Progression principles in English curriculum planning

Secondary English curriculum design series: part 3

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Overview

In this document
This document aims to identify and exemplify some of the key ways that progression can be built into the curriculum in English. It can be used to inform discussion between department leaders and line managers as well as providing some food for thought during the curriculum planning process.

This document is the third in a series of resources to support thinking about the curriculum in English: other documents in this series include *Literary heritage, cultural capital, representation and knowledge in English; English Language in the KS3 curriculum; Pitch and expectations for English,* and *Pedagogy for English.*

Points to consider when using this resource
When planning the English curriculum, there will always be specific factors related to the school context to consider – one size does not fit all and the experiences of the student community and the values of the school should, wherever possible, be reference points for teachers and leaders as they shape the learning offered to students.

Progression principles in English

Progression and the sequencing of the curriculum can and will work in a combination of different ways. There is no fixed hierarchy of knowledge or skills in English, nor can progression simply be based on 'harder' texts. Progress is cumulative and iterative as students become more familiar, confident, flexible and sophisticated in their reading, writing and speaking over time, drawing on an increasingly secure frame of reference and the ability to make connections between texts.

This section of this resource explores some of the ways in which the curriculum can be organised to ensure progression; a successful long-term curriculum plan is likely to include many or all of these sequencing strategies in combination.

Progression in reading

The emphasis in reading at KS2 is heavily focused on comprehension and inference as well as understanding words in context. An immediate jump, therefore, to a GCSE-style emphasis on analysis of language in Year 7 is inappropriate and unhelpful, leading as it does to frustration for both student and teacher.

Comprehension, inferential reading and interpretation continues to be of paramount importance to GCSE and beyond, underpinning all analysis; these elements of reading should continue to be a clear focus of teaching throughout KS3. Strategies for active reading should continue to be shared and modelled, and word study to develop vocabulary should be a strand of the curriculum. Students should be taught both to develop their own interpretations and to explore and test the validity of interpretations offered by others, explaining responses and supporting or contesting ideas with evidence.

Close reading, with a focus on the writer's language choices, will be developed throughout KS3 and schools should ensure that by the end of Year 9, students are confident in exploring the close detail of a text and in annotation, ready for GCSE.

Progression in reading can, of course, come partly through text choices – and yet, texts can be challenging in different ways and challenging texts can be studied at any point in the curriculum arc; texts are read for different purposes at different times and in varying degrees of depth and sophistication (consider, for instance, the emphasis in some university courses on the study of the same fairy tales taught in Years 1 and 2 or the different ways in which a skilled teacher would approach *Macbeth* in Year 7 and Year 11). English departments should not shy away from teaching challenging texts in KS3, but equally should not assume that this means that the diet of reading should be exclusively (or even mainly) 'classic', particularly in Year 7 – although classic texts should, of course, be included as part of the curriculum offered to students.

Doug Lemov (*Reading Reconsidered, 2016)* has identified the *"five plagues* (or challenges) *of reading"* as archaic texts, non-linear time sequences, complexity of narration, complexity of plot and resistant texts that are deliberately difficult to unpick.

Alex Quigley (*Closing the Reading Gap, 2020, p104)* identifies the *"arduous eight"* elements of reading difficulty:

> *"1)   Background knowledge…*
>
> *2)   Range and complexity of vocabulary…*
>
> *3)   Use of abstract imagery and metaphorical language*
>
> *4)   Sentence length and syntax*
>
> *5)   Narrative or whole-text structures*
>
> *6)   The generic elements of the text…*
>
> *7)   The scaffolds present, or absent, in a given text…*
>
> *8)   Text length"*

English departments need to consider how they can support students to develop their reading and understanding of texts across this range of *plagues* and elements of *arduous* difficulty as well as maintaining pleasure, fluency and confidence in reading.

Thematic sequencing and building a knowledge base

One strategy for curriculum design could be to organise content choices with a view to developing knowledge of the ideas and themes explored in texts, making connections between texts to inform understanding. This approach will depend on the choices of text and the desired end point where thematic and contextual knowledge comes together.

An example:

One of the texts studied at GCSE is Lord of the Flies *by William Golding and the English department wants students to approach their reading of this text with secure understanding of the world in which it is set and the mindset of the characters. The novel explores ideas about the "darkness of men's hearts", civilisation and savagery, sacrifice and integrity. The key characters are schoolboys from the 1950s, mainly educated through the public school system, and have attitudes that are the legacy of the British Empire; the failure of these ideals portrayed in the novel is informed by Golding's experiences of war and his fear of the rise of totalitarianism in the 20th century. The setting of the story is on a deserted tropical island.*

When mapping the curriculum for KS3, the English department have kept in mind these ideas and have decided to include in their long-term plan the following texts that are valuable in their own right and also have thematic or contextual links to Lord of the Flies*:*

Year 7	Year 8	Year 9
• Mythological grounding – myths of the labours of Hercules and the voyages of Jason and the Argonauts • Biblical story of the Garden of Eden	• Shakespeare text: *The Tempest*	• Extracts from *Robinson Crusoe* • *Bone Talk* by Candy Gourlay
classical education, civilisation and the wilderness, travel and exploration, monsters	*island setting, ideas about colonialism, civilisation, savagery, heroes and villains*	*alternative ideas about colonialism, civilisation, savagery, survival*
The Island at the End of Everything by Kiran Millwood Hargrave	• Pre-1914 poetry including *If* and *Invictus* • Non-fiction writing about survival in the wild	• journalism and argument about statues commemorating problematic historical figures
adventure story, ideas about colonialism, island setting	*self-reliance, survival, resilience, mindset*	*changing attitudes through time*

Building knowledge of how a particular type of text works

Careful sequencing of the curriculum to build understanding of a particular type of text can be very effective as it supports knowledge transfer from one application to the next rather than grounding all the knowledge gained in one particular text.

