

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

The National Curriculum for English from 2015

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*; *An Alternative Curriculum for English 3 to 16*; *Assessment and Examinations in English 3 to 19*.

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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Contents

Key Stages 1 and 2	3
Key Stages 3 and 4	12
A general difficulty: which century are we in?	17
Drama	18
The non-National Curriculum	19
Back to the drawing board?	20
In sum...	20
References	21

This document considers the new National Curriculum for English, introduced as from September 2014 and September 2015, discussing its shortcomings while acknowledging the positive features it contains.

Key Stages 1 and 2

The spoken language at both Key Stages

In a moment, we shall consider the exhaustively detailed requirements of the National Curriculum for reading, writing and grammar at Key Stages 1 and 2. Before doing so, we can deal with its requirements for the spoken language at these Key Stages remarkably briefly.

132 words, undifferentiated, are deemed enough to cover speaking and listening throughout the six years of statutory primary education:

Pupils should be taught to:

- *listen and respond appropriately to adults and their peers;*
- *ask relevant questions to extend their understanding and knowledge;*
- *use relevant strategies to build their vocabulary;*
- *articulate and justify answers, arguments and opinions;*
- *give well-structured descriptions, explanations and narratives for different purposes, including for expressing feelings;*
- *maintain attention and participate actively in collaborative conversations, staying on topic and initiating and responding to comments;*
- *use spoken language to develop understanding through speculating, hypothesising, imagining and exploring ideas;*
- *speak audibly and fluently with an increasing command of Standard English;*
- *participate in discussions, presentations, performances, role play, improvisations and debates;*
- *gain, maintain and monitor the interest of the listener(s);*
- *consider and evaluate different viewpoints, attending to and building on the contributions of others;*
- *select and use appropriate registers for effective communication.* (Department for Education, 2014b: 18)

This brevity brings a certain relief: at least the requirements do not actively prevent teachers from teaching well. It is perfectly possible to nurture pupils' growing competence in the spoken language within this sketchiest of frameworks. However, the government's true regard for the importance of the spoken word in the primary years is evident in the comparison of the attention given to it in these requirements with the attention given to reading, writing and grammar, to which we now turn.

The fundamental problem in reading, writing and grammar at Key Stages 1 and 2

In the areas of reading, writing and grammar at Key Stages 1 and 2, the government has made the mistake of imagining that prior, analytical instruction in the primary years will produce 11-year-olds who can read fluently and accurately, write correctly, and use correct grammar in their speech and writing. The evidence for this assertion is to be seen in the long lists of grapho-phonetic correspondences, spelling rules and grammatical concepts and terminology in the new National Curriculum documents, which those primary schools bound by the National Curriculum are obliged to teach. This retrospective formalism, with its false claim to represent rigour in the curriculum, fails to see that the way children learn to do things as complex as to read with fluency and understanding, to write correctly and to speak and write grammatically is *not* the way that adults, already competent in these things, find it most enlightening to analyse them abstractly.

To be clear: we are not saying that it is impossible to analyse the activities of reading, writing and the use of grammar in order more clearly to understand how they work. Professionals working in these areas should be able to do these things. The simple principle here is that competence is prior (both in the chronological and the intellectual sense) to analysis, not the other way round. Once learners have

acquired a degree of competence in any aspect of language, they can certainly be helped to reflect on that competence, to look at it objectively. This reflection will often involve analysis, abstraction. But the competence, in whatever degree, must be there first.

The folly of the government's statutes in the areas of reading, writing and grammar is compounded by the fact that the heavier load of pre-competence analytical learning is required of the youngest learners. The idea, presumably, is that once younger children have this knowledge on board, they will be able to perform effectively the activities to which the knowledge relates. Anyone who has taught in classrooms knows that heavier loads of analytical instruction have a better chance of succeeding *later*, once competence and confidence are firmly established; indeed, analytical teaching then has a good chance of being interesting and worthwhile.

That is why, in the cases of spelling and grammar, we shall argue that in the secondary years there should be *more* grammar teaching, not less, and that students should study analytically some of the reasons why the English spelling system is as it is. At the moment, the new National Curriculum orders simply require students in the secondary years to 'carry on the good work' which, it is assumed, will have been largely completed by age 11.

Reading at Key Stage 1

The overall aims for all four Key Stages, as they apply to reading, are that pupils should:

- *read easily, fluently and with good understanding*
- *develop the habit of reading widely and often, for both pleasure and information*
- *acquire a wide vocabulary, an understanding of grammar and knowledge of linguistic conventions for reading, writing and spoken language*
- *appreciate our rich and varied literary heritage.* (Department for Education, 2014b: 14)

These broad aims are unarguable.

The obsession with synthetic phonics

However enlightened are the government's overall aims for reading, there is a particular problem with its position on early reading. Its obsession with synthetic phonics as the only way that young children should be taught to read, and its clear advice that no other method will work, entirely miss the point that learning to read is a broader, more complex task than could be achieved by any single 'method'.

The word 'method' is at the heart of the problem. We are not in any crude sense 'anti-phonics'. We recognise that there are many grapho-phonetic correspondences in the English writing system, and that it is sensible to take advantage of this convenient fact. Meanwhile, very many English written words, and especially many of the commonest ones – those that young children will encounter most frequently – do not demonstrate straightforward grapho-phonetic correspondences. They have to be learned by means in which phonics can play no part. Furthermore, an excessive zealotry for synthetic phonics ignores a fundamental truth about reading: that it is essentially to do with the construction of meaning in the reader's mind, on the basis of the evidence provided by marks on a page or a screen. 'Method', any method, is too narrow a term to do justice to the hypothesis-forming, rule-testing, rule-adapting, memory-employing, meaning-making complex activity which is reading.

'Word reading' and 'comprehension' at Key Stage 1: a false dualism

The requirements for reading for Key Stage 1 are divided into 'word reading' and 'comprehension'. The word reading requirements for Years 1 and 2 fly directly and deliberately in the face of the idea that reading is a meaning-making activity. They are precise and detailed lists of instructions for the teaching of phonic rules. They demonstrate to its fullest extent the government's determination that synthetic phonics is the only means by which young children should be taught to read. This extremism is carried to the point, in the requirements for children at Year 1, of the explicit discouragement of the reading of books containing words which fail to conform to grapho-phonetic regularity (in other words, most of the books which five- and six-year-old children have been known over the years to enjoy).

