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Writing in A-level English literature essays: Professional reflections on text organisation

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ABSTRACT: There appears to be little research on the standard of post-16 students' writing and how it can be improved. In respect of such students, the focus of teaching professionals seems to be on content rather than on the writing process; arguably this leads to weaknesses in written expression. This article examines some current research and follows one teacher's attempts to put in place some strategies in her classroom to improve the overall text cohesion of analytical essay-writing of post-16 students. Following analysis of the work of ten, post-16, English Literature students, the article focuses on how the explicit teaching of planning, openings/introductions, paragraphing within the main body of the text and conclusions, affected students' analytical essay-writing. The article then reviews whether there are differences in how best to improve the writing of students of different abilities. Finally the article considers what implications the research has for teachers and for teacher education providers.

KEYWORDS: Post-16 writing, AS/A-levels, English Literature, text cohesion, paragraphing, analytical essays, essay-planning.

INTRODUCTION

As a teaching professional I have taught a range of AS/A-level[1] English Literature classes and I have become increasingly aware of the gap which exists in some students' work between the sophistication of their ideas and their written expression. Some students struggle with basic, analytical essay-writing skills such as introductions and conclusions, and many find higher-level skills such as overall text cohesion extremely problematic. Although the focus at AS/A level is largely on content, it is the case that a weakly written essay will result in a lower grade and, indeed, many examination boards do have an assessment objective (generally worth between 15-25%) which refers specifically to the quality of a student's written expression. Given that timed expository essays appear to be the means by which English Literature at this level is examined, it is important to focus on them even if we may feel that their centrality should be questioned.

As English specialists, we spend many hours with younger students discussing the writing process, but this seems to be largely abandoned once students reach the post-16 age-group. Yet, arguably, this is when we should be looking closely at their own writing in preparation not only for their A-level exams but also for university and future careers. In short, English Literature should be about both studying other people's written words but also about helping students to express themselves as clearly in writing as they can orally. From discussions with other English teachers, I

[1] AS Level is the first year of a two-year, post-16 qualification. -level is the second year of this qualification. Compulsory education in the England and Wales finishes at age 16, and AS and A levels are the stage before University.

do not think that this is recognised in schools and we seem to become so pre-occupied with covering the content of whichever syllabus we use[1], that essay-writing becomes, at best, an afterthought and, at worst, omitted almost entirely.

As part of a Masters Degree in Education, I decided to focus on writing at A-level English Literature and investigate what are the issues, what is the evidence from the existing research and what strategies can be used in the classroom to improve students' writing? An obvious starting point was to consider what are the current viewpoints and issues concerning AS/A-level English Literature and to use this reading to reflect on these young writers' needs and difficulties.

WHAT RESEARCH EXISTS AND WHAT DOES IT TELL US?

Much of the academic discussion concerning English Literature A level is about how students can better appreciate the texts they read rather than how (or even *if*) we should teach them how to improve their own writing. There appears to be none of the detailed analysis of writing that there is of GCSE[2] (for example, Massey, Elliott and Johnson, 2005) and any feedback on students' performance, even from the examination boards, is almost exclusively content-based. My initial thought on the debate about writing at Literature A level, is therefore "What debate?"

There is an "across the board" assumption that A-level English Literature students can write well, and the whole issue of teaching writing at this level is largely ignored. It is frequently the English Literature A level which comes in for the most criticism with the English Language and the English Language and Literature courses being applauded for taking a "wider" view. However, although these latter two courses are inevitably stronger on linguistics, having taught both of these courses it is the case, as with English Literature, that little or no instruction, guidance or even time is allocated to teaching students how to improve their essay-writing. Time is given to improving students' writing in their coursework pieces (although this tends to be a reactive, corrective approach and not a proactive, developmental one) but not in terms of producing a timed, analytical essay. The advocates of the more linguistic A levels seem to overlook this omission. Having marked and graded numerous essays for all three of the English A levels, explicit teaching of essay-writing is clearly needed, and I am surprised at the lack of interest in this area. If we agree that students should be "learning to use written language to make something of the experience of reading" (Dixon, 1987, p. 412), we surely need to look at the disciplines of reading *and* writing in order to achieve this.

