish. Particular bug-bears of mine are students being taught stock phrases that stack up like meaningless tautologies, making exam answers comprehensibly silly. Writing 'This clearly shows' about poetry (it clearly doesn't) and scribing parades of de-contextualised conjunctive adverbs as discourse markers (furthermore nothing, moreover less) being only the ones that have got my goat this week.

It is a shame that an honourable profession filled with teaching's finest accepts this waffle as being in any way deserving of anything other than lots of red pen. And such practices lead one into the direction of a search for an answer. What does anything mean? Who am I to trust here? Where is the voice of seasoned reason?

Chris Curtis entered the periphery of his editor's sight perhaps eight or nine years ago with a blog called *Learning from My Mistakes*. This title encapsulated, for me, a trustworthiness and humility that has become the alkaline to the acidity of my own arrogance. Chris does not delude himself into regarding himself as any form of pale English teaching deity. He's just a bloke (though a lovely one). But he's a bloke who's been teaching English for quite a long time, who does so to the best of his abilities and who is always on the lookout for new ways of saying things.

The sum total of that experience is included in this book. The beauty of having the thoughts of an experienced head of English for younger teachers is that Chris has thought quite deeply about some of the tropes of our profession; he has fallen down many of the same holes, made all the same mistakes, screwed up in the same manner as you, dear reader. The process of his path towards something significantly greater than competence has been taken with soft steps and, through this manner of being, Chris located a hunger in his gentility and has become that rarest of things in English teaching: an original voice worth listening to.

## HOW TO TEACH: ENGLISH

Chris has ideas that you can use. They are good. They are interesting. They are clever. Sometimes, they are funny. He is beholden to no one other than his students and his colleagues, in an unheralded school in an unheralded part of the country, who he 'clearly shows' that he dearly adores.

And the beauty of those ideas is that they don't take a great deal of setting up. Chris is a busy head of English; he hasn't got time for the overly wieldy. Also, you can use those ideas without having to buy into some grand ideology. I've used some of them this year in a school near the bottom of the league tables and even the recalcitrant and reckless gain enlightenment as a result. Chris Curtis has learned, and continues to learn, from making daily mistakes. Now learn from him and go and make different ones.

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# INTRODUCTION

When my editor and I discussed this book, I told him that I wanted to write about a practical and honest approach to teaching English. I am not a guru nor Jedi master. Nor am I one of those overpaid CPD consultants, sporting a shiny suit and spouting inspirational quotes. I am a bog-standard teacher who finds suits horribly constricting, and, on any given Tuesday, probably have mayonnaise down my tie. In terms of building my educational camp, I am less bothered about the paint and soft furnishings than I am about the bricks and mortar.

I am writing this as a teacher who has thought about his practice, and about how it can be improved to help the students learn as well as they might. This book is therefore nothing more (and nothing less) than a collection of practical approaches you can use in your classroom. I have used them all in mine and, in this book, I discuss the thinking behind them and how they could be adapted. Plus, they are quick and easy and you don't need to invest a whole weekend in preparation. You'll not need to spend the school's budget to fund them, and you'll not have to wade through numerous pages of waffle to find just one idea.

I have explored many ideas and thoughts in this book. Some you might agree with. Some you might not. However, I am always happy to discuss what works, what doesn't and why. Collectively, teachers should be asking these questions, and we should explore the impact of our decisions, considering whether commonly used practices are as effective as we think. That was my intention when I started writing a blog back in 2012. It was entitled *Learning from My Mistakes*, and my thinking was, why should an NQT have to make the same mistakes that I have?

For I have made mistakes in the classroom, and I hold my hands up to that. I don't mean simple errors like getting a student's name wrong or forgetting to use the 'correct' colour pen for marking. I mean mistakes like teaching a novel without thinking about the assessment from the start. I've taught texts that were too easy and some that were *possibly* too hard. We don't acknowledge the mistakes we make in teaching

often enough. There's a sense of pride in the profession: a male (or female) bravado that stops us fessing up to ourselves.

Why do NQTs make mistakes that more experienced teachers (forgetting that we too started from that point) might think are glaringly obvious? It's because we don't discuss them enough. Mistakes are seen as weaknesses, not as opportunities to learn something. If we don't explore them, how can we expect students to learn from theirs? What do we want our students to learn? How to talk about the mistakes made and find possible solutions to the problem. That's what I hope this book, and my blog, does. I am not writing this as a highly paid literacy consultant, from a gold chair perched on the lifeless bodies of former colleagues. I am writing this as a teacher who is going back into the classroom tomorrow. That is unless you are reading this during the holidays, then I will be back in at the start of term, probably with mayonnaise down my front.

So, what have I learned from my mistakes that I would pass on for others to avoid?

## 1. DON'T SPEND TOO MUCH TIME ON RESOURCES

When teaching *The Merchant of Venice* several years ago, I spent a good few hours making fifteen sets of three envelopes look just like the caskets that Portia's suitors have to open. The effect was spoilt in the sixty seconds it took me to hand them out. One student opened theirs and revealed to the class what was in them.

Put simply, the time spent on a resource has got to be proportional to the use you will get out of it. I have resources that I use again and again, such as a sheet listing opening sentences from various novels. I use this with Years 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11. If you want to spend time on resources – which can be fun in a strange way – make sure that you will get the due returns on them. A resource that can be used for all or most classes is better than a one-off for a poem you'll never teach again.

The lesson on *The Merchant of Venice* didn't amount to much as I had to hastily cobble together half a lesson to replace the discussion I was hoping the envelope activity would produce. It taught me that we can all too easily get caught up with

## INTRODUCTION

making things engaging or fun when, in fact, the text itself is the puzzle. Shakespeare's riddles are the key resource, not my pitiful attempts to create props. Now, several years down the line, I'd probably put all the riddles down on a sheet of paper or on the board and add these questions:

- Which chest is gold? Silver? Lead?
- Which chest contains Portia's image and hand in marriage?

