

# English

## A conversation with Mandy Lawson

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### **What do you want your students to be able to know, understand and do at the end of a successful key stage 3 English curriculum?**

When designing a key stage 3 curriculum for English, I believe it should be driven by the context that you are in. Given the relative insularity of our students' lives, we have designed a curriculum that allows them to see beyond their context. By the time they get into Year 9, we have tried to develop their ability to see the world from other people's perspectives, which is a key skill in English. A good key stage 3 English curriculum enables students to appreciate a world that is beyond their own. In tandem with this, it is also important to celebrate the students' local identity through the texts which are either written by local authors or set locally.

Another key concept you want students to understand is the idea of writers constructing texts for a purpose; closely related to that is the

students being able to develop their own stamina as a writer and their ability to craft texts deliberately. You have a lot of time in key stage 3 to forge the students' identities as writers. Thirdly, you also want them to be able to control the spoken word by the end of Year 9. Lastly, you must support them to gain an understanding of intertextuality, as well as a relationship of a text to its context.

### **Beginning at Year 7, how do you build an English curriculum that enables students to know, understand and do what you want them to at the end of key stage 3?**

There is a huge but welcome challenge when shaping a key stage 3 curriculum: the more you read, the more texts you want to include in the curriculum. At key stage 3, you have an almost limitless choice of texts available. You need to be resilient in listening to the different conversations about curriculum and what a good curriculum looks like. You must stay true to what you believe is right for your students. Deciding between a chronological approach and a thematic one is challenging.

You can build the curriculum around termly thematic units across Year 7 all the way through to Year 9. So, there are three units per year, and they are built around a theme. There is a core text at the centre of the unit, and then we have a satellite text booklet which supports the main text.

We choose our themes through working backwards: we look at key stage 4 and what we want students to be able to know, understand and do by the end of key stage 4. Then we build in opportunities for them to know, understand and do those things in Years 7–9 in a graduated approach. So, the theme of 'identity', for example, which is studied in Year 8, connects to texts such as *Macbeth* and the 'Love and Relationships' poetry when it comes to key stage 4. So that is a starting point in terms of building those themes, and it is a collective process for our department.

So, building from Year 7, we start the autumn term with the theme of 'Journeys' and the text *Skellig*. Then we progress from 'Journeys' to 'Relationships' in the spring term, with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as the central text. The summer term focuses upon the theme of 'Dreams', with *Billy Elliot*. Year 8 move on to the theme of 'Tyranny', looking at *The Hunger Games*. In the spring term of Year 8, the theme is 'Identity', with the core text the play script of *Noughts and Crosses* by Malorie Blackman. In the summer term, it is the theme of 'Conflict', with *Salt to*

*the Sea* by Ruta Sepetys – a really powerful text. In Year 9, we begin with the theme of ‘Outsiders’, with the central text being *Of Mice and Men*; ‘Family’/*Romeo and Juliet*; ‘The Supernatural’/*Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. The text choices are progressive, and not just in levels of complexity. In addition, it is important to surround the core thematic texts with many other texts within each unit’s satellite textbook, which we created within the department. This gives us flexibility to ensure the students are getting a varied diet of texts.

It is important to consider that it is not just what you teach that matters, but how you teach it. *Skellig*, for example, gets a bad press as a secondary text, but teach *Skellig* with a sharp focus on the biblical allusions and the mythology, and you can unpick its sophisticated complexities for students and leave students with a greater understanding of intertextuality. *Skellig* is so rich with symbolism and allusion; alongside the novel, we look at some classic mythology, and at texts like Carol Ann Duffy’s ‘Mrs Midas’, and then Kate Tempest’s poem ‘Icarus’. Students understand from the outset that writers are influenced by other writers, which helps them understand the concept of the writer as a crafter, as constructing and taking on board ideas from other people. There is an unrecognised, quiet tradition that serious writers are derivative before they find their own voices. Somerset Maugham, for instance, wrote in the style of half a dozen different writers until he found his own voice, as a legitimate way of apprenticeship into his own work. It does take a while to find your own voice, and it is tremendously useful for students to know that. Using Kate Tempest’s poem ‘Icarus’ is an incredibly powerful way of conveying this idea that nothing is really created in isolation – it is always in a context.