Fones (2000) makes a real attempt to bring some of the effective strategies from Key Stage 4 [3] into Key Stage 5. For example, she focuses heavily on independent working and extensive group work. Both of these are excellent strategies for encouraging debate and motivation in Key Stage 5 lessons, which can become rather too teacher-led. However, although she says the resulting essays were "well-shaped", her claim

[1] In the UK there are a number of different examination boards for English Literature AS and A levels. The texts they specify and the assessment objectives vary but they are broadly similar.
[2] GCSEs are the qualifications taken by all students at age 16 at the end of compulsory education.
[3] Key Stage 3 is the first 3 years of secondary school, Key Stage 4 is the next 2 years and Key Stage 5 is post-16, non-compulsory education.

that these strategies can lead to better essay-writing is, I think, somewhat overstated. If, as I suspect, she means the content of the essays, then I can understand her argument, but I do feel she has neglected the area of the students' own writing and in fact she writes of the essays produced: "Apart from a lesson on planning they received little input from me" (Fones, 2000, p. 202). I find it hard to believe that their writing skills can have improved significantly with so little teaching of writing.

The only area that appears to have attracted much comment is essay-planning. For instance, Brown and Gifford (1989) focus explicitly on writing and stress the need for effective planning. They produce a planning sequence which "needs practice without actually writing the essay so that it can be gradually bought down to 10 minutes. It cannot be assumed that everyone can do this, simply because they will have to" (p. 162). I agree entirely with this philosophy and would argue that this explicit teaching of the features of good essay-writing could be applied to aspects of writing other than planning.

To gain further insights that might support successful strategies, one has to move towards psychology texts and look at cognitive process theories. Ironically, it is from these types of texts rather than more "teacherly texts" that I have gained the most insight into *how* to begin devising some strategies to use in the classroom.

Hayes and Flower's work on the writing process is well known, and it is useful to understand the distinction between processes which they believe are triggered automatically and those in which the writer "decides to devote a period of time to systematic examination and improvement of the text" (Hayes & Flower, 1980b, p. 18). If we know which processes need to be practised, we can use this information to inform our teaching. This approach could be used to improve a variety of aspects of writing, but it is noteworthy that even here the best examples given still relate to planning ("either temporally or hierarchically") which is obviously considered to be key; "good writers appear to have more flexible, high-level plans and more self-conscious control of their planning than poor writers" (Hayes & Flower, 1980a, p. 44).

Despite the fact that the examples used by Hayes and Flower largely relate to planning, their approach could be usefully extended to other areas of essay-writing. It is because I consider textual cohesion to be the most difficult aspect of essay-writing that it seems obvious to me that this is an area we should systematically teach and practise. Writers need to become sufficiently familiar with writing cohesively that it becomes second nature. Hayes and Flower's work suggests that even the most apparently complex tasks can be "treated as routine if the writer has a stored frame or schema in memory to draw on" (Hayes & Flower, 1980a, p. 42).

In relation to addressing textual cohesion specifically rather than planning, it has been difficult to find any research or studies on this topic beyond very generalised comments, for example, "Some writers have a large and powerful repertory of composing skills; others don't" (Hayes & Flower, 1980a, p. 39). Whilst this is undoubtedly true, there seems to be a universal shying away from considering how we enlarge the students' repertory once they reach Key Stage 5.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE WRITING OF ONE A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE CLASS

Having considered the current research in this area (or lack of), the next stage was to do some research of my own into what the main areas of difficulty are for A-level students. I decided to use one class as my sample and collected one analytical essay written in timed conditions from each of the ten A-level English Literature students in this mixed-ability, Year 13 class. During the time I collected this data and planned the resulting lessons on essay-writing, we were studying Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, which the group really enjoyed and which obviously lends itself extremely well to discussions about writing.

Prior knowledge of this class (and of other A-level students) led me to focus initially on the cohesion of writing within the main essay. Linking paragraphs and producing a piece of writing which "flows" is an area of difficulty for many students. However, conversations with my class informed me that their perception was that introductions and conclusions were their weakest areas and so I included these in my research, too.