Pupils should be taught to... read books aloud accurately that are consistent with their developing phonic knowledge and that do not require them to use other strategies to work out words. (Department for Education, 2014b: 21)

Coming as an unexpected breath of fresh air, the comprehension requirements offer teachers every opportunity to teach well. They begin:

Pupils should be taught to... develop pleasure in reading, motivation to read, vocabulary and understanding... (ibid.: 22)

The comprehension requirements then list some entirely reasonable means by which these desirable ends may be achieved.

Thus, the Key Stage 1 orders for reading as they stand are incoherent and contradictory. Broadly enlightened requirements on comprehension, which give teachers all the professional autonomy they need to teach well, sit side by side with requirements at the word reading level so detailed, so micro-managing, that the teacher here is nothing more than a technician following instructions. And the instructions are simply wrong. An obsessive, exclusive focus on synthetic phonics is not the way to produce confident, accurate readers. Pleasure in reading, which in the new orders is confined to comprehension, must apply equally at every level of encounter with texts, including word recognition. This will only occur when beginning readers are encouraged to bring the whole range of their intellectual faculties to bear on the text in order to derive meaning from it, and are not confined to following one narrow and intellectually flawed set of procedures.

Reading at Key Stage 2

There is a sensible statement on reading in the introduction to the orders for Years 3 and 4:

[Pupils] should be developing their understanding and enjoyment of stories, poetry, plays and non-fiction, and learning to read silently. They should also be developing their knowledge and skills in reading non-fiction about a wide range of subjects. They should be learning to justify their views about what they have read: with support at the start of year 3 and increasingly independently by the end of year 4. (ibid.: 34)

There is an equally sensible paragraph on reading in the introduction to the orders for Years 5 and 6:

[Pupils] should be able to prepare readings, with appropriate intonation to show their understanding, and should be able to summarise and present a familiar story in their own words. They should be reading widely and frequently, outside as well as in school, for pleasure and information. They should be able to read silently, with good understanding, inferring the meanings of unfamiliar words, and then discuss what they have read. (ibid.: 42)

'Word reading' and 'comprehension' at Key Stage 2

As at Key Stage 1, the detailed statutory orders on reading are divided into 'word reading' and 'comprehension'.

Once again, nothing in the comprehension orders prevents teachers from teaching well. The approach to reading for information, with its awareness of the diversity of strategies by which young readers gain information from texts, is welcome. Also welcome is the emphasis on reading a diversity of literary and non-fiction texts, and the mention of reference texts such as dictionaries.

The word reading orders, however, are curious – and so brief that they can be quoted in full. Here are those for Years 3 and 4:

Pupils should be taught to:

- *apply their growing knowledge of root words, prefixes and suffixes (etymology and morphology) as listed in English Appendix 1 [the statutory appendix concerned with spelling], both to read aloud and to understand the meaning of new words they meet*
- *read further exception words, noting the unusual correspondences between spelling and sound, and where these occur in the word. (ibid.: 36)*

The equivalent orders for Years 5 and 6 are confined to the first only of the two bullet points above.

There is good value in the study of etymology and morphology, offered at an appropriate level of difficulty for the age range in question. However, confined as they are to the word reading orders, there is a danger that etymology and morphology will be taught in isolation from the study of whole texts. It is the study of whole texts (not necessarily long texts) which provides the most meaningful contexts in which those aspects of language can be discussed.

More phonics for failing readers

However, the significant thrust on the reading of words is to be found in the introductions to the reading orders both for Years 3 and 4 and for Years 5 and 6. For Years 3 and 4:

As in key stage 1... pupils who are still struggling to decode need to be taught to do this urgently through a rigorous and systematic phonics programme so that they catch up rapidly with their peers. If they cannot decode independently and fluently, they will find it increasingly difficult to understand what they read and to write down what they want to say. As far as possible, however, these pupils should follow the year 3 and 4 programme of study in terms of listening to new books, hearing and learning new vocabulary and grammatical structures, and discussing these. (ibid.: 34-35)

For Years 5 and 6:

It is essential that pupils whose decoding skills are poor are taught through a rigorous and systematic phonics programme so that they catch up rapidly with their peers in terms of their decoding and spelling. However, as far as possible, these pupils should follow the upper key stage 2 programme of study in terms of listening to books and other writing that they have not come across before, hearing and learning new vocabulary and grammatical structures, and having a chance to talk about all of these. (ibid.: 42)

In other words, if the medicine did not work by the age of seven, offer more of the same until the age of nine; if has not worked by then, repeat the prescription until 11. The two paragraphs just quoted, it is true, do include the correct advice that pupils who are still having difficulty learning to read words should, as far as possible, nonetheless be included in the activities which their more advanced peers are being offered.

To repeat: the recognition of grapho-phonetic correspondences is indeed one of the routes into reading. However, phonics has profound limitations when relied on exclusively, in that it ignores the central importance of the gaining of meaning in reading from the earliest beginnings, whatever a child's current level of fluency as a reader. The need to gain meaning applies with even greater force to those children who come into Key Stage 2 as unconfident readers. They need to be shown the whole gamut of routes into reading, not offered a single nostrum whose repeated application will produce diminishing returns.

Writing at Key Stage 1

The new National Curriculum orders have this to say in general about writing at all four Key Stages:

Pupils should develop the stamina and skills to write at length, with accurate spelling and punctuation. They should be taught the correct use of grammar. They should build on what they have been taught to expand the range of their writing and the variety of the grammar they use. The writing they do should include narratives, explanations, descriptions, comparisons, summaries and evaluations: such writing supports them in rehearsing, understanding and consolidating what they have heard or read. (ibid.: 11)

We can isolate the key lexical words from the first three of these sentences: 'stamina', 'skills', 'spelling', 'punctuation', 'grammar', 'writing', 'grammar'. The government's essential vision of the effective teaching of writing resides clearly in these words. In the fourth sentence, and well down the pecking order, we see that students must also write across a certain rather narrow and arbitrary range of forms. There is no mention of the possibilities which digital technologies offer student writers. This statement of priorities, and the balance of teaching approaches it requires, represent an inadequate understanding of writers and the writing process.