Teaching *Of Mice and Men*, which is often pilloried, allows you to illustrate structure, foreshadowing and a host of other subject-specific knowledge. It is another controversial text, but you must make it feel relevant. The issues around the representation of racism within it and using things like Akala’s talk on the N-word show students how the ideas entrenched in it are learning opportunities rather than problems. Students always have a powerful response to it. If you combine the ‘Outsiders’ unit with satellite texts – which include ‘The Right Word’ by Imtiaz Dharker in terms of the poetry and the really powerful slam poetry of Raymond Antrobus, such as ‘Dear Hearing World’ – it comes together

superbly well as a unit. For any head of department, planning a key stage 3 unit is an immersive experience, one in which you become completely invested. The process is powerful. The idea of helping our students appreciate some of the unheard voices is satisfying culturally, especially if your students do not experience much diversity within their community.

As you move from each unit, you are consciously developing students' knowledge, and building skills incrementally. Studying *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Year 7 is very different from the approach to Shakespeare you take in Year 9 with *Romeo and Juliet*. We are building the resilience required to understand and appreciate a Shakespeare text in Year 7. It is important to take time to emphasise that it is a performance on stage, interrogating the language so that they understand it is not as challenging as they might first think. We teach the play for academic enjoyment and the thematic focus – the central characters' relationships. By the time you get to the spring term in Year 9 and *Romeo and Juliet*, the students will be writing essays, because they have the reading resilience to know that Shakespeare is accessible, and their essay writing skills have been developed incrementally across the intervening units. Building students' knowledge, understanding and skills over the course of the key stage is what you want your curriculum to do.

### **Unit booklets supporting the main text**

Rather than separating the disciplines of prose, poetry and drama, the unit booklets contain examples from all three forms of literature that provide intertextual links to the main unit text and support the thematic focus of the unit. Several poems connect with the themes, as do some powerful short stories or extracts from fiction/drama. This allows for genuine diversity of text within each theme. You just cannot teach every great text in English, but you can teach extracts from many of them. *The Hate U Give*, for example, is a rich text, but there is no place for it as a central text on this key stage 3 curriculum, so it is now included within the satellite text booklet for the 'Outsiders' unit. If you include extracts from a range of texts within the booklets, and you promote those texts in the right way in the classroom, then the students are enthused to go away and read the rest of the texts, and as a result, reading for pleasure becomes normalised.

Securing a healthy work-life balance is not easy as an English teacher. This is where the unit booklets can help; they are photocopied at the beginning

of the unit, so there is no last-minute dash to the photocopier in the morning. All the materials are pre-prepared. All staff within our department are involved so that the individual expertise of colleagues is shared; through this, the department becomes stronger. It allows people to go back to their degree, think about the texts in depth again and enjoy coming up with what could work in these booklets. The unit booklets must be a collective effort and they are continually refined at the end of every unit.

In terms of workload and work-life balance, centralised planning is revolutionary. If units are well planned and well resourced, then colleagues can spend more time thinking about things like using visualisers to illustrate the writer's thinking processes in real time, because they are freed up: they are not spending every evening planning their lessons. The need for actual lesson planning is drastically reduced, because you are merely thinking about the questions you are going to ask, and the things you are going to write, and the things you are going to say.

