

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

Assessment and Examinations 3 to 19

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 Essentials of English*; *The Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework*; *The National Curriculum for English from 2015*; *An Alternative Curriculum for English 3 to 16*.

The 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

Curriculum and assessment have an interactive and mutual influence on one another. A central principle ought to be: decide on your curriculum first; then decide how to assess progress within that curriculum effectively. Too often, the order of priority of attention to the two things has been the opposite. But even within a right understanding of the relationship, modes of assessment have a profound effect on what is taught and learned in the curriculum, and how it is taught and learned.

Early Years Foundation Stage

There are two elements of formal assessment at the Early Years Foundation Stage. One is a 'baseline assessment', introduced from September 2015 and to be conducted – if schools wish to adopt the measure – at the beginning of every child's reception year. The other is the Early Years Foundation Stage profile, which has been in operation in one form or another since 2003, and which accumulates findings about a child's achievements throughout the reception year, leading to the completion of the profile as a written document during the last term of that year.

Baseline assessment

From September 2015, schools may use a baseline assessment to make a judgement on children's attainment in English and mathematics at the beginning of their reception year. The government has approved three providers (a number reduced from six) as designers of the assessments. Schools may choose the provider they prefer. They may also choose a provider other than one approved by the government, but in that case 'we won't reimburse any costs and or report your progress' (Standards and Testing Agency, 2015d). Baseline assessment is not compulsory; the guidance issued in February 2015 is as follows:

Government-funded schools that wish to use the reception baseline assessment from September 2015 should sign up with an approved provider before the start of the academic year. In 2022 we'll then use whichever measure shows the most progress: either your reception baseline to key stage 2 results, or your key stage 1 results to key stage 2 results.

From September 2016 primary schools will only be able to use reception baseline to key stage 2 results to measure progress. If you choose not to use the reception baseline, from 2023 we'll only hold you to account by your pupils' attainment at the end of key stage 2. (ibid.)

Early Years Foundation Stage profile

The Early Years Foundation Stage profile is an enlightened instrument. The principles on which it is based are admirable:

- *Reliable and accurate assessment is based primarily on the practitioner's knowledge of the child gained predominantly from observation and interaction in a range of daily activities and events.*
- *Responsible pedagogy must be in place so that the provision enables each child to demonstrate their learning and development fully.*
- *Embedded learning is identified by assessing what a child can do consistently and independently in a range of everyday situations.*
- *An effective assessment presents a holistic view of a child's learning and development.*
- *Accurate assessments take account of contributions from a range of perspectives including the child, their parents and other relevant adults. (Department for Education, 2014a: 8)*

A section of this guidance entitled 'Responsible pedagogy' contains an eloquent statement of the right relationship between teaching and assessment:

Responsible pedagogy enables each child to demonstrate learning in the fullest sense. It depends on the use of assessment information to plan relevant and motivating learning experiences for each child. Effective assessment can only take place when children have the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding, learning and development in a range of contexts.

Children must have access to a rich learning environment which provides them with the opportunities and conditions in which to flourish in all aspects of their development. It should provide balance across the areas of learning. Integral to this is an ethos which respects each child as an individual and which values children's efforts, interests and purposes as instrumental to successful learning. (ibid.: 9)

The formal profile document requires teachers to judge whether a child is meeting or exceeding a level expected at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage in each of 17 'Early Learning Goals', or is best described as being at an 'emerging level' in each of the goals. The goals are grouped within three 'prime areas of learning': communication and language development, physical development, personal, social and emotional development; and within four 'specific areas of learning': literacy development, mathematics development, understanding of the world, expressive arts and design. These are combined with:

a short description (i.e. one to two paragraphs) of how the child demonstrates the three key characteristics of effective learning:

- *playing and exploring;*
- *active learning; and*
- *creating and thinking critically. (ibid.: 19)*

There is a discussion to be had about whether 17 goals and three key characteristics of learning amount to an over-complex description of a child's achievement at the end of the reception year. We would favour a simplification, leading to the reduction of the number of goals to seven, making them coterminous with the three prime and the four specific areas of learning.

The overall excellence of the intention of the profile is spoiled, so far as the judgements on literacy are concerned, by the intrusion into the learning goals for reading and writing of the government's overriding obsession with phonics. Those two learning goals (or, in our simpler model, a single goal for literacy development) should be rewritten so as represent a broader understanding of how young children's powers of literacy develop.

The profile overtaken by baseline assessment

To stick to the bigger picture, the Early Years Foundation Stage profile gives teachers at Key Stage 1 ample information as to the achievements and needs of pupils beginning Year 1. It is surprising, therefore, that, as quoted earlier, 'From September 2016 primary schools will only be able to use reception baseline to key stage 2 results to measure progress'. Baseline assessment will become the only measure officially recognised by the government as the starting point for assessment of children's achievement from reception year onwards. The profile will presumably continue to be available, but its status will inevitably be downgraded.

It's clear that the government's preoccupation, in introducing baseline assessment, is with primary schools' overall accountability over a seven-year period. This preoccupation conflicts with the kind of enlightened understanding of the relationship between assessment and actual progress, a statement of which we have quoted: 'Responsible pedagogy... depends on the use of assessment information to plan relevant and motivating learning experiences for each child'.

And there are inconsistencies here. Why allow schools to choose from three providers for baseline assessment, but only have one provider for the Early Years Foundation Stage profile and the tests at Key Stages 1 and 2? Why make baseline assessment voluntary, but then say that the forthcoming Key Stage 1 tests of reading and of grammar, punctuation and spelling and the teacher assessment of writing (all compulsory and more stringently moderated since summer 2015 – see the sub-section on assessment at Key Stage 1 below) will not, from September 2016, be regarded as an accountability marker in judging schools' performance four years later, at the end of Key Stage 2? Is there a veiled threat in the government's guidance on this? 'If you choose not to use the reception baseline, from 2023 we'll only hold you to account by your pupils' attainment at the end of key stage 2.'

Early Years Foundation Stage: an alternative proposal for assessment

The new baseline assessment is a redundant tool and a waste of teachers' time. It will not supply information which a teacher of a reception class would not easily be able to gain after a few weeks' acquaintance with the children. It is quite wrong that it is to become the only reception-year assessment instrument which the government will officially recognise from September 2016.

