

Ten top tips for teaching grammar, punctuation and spelling



Literacy and learning advisors for the Royal Borough of Kingston, Christine and Lindsay have a long-standing and proven track record of effectively supporting school improvement in numerous schools across different boroughs. Together, their expertise covers a full spectrum of learning needs, including those of the more able, children with EAL, reluctant learners and those with socio-economic disadvantages. They have also led on improving boys' literacy, the development of thinking skills and the successful implementation of shared and guided reading and writing.

Language is a magnificent living thing: potentially as beautiful and delicate as a butterfly, and as powerful and dangerous as a panther. The study of wildlife should lead to an understanding of how it works within its surroundings and how it might be supported and nurtured. Some methods of study can too easily lead to the killing of a subject: dissecting it, stuffing it, or pinning it for display, and so missing the point of life's power and beauty entirely. The study of grammar might be approached in a similar way. Analytical grammar, in which aspects are identified and tagged, can kill the love of language quickly and efficiently, just as circling the blue bits would kill off any piece of artwork. But studying grammar in a compositional sense, always with a view to enhancing the meaning within communication, has great potential benefits to all our children as developing writers and speakers.

The new skills test for all year 6 pupils in England will include analytical questions, for which children need to be prepared. But, according to the Standards and Testing Agency's (STA) recently released English Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling Test Framework document, the mark scheme will reflect Bloom's Taxonomy for learning. There will be prompts to evaluate, synthesize, and so on (with questions of greater cognitive demand gaining more marks). The question stems go beyond identification, requiring children to categorise, explain and answer "how" and "why." But even if this were not the case, and the test was entirely analytical, research shows that a focus on compositional grammar would remain the more successful approach. You may, as we have, observed that analytical grammar lessons, taught in an isolated way will often fail to stick in a child's memory. The same could be said for spelling test words that children fail to remember only two weeks later. What does stick is learning grammar through oral and written composition, especially when applied in a range of written contexts. Grammar taught as a means towards enhanced communication will not only better prepare children for the new test; it will improve the power and beauty of their spoken and written communication beyond the classroom.

Acknowledging all of the above, we have put together ten key points that we hope will prove useful to you as you prepare your children for this new challenge.

1. Always use formative assessment to decide next steps for your children and your class. This might seem really obvious, but can be too easily overlooked when preparing for high-stakes assessments under time pressure. Look at the grammar and punctuation in children's *actual* writing – their stories, their reports, biographies and explanations – as well as any grammar testing you might do. And *begin* lessons with Assessment for Learning challenges such as, “Compose a sentence about how our young evacuee might feel, using an adverbial phrase.” This will show you what kinds of adverbials children use, where they place them in the sentence, and, indeed, who has yet to know what one is. Have children evaluate examples, and then you will have an extremely clear idea of what to teach next.
2. Teach grammar in a way that is purposeful and meaningful, even if it feels that the skills test is neither of those things. Grammar sessions can be discrete, but they should always be part of a teaching sequence: play with each new skill together, then compose using it together (making shared writing an intrinsic part of the process), then have the children apply the new skill in their writing. Whatever the skill is, be overt about its impact on meaning. For example: only use adjectives to add descriptive impact, and consider using a more precise noun instead. Rather than referring to verbs as “more interesting”, discuss how precisely a verb relates to its context.
3. Never neglect reading. Children who love reading and read enthusiastically are more likely to fair well in the new test (they are statistically more likely to succeed in Maths and Science too). We must all do everything we can to enhance the love of reading. It is always worth noticing together how any author uses a skill that you have recently been practising to enhance the text's impact (we use the word “noticing” as “underlining all the adverbs” is a pretty good way of killing reading enthusiasm!).
4. Demonstrate and model an enthusiasm and love for language; relish a wonderful subordinate clause and take joy in a well-chosen verb. If grammar is reduced to a dreary exercise, learning is unlikely; positive emotional resonance supports memory and deep learning.
5. Keep the discrete teaching of grammar multi-sensory and game-based. As a class, celebrate mistakes and risk-taking as these are the routes to new learning. Spend time returning to the new language skill to ensure mastery: hear it, speak it and write it in as many different contexts as possible.
6. Grammar and punctuation start with the basic sentence. Ensure that your children are absolutely secure in their concept of a sentence. Whatever the focus of a given lesson sequence, start with a sentence and enhance it. This could be by adding at either end, joining it to another sentence, or inserting something in it. Whatever you do, always start with a well-composed (and intriguing) sentence.

7. Combine the teaching of grammar and punctuation. Teaching commas only really seems to work when children master their own composition of different sentence types, including the complex. They will often grasp how commas work when these are taught within the context of phrases and clauses, as opposed to isolated 'insert the commas' exercises.
8. Broaden the application of grammar across the curriculum: start a humanities lesson with children composing a single sentence that recaps your last lesson's learning, applying the grammar skill taught most recently: "Give me a sentence about Victorian schools that includes an embedded clause."
9. Allow for plenty of collaborative learning, as studies show the power of peer learning. Have children work in pairs to write with a new skill, then swap and peer-assess and improve. If you have access to a visualiser, use it for peer-evaluation and improvement on a regular basis.
10. Use the correct terminology when teaching grammar, and use it when marking, giving feedback and setting targets. Have children use it in self- and peer-assessment.

Looking for teacher support which makes grammar fun?

Christine Chen and Lindsay Pickton have just created Grammar and Spelling Bug. Designed to give you all the tools you need to deliver the grammar, punctuation and spelling requirements of the new Primary English curriculum without reaching for a hefty academic tome. It includes comprehensive lesson plans and assessments available at the click of a button. What's more, your pupils will love practicing their newly acquired skills over and over with exciting, time-travel themed games.

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