Statements of Principle

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Drama in English: a curriculum mandate

by Sue Pinnick (NATE) and Jo Tregenza (UKLA)

Although drama is statutory within the English curriculum at Key Stages 1 and 2, the reduction of explicit drama content in 2013 has left teachers without clear guidance on the disciplinary knowledge, skills and progression to which children are entitled. This lack of clarity has led to uneven provision across schools and inconsistent preparation for transition into Key Stage 3.

UKLA and NATE welcome the Review's recognition that drama is a discipline in its own right. We support the call for greater specificity in the primary English Programmes of Study so that core concepts, such as role, character, tension, space, voice, improvisation and performance, are clearly articulated and taught progressively. Drama can enrich and enhance reading comprehension and contributes ideationally to writing; this should be made explicit. Strengthening expectations in the primary phase will help ensure that all children experience high-quality drama education that enriches their language development and confidence, while deepening understanding and broadening cultural participation.

At Key Stage 3, drama should be integral to the English curriculum, not confined to a narrow performance-skills strand, reflecting long-standing arguments that drama is a distinctive mode of meaning-making within English rather than an optional add-on (Franks, 2014; Bryer et al. 2023). While a discrete Key Stage 3 section on drama is welcome, the English Programmes of Study need to recognise drama as a way of thinking in and through texts across the whole subject, in line with accounts of drama-based literacies as multimodal, critical and participatory practices (Dawson & Lee, 2018; Medina et al., 2021).

A revised KS3 and 4 English curriculum might:

- Require drama-based approaches to reading not only plays, but also prose, poetry, non-fiction and multimodal texts, using conventions such as role-on-the-wall, hot-seating, freeze-frames or improvisations to deepen inference and critical response (Bryer et al., 2023).
- Specify that schemes of work should include sequences where students regularly move between drama and close reading (for example, embodying contrasting viewpoints in a scene before analysing narrative perspective or rhetoric), resonating with research on drama-based literacy work (Lee et al., 2020).
- Emphasise drama as a context for composition, with students improvising, scripting and redrafting monologues, dialogues and multimodal pieces emerging from drama worlds, thus linking reading, speaking, listening and writing (Bryer et al., 2023).

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- Highlight the cultural, ethical and affective dimensions of drama, including imagined worlds that explore power, identity and social issues, and support diverse students' participation and sense of belonging (Yandell, 2013).

Assessment of drama at Key Stages 3 and 4 in English should reflect this breadth. Alongside performance, teachers should informally assess interpretative talk in and about the drama, including how students use textual evidence to shape and justify their choices in role. They should also assess reflective writing such as director's notes, character journals and evaluative commentaries that link practical decisions to language, character, theme, structure and context, and writing outcomes that grow from drama (for example, transformed narratives, interior monologues or argumentative pieces), with criteria that recognise how embodied exploration enriches ideas, voice and control of form (Bryer et al., 2023).

As organisations committed to equity, language development and the arts, UKLA and NATE affirm that drama must be positioned as a meaningful, well-resourced and coherent part of both primary and secondary education. Every child deserves access to the expressive, imaginative and communicative possibilities that drama uniquely offers.

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Writing

by Debra Myhill (UKLA)

Writing is a cognitively complex, multidimensional endeavour. At every moment, writers must negotiate both what to say and how to say it. This process draws on a wide repertoire of knowledge and skills: generating and refining ideas; understanding purpose and audience; managing coherence and cohesion; deploying grammar to shape meaning; selecting vocabulary with precision; and controlling transcriptional skills such as handwriting, spelling, and punctuation. Effective writing instruction must recognise and respond to this complexity rather than reduce writing to a set of surface features or procedural steps.

At the heart of a successful pedagogy for writing is a strong classroom community of writers. Writing flourishes in environments where children are treated as authors, where their ideas are valued, and where motivation is actively nurtured. Choice — of topic, form, audience, or mode — strengthens engagement and fosters ownership. A community of writers shares drafts, responds thoughtfully, and understands writing as a process of crafting meaning rather than merely completing tasks. Such an atmosphere supports risk-taking, experimentation, and growth.

In the early years and Key Stage 1, transcription and composition must be developed in tandem. Transcription should not be positioned as a prerequisite to 'real' writing; rather, both dimensions grow alongside each other. Young writers benefit from composing meaningful texts even as they are consolidating spelling and handwriting. At the same time, attention to transcription and fluency remains essential, particularly for older pupils who struggle. When lower-level processes become more automatic, cognitive resources are freed for higher-level composition and revision.

Reading and writing are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. To write with confidence, students must read widely and attentively. Reading provides access to authentic models of language in use—published texts and students' own writing — demonstrating how writers structure ideas, create voice, and achieve rhetorical effects. Artificial or decontextualised language examples have limited value. Equally, writing deepens reading: through drafting, reflecting, editing, and refining, students develop metalinguistic insight into how texts work.