To provide a floor level for accountability purposes, we propose that reception-class teachers assess children's attainment in English and mathematics using the tripartite system of 'emerging', 'meeting' and 'exceeding' levels already built into the Early Years Foundation Stage profile arrangements. The teachers could make these assessments at the beginning of the January term of a child's reception year, once they have got to know the children well. The assessments would be externally moderated.

A simpler form of the existing Early Years Foundation Stage profile, with seven learning goals rather than 17, and retaining the short descriptions of the three key characteristics of effective learning, should continue to be used as the fuller account of children's achievements and needs at the end of the reception year, to be handed on to the children's teachers at Year 1.

Key Stages 1 and 2

The position until summer 2015

Key Stage 1

Until summer 2015, pupils at the end of Year 2 have been assessed by their teachers in reading, writing, and speaking and listening. For reading and writing, teachers have used tasks designed in 2007 or 2009 to make their assessments.

Until summer 2014, a selection of teacher assessments of reading and writing in a minimum of 25% of schools in each local authority was externally moderated. From summer 2015, this percentage has doubled. Teachers' judgements of pupils' achievement in the spoken language have not been externally moderated.

The assessments have led to the assignment of a National Curriculum level in the three modes.

In addition, since 2012 Year 1 pupils have undergone a 'phonics check', intended to test their grasp of synthetic phonics in reading. The check utterly fails to represent everything we know about how a successful five- and six-year-old reader should be operating. It also utterly fails to detect a failing five- and six-year-old reader, because to be able to pronounce isolated, phonically regular words, half of them non-existent, is no guarantee of being able to read in the sense of being able to understand meaningful print.

Key Stage 2

Until summer 2015, pupils at the end of Year 6 have taken externally set, externally marked tests in reading and in grammar, punctuation and spelling. They have been assessed internally in writing and in speaking and listening. Writing has been moderated in the same way as at Key Stage 1, though the minimum percentage of schools in a local authority a selection of whose teacher assessments have been moderated has remained at 25%. As at Key Stage 1, pupils' achievements in the spoken language have not been externally moderated.

The texts on which pupils' powers of comprehension have been tested in the two reading tests (one test for pupils likely to gain levels 3, 4 or 5 and one for pupils who might gain level 6) have been carefully chosen and are interesting. However, the tests have focused on far too narrow a range of the competences which pupils at Year 6 should be bringing to bear on texts. A description of the desirable range of these competences appears in the Key Stage 2 section of *An Alternative Curriculum for English 3 to 16*.

Similarly, the level of demand which the two Year 6 grammar, punctuation and spelling tests (as with reading, one for pupils likely to gain levels 3, 4 or 5 and one for pupils who might gain level 6) have made on pupils at Year 6 has not been unreasonable.

The fundamental objection to the grammar, punctuation and spelling tests, however, is that the splitting-up of the holistic and interconnected activities which constitute writing has implicitly sent a malign message to pupils and teachers. To have required Year 6 pupils to attend in Papers 1 and 2 at the lower level and in Papers 2 and 3 at the upper level to isolated sentences in which they can have had no great interest, which have borne no relation to the real work in literacy which they have been (or should have been) doing, has sent exactly the wrong signal. The signal has been, in effect, 'The books you have been reading and the writing you have been doing are all well and good. But this is something else. This is grammar, punctuation and spelling.' Meanwhile, higher-attaining pupils have been told, in effect, that spelling does not matter when it comes to an important, externally marked piece of extended writing (their Paper 1).

There has been a significant symbolism in the fact that both sets of tests have been set and marked externally, while writing has been assessed internally by the pupils' teachers. With regard to the activity of writing understood as a whole, teachers have not been trusted to see and judge manner (grammar, punctuation, spelling,) as well as matter (content). Manner is clearly what counts to those in charge, so it has needed to be externally controlled. There has probably also been an economic calculation: while it is possible to mark these tests quickly, since many of the questions have right or wrong answers, it would not be possible to do so when pieces of writing have to be judged as wholes.

The government's plans from summer 2016

That was the past. Unfortunately, the government's plans for testing at Key Stages 1 and 2 in the future are no improvement on the past, and in some respects make matters worse.

Key Stage 1

From summer 2016, there will be tests for Year 2 pupils in reading and in grammar, punctuation and spelling. These tests will be externally set, but marked by teachers in school. Writing will be assessed by teachers, with moderation, on the basis of pupils' work throughout the year. (We have seen that from summer 2015 50% of schools in a local authority have had a selection of their teachers' assessments of reading and writing at Key Stage 1 externally moderated. This doubling of the percentage will presumably continue in the case of grammar, punctuation and spelling as well as reading and writing.)

The Year 1 phonics check will continue.

On 3 November 2015, the Secretary of State for Education gave a speech entitled ‘One Nation Education’ at the Policy Exchange think tank in London. Among other proposals, she announced a further review of assessment at the end of Key Stage 1, with the possibility that, after consultation, the arrangements in place for summer 2016 might be replaced by tests which, in addition to being externally set, would also be externally marked (as will happen from summer 2016 at Key Stage 2 – see below). Her precise words were:

...to be really confident that students are progressing well through primary school, we will be looking at the assessment of pupils at age seven to make sure it is as robust and rigorous as it needs to be.

We’ll be working with headteachers in the coming months on how we get this right, holding schools to account and giving them full credit for the progress they achieve. (Department for Education, 2015b)

At the time of writing, no further information is available as to the terms of the review. It remains to be seen whether, if Key Stage 1 does go the way of Key Stage 2, the tests will still be of reading and of grammar, spelling and punctuation, or will be organised differently.

Key Stage 2

From summer 2016, Year 6 pupils will continue to take tests in reading and in grammar, spelling and punctuation. These new tests will have only one version each, but will include questions designed to test higher-achieving pupils. The tests will be externally set and marked. Writing – understood as being somehow separate from grammar, punctuation and spelling – will continue to be internally assessed, with moderation at 25%.