### **The narrative path through the English key stage 3 curriculum**

With finite time to teach everything you would like to teach students at key stage 3, you cannot waste a minute. When you are teaching Shakespeare, you do not want to have to teach elements of Elizabethan England every single time you teach a Shakespeare text. Instead, it is better if you make those links explicit and say, 'Actually, remember when you learned this in Year 7?' That encourages that sense of an holistic narrative in the classroom. The students will grasp the curriculum path because they will realise that the texts are related, that writers read other writers, that texts are influenced by the context in which they were written and that some themes are eternal obsessions for our species. It really helps if teachers teach across as many year groups as they can, because they then get a sense of how the curriculum is deliberately structured to build upon what has been taught before. On a rota basis, everybody needs to teach in every year group to fully appreciate the beauty and coherence of the key stage 3 curriculum.

When you teach language, you must build that pathway through the curriculum as well. To prepare for reading 19th-century texts from Year 9 into GCSE, we build extracts into the satellite text from Year 8 upwards. By the final term of Year 9, when the students encounter the full unit on *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the students will have the resilience to enjoy it at

that stage, as a precursor to studying *A Christmas Carol*, the text many schools teach in Year 10.

There is a huge caveat to all this: the key stage 3 curriculum is much more than preparing for GCSE. The curriculum prepares students to be citizens of the world and English has got a great part to play in that, because of the empathy and understanding you can encourage in them. It is woven through the narratives, and a love of narrative is central to being human. You want your students, years after you have taught them, to be able to engage in a conversation – be it about politics, or economics or love – and you want them to be able to contribute to that conversation with confidence. In English, you are, ultimately, enabling students to feel confident about having that kind of conversation. It is, as Christine Counsell says, about enabling our students to clamber on to the conversations of the educated and articulate themselves, so that they are not excluded from any subject or social hierarchy.

### **Teaching writing and textual analysis**

The visualiser has been a game changer when it comes to teaching writing and helping students understand the process of writing. If we expose students to the thought processes of a writer – why choose this word, not that one; what impact will that word have over this one – it supports them in understanding that a text is a construct and that the analysis of a text at word-choice level is central to the discipline of English. BV (before visualisers), you would share a pre-prepared response you had written for the students before the lesson. That was such a flawed approach. You would glory in how clever you were in writing an A\* essay, and the students would be intimidated by such a polished finished piece of writing they could never aspire to write themselves. Crucially, that approach missed out the cognition processes integral to writing. With visualisers, you can say, 'Let's write this together. Oh I've put this word there, but actually could I change that word...?' You can make the implicit explicit. That is tremendously powerful in encouraging students to grasp that producing a text is a conscious process. The revelation of the writer's thinking has helped that constant narrative in the classroom of saying, 'It's okay to make changes, to cross things out.'

One of the challenges is making sure that your staff feel confident to write model answers. Showing your writing process live to students is

challenging. You need to build up your colleagues' confidence. There are even practical issues about how to set up the equipment that help you demonstrate your writing more effectively to students. Colleagues have to grow in confidence. Subject leaders have a job to do in making their colleagues feel supported in being able to write 'in public'.

The idea that writing all comes down out of the sky, through your head, down your arm and onto the page – all perfectly formed – is worth unpicking. It helps dispel the misconception that longer essays are necessarily better essays. You can illustrate how, in four carefully crafted paragraphs, you can demonstrate all the writing techniques required. You do not need to write eight pages. Furthermore, visualising the thinking behind writing aids the planning process. You need to introduce the planning process right down in Year 7. Ensure that planning becomes an automatic first response to any writing task. It helps eradicate 'hope for the best' writing. In your key stage 3 curriculum, give students as many opportunities to write as possible by including those weekly writing opportunities where they can build up a portfolio of skills across key stage 3.

In my view, it is not helpful to expect students to do something that we are not prepared to do ourselves. 'We are going to have a go at this' is likely to be more powerful than 'You are going to have a go at this.' So sometimes, not all the time, it can be really helpful for you to say, 'I'm going to see what I can do.' At GCSE, this is powerful, because on the English language paper they have got so much to do in such a short time. There is the teacher standing at the front saying, 'You need to write this answer in ten minutes,' but if you write that answer with them, and share with them what you have been able to produce – and, perhaps, some of the challenges that you have faced when writing a response – then they feel that there is a greater relationship between the teacher and the students, which is powerful for any classroom climate. Students feel reassured by that. Moreover, when it comes to your subject knowledge as a teacher, attempting the examination papers that they are expected to complete is hugely powerful as well. If we can better understand the intricacies of what they are facing then we will be better placed to support them, because we will be aware of the pitfalls they face and the mistakes that they are likely to make.