The government makes perfectly clear its priorities with regard to writing at Key Stage 1: transcription (by which it means spelling and handwriting) comes first. It may be suggested that the order in which requirements are laid out is less important than what is in the requirements themselves. Perhaps: but the symbolism of the order is powerful. It is saying to teachers, 'Deal with this first.'

Spelling

At the very beginning of the requirements for spelling, readers are directed to 'English Appendix 1'.

Appendix 1 is on spelling and is statutory. It represents an unrealistic and theoretically wrong insistence on the teaching of formidably long lists of spelling patterns. For Year 1 alone, 46 separate spelling patterns must by law be consciously taught. The number drops to 26 for Year 2, to 17 for Years 3 and 4, and to 10 for Years 5 and 6 (though children at Years 3 and 4 and at Years 5 and 6 must also learn the spellings of a prescribed list of 100 words in each case). The error in this requirement begins with the simple fact that the number of patterns which must consciously be taught decreases as children get older. This is exactly the wrong way round. Young children need maximum exposure to and maximum practice in real written language. They need to be shown a limited selection of spelling patterns relevant to their actual or likely needs as writers. It is as children get older, and as their familiarity with actual written language increases, that they will be able to apprehend and make sense of a wider variety of spelling patterns.

This demand for the learning of huge numbers of spelling patterns by five-, six- and seven-year-olds is another case of an adult, analytical view of language inappropriately imposed on the psychologically integrated way in which young minds perceive reality, including the reality of written language. It will prove unworkable in the classroom. Unfortunately, it will not merely be unworkable, not merely a waste of a certain amount of teachers' and learners' time. The repeated attention to large numbers of analytically isolated spelling patterns will actually confuse and discourage some young writers, causing them to decide that the obscure codes and rules they are being asked to learn are an essential entry qualification which must be acquired in advance before they can be shown into the world of writing. That way failure lies.

The government's obsession with spelling patterns in writing is the twin of its obsession with synthetic phonics in reading. This twin obsession keeps tripping over the problem of the complex and often unpredictable relationship between the sound and the written mark in English. While acknowledging yet again that there *are* grapho-phonetic correspondences in English, lots of them, and that teachers should make use of this convenient fact in those cases where the correspondences apply, we repeat our warning against the excessive claims the government makes for these correspondences. A teacher who teaches that spelling patterns are always or nearly always regular in English words, and that this regularity is always or nearly always a function of symbol-to-sound correspondences, is misleading the children.

An Alternative Curriculum for English 3 to 16 offers a more effective approach to the teaching of spelling.

Handwriting

By comparison with the spectacular misjudgements on spelling at Key Stage 1, the handwriting requirements are modest and perfectly sensible.

Punctuation

The requirements for punctuation, which appear in the new orders themselves and in the statutory Appendix 2, are also in themselves perfectly sensible. They do not impose unrealistic expectations on young learners, and they could be taught largely within the context of children's actual writing and reading.

(However, the punctuation requirements are unhelpfully grouped with grammar and vocabulary in Appendix 2: three unlike things yoked together. Spelling and punctuation belong more easily with each other, both being aspects of orthography. They are sets of conventions strictly related to the written language, although punctuation is also often an indicator of grammatical choices that a writer has made.)

Vocabulary

In the general introduction to the English orders, there is a sensible paragraph on the learning of vocabulary:

Opportunities for teachers to enhance pupils' vocabulary arise naturally from their reading and writing. As vocabulary increases, teachers should show pupils how to understand the relationships between words, how to understand nuances in meaning, and how to develop their understanding of, and ability to use, figurative language. They should also teach pupils how to work out and clarify the meanings of unknown words and words with more than one meaning. References to developing pupils' vocabulary are also included within the appendices.

(Department for Education, 2014b: 16)

It is curious, then, that no mention of vocabulary is made in the sections entitled 'Writing – vocabulary, grammar and punctuation' at either Year 1 or Year 2. In both cases, the reader is directed to English Appendix 2, where the use of the term 'vocabulary' in practice simply means 'terminology'. It is obvious that, to the extent that aspects of writing are consciously taught, teachers will use terminology. In reality, vocabulary, as proposed in Appendix 2, is not a separate matter from grammar, punctuation or spelling. It is simply the language in which those things are discussed. Given that, apart from the paragraph just quoted, there is no reference to vocabulary in the sense of the lexis of the language in which children write, it is not helpful to treat vocabulary as a separate category. The absence of any detailed reference to children's developing mastery of vocabulary as lexis is another weakness of the new orders.

Composition

The composition requirements for writing at Key Stage 1 are oddly brief. They require some writing practices to be welcomed: for example, planning, evaluating, re-reading, proofreading, sharing writing with others. But little is said about *what* children should write. At Year 1, they are required to write sentences: nothing more. At Year 2, it is true, they are required to write 'narratives about personal

experiences and those of others (real and fictional)', to write about 'real events', to write poetry and to write 'for different purposes' – a vague category which could include all writing. This is an inadequate account of the diversity of purposes for which and the diversity of forms in which children should by the age of seven be writing. To say that the very important question, 'What should children write?' is insufficiently attended to would be a kindness. Here is yet one more weakness of the new orders.

Writing at Key Stage 2

At Key Stage 2, the orders for writing make the same distinction between transcription and composition as was made for Key Stage 1.

Spelling

At both lower (Years 3 and 4) and upper (Years 5 and 6) Key Stage 2, the government's priorities are clear. Transcription comes first and, within transcription, spelling. In making a point in the section on writing at Key Stage 1 above, we noted that 17 spelling patterns must be learnt in Years 3 and 4, 10 in Years 5 and 6, and that children at Years 3 and 4 and at Years 5 and 6 must learn the spellings of a prescribed list of 100 words in each case.