Reading and writing dismembered

Sample tests, similar to those which children will take in May 2016, have been published. They are available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-curriculum-assessments-2016-sample-materials>

This is not the place for a detailed critique of the individual questions and tasks in the four tests, and of the assumptions behind them. The important thing to note is that the objections we registered to the Key Stage 2 tests in use up to summer 2015 remain at this Key Stage, and have been extended to Key Stage 1 (in the latter case adding to the incoherence already in existence in the assessment of reading brought about by the Year 1 phonics check).

The grammar, punctuation and spelling tests divorce those three aspects of language from the contexts in which they should be considered: actual, whole, authentic pieces of writing, read or written. And there is no justification – only, perhaps, an argument to do with cost – for the continuing decision to test reading externally but to allow teacher assessment for writing.

Assessment of speaking and listening abandoned

The assessment of speaking and listening at both Key Stages, even in the unmoderated form which applied until 2015, has been abandoned completely.

The end of levels

National Curriculum levels have been abolished with the introduction of the new National Curriculum. From summer 2016, government and schools will use another measurement system, known as scaled scores. In September 2015, the Commission on Assessment without Levels, which the government had set up, issued its final report. The report offers this rationale for the removal of levels:

Despite being intended only for use in statutory national assessments, too frequently levels also came to be used for in-school assessment between key stages in order to monitor whether pupils were on track to achieve expected levels at the end of key stages. This distorted the purpose of in-school assessment, particularly day-to-day formative assessment. The Commission believes that this has had a profoundly negative impact on teaching.

Too often levels became viewed as thresholds and teaching became focused on getting pupils across the next threshold instead of ensuring they were secure in the knowledge and understanding defined in the programmes of study. Depth and breadth of understanding were sometimes sacrificed in favour of pace. Levels also used a 'best fit' model, which meant that a pupil could have serious gaps in their knowledge and understanding, but still be placed within the level. This meant it wasn't always clear exactly which areas of the curriculum the child was secure in and where the gaps were. (Department for Education, 2015a: 5)

The report makes clear and useful distinctions between in-school formative assessment, in-school summative assessment and nationally standardised summative assessment. It emphasises the essential link between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in terms very similar to those with which we began this document. It advises schools to be wary about purchasing one of the commercial assessment systems being promoted to them in the post-levels world:

Schools should... ensure that any system that they buy into fully meets the needs of their school curriculum and assessment policy. It is very important that these systems do not reinvent levels, or inappropriately jump to summary descriptions of pupils' attainments. Nor should they overburden teachers with recording duties or data management. (ibid.: 32)

The government has responded to the Commission's report, agreeing with all its recommendations. It supports the Commission's view that in-school assessment (both formative and summative) should be left to schools:

It is right that the Commission has not prescribed a specific model for in-school assessment. We believe that schools are best placed to determine what type of system will work for them. They have detailed knowledge of their pupils and the expertise to apply it. We encourage schools to make the most of the freedoms offered by the removal of levels and to use the Commission's advice to think carefully about the kind of system that would best meet the needs of their pupils, curriculum and staff when developing or reviewing their approach. (Standards and Testing Agency, 2015a: 4)

We welcome the freedom being offered to schools with regard to their own assessment systems. In fact, that freedom was always there, theoretically. There was never any obligation on schools to use levels except for end-of-Key-Stage tests and teacher assessments. It was just that levels crept more and more into assessments – and into pedagogy – throughout Key Stages 1 and 2.

An effective and manageable approach to in-school assessment

Continuous formative assessment throughout the years of schooling is more important than brief summations at the ends of Key Stages, necessary as these are, because good formative assessment actually affects future progress, rather than merely offering a snapshot of a moment in that progress. The Commission's report gives the following as examples of day-to-day in-school formative assessment:

- *Question and answer during class*
- *Marking of pupils' work*
- *Observational assessment*
- *Regular short re-cap quizzes*
- *Scanning work for pupil attainment and development.*

(Department for Education, 2015a: 18)

The report offers the following as the primary purposes of day-to-day in-school formative assessment:

For pupils:

In-school formative assessment helps pupils to measure their knowledge and understanding against learning objectives and wider outcomes and to identify where they need to target their efforts to improve.

For parents:

When effectively communicated by teachers, in-school formative assessments provide parents with a broad picture of where their children's strengths and weaknesses lie and what they need to do to improve. This reinforces the partnership between parents and schools in supporting children's education.

For teachers:

In-school formative assessment should be an integral part of teaching and learning. It allows teachers to understand pupil performance on a continuing basis. It enables teachers to identify when pupils are struggling, when they have consolidated learning and when they are ready to progress. In this way, it supports teachers to provide appropriate support or extension as necessary. It also enables teachers to evaluate their own teaching of particular topics or concepts and to plan future lessons accordingly.

For school leaders:

In-school formative assessment provides a level of assurance for school leaders. If school leaders are confident their staff are carrying out effective formative assessment, they can be assured that problems will be identified at the individual level and that every child will be appropriately supported to make progress and meet expectations.

For the Government:

The Commission believes that the Government should not intervene at the level of formative assessment, which should serve the needs of pupils and teachers.

For Ofsted:

Ofsted will want to be assured that teachers are making effective use of formative assessment to support teaching and learning. It forms part of Ofsted's wider judgements about the quality of teaching in schools. (ibid.: 19)

We support this understanding of the types and purposes of day-to-day formative assessment. A straightforward approach to in-school summative assessment of pupils' talk, reading and writing would be for teachers to take each of the points in the relevant Key Stage in each of the sections of *An Alternative Curriculum for English 3 to 16*. They could make a judgement at regular intervals (termly, perhaps; half-termly at the most frequent), involving a few brief notes on the particular achievements or shortcomings of each learner within each point. How much progress, if any, has he or she made on the point in question since the last assessment occasion? What are the most likely means of extending that progress further?

One of the benefits of a good assessment system is that it feeds back into the curriculum. A system of the kind proposed here is both summative and formative. It suggests to the teacher the kind of help the pupil needs next. It also sometimes reminds the teacher that there has not been enough activity within a particular aspect of the curriculum to enable a meaningful assessment to be made, and that this shortcoming needs to be rectified.

