

Doing better in GCSE English language

This guidance is for teachers working with students who are predicted to be grade D/C on the GCSE exams. It is intended to support teachers in helping these students to achieve a grade C. The advice offered may also be useful to other teachers and in turn to many other students.

By the time students come to revise for their GCSEs they have covered most of the syllabus in lessons. Revision is not about doing those lessons again but about reminding students of what they have covered and learned and revisiting any aspects which remain unclear in their minds.

An important element of subject revision lessons is to provide students with the opportunity to learn, practise and refine revision techniques. In this way individual students will discover for themselves those techniques which are personally most effective. In addition, you can provide focused feedback, not just on the subject material, but also on the techniques. Using lessons just to complete or review past test papers is unlikely to be an effective strategy for helping D/C students to improve. Neither is giving students unstructured lesson time 'to revise' since many of these students are not very good at revising although they may well give the impression of industriously getting on with their work.

Remember to link your planned English language revision with any whole-school programme and with advice that students may be receiving in their other subjects.

Further information and advice on helping these students revise and prepare for their exams can be found towards the beginning of the *GCSE booster pack* in the section 'GCSE booster: guidance for teachers and school leaders on using the materials'.

Using the subject guidance leaflets

There are two leaflets for English language. One is for you, the teacher; the other is for students.

It is envisaged that you will use these flexibly to suit your own circumstances. The student's leaflet can be photocopied and given to targeted students. Go through the leaflet with them. Encourage them to annotate it, and explain how your subject revision programme will fit with and support the students' own revision programmes and the advice on their leaflet.

Use the teacher's leaflet to plan your revision programme, covering those topics and aspects which you have identified as most relevant to the students. Encourage the students, at intervals during the revision programme, to use the traffic light system on their leaflet to assess their confidence in each aspect and to check with you those which remain difficult.

A number of revision activities are suggested in the teacher's leaflet, but plan your revision programme to suit your own students. Using specific revision activities is less important than planning to use a range to ensure that your lessons retain variety and that you offer students opportunities to work in their preferred ways.

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To achieve a grade C in GCSE English language examinations your students need to be able to show that they can do all of the following, not just by chance, but because they understand and are confident in what they are doing.

Reading (En2)		
What students need to be able to do	What this means to them	How you can help them improve
<p>1 Read literary and non-literary texts with understanding</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a range of reading strategies • Being able to deploy the strategies that are most appropriate to a given text • Having sufficient confidence and stamina to persevere with a challenging or longer text • Understanding that all texts have a purpose and an intended readership and that these factors have influenced the writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use shared reading to model reading strategies for different types of text • Use guided reading sessions to support students as they apply these strategies themselves • Demonstrate strategies for dealing with problems of unknown vocabulary and longer sentences • Expect students regularly to read texts for themselves rather than hearing them read aloud • Set reading homework and encourage independent reading at home • Train students to question the texts that they read (see appendix 1)
<p>2 Demonstrate understanding of texts by making an appropriate personal and critical response</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing understanding of the text's thematic content and being able to relate this to their own knowledge and experience • Seeing some of the implications of what is written as well as the literal meaning • Distinguishing fact from opinion • Responding to the questions set on a text in a focused and relevant way guided by the question's key words and terms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use shared reading and writing sessions to model the process of responding to a text and shaping that response into a written answer • In guided reading and writing sessions, target students who struggle to make relevant responses to texts of a given type, giving support at the point of framing a written response • Teach students habitually to consider whether their first response to a text really is justified by the words on the page • Encourage reflective reading by giving students tasks such as sequencing and annotation, e.g. marking factual content and opinion in different colours • Show students how to look for key words in examination questions and how to respond to these using the question to structure their answer

Reading (En2)

