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Engaging and inspiring learners in English, especially at Key Stage 3: Priestnall School

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Brief description

This case study shows how the creative use of visual stimulus and practical activity to build skills in English results in excellent progress and high attainment in a comprehensive secondary school. It explores the benefits of a two-year Key Stage 3 and how this has helped to prepare for study at GCSE and beyond. It describes the approach to literacy and reading at Key Stage 3 and explains the rigorous systems of assessment. It also exemplifies key features of monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning.

Overview – the school's message

'Students thrive in English because highly engaging teaching and creative schemes of work stimulate learning and challenge students of all abilities. For the last three years, the English team has operated a two-year Key Stage 3 and three-year Key Stage 4. This carefully planned programme systematically builds progression and reinforces skills in reading and writing. High quality marking ensures that strengths and weaknesses are identified and effective guidance provided. The curriculum enables students to thoroughly embed the skills required for success at GCSE and beyond.

The Head of English works in close liaison with the school librarian, Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) and nurture group teacher to ensure that weaker students make good progress in reading and writing. This includes joint work with primary schools and innovative work with parents and carers.

The rigorous programme of planning, monitoring, evaluation follows a whole-school pattern and contributes to the sharp focus on action to improve students' learning. The evident passion of the English team for their subject is reflected in the excellent range of extra-curricular trips, visits and clubs. Boys and girls alike are motivated by their learning in English with many choosing to continue their study of English post-16. Everything that we do

is firmly rooted in the belief that high levels of competence in English form the bedrock for success in life and in short, 'only the best is good enough'.

Julie Yarwood, Headteacher

The good practice in detail



The Ofsted survey *Moving English Forward* found that few secondary schools had taken the opportunity, following the end of the Year 9 statutory tests, to refresh their Key Stage 3 schemes of work. It reflected that, at Key Stage 3, not enough schools motivated students with tasks that were practical and relevant.

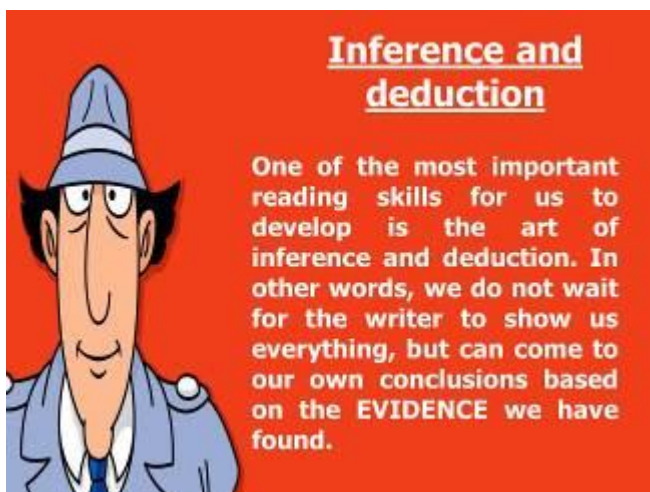
In 2011, the [Ofsted inspection](#) of the school highlighted students' excellent achievement and personal development

and an [inspection in 2013 of English](#) judged it to be outstanding. This case study illustrates the teaching and learning styles in English, explains how the curriculum at Key Stage 3 and 4 has been refocused, especially in Year 9, and how the rigour of assessment and monitoring contributes to outstanding teaching and learning.

Using PowerPoint and active learning methods to enhance teaching and learning

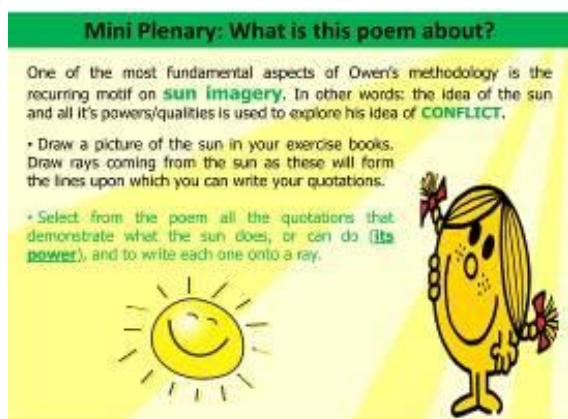
PowerPoint is used highly effectively to organise the curriculum, present concepts, introduce key skills, give explanations and sequence learning activities. Often, lessons begin with engaging, fun and seemingly unconnected tasks which are then related to the novel, skill, or poem. This means students are engaged and thinking creatively before being presented with their task. For example, in a [Year 7 lesson on *Airman* by Eoin Colfer](#) the skill of making an inference is introduced with a visual puzzle. Students often do activities which are fun and then reflect back on processes and strategies they used.