The learning of 17 and then 10 isolated spelling patterns and the spelling of 100 isolated words over each of the two two-year periods of Key Stage 2 do not in themselves represent loads as heavy as those to be imposed at Key Stage 1. But these requirements once again demonstrate a determination to superimpose an adult, analytical view of language on the psychologically integrated way in which young minds perceive language, and then generalise from their perceptions.

To take the very first example from the requirements for Years 3 and 4: the abstract learning of the rule that...

If the last syllable of a word is stressed and ends with one consonant letter which has just one vowel letter before it, the final consonant letter is doubled before any ending beginning with a vowel letter is added ('forget', 'forgetting', 'forgotten')...

...but that...

...The consonant letter is not doubled if the syllable is unstressed ('garden', 'gardener', 'gardening') (ibid.: 60)...

...is a harder intellectual task than to come to spell those words correctly as a result of becoming familiar with them in the context of their normal use.

Moreover, children must learn that this rule only applies when there is a *single* final stressed vowel. It does not apply to 'retreat', 'retreated', 'retreating'. It only applies when the *very last letter* is a consonant; not when the last syllable is stressed but the word ends with an 'e': 'create', 'created', 'creating'. It only applies when there is only *one* consonant at the end of a word: not 'conflict', 'conflicted', 'conflicting'. It only applies when the suffix begins with a vowel: 'fulfil', 'fulfilling' but 'fulfilment' (except in America – 'fulfillment').

This process of sub-division and exclusion – 'Only then, not then, only stressed, not unstressed, only single, not double, only stressed without a final 'e', not with a final 'e', only when the suffix begins with a vowel' – is interesting at the level of adult orthographics. Such patterns do exist. In this case, adult orthographics are imposed on children for reactionary educational reasons because of a defective understanding of learning on the part of policy-makers.

One of the requirements for Years 5 and 6 almost induces a smile. It admits that the method to be dunned into children has severe limitations:

Use **-ant** and **-ancel-ancy** if there is a related word with a /æ/ or /eɪ/ sound in the right position; **-ation** endings are often a clue.

Use **-ent** and **-encel-ency** after soft **c** (/s/ sound), soft **g** (/dʒ/ sound) and **qu**, or if there is a related word with a clear /ɛ/ sound in the right position.

There are many words, however, where the above guidance does not help. These words just have to be learnt. (ibid.: 67)

Despite the difficulties, most teachers will do their best to teach the patterns and the word lists, perhaps a few per week over a period of time, and children will do their best to learn them. Unfortunately, the learning of lists of isolated and sometimes quite advanced words is not a good way for pupils to gain a secure grasp of spelling. *An Alternative Curriculum for English 3 to 16* proposes better ways.

Handwriting

As at Key Stage 1, the requirements for handwriting at Key Stage 2 are perfectly reasonable, although the requirement at Years 5 and 6 that children should '[choose] which shape of a letter to use when given choices...' (ibid.: 47) is mysterious. There is no mention of the desirability of children learning keyboard skills from Key Stage 2 onwards, so that they can type at least as fast as they can handwrite. *An Alternative Curriculum for English 3 to 16* makes good this lack.

Punctuation

The occasional references to punctuation in the writing orders for Key Stage 2 are perfectly acceptable.

Vocabulary

The same criticism applies as at Key Stage 1: there is no mention of vocabulary as lexis.

Composition

As at Key Stage 1, the composition requirements for writing at Key Stage 2 are curiously brief by contrast with the excessively detailed prescriptions which apply to spelling. Once again, this inadequacy may well come as a relief to teachers; at least the orders do not actually prevent good teaching. They require some essential writing practices (for example, planning, drafting, evaluating, editing, proof-reading, sharing writing with others). This is welcome. But, as at Key Stage 1, there is almost complete silence about *what* children should write. There are three mentions of 'narratives' (one at Years 3 and 4 and two at Years 5 and 6) and one of 'non-narrative material' at Years 3 and 4; apart from those, there is no account at all of the generic range of writing which children should attempt. There is no mention of writing using digital technologies, or of writing which combines with other modes such as sounds and images to achieve its effect. These absences represent a serious shortcoming in the new orders.

Grammar at Key Stages 1 and 2

Appendix 2 of the new National Curriculum orders for English, on vocabulary, grammar and punctuation, which is statutory and which applies principally to Key Stages 1 and 2, begins thus:

The grammar of our first language is learnt naturally and implicitly through interactions with other speakers and from reading... (Department for Education, 2014b: 75)

Perfectly true.

Explicit knowledge of grammar is, however, very important, as it gives us more conscious control and choice in our language. Building this knowledge is best achieved through a focus on grammar within the teaching of reading, writing and speaking. Once pupils are familiar with a grammatical concept [for example 'modal verb'], they should be encouraged to apply and explore this concept in the grammar of their own speech and writing and to note where it is used by others. (ibid.: 75)

This is much more dubious. In particular, it is not the case that, once learners have been taught about modal verbs as a category, they will make more sophisticated and correct use of modals in their writing. Such an expectation yet again demonstrates a back-to-front view of how competence develops. It may be that at the end of an effective, appropriately pitched lesson on modal verbs, learners will be able to recognise and indeed generate examples of properly positioned modals in sentences. It is going too far to say that in the weeks and months to come they *will*, as a result of that lesson, also use modals better in their writing. Perhaps there will be an influence; if there is, it will be an aid to the major driver and developer of competence, which is positive experience of reading and writing.

Metalinguistic overload

In the new orders for Key Stages 1 and 2, there is an extraordinary overload of metalinguistic concepts and grammatical categories to be taught explicitly. At Year 1, children must learn about plural noun suffixes and that the prefix *un-* changes the meaning of verbs and adjectives. In Year 2, they must learn subordination and noun phrases. In Year 3, as well as learning about conjunctions, adverbs and prepositions, they must understand the use of the present perfect tense and take their understanding of subordination as far as the concept of the subordinate clause. Year 4 pupils must know about fronted adverbials and determiners. Relative clauses and cohesion are statutory for Year 5 pupils, while at Year 6 they must be introduced to the passive voice and to ellipsis. The subjunctive makes an entry in the upper years of Key Stage 2. In Appendix 2, it is there admittedly as a non-statutory example of the statutory requirement to study the difference between structures characteristic of informal and of formal language. In the 'Writing – vocabulary, grammar and punctuation' orders for Years 5 and 6, however, learning about the subjunctive is statutory: pupils must be taught to '[recognise] vocabulary and structures that are appropriate for formal speech and writing, including subjunctive forms' (*ibid.*: 49).