What students need to be able to do	What this means to them	How you can help them improve
<p>3 Justify responses by making appropriate reference to texts and explaining the significance of the example chosen</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using the Point – Example – Explanation structure as a useful vehicle for linking their responses to textual references • Making judicious use of quotations • Identifying the features of a text that exemplify the point they wish to make 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach students the PEE (point, example, explanation) formula, demonstrate it through shared writing and target students who have difficulty with it in guided writing sessions • Give students practice in selecting quotations for a given purpose • Teach the principle of making quotations as brief as possible • In shared reading, teach students to look for significant features in different types of text using annotation to mark them, ensuring that students have a reasonable grasp of terminology for these features • Discourage aimless ‘feature spotting’ and teach students that it is pointless identifying textual features unless connected to a comment on impact
<p>4 Select and summarise information from different sources</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify information in texts that is relevant to a specific purpose • Bring information together from different sources • Identify the key points, separating them from subsidiary points and any exemplification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach students appropriate reading strategies such as skimming and scanning; model these strategies in shared reading sessions • Teach a range of connectives (see appendix 2) that help students summarise information from different sources, e.g. <i>Whereas</i> The Times report states that..., The Telegraph claims that... • Teach students to identify topic sentences in paragraphs through shared reading • Ask students to annotate texts, identifying key points, subsidiary points and examples with different highlighters
<p>5 Show understanding of the part that language, text structure and presentational devices play in conveying meaning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding that authors make choices at word, sentence and text level, and that these choices affect the meaning of the text • Recognising some key features of grammar, vocabulary, text structure and presentation and knowing the terminology to refer to these • Making reference to specific text features and explaining the impact they have when justifying their response to a text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use shared and guided reading sessions to discuss the choices authors make, relating these choices to purpose and audience • Use gap-filling tasks to focus students’ attention on authorial choices at word level • Use annotation tasks to focus students’ attention on sentence structure, e.g. highlight all the short, simple sentences • Use annotation during shared reading to identify textual features, linking them to comments on impact (see KS3 Strategy <i>Grammar for reading</i>; ref. DFES 0049/2003) • Use a range of terminology best suited to the ability range of the class • Model during shared writing how to describe in a written answer the impact that the use of specific language features can have on readers

Writing (En2)		
What students need to be able to do	What this means to them	How you can help them improve
<p>1 Write in a way that holds the reader's interest</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being able to assemble and organise a number of relevant ideas • Communicating these ideas in a personal way, bearing in mind the needs of the intended reader at all times 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach students how to plan writing by introducing a range of planning strategies they can try; encourage students to find the approach to planning that best suits them as an individual (see KS3 Strategy <i>Improving writing training</i> 2003) • Use the teaching sequence for writing (KS3 Strategy English department training 2001) to encourage students to make links between their reading and writing • Use shared and guided reading sessions to teach the process of composition, showing students how writers think about the choices they face
<p>2 Adapt the way they write to suit different forms, purposes and readers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a range of writing styles and knowing how to choose a style appropriate to the task • Knowing the conventions of different forms of writing, e.g. scripts, instructions • Knowing the forms of language that feature in different types of writing, e.g. past tense conventionally used for narrative, imperative verbs for instructions • Being able to deploy features of impersonal writing such as the use of third person, passive voice, formal vocabulary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that schemes of work provide, over time, the opportunity for students to write in different forms and a range of styles • Use shared reading and writing sessions to introduce, consolidate or revise the conventions of different forms of writing, drawing attention to characteristic features of these forms through annotation and drawing up lists of key features • Give students the opportunity to write impersonally; support those students who have difficulty with this in guided groups giving direct tuition in difficult features such as use of the passive
<p>3 Use varied vocabulary and a range of sentence structures to good effect</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being able to use specialist terminology when appropriate • Actively choosing words that will increase the reader's level of interest • Understanding that vocabulary needs to match the purpose and intended readership of the writing • Choosing to use a range of sentence structures to increase the impact of their writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During shared writing sessions, focus on vocabulary choice and model the thinking behind such choices; engage students in discussions about word choice so that they become more discriminating • Encourage use of the thesaurus and any activities likely to build students' vocabulary • Consolidate students' understanding about the way words have literal meanings but also carry other connotations (see KS3 Strategy <i>Y9 Key objectives bank</i> p. 10) • When marking, take the opportunity to praise good vocabulary choices • Teach students how to vary their sentence starts by moving and embedding clauses; teach them to reflect on the impact of such changes on the reader • Revise the three main sentence types; use shared reading sessions to analyse the impact of these when deployed in texts • In guided writing sessions, target students who struggle to vary their sentences, giving specific practice in redrafting sentences