Writing instruction must also reflect the multimodal nature of contemporary communication. Students need opportunities to compose texts that integrate image, sound, layout, and digital media, and to understand how meaning is shaped across modes. Such experiences prepare them to communicate effectively in diverse contexts, including the world of work.

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Finally, the teaching of writing should be explicit, but not reductive. Students deserve clear teaching about how language choices create meaning and achieve particular purposes, but this should be rooted in rich discussion which fosters understanding of different possibilities. Grammar and vocabulary, therefore, should be taught as resources for thinking and crafting — not as compliance-driven checklists or formulaic genre recipes. Through close analysis of authentic texts and purposeful application in their own writing, learners develop control, flexibility, and rhetorical awareness. The ultimate goal is confident, reflective writers who understand writing as a powerful tool for communication and thought.

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Grammar

by Debra Myhill (UKLA)

Discussions about grammar teaching have too often been polarised into those for or against its inclusion in the curriculum. But this framing reduces complex questions of pedagogy to simplistic claims about 'what works'. Teaching and learning are situated, relational, and shaped by context, teacher expertise, and student need. The question is not whether grammar works, but how, why, and under what conditions it supports learning, and equally, when is it not helping learners.

Firstly, it is important to clarify the purpose of grammar in the curriculum, so that a coherent rationale for its inclusion can be articulated. Grammar is not simply about compliance with rules or the learning of terminology, but rather about the development of metalinguistic understanding, understanding about language, that strengthens reading, writing, and spoken language. This means grammar should not be positioned primarily as a mechanism for correctness or error avoidance, but fundamentally as a resource which enhances students' capacity to make and interpret meaning.

To understand what it means to learn grammar, it is critical to distinguish between tacit (implicit) and explicit grammatical knowledge. All fluent speakers have tacit knowledge, which allows them to use language naturally. Grammar teaching develops explicit knowledge — knowledge that can be named, discussed, and consciously applied. This may involve making existing tacit knowledge more conscious, or learning new concepts that may later become internalised. Explicit knowledge should support learners' needs as speakers, readers, and writers. Grammatical terms (metalanguage) are helpful when they support meaningful discussion about language choices, but understanding can also be demonstrated without technical labels, and for some learners at different points in their learning, the terminology can obstruct rather than support their learning. Terminology must serve insight, not replace it.

In order to foster this explicit knowledge, attention to grammar should be integrated within the teaching of reading, writing and talking, and always linked to authentic texts. Analysis of published oral and written texts and of students' own writing or talk provides meaningful contexts for understanding how grammar works in practice. Decontextualised exercises and feature-hunting weaken and undermine this fundamental connection.

Accordingly, we need to adopt a descriptive, meaning-focused view of grammar. Grammar is best understood not as a set of prescriptive norms but as a meaning-making system — a

resource students can draw upon to shape their understanding of how spoken and written texts are crafted, and to inform their own decisions as authors in speech and writing. Therefore, teaching should foreground how grammatical choices function in context rather than treating forms as inherently 'good' or 'correct'.

This means teaching grammar as choice, not prescription. Whilst there may well be cases where explaining a grammar rule helps an individual learner to progress, particularly those for whom English is an additional language, the real power of understanding grammar is in increasing recognition of the relationship between a grammatical choice and its linguistic or rhetorical purpose. In particular, grammar should be presented as a repertoire of meaningful options and students should be given opportunities to explore how alternative structures subtly shift meaning, tone, cohesion, and viewpoint. The goal is to expand students' understanding of the repertoire of possibilities open to them and to empower their authorial agency and decision-making.

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Media and multi-modal texts

by Anthony Cockerill (NATE)

A reformed English curriculum should position media and multi-modal texts not as peripheral 'modern add-ons', but as central to what it means to be literate. Young people encounter narrative, lyrics, persuasion and representation daily through film, music, podcasts, social media, gaming, advertising, graphic novels and interactive digital forms. We recognise that these are not distractions from 'real' reading; they are contemporary manifestations of language, rhetoric and storytelling.

Reform should embed sustained study of media and multi-modal texts across Key Stages 3–4, not confine them to isolated units. Students might analyse how image, sound, layout and movement construct meaning alongside written language. They should learn to read a news feed, a documentary clip, a political campaign video, a song or a branded Instagram post with the same critical attentiveness as they read a 19th-century novel. This includes explicit teaching about representation, bias, framing and media language.

