

The long and the short of GDS in Year 6 writing

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The title of this blog is back-to-front. We're in the final weeks of academic spring - that whizzy dash of a term - so time is relatively short in terms of taking on board advice relating to end of year statutory assessment. It should be the *short and the long* of GDS writing – but that just sounds wrong.

So why “the long”? Essentially, we need to fight back against the short termism of the past two years.



The nature of this year's framework, and its dissemination has allowed some space for deeper thought and discussion with colleagues in schools and on training courses. There is a sense that we are less in thrall to the prescriptive specifics of the here-today-gone-next-academic-year ITAF experiments of the past two years. This year, the STA kept good on their promises to release the frameworks, exemplification and associated guidance earlier in the year. Better still, we know what to expect in the coming year. That is always nice. Especially if you are in a year group subject to statutory assessment. Especially given the nature of accountability and what this means for class teachers at the sharp end of where writing meets statutory assessment outcomes. As a year 6 teacher, if I am completely honest, at times it would have felt like my life depended on that basic courtesy. You know, a bit of forewarning. Definitely appreciate that.

Short term and long term views

With this space, and the shifts in focus (as opposed to formality), it's easier to see where the reader-writer that many of us hold as an ideal sits within this system. There are explicit references to the influence of reading and to the importance of audience and purpose within the framework. It's an emotive subject, writing assessment. Throw accountability into the mix and the skewing and perversion of what 'good writing' might mean really begins to kick in. This series of blogs does not look to add to that debate. Not because it isn't important. I just feel that plenty of others have that task covered. These blogs are intended to be strictly helpful.

The series is going to divide along two lines.

- The short:

will be squarely written with year 6 teachers in mind. These blogs will offer short-term advice relating to the final stretch of this assessment period (2017-8) and how the particular requirements of the Teacher Assessment Framework may be navigated, and hopefully met in ways that feel principled and are supportive of what we might – in a giddy moment – call

“real English teaching”. [Please note: I always want to challenge what is meant by “real this” or “proper that” but time is short and I think you catch my drift].

- The long:

will offer advice, guidance, thoughts, and further reading to support whole school development of willing-and-able reader-writers (not to mention listener-speakers). These blogs look to focus on Greater Depth (the official brand) in the subject, but equally we now have a system that is more supportive of greater depth in a truer, happier sense - nurturing children that have plenty of reading powering their writing. This is a long term endeavour - and by that I don't mean merely the whole of year 6. It speaks to curriculum design and content, pedagogy, reading and writing cultures – the works. And it feels good to be able to see a refocussing on that. It never went away, but there has been a necessity for flurries of short-term advice as one hoop became a swinging wrecking ball in a kind of educational equivalent to running through the Sonic the Hedgehog environment, whilst trying to teach and assess reading and writing in a high stakes system of accountability.

Let's take a quick breath after that last sentence.

The reader(s) in the writer(s)

Let's take a look at each of the bulleted statements that make up the Year 6 standard. Up first, writing effectively for a range of audiences and purposes.

Working at GDS-Purpose and audience

Expected standard

The pupil can write effectively for a range of purposes and audiences, selecting language that shows good awareness of the reader (e.g. the use of first person in a diary; direct address in instructions and persuasive writing).

Greater depth

The pupil can write effectively for a range of purposes and audiences selecting the appropriate form and **drawing independently on what they have read** as models for their own writing (e.g. literary language, characterisation, structure).

The above is taken from the STA moderator training delivered autumn 2017 (these materials are available to schools within NCA tools). It sets out the requirements around audience and purpose for children working at the Expected Standard and those working at Greater Depth within the standard (GDS). Both look for effective writing for a range of purposes and audiences. GDS, though, has the emboldened requirement that children draw independently on what they have read. The independent bit is key here – we are not looking for the whole class application of that killer phrase from the latest shared text. It is more subtle than that. I say this because in the updated exemplification file for GDS writing - Frankie, our perennial high-achieving 11 year old - there are specific references to real writers:

'the title suggests an explanation, drawing on the language of 'Just So' stories'.

This is a nice touch in the piece. Well played Frankie. However, it does not set a precedent. It is important, in reading the commentaries in the exemplification files – and relating to the moderator training samples - that we keep the main thing the main thing. What is the statement asking for? How is this reflected in the child's writing? The statement neither asks for nor requires the obvious influence of a specific writer. We want, though, to see in our children, writers that can turn a phrase that sounds worthy of being read aloud and does not make you squint (too often) at a clunky moment. Please resist the urge to play spot the children's lit canon references in your children's work. Focus more on the effect it had on you, as you place yourself in the shoes of its intended reader.

If you want to look to further reading, consider CLPE's seminal *The Reader in the Writer* by Myra Barrs and Valerie Cork (2001). This classic title documents a research project that looked at how reading influences developing writing. I read it a long time ago. I recently re-read it. I think my first reading came too early in my career as I did not recognise or fully understand half as much as what I did on second reading. It is timelessly good so it may be worth purchasing a copy for the school and asking a reading/writing advocate with several years' teaching under their belt to read, distil and look to explore how the book's messages might help to further develop the long-term journey to accomplished, meaningful writing in your school. If you need further persuasion, here's the A S Byatt quote that prefaces the book:

I think I see good reading as the best way of encouraging, and making possible, good writing.

A. S. Byatt, On History and Stories

A quote for us all to cheer there. We will not need to lift it wholesale and replicate it in our children's evidence banks, but it would be nice to see its spirit threaded through their work. Later blogs (and others already written by my colleagues) explore this learning through immersion in more depth and also touch upon the teaching of contextualised grammar.