An example:

The English department wants to ensure that students are confident in exploring and responding to Shakespeare texts by the time they reach KS4. However, their students are entirely unfamiliar with Shakespeare in the original text versions on entry in Year 7 and also have relatively little experience of playscripts or text in performance. Rather than working backwards from KS4, assuming that students should be expected to respond to Shakespeare in the same way as they would at GCSE (ie through an extended written response to close reading of the written text) from the beginning, the department builds familiarity with Shakespeare's work from Year 7 upwards and uses a range of dramatic, creative and personal responses to assess understanding.

Year 7	Year 8	Year 9
• Range of playscripts and screenplays – conventions of writing for performance • Use of stage directions • Read openings of Shakespeare's plays in original text – exploring how Shakespeare captures the audience's attention and the ways that stage directions are integrated in dialogue • Read retellings of the rest of the stories of these plays • Shakespearean theatre, including The Globe Theatre – link to text in performance • Prepare and present a 'director's pack' with chosen scene annotated with descriptions of action and notes for performance • Debate which opening should be selected for entry to the Shakespeare Schools competition	• Study a whole play, supported by Leon Garfield's prose retelling • Focus on selected scenes tracking main storyline/character • Explore the way character is presented and developed • Respond through writing in role that shows understanding of character's motivations • Learn key speech by heart and perform/record speech – annotate with directions for performance • Compare two performances of the same scene from different productions where the key character is represented differently. Write to explain which performance is stronger and why	• Study a whole play • Create character profiles for a range of characters, supported by evidence from the text • Close reading of key scenes and annotation of text for different purposes • Exploration of imagery and layers of meaning in language choices • Explicit teaching of different forms of integration of quotations in argument • Writing introductions and conclusions to essays • Essay exploring the way a female character is presented • Looking at the play through the lens of gender representation • Rewrite a scene from the play in a modern setting

Developing social, moral and emotional maturity

The increasing complexity of moral and emotional themes can be a strand of progression in curriculum design. Literary texts offer a wealth of complex issues and situations – it is rare to find a straightforward happy ending in a text studied in the secondary curriculum. Consider the complexity and nuance of the following:

- social issues explored through non-fiction
- situations characters are placed in, including moral dilemmas and emotional pain
- psychological portrayals of character

An example:

The English department wants pupils to develop their moral judgement, understanding of character and response to the writer's ideas/message, and therefore chooses the following rites of passage texts:

Year 7	Year 8	Year 9
A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens	*To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee	*The Knife of Never Letting Go* by Patrick Ness
Simple moral message, straightforward characterisation and familiar story shape allows students to focus on grappling with Dickens' complex language and interesting authorial stance	Straightforward moral to the story centred on justice and kindness; heroic and wise central character in Atticus Finch; the challenge lies in understanding the social and cultural context of both setting and writing, and in the complex narrative voice	Complex moral questions and rites of passage narrative where the main character has to confront the attitudes he has grown up with and make independent moral choices; unflinching portrayal of moral failures from the main character; ambiguous ending

Progression within a form of writing

All writing teaching includes the key elements of accuracy and structure and these will be revisited repeatedly within and across year groups; curriculum planning that allows for revisiting, revising and re-applying key knowledge in increasingly complex contexts is more likely to lead students to successful outcomes and the flexibility needed at GCSE.

An example:

The English department wants to ensure that students are able to sustain a developed argument in the form of a piece of opinionated journalism for GCSE. This form of writing combines elements of journalistic writing and of rhetoric, as well as requiring students to have something to say – the ideas and reasoning that make a piece of writing worth reading. These elements are taught across KS3 and students are supported to recall and apply prior learning at each point, making connections between the elements of journalism and argument they have learned.