Crucially, production should sit alongside analysis. Students should have opportunities to create podcasts, blogs, advertising copy and digital narratives, making deliberate choices about mode, audience and purpose. In doing so, they develop rhetorical awareness: why a jump cut persuades; how soundtrack shapes mood; how typography influences tone. Such creative work should be integral to curriculum and assessment frameworks that value composition and analysis.

Importantly, this vision does not abandon literary study. Rather, it situates literature within a broader ecology of texts. Students might compare a Shakespeare scene with a contemporary screen adaptation or examine how poetic devices operate in spoken word performance and music videos. The aim is disciplinary coherence: understanding how meaning is made across modes.

In short, reform should affirm that to teach English today is to teach language in all its forms. Media literacy, critical digital competence and multimodal creativity are not optional extras; they are fundamental to cultural understanding and participation.

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GCSE English Language

by Anthony Cockerill (NATE)

Reform of GCSE English Language presents an opportunity to restore coherence, authenticity and intellectual rigour to the subject. NATE advocates for a decisive move away from a narrow, technique-driven model that rewards formulaic responses and superficial feature-spotting. Instead, it would re-centre the qualification on purposeful communication, thoughtful reading and crafted writing and establish parity with what students will encounter should they study English language at A-level.

Students should encounter texts in a range of forms (for instance, journalism, digital texts, transcripts and literary non-fiction) from a diverse range of authors and speakers — and from a range of time periods, including contemporary. They should have opportunities to respond in ways that mirror authentic acts of reading: critically responding to arguments, exploring perspective, exploring tone and reflecting on impact. Assessment tasks should prioritise personal response, interpretation, synthesis and critical judgement over the mechanical identification of language devices.

In writing, reform should foreground awareness of audience, purpose, voice and structure. Assessment tasks could be framed around credible, relevant and contemporary scenarios — writing a speech for a community campaign, crafting an opinion article, composing a reflective narrative, writing a poem, short memoir or flash fiction.

Grammar and technical accuracy remain important, but they should be assessed in context. Knowledge about language should serve communicative clarity and stylistic control, not exist as an abstract checklist. Students can demonstrate their understanding of syntax, cohesion and rhetorical strategies through analysis of real texts and application in their own compositions.

Ultimately, GCSE English Language should certify students as capable, critical communicators to prepare them for life in the 21st century. Reform should ensure that the qualification recognises adaptability, creativity and discernment.

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GCSE English Literature and poetry

by Anthony Cockerill (NATE)

A more fundamental reconsideration of the structure of GCSE English Literature might have opened space to rethink assumptions about literary value and cultural centrality. But if the current framework is to remain, then examination specifications must go further in foregrounding the historical entanglements of literature with empire, race and diasporic experience, from Shakespeare's engagement with early modern ideas of otherness, to the imperial contexts underpinning much nineteenth-century fiction and the postcolonial and migratory narratives shaping contemporary writing.

Within this wider frame, poetry reform offers a particularly powerful opportunity. At the heart of reform should be breadth and flexibility. While all students should encounter a range of historical periods and traditions, teachers should have greater freedom to select poems that resonate with their contexts and communities. Contemporary poets, global voices, spoken word artists and poets from diverse traditions should stand alongside canonical figures. Such diversity affirms that poetry continues to shape cultural, political and ethical discourse.

Reform in the teaching and assessment of poetry at GCSE offers a vital chance to rekindle curiosity, enjoyment and intellectual depth. Too often, poetry has been reduced to a high-stakes comparison exercise dominated by memorisation and formulaic essay structures. In such conditions, technical feature-spotting can displace genuine engagement, and interpretive risk is quietly discouraged.

Assessment should prioritise personal response and interpretation over reductive feature-spotting. Extended responses might invite students to explore how a poem constructs voice or perspective, how language shapes meaning and effect, or how context informs interpretation. These approaches honour poetry as an art form that rewards attentiveness, ambiguity and dialogue.

Memorisation requirements should be carefully reconsidered. While knowing poems well can deepen appreciation, assessment must not incentivise teaching that narrows engagement to predicted themes or rehearsed comparisons. Consideration should be given to models of assessment that allow open-text engagement, enabling more reflective and nuanced interpretation and reducing the high-stakes pressure that distorts classroom practice.

A revitalised poetry curriculum — and a reformed GCSE English Literature more broadly — would affirm that close reading is about sustained attention, imaginative engagement and

critical dialogue. It would recognise that literary study in a diverse, post-imperial and globally connected society must equip students to think carefully about identity, power and representation and it would position poetry as a rigorous, inclusive and vibrantly relevant part of young people's intellectual lives.

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Oracy and talk in the classroom

by Anthony Cockerill (NATE)

NATE's vision for reform places oracy at the heart of English, recognising talk not simply as a precursor to writing but as a mode of thinking, learning and participation in its own right. Too often, spoken language has been marginalised in high-stakes assessment systems that privilege extended writing under exam conditions. A renewed curriculum would rebalance this, acknowledging that exploratory talk is foundational to intellectual development.