The above is a small selection from the statutory requirements for grammar. This formidable set of new responsibilities for teachers is accompanied by a (non-statutory) glossary of terms (Department for Education, 2013c) which, taken as a whole, could usefully serve as part of the syllabus of an A-level course in language and linguistics. We hasten to say that it seems to us desirable that teachers, *at their level*, should know about the grammatical categories and terms listed in the glossary. The glossary announces itself 'as an aid for teachers, not as the body of knowledge that should be learnt by pupils' (*ibid.*: 1). Nonetheless, the grammatical terms as defined there are offered as supports for the explicit teaching to primary-school pupils of many of the concepts and categories they represent.

This will not work. Most teachers will do their best to meet statutory requirements, as they always have done, but a price will be paid. Too much time will be given up to separate grammar teaching at an unrealistically advanced level, at the expense of time given to the teaching of writing, which should include attention to all the aspects of convention and control which developing writers need: to the manner as well as the matter of what they write. *An Alternative Curriculum for English 3 to 16* contains a more modest collection of grammatical concepts and terminology which it would be realistic to introduce to children during the primary years, and some recommendations for the teaching of knowledge about language beyond grammar at Key Stage 2.

Key Stages 3 and 4

Spoken English

Key Stage 3

The orders for spoken English at Key Stage 3, like those for Key Stages 1 and 2, are brief:

Pupils should be taught to:

- *speak confidently and effectively, including through:*
 - *using Standard English confidently in a range of formal and informal contexts, including classroom discussion*
 - *giving short speeches and presentations, expressing their own ideas and keeping to the point*
 - *participating in formal debates and structured discussions, summarising and/or building on what has been said*
 - *improvising, rehearsing and performing play scripts and poetry in order to generate language and discuss language use and meaning, using role, intonation, tone, volume, mood, silence, stillness and action to add impact.*

(Department for Education, 2014b: 85)

Unlike the orders for Key Stages 1 and 2, these orders demonstrate a narrow vision of the forms and purposes of speech. Admittedly, they contain one reference to ‘informal contexts, including classroom discussion’, but, apart from that, the use of the spoken language at Key Stage 3, so far as the government is concerned, should be dominated by formality and performance.

The more formal, more performance-based uses of the spoken language – debates, talks, speeches, presented or dramatic readings of poetry – should certainly be part of the spoken language curriculum. But the spoken language should not be confined to these uses. There is no sense here of the range of kinds of talk, from the most exploratory, collaborative and tentative through to the most finished, individualistic and assertive, that teachers should admit in their classrooms.

Key Stage 4

It might be expected that the orders for the spoken language at Key Stage 4 would push teachers and students even more firmly in the direction of formality and performance. Surprisingly, there is a sort of about-turn, or at least half-turn, back towards a better balance at this Key Stage:

Pupils should be taught to:

- *speak confidently, audibly and effectively, including through:*
 - *using Standard English when the context and audience require it*
 - *working effectively in groups of different sizes and taking on required roles, including leading and managing discussions, involving others productively, reviewing and summarising, and contributing to meeting goals/deadlines*
 - *listening to and building on the contributions of others, asking questions to clarify and inform, and challenging courteously when necessary*
 - *planning for different purposes and audiences, including selecting and organising information and ideas effectively and persuasively for formal spoken presentations and debates*
 - *listening and responding in a variety of different contexts, both formal and informal, and evaluating content, viewpoints, evidence and aspects of presentation*
 - *improvising, rehearsing and performing play scripts and poetry in order to generate language and discuss language use and meaning, using role, intonation, tone, volume, mood, silence, stillness and action to add impact. (ibid.: 88)*

Unlike the Key Stage 3 orders, this list does not actively prevent teachers from teaching well. It demonstrates, however, a lack of coherence in government policy on the teaching of spoken language as between Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4.

GCSE English Language

Unfortunately, the statutory subject content for GCSE English Language for syllabuses to be taught from September 2015 is completely at variance with the Key Stage 4 orders, and is only concerned with formal presentations:

presenting information and ideas: *selecting and organising information and ideas effectively and persuasively for prepared spoken presentations; planning effectively for different purposes and audiences; making presentations and speeches;*

responding to spoken language: *listening to and responding appropriately to any questions and feedback;*

spoken Standard English: *expressing ideas using Standard English whenever and wherever appropriate.*

(Department for Education, 2013a: 5)

This variance is either unintended – the result of a failure of coordination between those drafting different documents – or it is an exercise in saying something moderately enlightened about the Key Stage 4 curriculum, while knowing that most teachers are obliged to focus on the GCSE requirements and will therefore be under pressure to neglect the more exploratory and collaborative aspects of talk. Whatever the truth of the matter, many teachers at Key Stage 4 will feel obliged to yield to that pressure.

On top of this, the government's true estimation of the value of the spoken language is to be seen in the fact that as from summer 2014 GCSE candidates' performance in the spoken language has no longer contributed to their main final grade in the examination. There is more discussion of this backward step in *Assessment and Examinations 3 to 19*.

Reading

Key Stage 3

At Key Stage 3, the distinction between 'comprehension' and 'word reading', which operated at Key Stages 1 and 2, has disappeared. There is one set of orders, simply called 'reading'. This is welcome, as it avoids the divorcing of comprehension from the recognition and study of individual words.

On the other hand, it might be thought odd that word-based teaching has largely disappeared from the Key Stage 3 orders. It may be argued that the study of morphology, apparently so important at Key Stage 2, is covered at Key Stage 3 by the requirement that pupils should read critically through 'knowing how language, including figurative language, vocabulary choice, grammar, text structure and organisational features, presents meaning' (Department for Education, 2014b: 83).