Scaled scores to replace levels

Levels will be replaced by scaled scores. The government's guidance on scaled scores describes them thus:

Scaled scores are used all over the world. They help test results to be reported consistently from one year to the next. We design national curriculum tests to be as similar as possible year on year, but slight differences in difficulty will occur between years. Scaled scores maintain their meaning over time so that two pupils achieving the same scaled score on two different tests will have demonstrated the same attainment. For example, on our scale 100 will always represent the 'national standard'. However, due to the small differences in difficulty between tests,

the 'raw score' (ie the total number of correct responses) that equates to 100 might be different (though similar) each year...

A pupil's scaled score will be based on their raw score. The raw score is the total number of marks a pupil receives in a test, based on the number of questions they answered correctly. The pupil's raw score will be translated into a scaled score using a conversion table. A pupil who achieves the national standard will have demonstrated sufficient knowledge in the areas assessed by the tests. This will mean that they are well placed to succeed in the next phase of their education. (Standards and Testing Agency, 2015e)

This guidance refers to a performance descriptor for each of the tests, intended to demonstrate whether or not a pupil has achieved the national standard. Performance descriptors appear in the Standards and Testing Agency's test framework documents. Here, for example, is the performance descriptor for the Key Stage 1 reading test. In order to achieve the national standard, a pupil must be able to:

- identify the meaning of vocabulary in context
- retrieve and explain relevant details from fiction and non-fiction to demonstrate understanding of character, events and information
- identify sequences of events in a range of straightforward texts
- make simple and general inferences based on the text
- make simple and general predictions based on the text.

(Standards and Testing Agency, 2015b: 17)

Here is the performance descriptor for the grammar and vocabulary element of the Key Stage 2 grammar, punctuation and spelling test. In order to achieve the national standard, a pupil must be able to:

- demonstrate familiarity with a range of word classes, their terminology and their use: nouns, verbs, adjectives, conjunctions, pronouns, adverbs, prepositions and determiners
- recognise and write different types of sentences: statements, questions, commands and exclamations
- demonstrate familiarity with terms relating to a sentence, including subject and object
- distinguish between co-ordinating and subordinating conjunctions and use them to link clauses appropriately
- identify and use main clauses and subordinate clauses (including relative clauses) in a sentence
- identify and use expanded noun phrases for description and concision
- identify and use fronted adverbial phrases to denote time and place (e.g. *Later that day, I met Tina.*)
- select pronouns appropriately for clarity and cohesion (e.g. **The pupils** will be visiting the **activity centre**. **They** will try all the activities **it** has to offer.)
- distinguish between formal and informal language and structures and standard and non-standard forms of English
- use Standard English when appropriate
- select and use regular and irregular verb forms that express present and past time, including the progressive and perfect forms (e.g. *We are hoping to win. I had swum across the lake.*)
- choose tenses accurately and mostly consistently
- ensure correct subject–verb agreement
- identify and use the active and passive verb forms
- identify modal verbs to express future time and degrees of possibility (e.g. *I might go to the park. They should be home soon.*)
- identify, form and expand contractions accurately
- select appropriate synonyms and antonyms for a wide range of words
- use prefixes and suffixes to change the meaning of words, for example, to change words into different word classes
- recognise and use words from the same word families.

(Standards and Testing Agency, 2015c: 29)

The first of these examples is manageable; the second is excessively lengthy and detailed.

The government obviously expects that its new system of scaled scores, combined with performance descriptors, will achieve better degrees of reliability and comparability across schools and from year to year than were achieved by levels. So far as teachers, pupils and parents are concerned, however, the move to scaled scores will simply replace one set of numbers with another set of numbers. In a later paragraph in its guidance on scaled scores, the Standards and Testing Agency acknowledges that we are still in the game of reducing a complex profile of achievement to a simple number, albeit one which it believes will be more valid and more reliable:

The old national curriculum levels are not relevant to the new national curriculum. However, in order to provide schools with some indication of the new standards, we have tried to indicate equivalence in a broad sense. At KS1 the national standard will roughly equate to an old level 2b. At KS2 this will roughly equate to an old level 4b. Otherwise levels and scaled scores will not be comparable. (Standards and Testing Agency, 2015e)

An alternative proposal for end-of-Key-Stage assessment at Years 2 and 6

Our alternative proposal for end-of-Key-Stage assessment at Years 2 and 6 takes into account the objections we have offered to the structure and format both of the arrangements in existence until 2015 and of those intended to take effect from 2016.

Two tests at the end of each Key Stage

It is perfectly possible to test reading and writing, in all the aspects appropriate for a given age group, using tasks which involve the reading and writing of an appropriate selection of authentic texts.

We envisage two tests for each of Years 2 and 6: one for reading and one for writing. The four tests would be externally set and internally assessed, with moderation. The tasks the tests contain would be included in large online banks of resources, updated regularly, from which teachers could choose.

The tests would represent the broad range of possibilities for pupils' comprehension of and responses to texts (in reading) and their competence and control as producers of texts (in writing), as represented by the requirements for reading and writing at Key Stages 1 and 2 in our alternative curriculum.

A reading test of this kind would assess pupils' overall understanding of and response to the meaning and structure of three texts in different genres, as well as their recognition of words, their understanding of grammatical concepts and terminology, their grasp of conventions of punctuation, their apprehension of spelling patterns and families.

Similarly, a writing test requiring pupils to write three pieces of continuous prose in different genres, with a suggested word limit for each, would assess the extent of a writer's competence, not just as a communicator of meaning and a handler of different genres, but as a user of the conventions of punctuation and spelling, and as a controller of the grammar of English.

No need for separate tests on grammar, punctuation, spelling and phonics

The separate tests of grammar, punctuation and spelling and the Year 1 phonics check could then be abolished. Reading would be seen as what it is: an activity in which the decoding of words and the comprehension of meanings are complementary, interactive aspects of the same, complex process. Writing would recover its wholeness too. Grammar, punctuation and spelling would be put back where they best belong: as integral parts of the construction of meaning in the written language by producers (in the writing tests) and by receivers (in the reading tests).

Performance descriptors linked to our alternative curriculum

We would have online performance descriptors of competence in reading and writing, as the government intends at present. However, the purpose of our descriptors would simply be to help teachers and moderators decide whether a pupil had *not yet achieved*, had *achieved* or had *exceeded* an expected standard in reading and writing at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2; so there would be two performance descriptors for each test at each level, one for achieving and one for exceeding the expected standard. The descriptors would be linked to the requirements for reading and writing in our alternative curriculum.

