

TODAY YOU WILL...

>EXPLORE A RANGE OF MULTI-MODAL APPROACHES TO ESSAY WRITING
>DEVELOP YOUR SPEAKING AND LISTENING SKILLS

ESSAY, ESSAY, ESSAY

It may sound like the start of a bad joke, but essay writing is a serious

business – **Steve Duffy** explores ways to make it more engaging for students of all abilities

All too often, students who have really engaged with a text or enjoyed a unit of work on, say, media, will groan in horror when the dreaded E-word is mentioned. What should be an excellent opportunity for them to showcase their progress and express their opinions becomes a boring, soulless exercise, which students feel is being done to them rather than by them. And this is usually our fault.

Why? Because we bore pupils to death going through exam board-approved success criteria, or we hammer home the fact that unless they use the writing frame we have given them, or include the requisite number

of PEE (Point-Explanation-Evidence, for those of you lucky enough not to have that acronym tattooed on your brains), then they will be unable to obtain the holy grail of a C grade/level five/whatever we feel that we as professionals need to be able to show to Ofsted/our head of department/NQT mentor (delete as applicable) that they can do. And therein lies the problem: with the best of intentions we have sucked

all the creativity and self-expression out of the task and left them with a glorified fill-in-the-blanks exercise. No wonder they recoil in disgust.

So, how do we get round this? By giving the power back to the students and letting them express their learning in a creative, fun manner, whilst still maintaining academic rigour and ensuring that they are developing the skills they need to succeed in English. That way, we'll all be laughing...

STARTER ACTIVITY +

With the powers that be placing increased emphasis on SPAG (Spelling, punctuation and grammar, for those of you etc.) basic literacy skills are under the microscope, but developing them can be a tedious affair. One way round this is to turn starter tasks into a fun activity, by getting the kids to pimp your sentence.

If your focus is on, say, using imagery to improve descriptive writing, put a basic sentence on the board like 'George played in the match' and ask the kids to pimp it by adding an adverb. Once we get to 'George played [superbly] in the match' we can take it up a notch by asking them to further pimp the sentence by turning it into a simile or metaphor. Hopefully we'll end up with something like 'George was a midfield general in the match' or 'George tackled like a terrier in the match' and so on. At KS3 you could try pimping sentences from simple to compound to complex; at KS5 by experimenting with advanced punctuation, and so on.

MAIN ACTIVITIES +

1 FILM FIRST

If students can't talk confidently and accurately about the subjects we are dealing with, they have little or no chance of writing about them effectively. One great way around this is to get them to film their 'essays' first. This strategy works particularly well with the GCSE 'writing triplet' style questions.

Let's say the essay topic is: 'Write an article on the pros and cons of the death penalty for a national newspaper'. Split the students into threes, one arguing for, one against, and one as the cameraman/debate host. Give them time to research and plan their arguments, gathering facts, statistics and case studies, then get them to film their debate as though they were being interviewed for the evening news. Once they have done this, play the videos back to the class and ask their peers to feedback on what was good about the arguments and how they could further develop their points. Once every group has

TURN OVER TO CONTINUE >>



been through this process and had feedback, get them to write the article during the next lesson. As well as increasing engagement and improving students' speaking and listening skills, this process has a spectacular effect on grades. In one study, in comparison to a control group who did the same essay in a more traditional manner with the same amount of preparation time, results in the film group were 68% higher when compared to their FFT target grades.

If your department doesn't have a set of small, cheap handheld video cameras and/or you don't have a media department to borrow equipment from, let the students use their phones. This gives them further ownership of the task, improves their ICT skills and helps them to see their beloved mobiles as useful learning tools.

+ ABOUT THE EXPERT



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HOME LEARNING

Create a Character

Students tend to love creative writing, but if your kids are anything like mine 'their' stories often end up as ultra-violent rehashes of already ultra-violent films... usually one of the many Final Destination or SAW franchises. And like the films, these stories tend to be totally plot-driven without any character development. Before setting a creative writing task, ask your students to invent a protagonist for their story, complete with a family history, likes and dislikes etc. This can be done in many ways: a yearbook or Facebook page, a video diary, a 'Wanted' poster and so on. By creating a character and thinking about his/her life, students are more likely to make the full cast act like three-dimensional beings rather than two-dimensional caricatures when they come to write their stories.



2 DEAR DIARY

When it comes to writing essays on novels and plays, exam boards often focus on specific characters' roles in the text. Let's take the venerable 'of Mice and Men', beloved of English teachers the world over, rather than setting your students the bog-standard practice question 'Explore the role of Curley's Wife in the novella', rephrasing it to create a first-person response helps students to get inside the character's head and improves emotional engagement.

First, try a hotseating activity:

place the students in groups of four and ask them to number themselves from two to five. Number two starts in the hotseat as Curley's Wife – the other three students ask her questions about her behaviour in section two ('Why are you mad at Curley?' Do you find Lennie attractive?' etc.) and the hotseater responds in character. Once they have exhausted all the events in which she is involved in section two of the novella, number three goes through the same process for section three and so on. In addition to getting students to think about events in the text from the character's point of view,

this also acts as a recap of the key events in which the character is involved.

Then, rather than writing a standard response to a standard question, ask the students to imagine that Curley's Wife kept a diary and to write the relevant entry from the section which they hotseated. They can then share their extracts with their group/the class as a synthesised first person response that explores both the character's role in the novel and her imagined emotional response to the events. You can then set an exam style question to embed the process.

SUMMARY

The key to getting students to write good essays is for us to let go of the reins and allow them fully to explore the character or issue we want them to write about. By allowing them to immerse themselves completely and engage emotionally in the writing process, we increase the chances of getting the perceptive, engaging responses necessary to achieve high grades. How's that for a punchline?