It is all about making thinking visible, articulating your thoughts. When you write, most of the time you are re-reading what you have

just written in order to write the next sentence. But when you do it at pace, under examination conditions, you are writing and re-reading almost simultaneously. It is an incredible process to do that expertly. Explicitly teaching the cognitive control methods required to write well can be done right down in Year 7. Actually, you could probably do it in primary school – the earlier the better. It feels right now that, in terms of academic challenge, you are at liberty to go beyond any expectations of what you should or should not be teaching students. Children like hard stuff. They like a challenge. They hate being patronised. The key thing is that they are not left to flounder. They certainly do relish doing difficult work, and it is our job to clear the undergrowth so that they can see what writing is about. As a result, they are likely to want to do more because they have looked under the metaphorical bonnet and have seen how the engine of writing works.

### **The intellectually interesting aspect of teaching new, unfamiliar content**

No two English degrees are the same, and it would be impossible for any one English degree to cover the full canon of the world's literature. So, for any English teacher, developing subject knowledge is an ongoing piece of work. It follows that acquiring good subject knowledge means that school leaders must put in place appropriate support. This is obviously a big issue in primary schools for all sorts of reasons, and it has got to be done at the appropriate pace over time – you cannot rush into this, but it is also an issue in secondary, because even if you are lucky enough to be teaching your first discipline that you read at university, what are the chances you are teaching exactly the same courses that you were taught? It follows that subject knowledge is important for all of us. Always try to be open with students. It is that age-old thing as a teacher: you can be asked something that you do not know the answer to instantaneously. So, generate a culture in your classroom where you explore a challenging issue together. And when you have a subject leader who says that it is okay to reveal that you do not know something, then I think that makes colleagues feel more confident.

Finally, it can take a long time to come to terms with the fact that the curriculum is never going to be completed. The idea of a utopian curriculum that is fully finished is delightful, but you are never going to



get there because you will tweak and refine and move on. So anybody planning a key stage 3 English curriculum has just got to accept that their job will never be quite done. The curriculum is a never-ending story – in a good way, because you add to it, and you refine it, and you ditch some stuff because it just does not work.

### **English: background**

To help us get our bearings, it is worth quoting the purpose of the English programme of study from the national curriculum:

English has a pre-eminent place in education and in society. A high-quality education in English will teach pupils to speak and write fluently so that they can communicate their ideas and emotions to others, and through their reading and listening, others can communicate with them. Through reading in particular, pupils have a chance to develop culturally, emotionally, intellectually, socially, and spiritually. Literature, especially, plays a key role in such development. Reading also enables pupils both to acquire knowledge and to build on what they already know. All the skills of language are essential to participating fully as a member of society; pupils who do not learn to speak, read and write fluently and confidently are effectively disenfranchised.<sup>1</sup>

Once the importance statements have been revisited, it is helpful for subject leaders and coordinators to discuss and agree with colleagues the reason why their subject, in this case English, is important for the pupils in their school. One way of doing this is to draw on a quote, in this case from James Earl Jones: 'When I read great literature, great drama, speeches, or sermons, I feel that the human mind has not achieved anything greater than the ability to share feelings and thoughts through language.' This kind of prompt allows us to formulate our way of stating the importance of the subject. We might agree or disagree with such a statement and in doing so come to a form of words which expresses our view of the importance of this subject, in this school. This moves us

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1 [www.bit.ly/3AvnG4U](http://www.bit.ly/3AvnG4U)

away from the territory of 'We teach this subject because of the SATs or GCSEs.' While the external tests and exams are important, they are not the totality of the subject.