I have found that lack of planning can lead to poor textual cohesion for many students and I needed to analyse this area to see if the data would support my judgement. Based on the above observations, I designed an analytical coding framework divided into four broad areas: planning, opening/introduction, main body of essay and conclusion. I applied this framework to each essay and the results were as follows:

Planning

60% of students in the sample produced and followed an essay plan. Where a plan had been produced, it was found to be thorough; but no students had put all of the points from their plan into their essay. This suggests that although 60% of students are comfortable with producing and using a plan, they perhaps need some guidance on how to plan more quickly and concisely, or how to be clearer about how many points can be covered in a limited time.

The students who did plan clearly understood how to note down which points they wanted to cover but not which order would result in the most cohesive piece of writing. They planned what to put in their essay but not how to structure it. Of the 40% of students who did not use a plan, I could see that at least one of them struggled with the essay although, conversely, one of the students who chose not to use a plan was one of the highest-achieving students in terms of grades.

Opening/Introduction

60% of students wrote an introduction to their essay which was either good or acceptable. 20% of students produced a weak introduction and 20% of students didn't write one at all. The 40% of students who comprise the last two categories is higher than I would have expected in a final-year, A-level group, when students should have been writing introductions for years. However, this is consistent with what the class told me were the areas they found difficult and, indeed, one of the students actually wrote a note – "I can't do this introduction" after their plan and then went straight into the main body of the essay.

80% of students referred to keywords from the essay question at least once in their introduction and so this seems to be an area of strength across most of the group. Signposting how the question will be answered and showing a clear grasp of the task were less good with only 50% of students achieving the former (even if it is a relatively unsophisticated approach, "In this essay I will discuss whether…") and 40% the latter. In terms of learning, it appears that many students have not progressed in their writing of introductions beyond dissecting the question and they need some teaching in using the opening/introduction as part of their answer. It is worth noting that the two students who regularly achieved the highest grades were two of the students to produce "good" introductions, and it was the less able students who struggled to write an introduction with much purpose.

Paragraphing within the main body of the text

One very clear result from the data in this section was that the two most able students referred to the essay question in the main body of the text multiple times (ten or more times), whilst the least able student referred to the question only once within the main body of the text.

Topic sentences were an area of strength with 60% of students using a topic sentence for each paragraph in this section and the remaining 40% of students having only one paragraph, each which did not have a clear topic sentence. In terms of teaching, it is perhaps only a reminder that is needed for the majority of students, as the knowledge and application are largely already present. This is also the case for ordering paragraphs by topic: 90% of students did order paragraphs by topic, and the one student who did not, failed to do so in only one instance.

Linking paragraphs to create a coherent argument is an area where the data suggests a gap in the students' learning. No students linked paragraphs by repetition (by this I mean a clear repetition of argument or point between two adjoining paragraphs with the clear intention of using this as a linking device). Only 30% of students linked paragraphs by a verbal echo (a similar but less definite technique to linking by repetition) and each student who did this did so only once. 70% of students linked paragraphs using adverbials and this did provide some cohesion. In terms of teaching, there is a need to show students that there are a number of ways of linking paragraphs, and that using an adverbial link is not always the most appropriate way of creating a cohesive and fluent piece of writing. Even in respect of the use of adverbial links, it might be worth drawing the students' attention to the effect of the more sophisticated "It could also be argued…." and "Within the first passage McEwan also…", as compared to the more basic, "Another…".

Essay conclusions

This was an interesting area, since students' perceptions were that this was one of their weakest areas. However, 30% of students wrote a good conclusion, 60% an acceptable one and only 10% a weak conclusion. This data suggests that students are reasonably competent at conclusions and are actually better at them than they are at planning (60% good/acceptable) or introductions (60% good/acceptable). 60% of students echoed the opening and 90% referred to the essay question in their conclusions. This indicates that students understand the point of a conclusion and do

use it correctly as a sort of end-point for their ideas in relation to the essay question. However, only 50% had a clear purpose in terms of what overall answer they had come to in their conclusions.