Writing (En2)		
What students need to be able to do	What this means to them	How you can help them improve
<p>4 Organise writing coherently using paragraphing and punctuation to ensure clarity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organising writing into paragraphs in a structure that matches the purpose of the text Constructing individual paragraphs logically and cohesively Using punctuation to assist the reader in gaining a clear understanding of what is written 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When teaching planning (see 1 above), make links to the use of paragraphs as a main organising principle Focus during shared reading on the way paragraphs are used by writers, drawing attention to the ways in which paragraphs are linked Teach organisation within paragraphs including the use of topic sentences and the use of connectives to link points, examples and explanations (see also KS3 Strategy <i>Improving writing</i> training 2003) Consolidate the use of commas and other marks to demarcate the boundaries between clauses and phrases within a sentence During shared reading, draw attention to the writer's use of punctuation to improve clarity for the reader
<p>5 Spell accurately and write neatly and legibly</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Showing consideration and respect to the reader by presenting work in neat and legible handwriting Having a knowledge of the spelling conventions of English Having a knowledge of commonly used words that are irregular in their spelling Employing strategies to ensure that their spelling knowledge is deployed consistently when they write 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask students to work in pairs to analyse the pattern of spelling errors in their recent work (use spelling analysis sheet on p. 7 of <i>Y9 Key objectives bank</i> or something similar); provide targeted spelling sessions for groups with specific error patterns Set individual spelling targets for students and link these to focused marking of their work Directly teach/revise commonly misspelt subject-specific vocabulary, e.g. <i>simile</i> Ask students to reflect on their strategies for proofreading, discussing what works for individuals; ask every student to write their own personal plan for reducing the number of errors in their writing

Appendix 1: Questioning the text

Before I start

- Why am I reading this text?
- What kind of text is it?
- What do I expect it to contain/be about?
- Do I need to read it closely or should I skim it for basic meaning or scan it to locate the relevant part?

Words

- Why has the writer used that particular word?
- I'm not sure what that word means. What's my best guess after looking at what comes before and what follows?
- Do I recognise the meaning of part of the word?

Sentences

- Do I need to go back and read that long sentence again? Does it make sense now? If not, can I see what is the subject and the main verb?
- Why is the writer using these long/short sentences?

Paragraphs

- What is the topic sentence of this paragraph?
- If I had to give this paragraph a title, what would it be?

Meaning of the whole text

- Are there any connectives that show me how ideas are linked in this text?
- Does this piece present itself in the usual way for a text of this type or does it do things differently? What other writing does it remind me of, or contrast with?
- Is there any other meaning 'between the lines' that I have to work out for myself?
- What is the character thinking or feeling? What would I think/feel if I were them?
- What does the writer want me to think at this point?
- Would people at that time in history/in that society have had ideas/thoughts/feelings that were different from mine?

Evaluation

- Why do I like/dislike what I am reading? Do I agree with the writer's point of view?
- Can I find words, phrases or sentences in the text that are clear evidence for what I think?

Appendix 2: Useful connectives

<p>Adding and also as well as moreover too</p>	<p>Cause and effect because so therefore thus consequently</p>
<p>Sequencing next then first, second, third, ... finally meanwhile after</p>	<p>Qualifying however although unless except if as long as apart from yet</p>
<p>Emphasising above all in particular especially significantly indeed notably</p>	<p>Illustrating for example such as for instance as revealed by in the case of</p>
<p>Comparing equally in the same way similarly likewise as with like</p>	<p>Contrasting whereas instead of alternatively otherwise unlike on the other hand</p>

Source: Literacy across the curriculum (DfES, 2001), *handout 3.1*.

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In the examinations, you will be assessed on reading and writing only. To achieve a grade C you need to be confident in all these aspects.

(Use the code in the second column to say how well you think you are doing: G - green, very confident; O - orange, not fully sure; and R - red, not very confident. Ask your teacher about anything you colour red.)