The riddles are engaging enough without half a tub of glitter and three hours' worth of prep. Engage with the students intellectually and you have got them for the lesson. Dumb down intellectual ideas and you'll have to work harder to maintain that level of thinking. *And* you'll have to create more resources. Intellectual engagement is free, paperless and easy to conjure up.

## 2. TECHNOLOGY IS A TOOL AND JUST THAT

I once lost a year's worth of resources due to a memory stick being put through a 40° cotton wash several times. I cannot describe the pain, anguish and suffering I experienced. I lost several units of work in the blink of a spin cycle. That's why – now – I back everything up and send it to my mum via email just in case I lose it.

Technology helps teaching, but it doesn't replace it. If your practice is too reliant on technology, then step away from it. Only the other week, I had someone use my room and change the settings on the computer so I couldn't use my PowerPoint of 'Ozymandias'. Plan B didn't work because the projector wouldn't show the YouTube video. I was left with a paperclip and a pack of lined paper and, in true MacGyver fashion, created a fairly good lesson. Without the technological fripperies we were able to focus on the text.

A computer doesn't make a lesson function. The teacher's brain does. And that only rarely breaks down.

### 3. PARENTS ARE NOT THE ENEMY

It's easy to forget that parents want the best for their children when you're constantly being bombarded with less than pleasant emails. Parents have fears, worries and anxieties for – and relationships with – their children. If a child is upset, they will naturally act to protect. Behind every parental complaint or issue is a reason. Understand the reason and you'll understand the parent.

One of the key difficulties in teaching is that we deal with so many humans: the young people we teach and the adults who love them most. The happiness of one is reliant and dependent on the other. And, dear reader, children are not always the most vocal of individuals. I'd advise all teachers to talk to parents. Chat with them and discuss issues. The problems I have had were usually caused by not openly discussing an issue so that it became something bigger at a later stage. Parents are people.

### 4. DON'T REINVENT THE WHEEL

I've spent thousands of hours making resources, and it has taken me over a decade to learn to use the people around me to help me get through the job. Teaching is hard, but all too often we don't utilise what's around us. A textbook can be part of the lesson. A colleague can help you plan and resource a lesson. It is about give and take. Give to others and it is easier to take.

The problem with teaching is the constant pace. It is just too fast and too busy. In the rush of things, it is difficult to be friendly and considerate. Occasionally, you can be too busy even to pee. Seek out resources and collaborate with others to make your work-life balance better. The job can swallow us up, and it is our collective responsibility to make sure that doesn't happen.

## 5. DON'T BOTTLE THINGS UP

Teaching is an emotional job. The majority of the time, we are trapped in a classroom with thirty human-shaped sticks of emotional dynamite. They could explode at any point and, as adults, we have to maintain a certain dignified restraint. We can't really burst into tears every time a student is either nice or unpleasant to us. Emotionally, we live on a knife edge. Here, it is good to talk, to discuss and to share thoughts and feelings. Do it over a drink. Do it after playing football. Just get it out of your system.

Oh, and one last bit of advice. Find a hobby and work hard to do it whenever and wherever you can. If you have no outside interests then you will become the job. That hobby might be reading, stamp collecting, painting, swimming, even naturism; but, whatever it is, keep at it and find the time for it. Don't let school make the things you enjoy become expendable. I have witnessed numerous teachers working both Saturdays and Sundays to keep on top of the job, which, after all, is just that – a job. Something that pays the bills. Regardless of how good or how bad you are, the cogs of the education machine will keep turning without you. It happens to us all. We'd like to think being a teacher is a vocation and a calling, but I haven't met that many teachers who'd be willing to teach for free.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Teachers are busy people and I've written this book with that in mind. It is a rarity for teachers to be able to sit down for a long time, and it is even rarer for a teacher to be able to sit down and read. Therefore, I've kept things quite concise. The time you spend trying to visualise an extended metaphor that is spread over several pages could be better spent on friends and family. So feel free to dip into chapters that are most relevant to something you are currently teaching or read from cover to cover.

Finally, just a quick note on the poems and literary extracts used throughout. These are mainly sourced from Project Gutenberg online editions as these are so easily accessible, and the precise wording quoted here matches these sources. However, please do check whether there are any slight textual variations between these and any other edition you might be using before exploring the text with a class.

## Chapter 2

# HOW TO TEACH WRITING

## – PART 1

Unlike speaking, writing is not a natural process. Whereas students pick up spoken language through experience and exposure, writing is a lot more complex and is primarily explicitly taught. It is difficult, time-consuming and, occasionally, quite boring. I was the kid who would rather chat and argue about a book than write about it. Like your average teenage boy, I'd spend ages procrastinating about writing. In fact, I tend to leave writing deadlines to the last minute. That hasn't changed much to this day.

The problem comes, perhaps, when we try to dress up the process, covering it in tinsel. We say it is fun and easy when, in reality, it is drawn out and blooming difficult. Personally, it took me writing every week on my blog to begin to understand how it really works. It also took me finding some good editors to make me see how to improve. One told me I needed more of an opinion, another highlighted my tendency to repeat things. I am still learning.

I think primary schools do a good job of making writing fun, but the veneer has worn off by secondary school. You are writing to make yourself understood and to present an image of yourself to another person. Some might say that writing is a dying skill, but if you look at the comments on a Facebook page or Twitter, you can see there has never been a greater need to help students, and adults, communicate articulately with the world and think about the message they are presenting to others.

There should be a balance in lessons between highlighting the areas for improvement (spelling, accuracy, grammar, content, structure) and praising what works. Students need to see success and be praised when they achieve it. Through chance, skill or mistake great writing can flow from even the clumsiest pen, but to increase the chances of that happening teachers need to ensure that there are lots of opportunities to write in lessons. We also have to overcome the thought that all writing should be

marked, assessed and inputted into a spreadsheet for a school leader to scrutinise. Work should be read, but it doesn't need a stamp of approval or detailed analysis from the teacher every time. An obsession with the final product can neglect the complex process of writing, which includes thinking, planning, sequencing, researching, reflecting, redrafting and fine tuning. Students need to explore and develop their voice, and that only comes with time and work on the processes involved. I have seen some students panic and worry when writing, because they are more focused on the end than the means. The fear of how the end product will be marked, and viewed, by the teacher has a detrimental impact. Rather than enjoy the process of communicating and exploring ideas, they are entrapped by their 'mind forg'd manacles'.