The best conclusions used language that was positive and assertive – .it seems clear" and "it is key", intermingled with the student's opinions/ideas. The least successful conclusions were almost a paraphrasing of the question with a very tentative attempt to give an answer. What the data also showed was that "higher-level skills" of concluding, with other questions raised by the text or closing the essay with deliberate ambiguity, were less widely employed. Here the figure dropped to 20% for the first and 0% for the second of these categories.

Key differences between the most and least able writers in the sample

There were several areas where the difference between the two students in the sample who regularly achieved the highest grades and the two students who achieved the lowest were noteworthy. The four areas I have shown in Table 1 below were the areas where the difference was most pronounced. In terms of teaching this has implications for quite strongly differentiated material (when focusing on improving writing as opposed to understanding of a Literary text).

	Good introduction	Average number of times the essay question is referred to in the main body of the essay	Average number of times paragraphs are linked by an adverbial	Good conclusion
Two most able students	2	10+	3	2
Two least able students	0	3	0	0

Table 1. Differences in essay-writing competences between more and less able students

TEACHING INTERVENTIONS – EPISODES ONE AND TWO: PLANNING

The data gathered during my research led me to plan several essay-writing sessions for the class. They were relatively short as I was still constrained by the need to get through the syllabus. Moreover, I felt that short, regular sessions on essay-writing would probably be the most palatable means of teaching what could be a very dry topic.

Having shared the findings of my analysis of their work with my class, I decided to begin by using a whole-class approach. I explained that lack of planning in their essays sometimes led to a sort of "patchwork" of ideas which lacked cohesion. This was a generally a bright group, so I explained some of the ideas behind planning. The class were receptive to one of Hayes and Flower's ideas, that one way of reducing cognitive strain is to depend on "procedures that are so routine" (Hayes & Flower, 1980a, p. 42) that they become almost automatic. Several students also studied psychology and were particularly comfortable with this type of explanation.

I began the lesson with a simple exercise on planning an argumentative piece which I took from a Key Stage 4 (GCSE) textbook. The students found this fairly easy, and it was clear to the students that at A level, something a little more sophisticated was required. we discussed options such as grouping ideas under main headings or jotting down all ideas first and then returning to number them to see how the essay could be made to "flow". Throughout, I reminded students that the purpose of planning was not only to ensure coverage of ideas but also to try to determine a structure fpr their work.

I put an essay plan on the board and asked the students to discuss its good and bad points and then to suggest a possible order for the ideas (each one being loosely a paragraph). I then gave a different essay title and we completed a plan as a whole class. Having spent the rest of the lesson on *Atonement*, I returned to planning five minutes before the end. I asked the students to implement what they had learned earlier by producing an essay plan for a third title, but to do it individually. This work was collected for analysis.

The following lesson, I asked three students to complete a questionnaire to try to ascertain whether the planning work had been effective. What they said revealed a clear divide along ability lines. The A and C-grade students had found the whole-class work productive. They had participated orally and now felt that they would have a go at producing a plan before starting their next timed essay. They had found the individual work useful as further practice, but had gained less from this than from the whole-class work.

The D-grade student's feelings about the lesson were the opposite. She had felt intimidated by the whole-class session and hadn't spoken up when I'd used phrases she didn't understand (although I *thought* I had checked understanding). She felt that the session had been taken over by the "cleverer" students and she only really engaged with the topic at the beginning when we did the GCSE planning and at the end when she tried to produce a plan on her own. Notably her plan contained some of the elements that I was trying to move away from (for example, random jotting down of ideas with no sequencing) and this would indicate that the episodes had not been particularly effective for her. It was clear from her comments that what she needed was more practice at planning but not in a whole-class setting. I knew that this class had a wide range of abilities, but I was not aware of how significant an impact different teaching strategies would have. Clearly, students respond in markedly different ways to different learning environments, even at A level.

TEACHING INTERVENTIONS – EPISODE THREE: INTRODUCTIONS

From my data, it seemed that writing openings/introductions proved to be an area where there was again a clear distinction between the most and least able in the group. Although my data showed that 60% of the students wrote either good or acceptable introductions, 40% wrote poor introductions or didn't write one at all. This was also an area which the students felt concerned about.