Value talk as highly as reading and writing

We would value pupils' achievements in the spoken language as of equal importance with those in reading and writing. Recognising the difficulty, however, of setting effective tests for talk externally, we would supply schools with online performance descriptors of competence in the spoken language, supported by audio-visual examples. As with the performance descriptors for reading and writing, there would be two for Year 2 and two for Year 6, demonstrating the characteristics which a pupil must show in order to achieve and to exceed the expected standard in the spoken language. The purpose of the descriptors, as with those for reading and writing, would be to help teachers and moderators decide whether a pupil had not yet achieved, had achieved or had exceeded an expected standard in the use of the spoken language. Assessment of spoken language would be internal, with moderation, like that of reading and writing, but on the basis of pupils' achievements over the whole of Year 2 or Year 6.

Moderation of 25% of schools in a local authority is normally sufficient

The government justified in the following terms its decision to double from summer 2015 the percentage of schools in a local authority a selection of whose teacher assessments at Key Stage 1 was moderated:

To help increase confidence and consistency in our moderation of infant schools, we will be increasing the proportion of schools where KS1 assessments are moderated externally. From summer 2015, half of all infant schools will have their KS1 assessments externally moderated. (Department for Education, 2014c)

The only legitimate reason for this change is that teachers' assessments of reading and writing at Year 2 have been shown to be less reliable than their colleagues' assessments of writing at Year 6. If this is the case, we can see the argument for increasing the degree of stringency. However, the default position should be a percentage of 25% of schools for all occasions of external moderation, unless there are particular reasons for more extensive scrutiny. If our supposition in the case of reading and writing at Year 2 is correct, the percentage of schools externally moderated should descend to the default position when the reliability of teachers' assessments there improves.

In the longer term: trust teachers more

At some point in the future, once teachers have become familiar with these arrangements, the government should feel secure in relying on teachers' professional judgements in making accurate assessments of their pupils' achievement in reading and writing at Years 2 and 6 without the compulsory use of externally set tasks. From that point on, the online banks of tasks would remain, and be refreshed regularly, but it would be for schools and teachers to choose whether or not to use them. (The tasks might be helpful, for example, to newly qualified teachers teaching Year 2 or Year 6 pupils for the first time.) Whatever happens, local moderation will always be needed.

GCSE English Language and English Literature

The subject content and assessment objectives for GCSE English Language and English Literature, which took effect from September 2015, have been in place since 2013.

Reading

There is much to welcome in the subject content and assessment objectives for reading. Students are encouraged to read widely and (in the case of English Literature but not English Language – a curious anomaly) for pleasure. An explicit link is made (again, in the case of English Literature but not English Language) between reading and the development of a student's own writing. In the English Language specifications there is a demand that students study and critically analyse a diversity of literary and factual texts, across a range of genres, from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, including online texts.

The reference to online texts to some extent makes good the absence of any mention of them in the Key Stage 4 programme of study, while highlighting more intensely the anomaly of that absence.

However, the fact that there is no prescription as to the number or kind of texts to be studied for English Language, and that 'All texts in the examination will be "unseen", that is, students will not have studied the examination texts during the course' (Department for Education, 2013a: 4), may lead teachers to make an unambitious selection of texts geared solely to the demands of the examination. There should be some prescription of literature in the English Language requirements – less of course in quantity than for English Literature: perhaps a Shakespeare play and a novel from the 19th, 20th or 21st centuries and an anthology of poetry.

Apart from the privilege of taking pleasure in reading, students following the English Literature course are fortunate enough to 'have a chance to develop culturally and acquire knowledge of the best that has been thought and written' (Department for Education, 2013b: 3). Why are these clear benefits not also available, at least in some measure, to English Language students too? Virtually all GCSE students will take English Language, while a much smaller number will opt for English Literature.

English Literature requires that students study some set texts in detail. The requirements are these:

Students should study a range of high quality, intellectually challenging, and substantial whole texts in detail.

These must include:

- *at least one play by Shakespeare*
- *at least one 19th century novel*
- *a selection of poetry since 1789, including representative Romantic poetry*
- *fiction or drama from the British Isles from 1914 onwards.*

All works should have been originally written in English. (ibid.: 4)

What has happened to the excellent requirement at Key Stage 3 that students study 'seminal world literature'? The exclusion of specific reference to world literature, written in English, particularly by 20th- and 21st-century writers from America, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, the Indian sub-continent and the Caribbean, suggests a narrowing of the range likely to be offered to Literature students. It is they, if anyone, for whom the offer should be broader and should give some inkling of English literature's world status: an inkling which should be given to students in largely monocultural as well as in multicultural classrooms. And there is an oddity here: 'representative Romantic poetry'. Without in any way undervaluing the Romantics, if the purpose is to insist on some great pre-1914 poetry, why not admit the Elizabethans or the metaphysicals or Blake or the Victorians as equally worthy candidates? The requirement would be better as 'major lyric and narrative poetry written before 1914'.

Writing

The English Language subject content and assessment objectives for writing are brief:

– *producing clear and coherent text: writing effectively for different purposes and audiences: to describe, narrate, explain, instruct, give and respond to information, and argue; selecting vocabulary, grammar, form, and structural and organisational features judiciously to reflect audience, purpose and context; using language imaginatively and creatively; using information provided by others to write in different forms; maintaining a consistent point of view; maintaining coherence and consistency across a text*

– *writing for impact: selecting, organising and emphasising facts, ideas and key points; citing evidence and quotation effectively and pertinently to support views; creating emotional impact; using language creatively, imaginatively and persuasively, including rhetorical devices (such as rhetorical questions, antithesis, parenthesis).* (Department for Education, 2013a: 5)

These requirements are welcome. They demonstrate a clear understanding of the diversity of purposes for which, forms in which and audiences for which students by this age should be writing. They give teachers every encouragement to teach well.

Two major shortcomings

The two major shortcomings at GCSE are the fact that since 2014 students' achievement in the spoken language has no longer counted towards their overall main grade in GCSE English Language; and that as from September 2015 coursework has no place in either the English Language or the English Literature examination. There is no legitimate justification for either of these changes.

