

# Refocusing Assessment

English

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# Refocusing Assessment – English

## Introduction

SSAT, ASCL and NFER have worked together to produce *Refocusing Assessment*, which is a resource to support schools in developing and reviewing their assessment practice. The resource identifies five key questions for all departments, which you will find below.

In the following pages you will also find some responses to each question. These are drawn from the expert panels that SSAT, ASCL and NFER convened, which were comprised of heads of department and representatives from subject associations. These are not intended to offer definitive answers to the key questions, but may help to support, challenge or structure your discussions.

For details about the references in this document, please refer to the *Refocusing Assessment* overview document.

## How to use this resource

- 1 Spend time with your department discussing each of the five questions.
- 2 Record a summary of your discussion.
- 3 Look at the responses produced by the expert panels. How far do they reflect the thoughts of your team?
- 4 See if you can summarise the 'assessment requirements' for your subject on the template.
- 5 You may then be asked to share your responses with other departments to help identify the commonalities and differences between subjects in order to help establish a whole school approach. You may wish to consider the following questions:
  - › How do the needs of different subject areas vary?
  - › How can you apply best practice in different subject areas whilst also maintaining consistency across the whole school?
- 6 You may wish to produce an action plan to modify and shape your assessment policy and practice.
- 7 Set a time to review and evaluate the impact of the action plan on assessment.

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# Five key questions

1

**What does it mean to be a successful student in English?**

What is the purpose of our subject?

What does it mean to be a good writer, reader and orator? Is this what we are preparing students for?

What are the core knowledge and skills required for success?

2

**What is the purpose of assessment in English?**

Why do we assess?

Who is assessment for?

3

**What does progress look like in English?**

How do we know when a student is making progress?

How might progress vary over time?

4

**How can progress be assessed most effectively in English?**

Which assessment techniques work best in English?

How successfully do we use formative assessment approaches?

How can formative and summative assessment work together to ensure effective assessment for learning?

How do we benchmark/quality assure our assessment practices?

5

**How do the assessment practices in our department contribute to/work with whole school policy?**

# Question 1: What does it mean to be a successful student in English?

Some thoughts from the expert panel discussion

English is a very broad subject, encompassing the academic disciplines of literature and language; technical and contextual knowledge and understanding; and a number of transferable skills. Because of this, defining success in English is complex and, historically, students' aptitude in the subject has been determined by a best-fit approach, which may ignore this complexity.

Underpinning the study of language and the study of literature are three broad skills: reading, writing and oracy (speaking and listening). Success in these skills is iterative, involving both technical and higher-order skills.

Since literacy and oracy are central to achievement across the curriculum, success in English is often regarded as the key to success in other academic disciplines. The English department often have a lead role in promoting literacy across the school.

Successful students in English will develop a love of reading, will read broadly and deeply for meaning, and will be familiar with a range of text types, genres and literary contexts.

Success in English results in students becoming literate and also becoming increasingly sophisticated in their study of language and literature.

Becoming good at English means

- › becoming a better communicator
- › making increasingly sophisticated arguments
- › being critically aware
- › analysing and seeing texts through different schools of thought
- › developing knowledge of the literary canon in its widest sense
- › using language, punctuation and grammar with greater accuracy and creativity.

Students need to combine technical accuracy with creative expression. They need to gain confidence in adapting their reading, writing and oracy skills to use them in a range of contexts and for a variety of purposes.

Successful writers will use a range of punctuation, grammar, syntax and vocabulary to express meaning for a variety of audiences and purposes.

## Question 2: What is the purpose of assessment in English?

Some thoughts from the expert panel discussion

The key purpose of assessment should be to help students understand where they are in their learning - supporting them to know what they are secure with in terms of their knowledge, understanding and skills and helping them identify areas to develop.

However, assessment can also:

- › allow learners to reflect on learning over time
- › be used to find out where students are before they start something new
- › help teachers reflect on their pedagogy
- › help teachers to develop a better understanding of the student as a learner
- › help to identify learning issues to support the planning of strategic interventions
- › provide a basis for a meaningful dialogue with students, parents/carers and other stakeholders, such as school leaders, governors and Ofsted, about students' progress.

Ultimately, because assessment must be linked to the curriculum, the core purpose of assessment in English must relate to what it means to be a successful student of English. English teaching should help students become more literate, more confident communicators, and better at the academic and disciplinary study of language and literature and assessments should help to monitor this development.

Assessment can be used formatively to help students improve their writing, by correcting spelling, punctuation and grammar errors, challenging students' choices in use of words and syntax, and extending students' vocabulary.