Our fetishism for marking has warped writing in the classroom. Teachers, if we are honest, will admit that we control the amount of work produced in a lesson so that there is less to mark. The sad thing is that this can cause us an inescapable cycle of underdeveloped work. The more we talk a language, the more fluent and confident we become in it. Equally, the more we write, the more fluent we become. We must address this and challenge how marking is used in the classroom. It shouldn't get in the way of progress and development. At the moment it *can*. Intervening during the process, for me, gets better improvements than summative marking. Why? Well, simply, in the middle of the process students are susceptible to change and willing to embrace it. As soon as we hit the end, it takes a highly responsible student to want to redraft and improve work. A discussion during the process can address the flaws of marking. Talking about what a student has done or could do will get better results than asking them to write five sentences after they have completed the work. The time before and during writing are instrumental periods of the process and when teachers should be diving in to help students. Afterwards is about learning from the process and making sure students can recall key parts, but during is when you can model, guide and support them to make changes.

What style of writing should dominate the classroom? Do we really want every student to use a clumsy facsimile of Dickens' style? Or do we want students to write in the style of Enid Blyton, or even Agatha Christie? Style is often dictated by fashion and so becomes problematic as fashions change. One teacher might particularly enjoy dystopian fiction, so their preferred style would be one of bleak description, buckets of misery and the odd shot of optimism. Another might be a fantasist and promote writing that features trolls, unicorns and mighty swordsmen. English teachers need

## HOW TO TEACH WRITING – PART 1

to be cautious of their own tastes and address the matter of style head-on. Compare Dickens to Rowling. Compare Dahl to Conrad. All are successful writers, but they haven't followed a formula that says, 'Do this and you will become successful.' A sparse, subtle writer can be as telling as a detailed, bombastic, repetitive one. This forms a minor paradoxical difficulty for students.

The problem comes as a result of our exam system and how teachers have interpreted marking. Is the exam assessing a student's proficiency in a skill? Or is it assessing the student's ability to include a language feature? Skills have been neglected in favour of more easily evidenced content. Students are told that if they include X, Y and Z they will get a top grade. Evidencing content features has warped teaching and marking. If a student includes a feature, then it is evidence, I suppose, that a student *can* use it. But have they used it skilfully, appropriately, effectively or structurally? Did the student simply plonk a semicolon in because a teacher told them to throw one in like a grenade and hope it does the job? Bloated writing is rewarded by teachers and is not considered successful in academic terms unless it has numerous (clearly visible) markers. No matter what the student is writing, they have to pack it with discernible features associated with the top grade. In fact, exam boards are increasingly requesting that teachers, and students, move away from this approach and stop using content mnemonics such as AFOREST<sup>1</sup> and the like to instead focus on the communication of ideas.<sup>2</sup>

Simplicity in writing is not encouraged in schools. There are writers whose work is seemingly effortless and beautiful, with very few unwieldy words or obvious techniques, and they are the ones we should be including in lessons. For me, these include Patricia Highsmith, Angela Carter, John Steinbeck, Ray Bradbury, Ian Banks, Stephen King, Saki, George Orwell and Ernest Hemingway.

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1 A simple acronym used for persuasive writing to ensure that students use alliteration, facts, opinions, rhetorical questions, emotive language, statistics and tone.

2 AQA, *GCSE English Language Paper 2 Writer's Viewpoints and Perspectives: Report on the Examination*, 8700, June 2017. Available at: <https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/sample-papers-and-mark-schemes/2017/june/AQA-87002-WRE-JUN17.PDF>.

An idea can be expressed in a single sentence or a whole paragraph.

**Example 1:**

*Marley was dead, to begin with.*<sup>3</sup>

**Example 2:**

*It was the best of times,*

*it was the worst of times,*

*it was the age of wisdom,*

*it was the age of foolishness,*

*it was the epoch of belief,*

*it was the epoch of incredulity,*

*it was the season of Light,*

*it was the season of Darkness,*

*it was the spring of hope,*

*it was the winter of despair,*

*we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.*<sup>4</sup>

The examples prove that there is more than one way to set the tone and scene. Where one is blunt and direct, the other is grandiose and poignant. They have similar functions but achieve them in different ways. A simple sentence can be just as powerful as a long multi-clause sentence or detailed paragraph. The key is knowing when it is best to use which option and in which context. Both are styles we should explore to help students write well.

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3 C. Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (Project Gutenberg ebook edition, 2006 [New York: The Platt & Peck Co., 1905]), p. 11. Available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/19337/19337-h/19337-h.htm>.

4 C. Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (Project Gutenberg ebook edition, 2004 [1859]). Available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/98/98-h/98-h.htm>.

## 1. SEXY SPROUTS

Over the years, I've spent countless hours teaching the features of different text types and ended up frustrated when information only stuck in the heads of the most able students. Students with an advanced level of understanding were able to recreate texts while others were only able to copy their most basic features. I have read countless newspaper reports which have been a narrative set out in columns with a headline and lovingly and time-consumingly drawn picture. Looks like the real thing; doesn't read or sound like it.

Writing can appear close to wizardry. You are mixing a number of ingredients to make a powerful spell. It was when I was working on some persuasive writing with Year 8 that I developed what has been, for me, a monumental piece of understanding. We were watching the infamous Marks and Spencer adverts where glossy footage of food is narrated by the soft, slowly spoken, sultry voice of a woman. It made food sound sexy. We attempted to give sprouts that treatment.

---

*Soft, silky leaves peel back to show a crunchy, hard centre. Ready for picking.*

---

The great thing was that it made students use all of the techniques I had previously spent months teaching them ... naturally and automatically. Putting the emphasis on effect instead of text type made the writing instantly better. Instead of asking students to write 'dot-to-dot' pieces, I was asking them to make real texts with the emphasis on the impact. In truth, I was getting students to act as real writers. Real writers don't follow a set list of ingredients. They try their damndest to communicate a thought or a feeling. I gave classes the following piece of text and asked them to rewrite it for a different effect, ranging from guilt to boredom to awe.