The sidelining of spoken English

It is impossible to argue that our future citizens will not need a fluent and persuasive command of spoken English in their working and personal lives; it follows that such a centrally important competence should be assessed as an integral part of the major GCSE examination in English.

For decades, means have been found to assess students' achievement in the spoken language at 16. Spoken language, by its nature, may be harder to assess accurately than written language, but the presence of difficulty is no reason to duck the challenge. There is only one reason for the sidelining of the spoken language at GCSE: the government's true estimation of its importance by comparison with writing. Even to embark on such a comparison is absurd. Surely it is obvious that the spoken and the written language are of equal importance, and that competence in the one feeds into competence in the other. Students' achievement in the spoken language should be reinstated as a contribution to their main grade; we would suggest at 25%.

The abolition of coursework

In removing coursework from GCSE English, the government has undermined a principle which, in theory, it enthusiastically supports: that young people should increasingly take responsibility for their learning, should show that they are capable of independent study and research. These qualities are valued in higher education, as we say in the section below on English at 16 to 19, and they are clearly of great importance in many areas of the world of work. To remove the experience of coursework from the schooling of 14- to 16-year-olds is to deny them the opportunity to take a measure of responsibility for their learning, and to ill-prepare them for future challenges in education and work.

The government is right to be concerned about the possibility that students will cheat, especially in the age of the internet, by passing off others' writing as their own. The facts, however, should have allayed this concern. The number of incidents of malpractice in all GCSE and A-level subjects across all the

exam boards in 2014 actually decreased from previous years: 2,550 penalties were issued, representing 0.012% of the total number of entries; that is, 12 per 100,000 (Ofqual, 2014). This is 12 too many, of course, but it absolutely does not justify the abolition of coursework at GCSE. It should be reinstated; we would suggest at 25% in both English Language and English Literature.

Thus, students' performance in final written papers would account for 50% of the weighting in English Language and 75% in English Literature.

English 16 to 19

A- and AS-levels

In England, there are three A-level and AS-level examinations in English: English Literature, English Language, and English Language and Literature. For convenience, we shall call them the 'Englishes'.

A process of reforming A- and AS-levels in England began in 2013. The reformed A- and AS-level syllabuses began to be taught in September 2015.

The 'decoupling' of AS- from A-level

In the previous system, the overall A-level grade was the sum of its parts (normally between four and six), taken at stages throughout the course. After successfully completing a certain number of these parts (or units, as they were generally called), students could be credited with an AS-level ('Advanced Subsidiary') qualification, which could be used as a contribution to a full A-level, but which could also be taken away as a qualification in its own right. From 2000, it was common practice for students on A-level courses to take five AS-levels in the first year of their sixth-form studies, and two or three A-levels in the second year.

AS-levels within the reformed structure (operating from 2015, first examined in 2016) no longer contribute to an A-level qualification; they are freestanding, separate qualifications, 'decoupled' from the A-level system. This means that if students want to take an AS-level and then decide to take the full A-level in that same subject, they have to take all the A-level assessments at the end of the course, even though they will have already been examined on the same subject content at AS-level (because AS-level is a subset of A-level in terms of content). However, A-level examinations are not allowed simply to repeat the AS formats even where the same content is being covered, as they must operate at a more demanding level. They inevitably introduce new elements, too. So from the perspective of a student who has taken AS-level examinations and then goes on to take A-level examinations, there is potentially some misleading familiarity. For example, a task that looks familiar from AS-level might require a different approach at A-level.

The retention of the AS qualification as a 'decoupled' element has severely constrained how the subject can be taught, because it has created a number of different groups within classrooms who will all need to be accommodated and supported:

- AS-level students who pass the AS and leave the group after a year
- AS-level students who pass the AS and decide they like English enough to want to do an A-level; they now have a qualification but one that doesn't 'count'
- A-level students who take no exams until the end of the two-year course.

This is not simply a question of what to do, when. It is a question that affects how students are to make sense of the assessments they are facing, and how they are going to see themselves as learners.

In some schools and colleges, all the A-level students will be funded to take AS assessments as a kind of 'mock'. In these cases, all the students, not just some, will be going over previous content in the second year, but via new exam formats. This will be less complex for teachers to manage. But they will still be teaching a second-year group whose existing qualifications don't count towards their final grade, which

will be a new experience for everyone concerned. It might also be the case that early failure or poor performance at AS will discourage students from continuing. In the previous modular system, where earlier assessments counted, poor performance could sometimes act as a spur to galvanise students into action to make up lost ground in the second year.

The downgrading of coursework

The contribution of coursework (in the reformed system called 'Non-examined assessment') to the overall A-level grade has been reduced from 40% to 20%. This change goes against all available evidence that the coursework element of English study at 16 to 19 – with its emphasis on developing the ability to do independent work and pursue individual research plans, to undertake critical thinking, to produce a sustained piece of academic argument, draft, scrutinise and redraft original writing – was the part of the A-level English curriculum most valued by universities. Over the years, assignments have gradually replaced many exams on degree courses in universities, precisely because it has been recognised that students' standard of intellectual performance is improved considerably if they are able to spend time planning, thinking about and directing their own enquiries. Universities have seen coursework at A-level as a key factor in smoothing the transition from school or college to undergraduate study.

The issue at the core of the government's decision to limit coursework is nothing to do with pedagogy, and everything to do with concerns about cheating (as at GCSE, as discussed earlier). Of course, plagiarism and other forms of cheating need to be taken seriously. But no one ever suggests that universities should drastically reduce or even remove the coursework assignments they set and revert to exams because of the same concerns. We have already quoted the number of identified cheats across GCSE and A-level in all subjects in 2014: 12 per 100,000 examination entries. The A-level reforms were supposedly designed to prepare students more effectively for higher education. The limitation of coursework does precisely the opposite. In effect, because there is now no coursework of any kind at GCSE, students will be taking their first tentative steps towards independent work of this kind only very shortly before encountering it as the main form of assessment at university.