The overarching aim for English in the national curriculum is to promote high standards of language and literacy by equipping pupils with a strong command of the spoken and written language, and to develop their love of literature through widespread reading for enjoyment. The national curriculum for English aims to ensure that all pupils:

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; write clearly, accurately and coherently, adapting their language and style in and for a range of contexts, purposes and audiences; use discussion in order to learn; they should be able to elaborate and explain clearly their understanding and ideas; are competent in the arts of speaking and listening, making formal presentations, demonstrating to others and participating in debate.

## **Professional communities**

Subject associations are important because at the heart of their work is curriculum thinking, development and resources. The subject association for English is the National Association for the Teaching of English<sup>2</sup> (NATE), and any member of staff with responsibility for a subject should be a member of the relevant subject association, and this should be paid for by the school.

Twitter subject communities are important for the development of subject knowledge because there are lively debates about what to teach, how to teach and the kinds of resources that are helpful. For English, it is worth subscribing to Litdrive<sup>3</sup> and following NATE<sup>4</sup> on Twitter and the hashtags #engchatuk #TeamEnglish #Litdrive.

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2 [www.nate.org.uk](http://www.nate.org.uk)

3 [www.litdrive.org.uk](http://www.litdrive.org.uk)

4 [www.twitter.com/NATEfeed](https://www.twitter.com/NATEfeed)

## An overview of the Duchess's Community High School's key stage 3 English curriculum

'The more that you read, the more things you will know, the more that you learn, the more places you'll go.' – (Dr Seuss)

The DCHS English curriculum supports the needs and character of our fully comprehensive and inclusive educational setting. Our choices ensure all students are literary explorers, creative, independent writers and confident speakers. In moving through the curriculum, students will embrace their local identity through exploring texts and voices set within our Northumberland context and shape their multicultural identity through studying diverse voices from across the globe and their national identity through celebrating British texts from the literary heritage. In doing so, students will explore context and how it shapes meaning, know and value a writer's ability to construct a text consciously for effect, and develop and improve their own stamina and skill as a writer. Ultimately, they will grasp the power that lies in being able to control the written and spoken word and appreciate that great stories can open our minds and challenge us to imagine a world beyond the limiting confines of our own.

	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9
Autumn	<b>JOURNEYS</b> Core Text: <i>Skellig</i>	<b>TYRANNY</b> Core Text: <i>The Hunger Games</i>	<b>OUTSIDERS</b> Core Text: <i>Of Mice and Men</i>
Spring	<b>RELATIONSHIPS</b> Core Text: <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	<b>IDENTITY</b> Core Text: <i>Noughts &amp; Crosses (play)</i>	<b>FAMILY</b> Core Text: <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>
Summer	<b>DREAMS</b> Core Text: <i>Billy Elliot</i>	<b>CONFLICT</b> Core Text: <i>Salt to the Sea</i>	<b>SUPERNATURAL</b> Core Text: <i>Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde</i>

### **Three documents for your senior leader line manager to read about English**

1. The Curriculum: Gallimaufry to Coherence by Mary Myatt
2. The ResearchEd Guide to the Curriculum: An evidence-informed guide for teachers Edited by Clare Sealy and Tom Bennett
3. Why a thematic curriculum is brilliant for Key Stage 3 English (and why it's also great for your GCSE students too), blog by Anthony Cockerill: [www.bit.ly/3INaR1V](http://www.bit.ly/3INaR1V)

### **Five questions for your senior leader line manager to ask you about English**

1. What is so wonderful about teaching English?
2. Outcomes aside, what do students gain from English as a subject?
3. What are the driving factors behind the text choices on our English curriculum?
4. What strategies are in place to ensure that the development of subject knowledge is prioritised in the department and that there is parity for NQTs, RQTs and more experienced teachers?
5. Please could you explain how the English curriculum ensures that students learn more, know more, remember more and can do more at the end of each year.