In English, we also assess for knowledge and understanding. This includes understanding narrative, plot and character, literary devices, contextual understanding, and the correct use of spelling, punctuation and grammar.

As is the case with every subject, assessment in English is inextricably linked to teachers' understanding of what their subject means, what they choose to teach and how. What we choose to assess, and when, shows us what we think is important about our subject.

Formative assessment can provide helpful insights into learning and take a range of forms, for example: from informal discussions, to the use of 'hinge questions' in lessons, to assessing extended tasks that can be used to tease out more complex and deeper levels of understanding. Effective formative assessment should address the totality of a student's performance, not just the easily measurable, and is integral to everyday teaching.

In developing formative assessment, it is vital to consider what information the assessment is aiming to collect. Effective formative assessment helps to identify strengths and areas for development and can also help to demonstrate progress over time.

Formative assessment of reading takes different forms over time; from helping students to decode letters, words and sentences, to making increasingly complex arguments about texts, and comprehending gradually more diverse and difficult texts in a range of contexts. At every stage of secondary education, these can be useful assessments – and one piece of evidence can often be used to evidence multiple skills.

Assessment information is needed for a variety of stakeholders and purposes but, fundamentally, assessment should be focused **on** the student and **for** the student. It should:

- › allow students to know where they are in their learning
- › help to inform future teaching and learning activities
- › help to identify specific learning issues and to provide additional support/intervention where needed
- › track and monitor students' progress and to identify underachievement.

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## Question 3: What does progress look like in English?

Some thoughts from the expert panel discussion

Because of the broad nature of English, progress is unlikely to follow a linear pattern. It is quite possible to make progress in one skill, but not in another. Even within one discrete skill, progress in English is not always accumulative. For example, it is quite possible for a student to use a semi-colon correctly, but not use a colon correctly. Likewise, students may progress more quickly in their critical appreciation of one type of text than another.

It is important that subject teachers understand the progress students are making in the specific skills of English. An aggregated measure of progress may be useful for whole-school accountability but will do little to help an individual become better at English.

It should not be assumed that a student is failing to make progress in a particular skill if their performance is uneven. In order to make meaningful judgements about progress, it is important to look at performance over an extended period of time and in a range of contexts.

There are some broad indicators of progress that teachers look for, including more interesting and sophisticated arguments, attitude towards to the subject, making links and connections, being more critical, greater depth and an increasingly nuanced understanding of genre, audience and purpose.

It can be helpful to consider:

- > depth
- > sophistication
- > strategic intent

across the skills of reading, writing and oracy.

# Question 4: How can progress be assessed most effectively in English?

Some thoughts from the expert panel discussion

Common to all assessments is the requirement that students produce evidence (which may be written, verbal, visual, etc.) from which a teacher is able to make inferences about what they can or cannot do, against the criteria of the curriculum.

Assessments are likely to focus on both application of skills and understanding of literary knowledge, with both achieving different purposes. For example, assessment may evaluate the success with which a student constructs a sentence, or may test students' knowledge of a novel's plot.

Consideration should be given to the role of both formative and summative assessment judgements. Formative judgements may be made on a daily basis, several times during a lesson. When considering progress, summative assessment judgements should be made at appropriate intervals, with enough time between each to be meaningful.

Good assessment should focus on the key construct that is being taught; although of course more than one construct may be taught and assessed at the same time. So, for example, one assessment may evaluate students' understanding of a character, but also their use of an essay paragraph structure (e.g. PEA - point, evidence, analysis; or EPEE - evidence, point, explanation, evaluation).

Effective assessment in English will evaluate whether a student can do something in one context and how confident a teacher is that they could achieve this in different contexts. To do this, assessments are likely to be a spiral, with the same skills being revisited at different points in the lesson, term, year or course.

Examples of effective assessment practice include:

- › modelling – e.g. shared reading and writing as a class, exposing the thinking behind choice of vocabulary
- › sharing work to assess – e.g. giving students access to exemplar answers at different grades, giving feedback in groups of four with students having to workout whose feedback is whose
- › peer assessment – e.g. asking students to look for certain types of word, punctuation, etc in their peers' work
- › self-assessment – e.g. asking students to evaluate their work against clearly explained success criteria
- › dialogue – e.g. monitoring understanding through class or pair discussions
- › socratic questioning – e.g. in pairs, one student is only allowed to ask questions, the other to provide answers
- › multiple-choice questions – e.g. 'which of these sentences is best described as a metaphor?'
- › essay questions – e.g. adapted from sample GCSE papers
- › visual cues – e.g. evaluating figurative language from a pictorial representation of the same text.