

Grammar and Punctuation: Standard English is key



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.

Every class of children is unique and even parallel classes in the same school may have different grammatical stumbles. There are common, high-frequency sticking points, though; you might recognise some of these needs and have use for the suggested strategies.

Standard English is the first priority.

Standard English is the grammatical form being assessed in the Skills Test, and it's the grammatical form required of nearly all writing. It is associated with formal speech but can also be used informally. It is not 'received pronunciation' and it can be spoken in any accent, as Radio 4 tries hard (these days) to exemplify. Children who have the ability to use Standard English are not only at an advantage in grammar and writing assessments; they have an advantage in life, as many professions will not consider someone who does not use it. We must be clear that in Standard English, errors such as "we was" (subject-verb agreement) are as wrong as $3+4=8$, and letting children believe otherwise reduces their chances in life.

If you teach children who lack secure Standard English, it is worth thinking of it as mastering an additional language form. When we teach children French or Spanish, we are not requiring that they use that form all the time: we are giving them a skill that will be useful in certain contexts. This is precisely true of Standard English. Be clear that slang, dialect and so on are not wrong: they are just wrong in certain contexts (i.e. formal speech and the great majority of writing).

- Language is acquired largely through imitation, so exposure to excellent Standard English models is crucial, particularly where such models are lacking at home.
- A major source of such language is reading: another reason for ensuring that children enjoy reading enough to choose to do it often enough for it to have impact.
- Language is acquired largely through imitation, so exposure to excellent Standard English models is crucial, particularly where such models are lacking at home.
- Being read to helps enormously, and this has been squeezed out of many KS2 timetables...but what if you knew it supported preparation for the Skills Test? Children need to be read to (for reasons far beyond Standard English) and the pressures of modern family life often prevent this happening: we have to plug that gap.
- Supplement this provision by getting audio books for children to borrow: a homework that ought to be enjoyable will definitely have impact, and produces no marking.
- Use multi-media models in non-fiction writing units: imitate David Attenborough in information writing; imitate the Radio 4 news for journalism.
- Have (vetted) Radio 4 programs on in the classroom during early work. Children exposed to their parents' love of this station have opportunities to absorb a quality of language other children never hear.
- Always remember the process, hear it – speak it – write it, because if they have never heard it, they certainly won't be writing it.
- In the classroom, correct Standard English errors as they occur, but do it well: celebrate “marvelous mistakes” as an opportunity for learning, and be clear that “classroom English” or “writing English” is something we have to master as well as the language we may speak the rest of the time.

Commas are for meaning

The comma is used to keep meaning clear within a sentence, even in a simple list: “I bought butter chocolate biscuits and soap” Do you mean butter, chocolate and biscuits? Butter and chocolate biscuits? Butter chocolate biscuits? An absent or badly-positioned comma can radically alter meaning in a multi-clause sentence: “He strode on his shoulders back” can be read in a few ways, but “He strode on, his shoulders back” is pretty clear.

Include commas when teaching lists, the addition of phrases, the insertion of additional information and when developing multi-clause sentences. Enjoy ambiguities and confusions together which arise from missing or misplaced commas. Correct comma usage is often a great indicator of secure grammatical understanding: notice it in texts read together, model it in shared writing and celebrate it in children's writing.

Using correct terminology

Many teachers will be concerned about their children's grasp of the correct grammatical terms, but giving lists of words to learn is likely to be as effective as those spelling lists that seem to be so easily forgotten. Instead, use the correct terminology throughout your teaching. Start off at the point of teaching grammar; use it again in shared reading and writing and in success criteria and targets. Encourage and reward children for using it in peer- and self-evaluation; use it in other subjects ("Give me a noun phrase to describe Henry's armour") and use it to make drama better ("use an adverbial phrase to describe how you think she should hold out the key"). And then use it specifically in marking writing. Keep in mind that grammar and punctuation "stick" when they are used for purpose and practiced repeatedly in multiple contexts. The focus must always be on enjoying the clarity, precision and sometimes the originality of a well-made choice.

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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