



“Make no apologies for listening to death-metal as you underline spelling errors..”

THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH RELYING ON LITTLE RITUALS TO GET YOU THROUGH ANOTHER DAY IN THE CLASSROOM, SAYS **TOM STARKEY** – AS LONG AS YOU REMEMBER ONE, ESSENTIAL RULE...

A friend of mine used to have a single, special pen to do his marking. They spent wonderful times together: romantic walks through the park on winter days, cozy nights by the fire, that type of thing. He loved that pen. I tried to tell him that it wouldn't work out; tried to warn him against such immense folly. I grabbed him by the lapels and shook him by the shoulders on many

occasions but he didn't understand. Took my concern for jealousy, the poor fool.

You see, you can never, ever have a single, special pen because when it eventually goes on walkabout (as they invariably do – all pens have itchy feet and are born wanderers) you'll be paralysed. Stuck. Never to mark another stroke. Oh, you'll try other pens. You'll tell yourself you can move on but you'll know in your heart of hearts that it's over.

His went missing during lunch duty on a cold Tuesday morning. By Friday he was escorted off the premises after the caretaker found him digging up the playing field muttering *'This was where I last had it... this was where I last had it... this was...'*

I warned him, but that doesn't mean I don't sympathise. We've all got our own little quirks and foibles to get us through some of the more mind-numbingly repetitive tasks we encounter on a daily basis. Some

won't touch a book without plugging their headphones in and listening to some major-league headbangin' tunes to get them through. Others need zen-garden quiet and solitude to get down to work. I myself need a clear desk before I even begin to contemplate marking a single thing (and before you say something fiendishly witty and clever, yes I have marked a book since 2004 and I don't care what any of my colleagues tell you.) I'll stack those things on the left and move them to the right when I'm done. I'll stop half way through to have a congratulatory cup of cha when the two piles are exactly the same height and never before. It's not OCD, it's just a little thing that can help me get through the grind. It might seem a tad weird to others looking in, but whatever gets you through that bottom-set of Shakespeare controlled assessments is what I say.

In many ways these strange routines and eccentricities are life-affirming. They stamp our own personality onto things that can be impersonal. Endless feedback that greys the world is brightened (albeit momentarily) by the ink of a golden glitter pen. The comfort of twirling a whiteboard-marker between your fingers like a majorette as you wait for the completion of a mock exam can make the time go that little bit faster. The bemused look of your tutor group as you pretend that you're in a Victorian boarding school by taking the register using only their surnames because it puts a smile on your face allows

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tom Starkey is a teacher in an FE college in the north of England. He blogs at [stackofmarking.wordpress.com](http://stackofmarking.wordpress.com).

you to break things up a bit.

These little things are part of us, and in a profession where we have to navigate a thousand different pressures from outside (be it from politicians who like to treat the issue of school like the worn and grubby football in a 100-a-side break-time game or inspectors who enjoy nothing more than telling you the right way of teaching a class after meeting them for approximately 17.2 seconds) losing yourself can be a hazard of the job.

So I say embrace the weirdness. Make no apologies for listening to death-metal as you underline spelling errors. Don't be ashamed of the funny looks you get as you strut up and down the classroom, making intricate patterns in the air with your drywipe. Ignore those who show disdain as you use a ruler to judge whether those two piles of exercise books really are the same height or whether you need to do just one more.

Just never, ever have a single special pen.

Or if you *are* going to have a special pen, have a special *type* of pen. Choose something that's easily available and buy in bulk. It means a hell of a lot less digging.

Thanks for reading.