Who do you think you are? Choosing register

Working at GDS- speech and writing

- The pupil can distinguish between the language of speech and writing³ and choose the appropriate register

- Pupils working at 'greater depth' should be able to consistently distinguish between speech (e.g. playground language, informal conversation...), and written language (e.g. that used for stories, reports, persuasion...).
- 'Register' refers to pupils selecting vocabulary appropriate to the context of the writing, for example, indicators of formality in a letter of complaint; concision within a stage direction; contracted forms in casual dialogue.



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I should point out that this slide (from the same presentation as before) behaves differently to the last. Where the previous slide placed EXS alongside GDS for comparison, here we have the GDS statement and some clarification. This statement – and the next – will require further unpicking. There is some crossover between bullet two and three so I will return to these shortly in another blog.

For now, I would draw your attention once again to the moderator training materials in NCA tools, specifically Activity 3 relating to GDS pieces C and D. Here moderators were asked to look at two letters written in a unit based upon Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. In this task, the writers were asked 'to write a letter from Juliet to her father, begging him to reconsider his decision to force her to marry Paris.' Only one of the letters is judged to meet this particular statement relating to register.

The materials include a commentary that sets out why one of the letters does not meet the statement. Reasons given include the following: 'slips into overt confrontation that show a lack of understanding of the etiquette of the day'; 'contemporary colloquialism'; 'less precise choices of vocabulary'. The judgement around etiquette stuck me as harsh on first (and second and third) reading. Certainly, a rounded understanding of the historical/social/cultural context is a key feature in GCSE level English learning. I would want to cut a ten/eleven year old a little slack there. But it is fair to say that the letter does not really meet the brief convincingly enough to say that this statement has been met.

The lesson here seems to be around task selection. I happen to think it was a rich task and both letters have a range of strengths. So we would not want to avoid this type of writing in class. Not at all. However, if you are looking to secure the ‘right’ kinds of evidence, you may wish to think carefully about the work that is being set and how well equipped your pupils are in taking on the task. I must stress, this should not limit or narrow the range of writing opportunities or the scale of ambition you serve up to the class. You just might need to be strategic about when and where extended writing opportunities occur. I am going to be returning to task selection in an imminent blog, and will share an approach I used in my year 6 classroom that we might label “Expert Texts.” This will sit under the umbrella of long-term approaches that are aimed at a whole school audience.

building expertise

| <u>aut</u> 1 | <u>aut</u> 2 | spring 1 | spring 2 | summer 1 | summer 2 |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
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Formality is for life, not just for previous academic years

Working at GDS-levels of formality

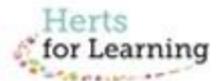
- The pupil can exercise an assured and conscious control over levels of formality, particularly through manipulating grammar and vocabulary to achieve this.

- There is no requirement for pupils to manage shifts between levels of formality within a single piece of writing; however, pupils working at 'greater depth' must demonstrate the ability to manipulate grammar and vocabulary according to the context of the writing. The emphasis on 'assured and conscious control' refers to the fact that choices made in their writing are **deliberate and considered**.



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We are on safer ground here at statement 3, I think. I've shared plenty of our thoughts on the topic of formality. I am delighted to say that last year's blogs – links below including a guide to informal and formal features – are still relevant. The only, deeply significant point to make here is we are no longer required to get all 'gussied up' and take part in the shifts in formality Hokey-Cokey. No longer **must** we move between formal and informal, or vice versa in more than one place in more than one piece. I just had a happy little cry then. It was beautiful. However, if your adept young writer happens to do this, and does it well, hurrah, that is evidence too. Whatever they are doing with formality it has to be appropriate and consistent for as long as it needs to be. That might be a whole piece or it might be a section.

- [In search of GDS pt 1: Shifts in formality](#)
- [In search of GDS pt 2: a lesson in formality](#)

Formality done. Final statement....

Check that it is all kept in check: punctuation

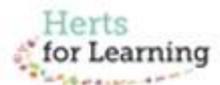
Working at GDS- punctuation

- The pupil can use the range of punctuation taught at KS2 correctly (e.g. semi-colons, dashes, colons, hyphens) and, when necessary, use such punctuation precisely to enhance meaning and avoid ambiguity.
- The statement does not refer to specific punctuation marks, or to how they should be used. Pupils working at 'greater depth' should demonstrate their understanding of a range of punctuation taught at key stage 2, using it correctly and precisely to enhance meaning and avoid ambiguity.



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I will not linger here. Punctuation is not new and it is visible, and - so long as we are secure in our subject knowledge – relatively straight forward to evaluate. Look for the usual ailments: overuse; inappropriate use; too narrow a range; too extensive a range; basic errors. The proofreading aspect of writing will come into play here. Basic accuracy is critical. Sensible ambition is advisable. Does that mark earn its place? If not, encourage the writer to reconsider, reshape, re-form, remove and/or replace. Experiment for sure, but have good reason to commit to your final choices and placement.

Full stop.

That's it for now. A bit of a blogging mission statement and some initial responses to this year's published materials. I must close by saying thank you to my colleague, Clare Hodgson, on the Herts Assessment team. We co-deliver our Assessing and Securing GDS in Year 6 writing course and – I kid you not – it has been a joyful and enlightening experience on every occasion. If you don't believe me, I have the many evaluations that prove it. Therefore, I also want to thank those colleagues that have worked with us in schools as well as on courses. Not just in Herts I might add – thank you to teaching colleagues in London, Macclesfield, Essex and Cambridgeshire– you have been wonderful to work and share with.

If you would like to discuss future support options for your school or cluster, or you have any queries relating to this blog, do get in touch:

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