There are no specific instructions from Ofqual or the Department for Education as to coursework at AS-level. However, complex other constraints to do with balance of units, acceptable numbers of elements in the course and the workings of assessment objectives mean that coursework has effectively been excluded from AS. None of the exam boards offering AS to candidates in England has any coursework in its reformed syllabuses. If non-examined assessment applies only to A-level and not to AS, there will be pressure on teachers to leave the coursework to the second year of the course, which is hardly ideal.

The disUnited Kingdom

The changes described above apply to England only. The other three parts of the UK have devolved powers and are following their own distinctive pathways in terms of educational policy. Teachers of students at 16 to 19 feel an obligation to help their students with university applications. With some A-level subjects reformed and others not, and with some parts of the UK operating non-reformed and others reformed versions of the same subject, the picture is considerably more challenging than it was.

Whereas schools across the UK are required either to take reformed A-levels or non-reformed ones (or Highers in Scotland), depending on where they are located, universities have no such regional constraints, although there are complexities around tuition fees, of course. But it is unclear what difference it would make to a student's chances if he or she applied from one area to another: for example, if a Welsh student applied to an English university. In theory, universities in England should look more favourably on applicants with reformed qualifications, since they are supposed to be more rigorous and robust. However, all the qualifications, old and new, have the same names and so in reality many admissions tutors are unlikely to know the difference.

Language in a digital world

The study of ‘electronic and multimodal forms’ is required by the English Language subject content. Students must study multimodal texts as part of their experience of textual variation. (There is no such requirement in English Literature.) In English Language, students can additionally choose to produce multimodal texts themselves. These requirements and possibilities are welcome.

No original writing in English Literature; Creative Writing to be abolished

An innocent observer might imagine that, all of the ‘Englishes’, English Literature is the one associated most strongly with creativity. But although the requirement to develop and credit students’ skill in using English is part of English Language and of English Language and Literature, it is not a fundamental part of English Literature, where writing skills are seen only as a way of showing knowledge of the field of study. This means that the use of English in English Literature is associated solely with essay writing and discursive argument (or with re-creative tasks that constitute a literary critical method). Perhaps the traditional idea of ‘admiring’ great literary works is also still having an effect here, in suggesting that literary texts constitute a sort of hallowed ground that no apprentice writer such as an A-level student should be allowed to approach. Whatever the case, it makes no sense for English Literature to exclude original writing.

One result of this exclusion of students’ original writing from English Literature has been the arrival of a new A-level subject altogether, Creative Writing, which began in 2013. This subject has proved popular in its short lifetime, echoing the popularity it has achieved for many years in higher education, showing that there is both professional confidence in teaching the subject, and student interest in learning creative skills.

We are dismayed, therefore, at the government’s decision to abolish Creative Writing A-level. It will be examined for the last time in 2018, with one opportunity for a re-sit in 2019. The government justifies its decision by pointing to its effort to ‘streamline’ the range of qualifications on offer, and by suggesting that there is overlap between Creative Writing and the English A-levels. The latter of these justifications is clearly fallacious. Creative Writing was introduced precisely because English Literature, the most popular of the ‘Englishes’, makes no space for original writing. We have acknowledged that English Language and English Language and Literature do allow for original writing, which tends to be more pragmatically oriented. Creative Writing has been the one place at A-level where original literary writing is required and encouraged. We note the outcry at the government’s decision, and associate ourselves with it.

Where should assessment at A-level be heading?

End-of-course assessments of linear courses, reductions in coursework, the limiting of opportunities for re-sits: all these point backwards to a former time. Pen-and-paper assessment hasn’t changed in decades. Meanwhile, most of us spend most of our writing time at a keyboard of one kind or another. Keyboards have become the norm; even in classrooms, tablets and i-pads are replacing paper notebooks. Spelling routines are memorised partly by the habitual movements of the muscles in our hands, so – for most of us – this means movements across a keyboard rather than joining letters together with a pen. Writing digitally means that we get used to drafting and editing as we go, rephrasing, reorganising and reshaping until we have produced something that we are happy with. But we still insist that students go and sit in an exam room for several hours and, using a pen, produce legible coherent pieces of writing in a paper booklet.

One of the oddest aspects of the current situation is that almost every aspect of national assessment is online – apart from the writing by the students themselves. Exam papers are produced largely online; teachers and markers are standardised online; most students' writing will be marked online within the next couple of years, scanned onto computer systems so that the handwriting can be read electronically.

We have seen that the subject criteria for English Language A-level require students to understand multimodal texts, and allow them to produce multimodal texts as part of their coursework. Exam papers for English Language regularly include website material that has been captured via screenshots, reset by typesetters and turned into paper. In English Language and English Language and Literature exams, students may be asked to 'write' website material on paper in the exam booklet. This is an absurd situation. We in the UK must have the technological expertise to set up robust monitoring systems within the computer-based working spaces that are required to run online exams.

Aside from being able to experience and produce multimodal texts properly, there are other reasons for using computers in exams. For many years, English Language A-level students have had to work on spoken language in exam conditions by reading and interpreting transcripts. Aspects of spoken language such as non-verbal behaviour, prosodic features such as intonation, paralinguistic effects such as whispering or laughter, the pragmatics of simultaneous speech, and the particular pronunciations of regional speakers and of young children, all have to be imagined via transcription symbols and keys. This can turn interpretation into a sort of literary-critical exercise where one has to imagine the voices behind the words.

Think how much more interesting, realistic, genuine and immediate would be the experience of hearing speech or – even better – hearing and seeing speech unfold within video, so that the spatial and temporal aspects of the interaction could be appreciated. The study of language change would be transformed, as students would be able to hear how texts sounded up to 150 years ago. These ideas are focused on English Language, but the other 'Englishes' would benefit too. Poetry could be heard, drama could be seen as well as heard, a prose text could be run alongside a film clip. English could finally escape the page.

Qualifications other than A-level at 16 to 19

There are many thousands of 16- to 19-year-olds in schools and colleges for whom A-level or AS-level are not suitable or not yet suitable, or who simply prefer a qualification of a more practical, career-based sort. These students need a worthwhile qualification of some kind either in English, or involving the use of English in achieving a qualification with another name.