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*Pure evil. The worst vegetable in the world. A soggy, watery parcel of smelly green goo. It is as if the worst of every meal has been scooped together and boiled down into one small ball. Eating them is like eating sick that has been left out overnight and has little bits of peas floating around in it.*

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The discussion moved away from identifying simplistic devices. Now students were thinking, and that is the key word, about how to achieve the desired impact. They were asking the right questions instead of questioning what they needed to include. They weren't looking at writing as a shopping list.

Thanks to several students and classes for producing the following examples:

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**Making the reader feel impressed and awed.**

*Brussel sprouts handpicked by Scottish farmers. All washed in fresh, crystal clear bottled water. All the way from the waterfalls in the Scottish Isles. Feel the sensation as you bite slowly into the crispy, crunchy leaves of this round succulent wonder of the earth. These sprouts will light up any occasion. Be sure to indulge yourself on these green parcels of delight and joy.*

**Making the reader feel guilty.**

*How would you feel if you were walked past in the supermarket every day, with no one even thinking about buying you? Well, this is how Barbara and her family feel. They grew up dreaming of the open air, but when they finally got there, they were ripped and torn from their homes and were shoved in a tight, uncomfortable plastic box and stacked on shelves where nobody looks. Forgotten and unloved, Barbara waits.*

**Making the reader feel shocked and horrified.**

*At six months old, they are ripped from the safety of their family and thrown into boiling water. Their skin melts and their leaves burn away from their body. Slowly, they suffer in pain as they die in the skin-blistering water. It takes two minutes for a sprout to die in boiling water. If they are lucky, they are chopped or mashed beforehand. The majority are not so lucky and they face this agonising death.*

**Making the reader feel a sense of urgency and need.**

*Now these sprouts are limited edition. One of a kind. They come in several shades of green. Select the best one for your meal. A light green for a light, healthy meal and a dark shade of green for a decadent, rich meal. They are so versatile. From cooking to eating, there's so much you can do with these limited edition sprouts, which have been genetically engineered to be even tastier than the average*

*sprout. But stocks are limited, so if you want to experience something new, experience something different, experience something original, then pick up a bag now. Only £5 for a bag, buy this special treat for a loved one, a friend, or even to treat yourself.*

---

This had a knock-on impact on their creative writing. It highlights one of the problems students have: often they are limited by the 'effect' of their creative writing. How many times have I read something intended to scare me? Students tend to have two default modes: to scare or to use humour. Open them up to other effects and feelings and you'll get more interesting and, more importantly, meaningful writing. To aid their realisation, I tend to place huge emphasis on the emotional journey: write me a story that covers these three emotions – fear, disgust, pride.

## 2. SENTENCES

You tend to find that specific students have a penchant for particular techniques. Thomas always focuses on alliteration. Sam can spot a simile a mile off. Or, if you are lucky, as I once was, they can spot any religious reference in a text. For me, it is sentence types. I will come back to them later, as I am somewhat obsessed with them. I love finding new sentence types. I love teaching sentences. I love exploring the meaning behind the construction of a sentence.

Several years ago, I came across an idea by Alan Peat that I have used again and again. Modelling is important and the more we can do it the better for our students. I am the role model at the front of the class. I should be setting the example. Yes, you can, and should, openly make mistakes to show you are human but, importantly, you should be an example to model, mimic and copy. Just don't copy my dress sense or mannerisms.<sup>5</sup>

Alan's idea is simple. You take a particular grammatical structure and name it – for example: the more, the more sentence.

---

5 Or you'll end up with mayonnaise on your tie.

*The more I waited, the more I worried.*

---

You explicitly teach students the sentence construction. Help them to see how and why the sentence is constructed in that way. You can also draw attention to the use of punctuation, aiding and developing their control of the same. Afterwards, get students to create their own in isolation.

---

*The more I looked, the more I panicked.*

*The more she ate, the more the people in the restaurant noticed her.*

---

Then I get students to write a paragraph which includes the structure. Over a couple of lessons, I can cover about ten of these structures. We then write a longer text incorporating them all. All the time, I am modelling the process of writing. As I have been doing this for years, I have collated examples into a booklet for most units. They make a nice homework, starter or even intervention strategy. The students have to create three different examples using the structure in the model.

My sentence obsession is so bad that I am constantly looking for new ones. Each book I read serves up a collection to mimic and use. Teach one sentence a week and a student could have thirty different ones before the end of the year. I even get students to find and name their own. This allows them to identify the key components of sentences in a way that they can replicate in their own writing. Students are focused on the structure more than the content when they do this. For example, a student of mine named one structure a 'happy/sad' sentence.

---

*The children laughed and giggled as the soldiers lifted the corpse off the ground.*

---

Alan Peat has a number of different resources and apps linked to the idea and they do help students to develop and improve their writing. I'd highly recommend his *Writing Exciting Sentences: Age Seven Plus* and his website for resources.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. PARAGRAPHS

I will admit that for years I was pretty clueless about teaching paragraphs. I followed the usual party line of TIP TOP. Start a new paragraph for each change of time, place, topic or person. I would repeat this again and again, but I didn't really get under the surface until I used Alan Peat's sentence structure approach. Then I looked at how I could adapt this for other aspects of English teaching. So, I tried to name and categorise different paragraph structures and, in doing so, felt a little like a Victorian explorer pinning butterflies to a board.

On a sheet of paper, I drew several boxes and filled them and then some more. I made sheets for non-fiction and fiction. I now use them for all forms of writing with all levels of student. It provides a great starting point for writing and offers students many possible choices. After all, we don't want students to default to the typical.