It is also true that in the Key Stage 3 writing orders, to which we will come in a moment, there is a separate section on grammar and vocabulary, under which morphology could presumably be studied. But there is no mention of etymology, again apparently so important at Key Stage 2, either in the reading or the writing orders.

This is strange. The secondary years are the time when the analytic study of language should receive greater attention, whether this study is concerned with word classes, word structure (which would include morphology), sentence grammar, text grammar, the history of change in English (including etymology) or other aspects of knowledge about language. The orders have the relationship between competence and analysis precisely the wrong way round in the relative emphasis given to them in the primary and secondary years.

These criticisms notwithstanding, there is nothing in the Key Stage 3 reading orders which prevents teachers from teaching well. In this respect they are similar to the comprehension orders at Key Stage 2. There is range and diversity in the requirements as to *what* students should read:

The range will include high-quality works from:

- English literature, both pre-1914 and contemporary, including prose, poetry and drama
- Shakespeare (two plays)
- seminal world literature (*ibid.*: 83)

...and in the requirements as to how they should read. For example, they should be taught to:

- understand increasingly challenging texts through:
 - learning new vocabulary, relating it explicitly to known vocabulary and understanding it with the help of context and dictionaries
 - making inferences and referring to evidence in the text
 - knowing the purpose, audience for and context of the writing and drawing on this knowledge to support comprehension
 - checking their understanding to make sure that what they have read makes sense. (*ibid.*: 83)

Key Stage 4

The orders for reading at Key Stage 4 have broadly the same good qualities as those noted at Key Stage 3. Once again, it will be perfectly possible for teachers to teach well within them.

There is, however, one oddity. Pupils should be taught to:

- read and appreciate the depth and power of the English literary heritage through:
 - reading a wide range of high-quality, challenging, classic literature and extended literary non-fiction, such as essays, reviews and journalism. This writing should include whole texts. The range will include:
 - at least one play by Shakespeare
 - works from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries
 - poetry since 1789, including representative Romantic poetry
 - re-reading literature and other writing as a basis for making comparisons
 - choosing and reading books independently for challenge, interest and enjoyment. (*ibid.*: 86)

The oddity is 'representative Romantic poetry'. Without in any way undervaluing the poetry of the Romantic movement, 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? In short, the requirement would be better as 'major lyric and narrative poetry written before 1914'.

Writing

Key Stage 3

We emerge from the micro-management, the long lists of spelling rules, the adult-speaking-down-to-child analytical and deductive obsessions in the writing orders for Key Stages 1 and 2, into a simple and trusting brevity at Key Stage 3.

The Key Stage 3 writing orders cover just over half a page. They pay some attention to *what* students should write ('well-structured formal expository and narrative essays; stories, scripts, poetry and other imaginative writing; notes and polished scripts for talks and presentations; a range of other narrative and non-narrative texts, including arguments, and personal and formal letters' [*ibid.*: 84]); and they mention planning, editing and proofreading.

With regard to spelling, teachers are referred to Appendix 1 on spelling, as provided for Key Stages 1 and 2. It is presumed, wrongly, that all the essentials to do with spelling will have been covered by Year 6. The requirement at Key Stage 3 is merely that students should '[apply] the spelling patterns and rules set out in English Appendix 1 to the key stage 1 and 2 programmes of study for English' (*ibid.*: 84). This simple and trusting brevity over spelling is once again wrongly balanced in terms of the requirements made of pupils of different ages. There should be *more* conscious, analytical attention to spelling in the secondary phase, including the study of spelling patterns, and less in the primary phase.

Key Stage 4

The orders for writing at Key Stage 4 are even briefer than those at Key Stage 3 – so brief, in fact, that they may be stated in full:

Pupils should be taught to:

- *write accurately, fluently, effectively and at length for pleasure and information through:*
 - *adapting their writing for a wide range of purposes and audiences: to describe, narrate, explain, instruct, give and respond to information, and argue*
 - *selecting and organising ideas, facts and key points, and citing evidence, details and quotation effectively and pertinently for support and emphasis*
 - *selecting, and using judiciously, vocabulary, grammar, form, and structural and organisational features, including rhetorical devices, to reflect audience, purpose and context, and using Standard English where appropriate*
 - *make notes, draft and write, including using information provided by others [e.g. writing a letter from key points provided; drawing on and using information from a presentation]*
- *revise, edit and proof-read through:*
 - *reflecting on whether their draft achieves the intended impact*
 - *restructuring their writing, and amending its grammar and vocabulary to improve coherence, consistency, clarity and overall effectiveness*
 - *paying attention to the accuracy and effectiveness of grammar, punctuation and spelling. (ibid.: 86-87)*

With regard to writing, the orders for Key Stages 3 and 4, like the composition orders at Key Stage 2, come as a relief. They do not actually prevent or impede good and imaginative teaching. There is something there about range, something about the composition process, something about purposes and audiences.

Grammar

Key Stage 3

The pattern is set: as with the parallels in reading and writing, we emerge from the extraordinary overload of metalinguistic concepts and categories to be taught explicitly about grammar at Key Stages 1 and 2 into a relatively simple, 'trust-the-teacher' brevity in the new orders for Key Stage 3.

Grammar is mentioned three times in the Key Stage 3 writing orders. There is then a separate set of orders on grammar and vocabulary, with the same status as those on reading, writing and spoken English. After the unrealism of the demands at Key Stages 1 and 2, we might have expected that the new Key Stage 3 orders would make demands hitherto appropriate for first-year students on a degree course in linguistics. But we're in for a surprise.

Pupils should be taught to:

- *consolidate and build on their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary through:*
 - *extending and applying the grammatical knowledge set out in English Appendix 2 to the key stage 1 and 2 programmes of study to analyse more challenging texts*

- *studying the effectiveness and impact of the grammatical features of the texts they read*
- *drawing on new vocabulary and grammatical constructions from their reading and listening, and using these consciously in their writing and speech to achieve particular effects*
- *knowing and understanding the differences between spoken and written language, including differences associated with formal and informal registers, and between Standard English and other varieties of English*
- *using Standard English confidently in their own writing and speech. (ibid.: 84)*

So the assumption is that the detailed explicit work on grammar and vocabulary should have been completed by the time children leave primary school.