Year 7	Year 8	Year 9
News report of an event – elements of reportage style and structure	Exploration of Greta Thunberg's speeches and David Attenborough's scripts – opinionated writing about the protection of a particular habitat	Journalism and 'fake news' – ethical considerations, research requirements, bias, critical thinking and evaluation of journalistic sources
Elements of Aristotelian rhetoric – *ethos, logos and pathos* – and exploration of famous speeches	Detective fiction – explanation of the reasoning behind the identification of the murderer, sustaining an argument and supporting with evidence	Features articles – exploration of structure, particularly introductions and conclusions and features of cohesion. Journalistic editing and editorial stance.
Non-fiction texts – survival and rescue	Non-fiction texts – ethical living and food security	Non-fiction texts – political representation

Progression in creative writing (fiction and non-fiction)

Writing tasks at GCSE are short, tightly controlled and produced under time constraints with minimal stimulus. In order to develop students' confidence and flexibility in writing ready to apply their learning to these conditions, KS3 writing should be taught differently, using texts to inspire and exemplify excellence, writing at greater length and providing plentiful opportunities for drafting, editing, polishing and publication. Students should not be expected to write in a GCSE style (ie being given a task and producing a piece of writing rapidly without explicit teaching) as the norm at KS3, although the application of learning in this form can be useful in building stamina and speed over time. Year 7 students, in particular, may need to write surprisingly slowly in order to achieve high quality outcomes, and maintaining the quality and accuracy of writing achieved at KS2 over time is crucial to maintaining motivation and self-esteem; by rushing and by removing the drafting and editing process too quickly, it is easy to reduce quality of students' writing and therefore unconsciously reinforce lowered expectations.

As previously noted, almost the full range of technical features required for writing is explicitly taught at KS2. Progression in writing, therefore, subsists in the increasingly confident and thoughtful choices made by students in their writing, drawing upon their reading and developing their own writing *voice*. Increasing complexity of vocabulary and grammar are not necessarily desirable, while sensitive matching of writerly choices to purpose, audience and form are the key elements of success. Explicit teaching of elements of writing and the use of texts to exemplify excellence are vital across KS3 and KS4; while there is no hierarchy of techniques, progression can be built into the curriculum by ensuring that each element that is taught is then re-applied in new contexts and combined with other choices to suit the demands of the writing task.

An example:

The English department is keen to develop students' structuring of texts, ensuring that elements of cohesion are thoughtfully and carefully used in fiction writing. In each narrative writing unit, students are expected to apply what they know and to use features previously taught, as appropriate.

Year 7	Year 8	Year 9
Review of elements of cohesion that typically continue to challenge pupils at KS2 – consistency of viewpoint and timeline (verb tenses), paragraphing by time, place, person and topic, links between paragraphs using prepositional phrases and time phrases. Explicit teaching of framing of flashback.	Teaching of the use of a recurring motif to create cohesion; focus on shifts of narrative perspective. Explicit focus on teaching openings and endings of stories.	Teaching of the use of dual perspective narrative; focus on teaching structural techniques for the building of tension and tightly controlled action sequences, linking paragraphs through repetition and variation of key words.

Progression in critical writing

Critical writing, or academic, essay-style writing, is the distinctive form of writing not taught at KS2 that becomes a key element of the curriculum at KS3; over time, the essay becomes one of the main ways that students' reading is assessed. In the early stages of learning to write in this new style, however, students' critical writing can be a barrier to accurate assessment of student's understanding and thinking about texts. English departments should consider how to introduce, teach and sequence critical writing in such a way that students become comfortable to present their understanding of texts in this form by the time they need to for GCSE. Both the development of the critical style and the development of the ideas and content need to be planned and structured carefully over time.

Many schools, over recent years have focused on teaching formulae to guide students' critical writing such as PEE (point, evidence, explanation), PETAL (point, evidence, technique, analysis, link), PETZL (point, evidence, technique, zoom in, link) to remind pupils of the areas to cover in a paragraph. However, these frameworks can prove restrictive and cause students' critical writing to become *empty*: while a student might have mastered the structure of a critical paragraph and might be able to use the types of sentence openers that shape a response but still find it difficult to grapple with the big ideas in a text and have something interesting to say. It is crucial, therefore,

that schools both teach the elements of the written form and maintain a focus on developing the students' authentic response to texts.

Task design is an important element of this progression and the use of GCSE-style questions and task titles is unlikely to be successful or helpful in lower KS3, whereas tasks that require students to express opinions around texts are more likely to capture and develop thoughtful responses; equally, students' understanding of literary texts can be captured more effectively in creative responses or short-form questions and answers rather than in essays until the written form has been taught and students feel confident to write in this way.

Pupils will improve their critical writing for the long term through opportunities to write at greater length and with greater emphasis on self-correction, editing and producing polished work that aspires to a higher standard than that which can be achieved under fully controlled exam conditions. There is greater benefit from focused work than from repeated exam practice.

An example

The English department is aware that students have not written essays at primary school and is keen to develop students' critical vocabulary and awareness of the elements of an academic written style from Year 7 onwards but aims to build confidence over time; initially, students' critical writing is based on material and understanding of texts already secured in class, and is assessed as writing, rather than as a vehicle for the assessment of reading.

Each element of critical writing that is taught and modelled is then applied with increasing independence across a number of tasks and texts so that confidence is achieved in the written form and students' written responses to texts in this style can eventually be used to assess their reading understanding. (*The table below is an example, not a prescription.)

Year 7	Year 8	Year 9
Critical writing taught and modelled:	*Critical writing taught and modelled:*	*Critical writing taught and modelled:*
Paragraphs exploring a character, using evidence and some critical vocabulary and the academic present tense	Planning a short essay on a character or theme, writing effective introductions and conclusions, organising material into a structured argument	Increasingly detailed response to close reading and analytical response to language

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