Here's one such example, following the 'No ... No ... No ... No ... But, there was ...' paragraph structure:

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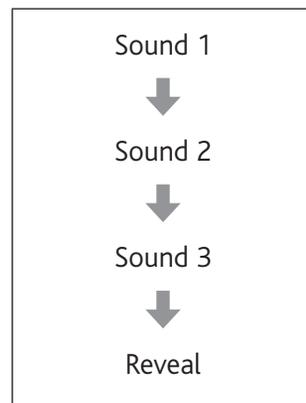
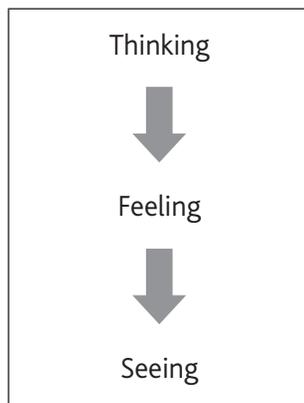
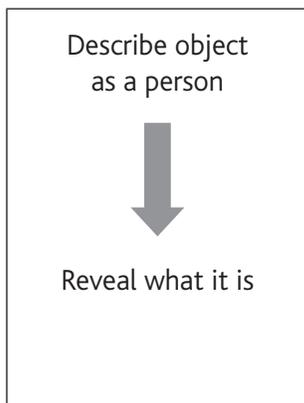
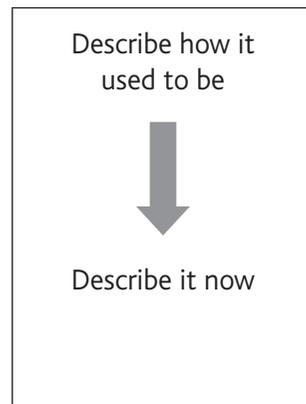
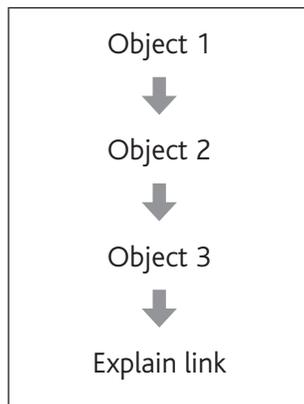
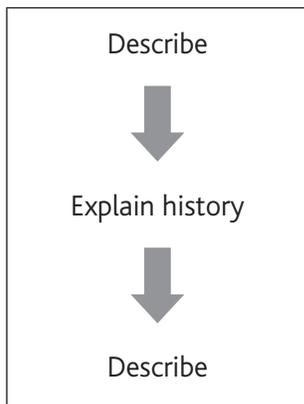
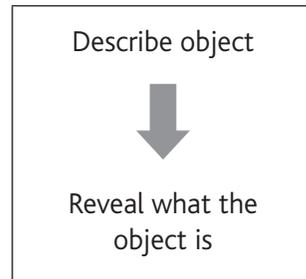
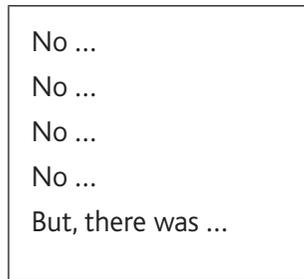
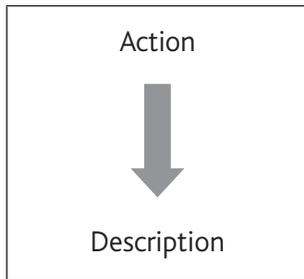
*No life had visited the room. No light had touched its fingers on the delicate wallpaper and fine paintings. No breeze had tickled the faded curtains and frail netting across the boarded up windows. No soul had experienced rest here. But, there was one movement.*

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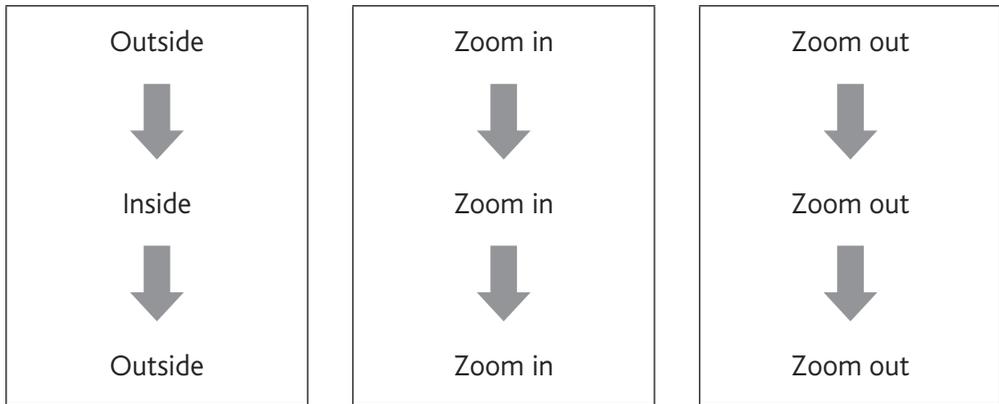
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6 A. Peat, *Writing Exciting Sentences: Age Seven Plus* (Biddulph: Creative Educational Press, 2008). His website is <https://alanpeat.com/>.

HOW TO TEACH: ENGLISH



## HOW TO TEACH WRITING – PART 1



When you have a starting point, you can be more playful with the structure. I always love it when a student invents their own.

---

A year ago. A month ago. A day ago. Today.

*A year ago, the beach was hidden from the world. A month ago, a boat arrived and people found this oasis of beauty. A day ago, more people arrived. Today, I discovered what had happened to my sanctuary.*

Close, closer, closest.

*Close to me was a light. It was flickering gently in the breeze. Closer still were the sounds of people, laughing and chatting. Closest to me was the person I loved most in the world.*

Near, far, near, far.

*I could hear my friend's breathing behind me. The enemy was on the outskirts of the city, getting closer to us by the minute. My friend's eyes showed fear and terror. The footsteps of the soldiers echoed as they entered the city looking for us.*

---

## 4. UNDERSTAND THE RULES OF PUNCTUATION

Over the years, the teaching of punctuation has suffered some bad press. The SPaG (spelling, punctuation and grammar) lesson was often frowned on because it was seen as lazy. In some eyes, if it isn't active, physical or flamboyant then it isn't teaching. A teacher simply pulls out a grammar textbook and students proceed to complete the task. Where was the teacher acting out at the front of the class? Where was the card sort? The essentials were lost in entertainment pretending to be teaching. Punctuation got a rough deal. It wasn't sexy. Yes, people might have a penchant for semicolons or colons because they appear as if they might be difficult. But, you wouldn't see teachers planning a lesson on comma usage if they wanted it to be 'outstanding'.