Key Stage 4 and GCSE English Language

As at Key Stage 3, grammar is mentioned three times in the Key Stage 4 writing orders, and ‘Grammar and vocabulary’ has its own section, which is only a little longer than that at Key Stage 3.

Grammar and vocabulary

Pupils should be taught to:

- *consolidate and build on their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary through:*
 - *studying their effectiveness and impact in the texts they read*
 - *drawing on new vocabulary and grammatical constructions from their reading and listening, and using these consciously in their writing and speech to achieve particular effects*
 - *analysing some of the differences between spoken and written language, including differences associated with formal and informal registers, and between Standard English and other varieties of English*
 - *using linguistic and literary terminology accurately and confidently in discussing reading, writing and spoken language. (ibid.: 87)*

Meanwhile, the subject content and assessment objectives for GCSE English Language syllabuses, studied from September 2015, make rather modest demands with regard to grammar. GCSE specifications in English Language should enable students to:

- *read a wide range of texts, fluently and with good understanding*
- *read critically, and use knowledge gained from wide reading to inform and improve their own writing*
- *write effectively and coherently using Standard English appropriately*
- *use grammar correctly, punctuate and spell accurately*
- *acquire and apply a wide vocabulary, alongside a knowledge and understanding of grammatical terminology, and linguistic conventions for reading, writing and spoken language. (Department for Education, 2013a: 3)*

Grammar in primary and in secondary: the wrong way round

All our educational experience tells us that, if there is a time when knowledge about language should become more explicit, when the use of terminology should advance, when analysis of texts, including grammatical analysis, should occupy more of the teacher’s and the students’ time and attention, it is at the secondary-school stage. This is when students come much more to ‘know what they know’, to reflect on their knowledge, to engage in acts of metacognition: learning about learning, reflecting on learning. Metalinguistic knowledge is a part of metacognition. And yet all the government’s new, explicit, detailed, statutory demands about the learning of grammar apply to primary-school pupils. As we have noted earlier, secondary-school students are merely required, in a general way, to ‘carry on the good work’.

This is the wrong way round. By all means let there be more grammar teaching in secondary schools, as long as it is explained through patterns and examples and based on the study of authentic texts. Let there be some but less grammar teaching at Key Stage 2. Let there be a little grammar teaching at Key Stage 1, but let those pupils be overwhelmingly preoccupied with the essential task of becoming confident users of language.

The topsy-turvy understanding of the relationship between competence and analysis, represented by the different quantities of requirements on teaching grammar at the four Key Stages, proceeds from a wrong conception of learning. It is the same tempting conception which has led to the follies in the areas of early reading and the teaching of spelling. 'Get the rules straight first,' it says, 'and competence will follow.' Wrong. A right conception of learning says, 'Enable, encourage, support developing competence first, and awareness and application of the rules – and an active interest in those rules – will follow.'

A regrettable absence: knowledge about language

The teaching of grammar sits best within the overall study of language as a phenomenon. There has been substantial work on knowledge about language, as it has come to be known, since the original introduction of the National Curriculum. Regrettably, little of this work has made its way into the new orders. We acknowledge the references to 'differences between spoken and written language, including differences associated with formal and informal registers, and between Standard English and other varieties of English' at Key Stages 3 and 4, already quoted, and those to etymology and morphology at Key Stage 2, curiously absent however at Key Stages 3 and 4. But there is no worked-out, progressive programme of study for knowledge about language. We have made good this lack in *An Alternative Curriculum for English 3 to 16*, from Key Stage 2 upwards, after the proposals for grammar.

A general difficulty: which century are we in?

A particular blind spot in the new orders, across the piece, is the almost total absence of any recognition that in the second decade of the 21st century the children and young people in our schools are surrounded by electronic and digital media. As receivers and as producers, they use these media for information, education and entertainment all the time, in their home and personal lives and – to varying degrees – at school.

The government of course understands that we are in the midst of a digital revolution proceeding at a breathtaking pace. It communicates with schools via the internet, and expects schools to respond in like manner. Computing is now a National Curriculum foundation subject, compulsory at all four Key Stages, whose intention is to equip 'pupils to use computational thinking and creativity to understand and change the world' (Department for Education, 2014b: 230). How strange then that the new National Curriculum for English opts to respond to this new world, in which meanings and messages travel and are transformed via these extraordinary new media, by turning its back on it. The government's dislike of media education is clear; for the first time since the introduction of the National Curriculum, there is no mention of teaching about the media in the new orders. By contrast, *An Alternative Curriculum for English 3 to 16* assumes the use of digital technologies and styles of communication in all areas of language learning, and includes a whole section on media.

Drama

The following requirement appears in an introductory general section on spoken language in the new English orders:

All pupils should be enabled to participate in and gain knowledge, skills and understanding associated with the artistic practice of drama. Pupils should be able to adopt, create and sustain a range of roles, responding appropriately to others in role. They should have opportunities to improvise, devise and script drama for one another and a range of audiences, as well as to rehearse, refine, share and respond thoughtfully to drama and theatre performances. (Department for Education, 2014b: 15)

The paragraphs below contain every reference to drama and to activities connected, however tangentially, with drama in the new orders.