Reading		
Can I?		What can I do to improve?
<p>Set about reading a text in the best way and keep going even if it gets difficult.</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center; line-height: 20px; margin-bottom: 2px;">R</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center; line-height: 20px; margin-bottom: 2px;">O</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center; line-height: 20px;">G</div> </div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When I read what's on the exam paper, ask myself: What is this text for? Who is it for? • Decide whether I need to read closely, skim read or just scan the text. • Guess the meaning of words I don't know by thinking what would make sense. • Go back to the beginning of the paragraph if I find I have lost the meaning.
<p>Show that I understand:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what the text clearly states; • what the text suggests; <p>by writing clear answers to questions.</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center; line-height: 20px; margin-bottom: 2px;">R</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center; line-height: 20px; margin-bottom: 2px;">O</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center; line-height: 20px;">G</div> </div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlight the key words in the question (e.g. <i>Explain why</i>) so that my answer is to the point. Before I start writing, think: Is this really what the question is about? • If I can't find the answer directly in the author's words, do some detective work and try to find where the answer is suggested by something in the text. • Remember that opinions are just what somebody or some people believe. If they are trying to persuade me, they may present their opinions so they look like facts.
<p>Back up what I say by giving examples and explaining them.</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center; line-height: 20px; margin-bottom: 2px;">R</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center; line-height: 20px; margin-bottom: 2px;">O</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center; line-height: 20px;">G</div> </div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If it fits the question, use the PEE formula: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This is my point. - Here is an example from the text. - Here is a comment to explain the example. • If I need to quote, make it as short as possible - it may be quicker just to refer to a line, sentence or paragraph.
<p>Find the important bits of information in texts and put them together in my own words.</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center; line-height: 20px; margin-bottom: 2px;">R</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center; line-height: 20px; margin-bottom: 2px;">O</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center; line-height: 20px;">G</div> </div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scan texts and skim read until I have located the information I need for the question. Mark the sentences or paragraphs and read them carefully. • Use good connectives to help write my answer. <i>Whereas, On the other hand, Instead of</i> are useful links if I am saying that the information is different in two texts. <i>Similarly, Likewise, In the same way</i> are useful if the texts are saying more or less the same.
<p>Make comments about the way a writer has chosen:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to use words; • to set out their writing and present it to the reader. 	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center; line-height: 20px; margin-bottom: 2px;">R</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center; line-height: 20px; margin-bottom: 2px;">O</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center; line-height: 20px;">G</div> </div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure my comment is about the effect of the author's special use of words or presentation. For example, don't say: <i>It's a good description because there are lots of adjectives.</i> Say: <i>The many adjectives make the description richer and more detailed so the reader can imagine the scene more easily.</i>

Writing		
Can I?		What can I do to improve?
Collect ideas and plan a piece of writing that will hold the interest of my reader.	<input type="radio"/> R <input type="radio"/> O <input type="radio"/> G	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the way of planning that I find easiest. It might be a list of bullet points or some kind of diagram. Put all my ideas down quickly, then cross out what I don't like and organise the rest into the best order. Use the information in the question to help me think of ideas. <i>Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How?</i> are questions that can sometimes help to generate ideas. Respect the reader. Include all the information they need. Make it make sense.
Write in different ways.	<input type="radio"/> R <input type="radio"/> O <input type="radio"/> G	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revise the key features of different types of writing so I can include them in my work. By thinking about the purpose and the intended readership of my writing, decide how formal and/or impersonal it needs to be. Adapt my writing to match this. Remember not to use the language of ordinary speech if I am writing formally. For example: We say, 'Thanks a lot!' In a formal letter we write, <i>I am most grateful</i>.
Add interest by choosing the best words and by the way I write sentences.	<input type="radio"/> R <input type="radio"/> O <input type="radio"/> G	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I will need to write quickly, but I should stop sometimes and think: Is that the best word I can use? Can I write something more powerful, more unusual, more exact? Vary the length of my sentences - using short, simple sentences for emphasis and longer sentences to link ideas together. Start my sentences in different ways. Don't always start with the subject and the verb of the main clause.
Make my writing very clear by using paragraphs and punctuation.	<input type="radio"/> R <input type="radio"/> O <input type="radio"/> G	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Think about paragraphs while I am planning and before I actually start the writing. Remember to start a new paragraph for a change of time, change of topic, change of speaker. Look at my longer sentences to see whether a comma between clauses or to separate a phrase from the rest of the sentence would help to make them clearer. Don't use commas instead of connectives. Check that I have remembered other punctuation like speech marks and apostrophes.
Write neatly and keep the number of spelling mistakes down.	<input type="radio"/> R <input type="radio"/> O <input type="radio"/> G	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I may be nervous in the exam, but I shouldn't write so quickly that it is hard to read. I won't lose marks for crossing out mistakes. Know which words I am sometimes careless with. Look closely at these when I read through my writing. If there are common words that always trouble me (e.g. How many f's and t's in <i>graffiti</i>? How do you spell <i>necessary</i>?), make sure I have got a way of remembering what is correct. Don't avoid using an excellent word because I am unsure of the spelling; but do make sure that I don't make mistakes in simple, common words that I could be expected to know.