Punctuation, love it or hate it, is an integral part of writing and communication. We all know how a comma in the wrong place makes it sound like someone is going to eat their granny, but there is something important about learning the function of pieces of punctuation, or even how they can have multiple functions. Without this level of precision, we end up just telling students to chuck in an exclamation mark because Ros Wilson's 'Punctuation Pyramid' tells us it's better than a comma.<sup>7</sup> Or just use a comma when there is a pause. Punctuation has been simplified, neglected and misused.

We have even got to the stage where we have endless battles between the pro- and anti-teaching-grammar camps on Twitter. Personally, I think you need a healthy balance of both explicit grammar teaching and implicit learning through reading. They go hand in hand, not arm against arm. Learning what a conditional sentence<sup>8</sup> is will not instantaneously make you the greatest writer, but it will help you to notice the different ways writers use it. Later, you will be able to adopt it in your own writing. I don't agree with the vocal (mainly children's) writers who spout how the learning of grammar rules is actually detrimental to expression. Some of our greatest Victorian writers had the most rigid and explicit grammar teaching and they turned out alright. To an extent, English teaching has always been a battle between order and chaos – or

---

7 See <http://www.andrelleducation.com/big-writing/>.

8 A conditional sentence is a complex sentence often made from two clauses exploring the impact of a certain condition/context/scenario. One clause contains a condition: 'If I am late' and the other an outcome or solution: 'you can start making tea.'

## HOW TO TEACH WRITING – PART 1

simply, rules and freedom. We want students to be creative, but we also want them to follow the rules of language. It is far better for this to happen from a place of knowledge rather than by happenstance, serendipity and ignorance.

Grammar is like the rules behind a game. You could still play without them, but you wouldn't do it properly and chaos would ensue. Yeah, you might score a goal, but how do you know what a goal is, or what skill and finesse look like. You'll most likely be disqualified in any case because you didn't follow the rules. When you have the rules clear in your head, you can use them to your advantage, use them to find the shortcuts and, ultimately, to win. Plus, rules help narrow the parameters. There is less chaos and fewer variables, so what you effectively work on is a narrow band of skills.

There's a glut of people in society, often famous writers, who argue that they weren't explicitly taught grammar but look at how successful they are. A group of people who seem to have had an education on a *Lord of the Flies* style island devoid of adult supervision and rules. Like the boys in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, it seems idyllic and fun, but I don't think Piggy would agree. Explicit teaching of grammar ensures that students, like Piggy, are not let down and have a chance to succeed.

It is our job to help our students master the rules of writing, and those jobs may be forfeited if Tiny Tim decides to write his story without any punctuation because he wants to symbolise the way the education system has stymied his creativity. Yes, it might be lovely and beautiful that a student can express his ideas through a rhyming couplet, but if that student can't write a competent letter of application then the couplet is unlikely to be of much use. There is a moral dimension to grammar. We want students to better themselves and understanding grammar is one way to do that. All too often, those protesting about explicit grammar teaching are not interacting with students day in, day out. So what would they know?

Take the simple exclamation mark: a mark that editors hate and that has been abused for decades. In lessons, it is used with gleeful abandon to show shock. But doesn't it have another purpose? To show disgust? To show disbelief? To show surprise? Young writers overuse the exclamation mark because social media has made it acceptable.

*What is that!*

*I am not going to touch it!*

*Not again!*

---

The exclamation mark is used for different effects. The function is the same, yet the purpose is different. Teach the function of the punctuation, then explore its purpose. We know that single inverted commas are used to separate words from the original text, yet the purpose of inverted commas can also be to show sarcasm, humour, exaggeration, shock, disgust, etc.

I often get students to use punctuation with purpose. Well, effect really, because I blur the two together. Telling students to use different pieces from the 'Punctuation Pyramid' is helpful to develop variety, but it is pretty useless when you are trying to use punctuation to any sophisticated level. Therefore, I get students to use punctuation with a particular effect in mind.

Use inverted commas to be sarcastic.

---

*The dress was incredibly 'fashionable'.*

---

Use ellipses to show you have forgotten something.

---

*I walked down the stairs thinking about something to do with ... with ... something I couldn't remember.*

---

Use a colon for dramatic effect by referring back to something that was hinted at before.

*The room was empty apart from a dark figure: a statue whose eyes looked directly at me and blinked.*

---

Use two dashes to add a parenthetical comment and change the tone of the writing.

---

*The journey back home had been surprisingly quiet – I later realised I had forgotten to put the baby in the car when I left the shopping centre – as I plodded through my daily routine.*

---

Always link punctuation to effect and to function. Students need to be explicitly taught these functions. We want students to write with clear purpose and this needs to be drip-fed to them all the time. Punctuation has a job and an effect.

## 5. LISTS, LISTS, LISTS

I believe it is better to teach one thing really well than lots of things badly. Over the years, acronyms have sprouted up to try to teach/force decent writing to/onto students. They have always, in my opinion, ended up with students trying to cram absolutely everything into one sentence or paragraph. One such example was AFOR-EST (as we saw, a simple acronym to ensure students use alliteration, facts, opinions, rhetorical questions, emotive language, statistics and tone, not much appreciated by examiners). It reduced writing to a series of bolt-on techniques. Through such a prism, a good piece of writing will cycle through a predetermined list of techniques. Writers don't work like this, of course. You can't imagine Jane Austen agonising over the fact that she hasn't used a rhetorical question in a paragraph. Yet English teachers use this approach to engineer Frankenstein's monster in writing.