Key Stages 1 and 2

The brief, undifferentiated set of orders for spoken language for the whole of Key Stages 1 and 2 contains the requirement that pupils should be taught to ‘participate in discussions, presentations, performances, role play, improvisations and debates’. (*ibid.*: 18)

The requirement that ‘pupils should become more familiar with and confident in using language in a greater variety of situations, for a variety of audiences and purposes, including through drama, formal presentations and debate’ appears in the introduction to the section on Years 3 and 4. (*ibid.*: 35)

The reading comprehension orders for Years 3 and 4 include the requirement that pupils should ‘[listen] to and [discuss] a wide range of fiction, poetry, plays, non-fiction and reference books or textbooks’. They should ‘[prepare] poems and play scripts to read aloud and to perform, showing understanding through intonation, tone, volume and action’. (*ibid.*: 36-37)

At Years 5 and 6, ‘Pupils’ knowledge of language, gained from stories, plays, poetry, non-fiction and textbooks, will support their increasing fluency as readers, their facility as writers, and their comprehension.’ ‘...pupils’ confidence, enjoyment and mastery of language should be extended through public speaking, performance and debate.’ (*ibid.*: 42-43)

In the reading comprehension orders for Years 5 and 6, pupils should ‘[continue] to read and discuss an increasingly wide range of fiction, poetry, plays, non-fiction and reference books or textbooks’. They should ‘[prepare] poems and plays to read aloud and to perform, showing understanding through intonation, tone and volume so that the meaning is clear to an audience’. (*ibid.*: 44-45)

The writing composition orders for Years 5 and 6 include the requirement that pupils should ‘perform their own compositions, using appropriate intonation, volume, and movement so that meaning is clear’. (*ibid.*: 49)

Key Stage 3

The reading orders at Key Stage 3 include the requirement that pupils should ‘[read] a wide range of fiction and non-fiction, including in particular whole books, short stories, poems and plays with a wide coverage of genres, historical periods, forms and authors. The range will include high-quality works from English literature, both pre-1914 and contemporary, including prose, poetry and drama, Shakespeare (two plays), seminal world literature...’ (*ibid.*: 83)

Pupils should be taught to ‘read critically through... understanding how the work of dramatists is communicated effectively through performance and how alternative staging allows for different interpretations of a play’. (*ibid.*: 83)

The writing orders at this Key Stage include the requirement that pupils should be taught to produce ‘writing for a wide range of purposes and audiences, including... stories, scripts, poetry and other imaginative writing’. (*ibid.*: 84)

The orders for spoken language include the requirement that pupils should be taught to ‘[improvise], [rehearse] and [perform] play scripts and poetry in order to generate language and discuss language use and meaning, using role, intonation, tone, volume, mood, silence, stillness and action to add impact’. (*ibid.*: 85)

Key Stage 4

The writing orders at Key Stage 4 include the requirement that pupils should ‘[read] a wide range of high-quality, challenging, classic literature and extended literary non-fiction, such as essays, reviews and journalism. This writing should include whole texts. The range will include at least one play by Shakespeare, works from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries...’ (*ibid.*: 86)

As at Key Stage 3, the orders for spoken language at Key Stage 4 include the requirement that pupils should be taught to ‘[improvise], [rehearse] and [perform] play scripts and poetry in order to generate language and discuss language use and meaning, using role, intonation, tone, volume, mood, silence, stillness and action to add impact’. (*ibid.*: 88)

Several of these references focus on the perfectly valid, indeed important activity of the reading and writing of scripted literary drama, an activity nonetheless well away from the purposes and forms of educational drama as most of its practitioners understand it.

There is no point in finding detailed fault with individual references to drama in the new orders. Indeed, the first of the quotations above is admirable. Our criticism doesn’t reside in the detail; it resides in the fact that, put all together, the requirements here do not add up to a substantial, coherent, rigorous, iterative, developmental account of drama, either as a part of English, or as a learning medium across the curriculum, or as a freestanding school subject. The drama section of *An Alternative Curriculum for English 3 to 16* attempts to do what the new orders have failed to do.

The non-National Curriculum

We welcomed the original principle of the National Curriculum, introduced in 1989 and 1990, which was to offer a broad statement of the knowledge, skills and understanding to which all students in state schools in England and Wales were and are entitled.

England is now in the incongruous position of having a majority of state secondary schools and a growing minority of primary schools – those that are academies and free schools – which have been released from the obligation to follow the National Curriculum at all (though we acknowledge that all state schools are bound by the government’s assessment requirements).

Why go to all the trouble of designing a legally enforced National Curriculum and then abandon the principle of general entitlement? This is an incoherent and inequitable position. Either have legal enforcement for all – and the logic of this position, utopian as it may seem, would be to include independent schools within the scope of the legal enforcement – or achieve a broad national consensus on the knowledge, skills and understanding which children and young people are entitled to have gained in each curriculum subject at various stages of their schooling, without the need for legal enforcement.

Back to the drawing board?

The new National Curriculum for English contains many ill-judged requirements, much legally binding content which runs contrary to the way in which children and young people most effectively learn English. That is why we have written *An Alternative Curriculum for English 3 to 16*.

At some point in the future, across the whole 3 to 16 age-range, and taking in both curriculum and assessment, government and English-teaching professionals will have to sit down together and make something better than has been made now, because significant sections of the new requirements will prove unworkable.

In sum...

- The new National Curriculum for English is a thing of mixed quality.
- It undervalues the spoken language at Key Stages 1 and 2, and is over-concerned with formal, performance-based uses of the spoken language in the secondary years.
- Its approach to the initial teaching of reading and to the teaching of spelling and grammar at Key Stages 1 and 2 is based on a flawed understanding of learning in these years: one that imagines that analytical instruction is a prerequisite for competence.
- Its requirements for comprehension in reading at Key Stages 1 and 2 are perfectly acceptable. Those for composition in writing at Key Stages 1 and 2 usefully refer to some of the essential processes involved in writing, but say far too little about *what* children should write.
- Its requirements for reading and for writing at Key Stages 3 and 4 are broadly acceptable.
- The requirements on the teaching of grammar in the primary years should be more modest; those in the secondary years should be more detailed and more demanding.
- The paucity of requirements to do with knowledge about language other than grammar is regrettable.
- The new orders ignore the electronic and digital means of expression and communication with which most of our children and young people are intimately familiar. They have abolished any reference to media education. These are major omissions.
- The requirements for drama, whether as a part of English, as a learning medium across the curriculum, or as a freestanding subject, are inadequate.
- At some point, there will have to be further revision of the orders, to deal with those parts of it which will be seen to be unworkable.

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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.

The ten booklets in the series are:

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

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Reading 7 to 16: Peter Traves

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For more information, contact John Richmond: john@jrichmond.demon.co.uk

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