I prepared a 30-minute episode on introductions. I shared with the group exactly what I felt constituted a "good" introduction[1] and there was a whole-class discussion about what the purpose of an introduction was. Interestingly, several students (generally lower ability) did seem to think that they just needed to paraphrase the essay question. The more able had some ideas about giving an overview of their opinion but none of them had considered that an introduction was an opportunity to define key terms or to illustrate that they had an understanding of the overall task.

I split the class into two groups and asked one group to work with me and the other with the excellent trainee teacher that I was lucky to have working with me that term. The groupings were based on ability and, although I think this was obvious to the students, they were positive about working in smaller groups (five students in each group).

The students were given an introduction I'd written and asked to pick out the features of an effective introduction we'd discussed earlier. I was working with the less able group, and they were able to identify the key features. But what they found most useful was when I gave them the "teacher's sheet" which gave an explanation of my thought process as I was writing the introduction. From this they could see how I had thought about not just the general ideas but also why I'd picked specific words. Building on the previous teaching episodes on planning, they were also able to see how a good introduction relied upon a plan having been completed.

The students then planned and wrote an introduction for another essay title. My group chose to do this individually but were happy to then swap and analyse each other's work. This was the first time I had used peer assessment at Key Stage 5, and it was very effective. However, the students did say that they wouldn't have been so open with what they perceived as the "cleverer" group. There did not seem to be the same concern about discussing the content of their work, so it seems clear that the less able students were less confident in their essay-writing than in their ideas about a text.

The more able group chose a slightly different strategy and planned the essay and wrote an introduction as a group. This perhaps illustrates their greater confidence in essay-writing. I had assumed that all of the students would prefer to work as a group and hear other people's ideas, but in fact the less able preferred to work quietly on their own. Perhaps this was their way of ensuring they could actually do the work as opposed to discussing doing it. This is an important distinction and is particularly relevant in English Literature, when so much of the work is based on discussion and shared ideas. They perhaps need more practice in essay-writing, but broken down into manageable "chunks".

Three students again completed a questionnaire and it was the D/C-grade students who had found this episode most useful. The A-grade student had already been writing good introductions. However, one idea – the use of an introduction to define key terms – was a new one to her and she could see how for some essay titles this

[1] My key points for a "good" introduction to an analytical essay are:

- Refer to or, where necessary, define key words from the essay title;
- Signpost/indicate how the question will be answered;
- Illustrate a clear understanding of the whole task;
- Use the correct Literary terminology as appropriate.

would be very useful. For example, two weeks earlier students had done an essay with the following title: By a comparison of two passages, consider how McEwan treats destruction in *Atonement*". The A-grade student saw that her introduction would have been more effective had she included a definition of her understanding of the different types of destruction in the novel, rather than trying to work this into the essay as she went along. This teaching episode also aided my future teaching with the A-grade student, as it gave us a shared vocabulary to discuss future introductions.

A key point for me was how to ensure that the teaching episodes on essay-writing weren't just stand-alone episodes. I devised a simple, essay feedback sheet for future essays, on which I divided my comments into specific categories to address the areas of essay-writing we'd focused on. I used this sheet for the remainder of the course and it did make my feedback more meaningful, as it helped the students to focus on essay-writing as well as on content. We returned to planning and writing introductions later in the course, and there was a greater feeling of confidence across the group. We did another peer assessment exercise (again in ability groups) and most of the students were able to comfortably discuss strengths and weaknesses.

TEACHING INTERVENTIONS – EPISODE FOUR: TEXT COHESION

The data from the "Paragraphing" section of my research showed that the group were fairly strong at using topic sentences and organising paragraphs by topic, but less competent at linking paragraphs (70% of students used adverbials to link paragraphs, not always appropriately, but only 30% of students attempted any other linking techniques).

I explained to the whole class why a good essay should "flow" and I gave examples of various linking techniques – adverbials, verbal echoes and repetition. I also explained that those particular students hoping to achieve a high grade ought to use a variety of linking techniques.

One thing that students had found helpful in previous episodes was using examples of actual essays as models. Consequently, I had typed up an essay which was an amalgam of paragraphs from various students' previously completed timed essays. As the paragraphs came from different students' essays, there was a lack of cohesion, although I ensured that the paragraphs were compatible and *could* be made into a cohesive essay. With the class divided into two groups, each group was asked to write a linking sentence for each paragraph and to identify the technique they were using.