Teaching often leads to conceptual reduction rather than clarification. I'm a big believer in teaching something in great detail and making students masters of that aspect. Over the year, we will keep coming back to things previously taught. Instead

of repeating the reductive muddle of AFOREST, I ask students to remind me of variations, for instance, of using a list in a sentence. In my experience, students can write far more effectively by using lists than through employing some daft acronym.

Structurally, there are three main places to use a list in a sentence: at the start, in the middle and at the end.

- 
- 1 *Coffee, Twitter and music keep me sane.*
  - 2 *I wonder how I ever coped without video games, TV and the Internet as a child living in Wales.*
  - 3 *Wales has a historic tradition of singing, playing rugby and cwtching.<sup>9</sup>*
- 

Teaching students to write using lists is like going back to the beginning. The problem with lists is that they are generally used as a simple functional device: 'I need to list the objects I placed in my bag.' Students don't often see them as tools with which we can affect style or meaning.

A list at the start of a sentence can help to bamboozle a reader by linking odd combinations of words.

---

*A brick, a carrot and a notepad are the things I regularly carry in my handbag.*

---

A list at the end of a sentence can create a sense of drama.

---

*The day was interesting: it featured fun, laughter and death.*

---

---

9 This is a big Welsh cuddle.

## HOW TO TEACH WRITING – PART 1

A list in an unusual or particular place can create a sense of expectation. In horror stories and ghost stories, the power of suggestion is incredibly effective. The first noise is something harmless. The second noise is harmless too. By the time we get to the third noise, we think it is harmless but, in fact, it is a mass murderer getting ready to add to his list of victims. This 'rule of three' can be used to great effect in stories.

---

*On the cold, dark and lonely moor nestled a cold, dark, lonely house where a woman sat in a window with cold, dark and lonely thoughts and murder on her mind.*

*The man's empty, cold and narrow eyes followed the people and his mind too was empty, cold and narrow, but the thing in his hands wasn't empty: it was cold and narrow.*

---

Lists aren't just affected by where you place them in a sentence but also by what you list.

---

*Now, my shopping bag ordinarily contains eggs, flour and milk. My annoyance, anger and humiliation became evident when I returned home to see I'd (incorrectly, mistakenly and stupidly) forgotten to buy wine – the most important ingredient for all meals. Well, my meals, anyway.*

---

Listing different parts of speech (or other varieties of abstraction) can produce some interesting effects. Consider the effect created by the following.

---

*A list of emotions. Anger, frustration and fury were all he felt at that time.*

*A list of verbs. The train shuddered, rocked, tilted and jolted over the tracks.*

*A list of adverbs. He typed the email furiously, frantically, fitfully.*

*A list of prepositions. The balls flew near, over and beneath the people seated on their chairs.*

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A list of pronouns. *She couldn't decide if it was her, him or them to blame for the accident.*

A list of words with the same prefix. *She felt unimportant, unnecessary, uninvited and unwanted at the party.*

A list of words with the same suffix. *The tree was fruitless, hopeless and meaningless.*

A list of similes. *Time moved slowly like a lazy, tired animal, like it had no care in the world, like a petulant child instructed to tidy its room.*

A list of colours. *The flowers' greens, light blues and aggressive reds camouflaged the creatures hiding among the petals.*

A list of sounds. *The wheels of the car crunched, shattered and scratched the pieces of glass.*

---

I could go on. There are so many variables. Yet we rarely teach students to experiment and play with lists. Students could consider how many items they might put in a list, or they could consider the order. The beauty of lists is that they are not limited to writing. Lists have a valuable benefit for analysis. They can highlight complexity and multiple meanings. 'The article persuades, shocks and advises us of the dangers of smoking.' A sentence like this shows us that the student understands that the text has a number of purposes. If the student lists those purposes in the order in which they appear in the text, then the student will be commenting on the structure as well as the purpose.

---

A list of the writer's purpose/message. *Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing highlights how men view love, how easily they damage relationships and how they struggle to articulate and manage their feelings.*

A list of the reader's/audience's feelings. *The audience respects, idolises and fears Othello at the start of the play.*

A list of words to describe the text/character. *Macbeth's insecurity, naïvety and inconsistency combine to fuel his downfall.*

A list of techniques. *The use of alliteration, words associated with pain and the word 'danger' combine to create a sense of fear as the poet expresses the reality of the soldier's fate.*

---

The list of possibilities is endless, infinite and continuous.

## 6. MODEL AND READ ALOUD

I write in almost every lesson. I think it is important that students see me writing. I set students off to write and I have a go myself while they are doing it, asking myself the entirely reasonable question: can I do what I am expecting students to do? My early years of teaching were spent setting students off to write and then waiting at the front to see what they would produce, wondering how much work I'd have to mark or what I'd have for tea. Like an expectant father, I'd pace the classroom. Usually, the arrival was met with tears but not of joy.

Now, I do the same task as them. And, as I am sharing their experience, I am able to ask questions like:

- Who else found it difficult to start?
- Did anybody else manage to use a rhetorical question? (What's that? You struggled, Jane? Never mind.)
- Anybody else struggle to fit that word in?

There are few things more powerful than a shared experience in learning. Years down the line, every student can remember the time a wasp got into the classroom and the time Bill vomited over the front row of desks. A shared experience easily becomes a shared memory as we constantly remind each other of it. The other advantage of sharing the experience is that students can see what a good example looks like and, even more importantly, how you write.

## HOW TO TEACH: ENGLISH

Able students are great, but they can give others a misguided idea of how easy it is to achieve success. There will always be students who can quickly produce superb pieces of work with little apparent effort. Other students will see them as something to aspire to: that's why some boys race to finish first because that's what 'brighter' students seem to do. Me tapping away on the board helps students to see the pace at which I write, which is quite slow. It also allows them to steal or borrow ideas, words or phrases for their own writing. Speed of writing is needed in the final exams, but not necessarily in the years leading up to them. I set the pace for the completion of the task.

The other advantage of having a clear, visual example is as a point of reference. I love saying to students, when we have finished, 'Who wrote it like I did? Who didn't?' At that point, you learn about the different possibilities on offer. The students learn that there is more than one way to approach the task. Also, they can see the humour in my writing. I love being playful and I model this to the students. Can I write a paragraph without the word 'the'? Can I describe a setting without mentioning anything visual? Can I reference the head teacher without the class knowing?