Level 3 qualifications

The government has introduced two new sets of advanced qualifications, with the same level-3 status as A-level, and intended to attract the same esteem. These are Tech levels and Applied general qualifications.

Tech levels 'equip students with specialist knowledge and skills, enabling entry to an apprenticeship, other skilled employment or a technical degree. Backed by employers, they equip young people with the specialist knowledge they need for a job in occupations ranging from engineering to computing, hospitality to accountancy. In some cases they provide a "licence to practice" or exemption from professional exams' (Department for Education, 2015c: 6).

Applied general qualifications 'equip students with transferable knowledge and skills. They are for post-16 students wanting to continue their education through applied learning and fulfil entry requirements for a range of HE courses – either by meeting entry requirements in their own right or being accepted alongside and adding value to other qualifications at the same level' (ibid.: 6-7).

Both these qualifications, which will first be reported in 2016, are welcome as examples of the effort to bring equivalence of esteem with A-level to more technical, practical, career-based qualifications.

Up-to-level 2 qualifications

Many students who enter post-16 education without a grade C or better at GCSE English (a level 2 qualification) retake the course, in the hope of getting at least a C grade the second time round.

The government is rightly insistent on the importance of English and mathematics in the education of all 16- to 19-year-olds, at whatever level:

All students aged 16 to 18 who do not hold a GCSE A-C or equivalent qualification in both maths and/or in English [sic] are required to be studying these subjects as part of their study programme in each academic year...*

Where appropriate, students can study other English and maths qualifications such as Functional Skills and Free Standing Maths qualifications recognised by the funding condition as 'interim' or 'stepping stone' qualifications on the journey towards achievement of a GCSE. (ibid.: 9)

Since 2010, many of the students not immediately retaking GCSE have taken one of these 'stepping stone' qualifications instead. Several of the examining bodies regulated by Ofqual have offered Functional Skills courses in English, mathematics and ICT at three levels: entry level (itself divided into sub-levels 1, 2 and 3), level 1 and level 2.

In the case of English, the course is divided into three familiar parts: reading; writing; and speaking, listening and communication. As the word 'Functional' suggests, the focus of study is on practical, real-life rather than aesthetic uses of the language; there is no study of imaginative literature, for example. The outcome of the examination is a simple pass or fail; there are no grades.

In 2014, about 150,000 students achieved a level-2 pass in Functional Skills English. Until August of that year, a level-2 pass was considered the equivalent of a grade C at GCSE. Since September of that year, a level-2 pass has lost that equivalence, and has been considered another stepping stone, beyond level 1 and entry-level passes, towards the achievement of a grade C.

From September 2015, the government has narrowed the options for some students:

...all full-time students starting their study programme who have a grade D GCSE in maths and/or English must be enrolled on a GCSE, rather than an approved 'stepping stone' qualification. This revised condition does not apply to students on apprenticeships or traineeships. (ibid.: 9)

A GCSE-equivalent qualification designed for post-16

In the light of this new requirement, there is a clear need for a GCSE-equivalent qualification designed for post-16 students. This group includes adults learning English as an additional language and mature students who were not successful at school, as well as young people aged 16 and 17 who have not achieved at least a C at GCSE in Year 11 of their schooling.

It is hardly motivating to 16- and 17-year-olds with recent experience of failure or limited success at GCSE to be confronted with exactly the same course again a short time later. There are tasks which could be undertaken and texts which could be studied which are more suitable for an older age-group than for 14- to 16-year-olds. A different kind of course could be offered, without compromising on the proper degree of demand which the examination should make on students. It would be equivalent to GCSE, as we have said, but with a different name.

In sum...

Early Years Foundation Stage

- The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile is, overall, an excellent document, demonstrating an enlightened understanding of learning and of the relationship between learning and assessment. It is a little spoiled by the government's obsession with phonics as the only effective means of teaching early reading, and is perhaps over-complex. But it remains the only instrument teachers need in order to assess children's achievements in the Early Years Foundation Stage. It could be used as a means of arriving at a floor level, for accountability purposes, at the beginning of the January term of a child's reception year.
- The new baseline assessment is unnecessary and a waste of teachers' time. It should be abandoned.

Key Stages 1 and 2

- The government's plans for testing at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2 from 2016 are no improvement on those which operated until 2015, and in some respects are even less satisfactory.
- The ending of levels is in itself welcome. It may well be that scaled scores will be more accurate and reliable than levels have been. However, so far as schools, teachers, pupils and parents are concerned, one set of numbers will have replaced another set of numbers.
- The re-emphasis on the importance of in-school assessment, formative and summative, in the Final Report of the Commission on Assessment without Levels and in the government's response to the report, is welcome. We have suggested an approach to in-school assessment which accords with the spirit of these two documents.
- The testing of reading and writing should treat these two complex activities as wholes. At present, the testing arrangements dismember them.
- The spoken language should be assessed with the same rigour as reading and writing, using teachers' moderated judgements of pupils' spoken language throughout Year 2 or Year 6.
- The outcome of testing or teacher assessment should be a judgement as to whether a pupil has not yet achieved, has achieved or has exceeded an expected standard in reading, writing and the spoken language. It is the accumulation of these judgements across a cohort of pupils which will provide schools, parents, the local authority and Ofsted with the information as to how effective is a school's teaching of English.

GCSE English Language and English Literature

- Coursework should be restored to GCSE English Language and English Literature, at 25% of the total weighting.
- Students' achievement in the spoken language should once more count towards the main grade at GCSE English Language, at 25% of the total weighting.
- There should be some prescription of the literature to be studied at GCSE English Language.
- Seminal world literature should be part of the requirement for study at GCSE English Literature.

English 16 to 19

- AS-level should be 'recoupled' with A-level, as was the case until 2015.
- Coursework should be restored to its former maximum weighting of 40% of a student's final grade.
- Digital, electronic and multimodal texts should be studied more widely across all the 'Englishes'.
- Digital and electronic materials and equipment should be in use in final examinations.
- More opportunity should be made for original writing in all the 'Englishes'.
- Creative Writing A-level should be reinstated.
- The level 3 qualifications other than A-level now on offer to students at 16 to 19 are welcome.
- A qualification of equivalent value to GCSE, better suited to the needs of post-16 students, is urgently required.

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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.

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