

# Spelling it out

As the exam goalposts shift yet again, **Julie Gibbings**, schools manager at the National Literacy Trust suggests some engaging ways to include SPaG across the curriculum...

Since January this year there has been a renewed focus on spelling, grammar and punctuation (SPaG) in GCSE qualifications, with marks awarded in English literature, geography, history and religious studies papers. This was announced back in December 2011, so it's given us a while to get used to the idea and to incorporate it into lesson planning for years 7 – 11. Five per cent of the total marks in these subjects will be for accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar.

The Department for Education has many reasons for introducing these marks, which are all part of the government's increased emphasis on SPaG throughout the primary and secondary curriculum. The Importance of Teaching white paper states:

*“When young people compete for jobs and enter the workplace, they will be expected to communicate precisely and effectively so we think that changes in the last decade to remove the separate assessment of spelling, punctuation and grammar from GCSE mark schemes were a mistake.”*

This of course means that all teachers need to ensure their lessons feature elements of SPaG. Many have argued that this may pull schools away from subject content, but there are benefits to be found too. The Chartered Business Institute has reported that 42% of employers are not satisfied with the basic use of English by school and college leavers. As a result 44% have to invest in remedial literacy. We need to



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**JULIE GIBBINGS** IS SCHOOLS MANAGER AT THE NATIONAL LITERACY TRUST, WHICH PROVIDES PRACTICAL STRATEGIES ON IMPROVING LITERACY SKILLS FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL THROUGH ITS CONFERENCES AND NETWORK. FOR MORE INFORMATION, ADVICE AND TIPS, VISIT [LITERACYTRUST.ORG.UK](http://LITERACYTRUST.ORG.UK)

address this and help prepare our pupils for real life – but do it in a way that is both relevant and engaging.

We believe it is the responsibility of all subject teachers, not just the English department, to incorporate SPaG into lesson plans. It doesn't have to be a chore – there are unlimited options to keep things interesting, and you needn't be restricted to routine spelling tests for key vocabulary (although pop quizzes can be useful). A whole-school approach is vital for consistency of teaching, however. It ensures that key literacy skills are embedded for students and enables them to transfer skills across everything they do.

At the National Literacy Trust we work with a number of secondary schools and showcase best practice. Some of our network members have provided top tips that could easily be replicated in your classroom...

### 1 Sarah O'Donnell, (LITERACY COORDINATOR, BANBURY ACADEMY)

We have remodelled our marking practice from Y7 upwards to focus on SPaG. So we have posters in every classroom in every subject (we are linking SPaG to Quality of Written Communication in a drive to ensure all students apply it in all subjects). We then mark using S P G in the margin to indicate where corrections need to be made (which are done in green pen). We also had a whole school launch in tutor time of SPaG to explain what it means, with a video to reinforce it – and every exercise book has a sticker on the front reminding students to check their SpG.



## 2 Alison Wilcox

### AUTHOR OF BOOKS ON CREATIVE WRITING

With the exception of subject-specific technical words, the majority of the spelling issues in secondary school involve the rules with regard to suffixes, and homophones.

The key to improving spelling and embedding the knowledge is in the editing process and self-assessment. However, before this can be successfully implemented, the students need to know the rules. One of the problems is that the students have probably been using the incorrect spelling for some time. They need to be aware of their own misconceptions and accept that they continually need to check their work for these errors until they are eliminated e.g. there/their. It may initially involve them highlighting the words in every piece of work and thinking about the rule before they decide which is the correct spelling. Checking carefully in the editing process is time-consuming, but it allows them to focus on the flow of their ideas and writing rather than on the technical aspects. Over time, the previous errors/misconceptions are forgotten and the correct spelling becomes a habit.

### TRY

- + Using a piece of their written work and asking the students to highlight any words where a suffix has been added. Write them in a list.
- + Collecting a list of spelling errors from each student. Collate errors into specific rules and ask them to identify the spelling rule.
- + Getting students to edit any piece of work and highlight any suffixes. Check the spelling and rule.
- + During this process, it will become evident which rules/spellings are not secure, and students can be given the opportunity to ask for mini-clinics on specific areas.

## 3 Nicola Brooks

### (HEAD OF ENGLISH, THE SPRINGFIELDS ACADEMY)

We currently have a Word of the Week across the school, which focuses on commonly misspelt words e.g. definitely, separate.

We have these displayed in offices, classrooms etc. We then do spot-checks during the week e.g. pupils have to try to spell it before they can go to break etc.

We also have SPaG-savvy exercises, for example, getting pupils to turn text speak into formal English. This really makes them think about the differences between formal and informal language.

Encouraging peer marking can have a great impact. Pupils notice mistakes in others' work more easily than they do in their own.

Get your students to think of SPaG outside of the classroom. Encourage them to go out and find 'bad' examples of SPAG – walking them down any high street will reveal numerous errors!

Finally, we've had success getting classes to be on the look out for secret spelling errors in your own teaching; award prizes for those who spot them.

## 4 Deb Garfield

### SSAT LITERACY CHAMPION, SHEVINGTON HIGH SCHOOL

All students are taught a default way of organising their writing using the acronym BOSS (Brainstorm, Organise, Sequence, Sentence) and this is their 'go-to' option for all long answers when they suddenly have brain meltdown!

To improve their writing, they use VCOP (Vocabulary, Connectives, Openers and Punctuation) in order to get those extra marks. They can do this when they review and improve prior to submission or end of exam. Each department has created its own version of the VCOP pyramid to encourage high levels of writing using vocabulary/connectives pertinent to their subject.



"It doesn't have to be a chore – there are unlimited options to keep things interesting, and you needn't be restricted to routine spelling tests for key vocabulary"