At this point, I get a chance to read students' work out loud. This, I feel, is a neglected aspect. We get students to read out their own work and that is commendable, but it lacks the life and power of the teacher doing so. I can use my delivery to turn the most turgid, clunking prose into something rather more atmospheric. I love the drama of reading out a student's writing and, whether it be a letter or a piece of creative writing, I am modelling how the text *might* be received and experienced. The voice of the writing is reflected in how I speak. I will pause for emphasis, speed things up, slow things down. All the time, I'm modelling the way the text is communicating to the reader. Every text is a performance. Teach students that writing is a performance and it becomes more interesting.

Over the years, this has been incredibly powerful as bright boys, especially, try to build up the humour and explore different ways of creating an effect. I always find one student is willing to push the boundaries to try and outsmart me. For a whole year, one played a cat and mouse game with me. We both had fun and the class did too because we were writing for an audience – each other. The class couldn't wait to see how the student had ridiculed and belittled me. I am 5 foot 5. There was a theme.

## 7. LOTS OF WRITING – THE 200 WORD CHALLENGE

I've changed the way I view writing over the years, and now think there isn't enough of it in schools. Students don't write enough in English or in other subjects. There's a simple reason for this: the expectation that every piece of work should be marked in depth. Senior leaders have propelled this expectation to the extent that, in some schools, teachers avoid extended writing so that they don't have to mark so much. This has caused a problem. The fear of being judged by an outsider for not marking work has changed the balance in the classroom. The fear is a genuine one, but it should be addressed by any good senior leader. The students should be working harder than the teacher. Fact! An exercise book should be full of work. That's what I want to see. If not, what have you been teaching and what has the student been learning? If we want students to be better writers, we need them to improve their fluency – and that only comes with constant writing.

In English, our units of work are planned around using a particular style termed 'transactional writing'. We spend whole terms analysing how and preparing to write in such styles, but the creativity, fun and enjoyment are leeched out when you are five weeks into term and now you get to write your very own letter to a charity. The immediacy of writing is often neglected. You either have wishy-washy musings about a character's feelings in a play or you have a rigid style that students must emulate otherwise they have failed to understand the text type.

In my school, we've changed the way we view writing. We've made it a weekly thing. In the last lesson of the week, we get students to write a piece of fiction or non-fiction. Each week is a different style and a surprise. Rather than get students to produce one piece of extended writing a term, we get them to produce multiple stylistically different smaller pieces. They write more and, to be honest, what they produce now is more creative.

## HOW TO TEACH: ENGLISH

We followed a process very similar to the various writing challenges used in primary schools. First, we give the students a PowerPoint slide with the following information:

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**Persuade teachers that you are the best student in the school**

You must include the following:

- A link to a historical event.
- A line from a famous song.
- A quote from a well-known speech.
- A simile.
- A fact.

You must include the following word in your writing:

Indisputable: it is true and nobody can argue with the fact. As in, *Mrs Jones' cooking is indisputably good.*

---

Students then write for twenty-five minutes, aiming to produce at least 200 words. There are no interruptions. Students are expected to write without asking questions so they can build up their independence. If the text or task is particularly challenging, the teacher might clarify or reteach an aspect. During the writing, I will mark ten students' work and help them.

For the second half of the lesson, students peer assess using the following format:

---

**Peer assessment**

- 1 Highlight and label the following: a link to a historical event, a line from a famous song, a quote from a well-known speech, a simile, a fact.
- 2 Circle any errors.

## HOW TO TEACH WRITING – PART 1

- 3 Write down what they need to do to improve the content/structure/writing.
  - 4 Sign and date it.
- 

Finally, I get students to respond to the peer assessment with this:

---

Correct each circled mistake and write a quick explanation of the mistake – spelling/I missed a letter/I forgot a comma.

---

In the final few minutes, I read out some of the best examples. If there is a really good one, I photocopy it for the next class so it can inspire and direct them.

Yes, this is the old kind of composition task that was commonplace many years ago, but it worked very well for both teachers and students. Teachers were happy because lessons were easily planned, and it helped revise techniques from other areas of the curriculum. Boys were happy because it was immediate, quick and gave them the freedom to use humour. Girls liked it because they could be more creative and because the previous teaching of writing was fairly restrictive. The students' writing has improved but, more importantly, their voices have developed through writing more. And it's not the same students producing the best pieces all the time. Who knew Lucy could be so sardonic and witty in her writing?

Students look forward to the 200 Word Challenge now. It's a chance to be creative, to be surprised by the task, to experiment. We love playful and witty writers, yet we often don't create the environment for students to be as creative as they might be. The manacles need to come off sometimes. Just get students to write more. When they are writing, they are thinking. And that is what we want.

# Never underestimate your duty and power as a teacher of English.

English teachers help students to think and feel. They prompt them to reflect on their actions. They hold a mirror to society and inspire students to see how they can make it better.

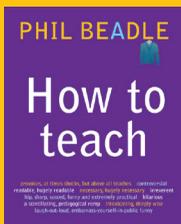
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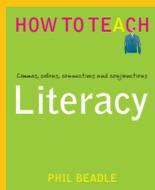


**Chris Curtis** is an English teacher and head of department with over a decade's experience in education. Chris is forever reflecting on which aspects of his teaching work best for his students and, as an avid reader and blogger, is a big believer in sharing practical ways to tackle difficult problems in the classroom.

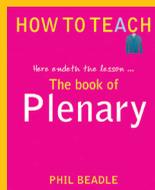
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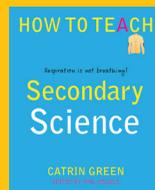
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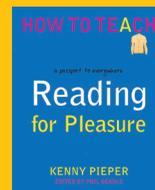
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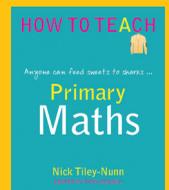
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