The trainee teacher took the less able half of the class. We had discussed in advance that, although they would hopefully gain something from looking at a range of strategies, they might rely heavily on adverbials. Considering that some of these students generally made very limited attempts to link their paragraphs, their essays would be vastly improved, even if the only outcome of this episode was to encourage appropriate use of adverbials.

The more able group were working with me, and I explicitly encouraged them away from adverbials and towards alternatives. They very quickly understood that repeated use of adverbials could result in rather dull, formulaic essays. One positive aspect of

our discussion was that they volunteered the idea that text cohesion relies upon planning and so they were building on a previous teaching episode. As we worked through the essay and discussed how we could link paragraphs and whether we could change the order of the paragraphs, it was clear that this group responded well to a combination of explanation, discussion, modelling and practice and enjoyed working together, hearing other students' ideas and offering comments.

Following this teaching episode, the more able group did use a wider range of linking strategies in their essays and I explicitly commented on this area in my feedback. The episode had less impact on the less able students, who made obvious attempts to use adverbials to link paragraphs but still not always appropriately and in a rather self-conscious manner. For some of them, this had been a new concept, which was introduced too late in the course. Had I started this work with them in Year 12, I suspect that all students would have benefited more.

The questionnaire from the three key students revealed that, as I had thought, this episode was useful for the A-grade student. It had made her more conscious of her essay as a whole rather than as a group of points. For the C' and D-grade students, the discussion on adverbials was useful (they said) but I could see from their essays that a lot more work would have been needed on the area of whole-text cohesion to have much positive effect on their writing. In some ways, this was the least successful episode, as I feel that it actually confused and worried some of the less able students. Had I addressed this area with just the A/B-grade students (at this late stage in the course) it would have been more appropriate.

IMPLICATIONS

Explicit teaching of the features of good writing should continue to be taught throughout Key Stage 5, just as it is explicitly taught throughout other Key Stages. The statement, "students do not write well because they are not taught to write" (Odell, 1980, p. 139) could apply to some of my A-level students. Their writing may be far above average and above the standard they are likely to need in many careers, but it is poor essay-writing rather than lack of understanding which will result in lower grades for some of the students in this class. Had they worked on essay-writing from Year 12, I suspect that some of them would have achieved a higher grade.

It might be the case that D-grade students at A level will not be able, for example, to link paragraphs using a verbal echo. However, if they can be taught to at least grasp the concept of cohesion and use some strategies to work towards it, it is worth spending some valuable teaching time on essay-writing. In addition to the benefits this will bring to their essay-writing, a clearer approach to how essays are written may well lead to clarity of thought in other areas. With this in mind, the issues that have been highlighted by this research are largely about *how* best to teach these essay-writing skills rather than *whether* to. It is the case that all of the students benefited from the explicit teaching of these skills and their essays improved, in varying degrees, over the term.

It seems that some of the most successful strategies were those which are commonly used in Key Stages 3 and 4: modelling, peer assessment and small group work. From

anecdotal evidence (and my own experience) I think it is fairly common for Key Stage 5 lessons to become rather teacher-led as we strive to "get through" the texts. To teach *writing* to these students necessitates their having time to try things out on their own and with others. This also links with the difficulties I had in teaching quite a mixed ability class – they generally responded well to the same strategies I would use in a Key Stage 3 or 4, mixed-ability class: differentiation through questioning, grouping, outcome and, sometimes, task.

The fact that several students claimed never to have been taught some of these skills perhaps highlights a pedagogic weakness in secondary-school teaching. Indeed, this was what several teachers claimed during my research. Some said that they could recognise good writing at Key Stage 5, but could not necessarily identify its features and therefore obviously could not teach it. This, then, is an issue for teacher education as well as for teaching. From a practitioner's viewpoint, the effectiveness of my teaching and marking has been increased by a more focused analysis and feedback on specific essay-writing skills. This is something which will now become a regular feature of my own teaching and I will certainly incorporate regular and explicit essay-writing episodes into my A-level schemes of work.

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