In practical terms, reform would embed structured, purposeful talk across all phases. Students should regularly engage in dialogic activities: whole-class discussion, exploratory group work, collaborative problem-solving, performance (role-play and hot seating) and debates. Teachers would foreground strategies that underpin effective talk — building on others' ideas, challenging respectfully, qualifying claims, synthesising viewpoints. Oracy would be taught as craft, not left to chance.

This approach is particularly significant for equity. High-quality classroom talk can reduce barriers for students who may struggle with writing fluency, for those who are bi-lingual or for those who are developing confidence in Standard English. By valuing home languages and dialects within exploratory talk while also teaching code-switching and register awareness, the curriculum can affirm linguistic diversity.

Assessment reform should reintroduce meaningful recognition of spoken language. Rather than tokenistic endorsements, students might complete an internally assessed, externally moderated spoken project — for example, a researched presentation followed by a question-and-answer exchange, or a collaborative discussion assessed against transparent criteria.

Oracy also strengthens reading and writing. Discussion before writing enables students to rehearse ideas, refine vocabulary and test interpretations. Debating alternative readings of a poem deepens analytical precision. Discussion about independent reading or whole-class, shared texts acknowledges reading as a social, dialogic practice that enhances students' engagement with volitional reading. Rehearsing an argument aloud, for instance, can clarify structure before it appears on the page. Reform should therefore promote pedagogies in which talk and writing are interwoven rather than hierarchically ordered.

Ultimately, a curriculum that values talk recognises English as a social discipline. Language is how we negotiate meaning together. By foregrounding dialogic classrooms, reform would

cultivate confident speakers and attentive listeners capable of participating in public discourse with nuance and respect.

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A whole child approach to reading

by Jo Tregenza (UKLA) and Teresa Cremin (UKLA)

The Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR) provides a timely opportunity to rethink how reading is conceptualised and taught across the primary years and beyond. UKLA and NATE welcome the Review's recognition that English is a cumulative, meaning-making discipline that cannot be reduced to atomised skills or narrow assessment objectives. To build a world-class curriculum, we must reaffirm reading as a richly cognitive, cultural, social and relational practice.

Reading is more than the accurate decoding of print. While secure word recognition is essential, research such as Oakhill's (2026) demonstrates that comprehension depends on vocabulary, background knowledge, inference, and the ability to integrate meaning across whole texts. Snow's (2016) international research reinforces this: phonics is a vital early component, but it represents only one part of a broader developmental trajectory that includes oral language, conceptual knowledge, comprehension processes, and sustained engagement with texts. Snow (2016) argues that early reading instruction must be embedded within rich literacy experiences if children are to become fluent, thoughtful readers

In line with this evidence, UKLA and NATE support a balanced approach to early reading. International research suggests that daily phonics instruction should be short, focused, and time-limited, typically around 20 minutes daily?, ensuring children secure the alphabetic principle without narrowing the wider curriculum. Excessive time spent on phonics risks displacing the oral language, vocabulary, knowledge and relationship building, and whole-text reading that Snow (2016) identifies as essential for long-term reading success.

Recent evidence presented by Cremin (2026) to the Education Select Committee strengthens this argument. She highlights a national challenge: England has succeeded in teaching many children to decode, but far fewer choose to read. The distinction between being able to read and being a reader is crucial. Longitudinal evidence shows that volitional reading is associated with stronger comprehension, richer vocabulary, improved academic outcomes, and enhanced wellbeing (e.g. Torppa et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2023). Cremin et al (2026), drawing on an extensive review of the available evidence that frames reading development as a reciprocal relationship — where the "will and skill" reinforce one another — underscores the need for a curriculum that nurtures both proficiency and pleasure.

The CAR review also identifies persistent challenges at transition. Greater clarity and

precision in the aims of each key stage is essential. UKLA and NATE propose that curriculum writers draw on robust developmental frameworks such as the CLPE/UKLA Reading Scales, which capture both cognitive and affective dimensions of reading and writing.

Relationships sit at the heart of this work. A curriculum that honours professional judgement, protects reading for pleasure, and supports progression across phases will enable all children not only to read, but to become readers.

UKLA and NATE call for a curriculum that values diversity, breadth, and depth; that recognises reading as cognitive, cultural, social and relational practice; and that empowers teachers to cultivate knowledgeable, motivated, and joyful readers. To build a genuinely world-class curriculum, we must move beyond minimal compliance and towards a vision of reading that is intellectually ambitious, culturally responsive, and rooted in the pleasure and power of reading itself.

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