The fun elements to all lessons switch students on. Verbal and pictorial references to students' cultural knowledge and experience humorously engage students and encourage creative and active thinking. The varied activities in this well-sequenced [Year 9 lesson on horror stories](#) are enhanced by the graphics which refer to films and cartoons. The active tasks involve physical movement and are embedded in the presentation, highlighted by the humorous reference to the dance song, 'I like to move it, move it'. Thinking skills activities, like the use of boggle boxes, are included in all lessons.



The [Year 9 war poetry lesson](#) exemplifies the methodical use of colour to highlight key skills, explain key terms and focus on features of text at word, sentence and paragraph level. In this example, the sun imagery in Wilfred Owen's poem 'Futility' is used creatively as a vehicle for students' response.

Students are exposed to lots of different writing styles and genres. This is intensified by the passion of the staff about reading and the subject. Teachers are avid readers and this rubs off on students. All lesson objectives are rooted in assessment levels and foci but the presentation of lessons is set in the broader context of actively engaging students' interest.



All schemes of work on reading and writing have opportunities for students to work creatively. Detective reader, murder mystery, and crime scene investigation approaches engage students and draw on their cultural experience. All lessons are pitched at an appropriately high level, no matter what set. All of the English team have become skilled and resourceful in combining high-quality visual stimulus and active learning methods to engage all levels of learners. The team is always updating schemes of work and incorporating new things they come across.

Two-year Key Stage 3; three-year Key Stage 4

In Year 9, students have a foundation year in preparation for their GCSEs in English Language and Literature. This gives a real focus to Year 9 following the abolition of statutory tests. Sophie Birchenall, Head of Department and senior GCSE examiner, says 'Year 9 students are really serious and engaged in their work towards GCSE. They are better prepared for the different types of assessment; they develop the right skills and attitudes and are more mentally prepared for the stress of examinations'. The [Year 9 curriculum plan](#) shows how the units are planned and assessed.

How do teachers stop students switching off through over-familiarity with the GCSE course? The two creative writing courses and controlled assessments in Year 9 contrast with Year 10 which have different titles and focus on different styles of writing. In Year 9, the 'Conflict' cluster of poems is used to develop the ability to analyse and compare. In Year 10, these skills are developed by studying the 'Character and Voice' cluster. This avoids stale responses and equips students to give deeper and more reflective interpretations of poems. When it comes to 'Of Mice and Men' and 'Romeo and Juliet', Year 9 schemes of work focus primarily on plot and character as illustrated by this [lesson about Juliet](#). This enables lessons in Year 10 to focus directly on language, structure and form, as this [lesson on Act One, Scene 5](#) shows. This strategy not only produces more detailed responses, but also saves vital time in what is a tightly packed course.



Assessment and marking

The rigour of marking and assessment accelerates students' progress. Students in all years have a formative and a summative assessment each half term. The formative assessment focuses on one or two skills. The summative assessment considers all the skills and produces a level or grade. At each assessment, students are given two targets for improvement. When this system was introduced the department found it hard to manage but they have now worked out how to spread it over a term as shown by [the assessment calendars](#).

In addition, books are marked every two weeks. Each piece of work has a positive and often a personal comment from the teacher, which increases student confidence, and a target for improving a skill. Books of lower ability sets are marked to the same standard as the higher ability. Teachers' hard work and high commitment communicates high expectations to students. Students value the continuous feedback which enables them to quickly put their learning into practice and frequently check their progress.

Basic literacy and the promotion of reading

The English department works in close conjunction with the librarian and the Special



Educational Needs Coordinator to meet literacy needs and promote reading. Fortnightly sessions on spelling, punctuation and grammar help students in Years 7 and 8 to secure progress from level 4 to level 5. In Years 7 to 9, students have a library lesson which successfully encourages reading and discussion of fiction. This is enhanced by after-school reading groups with more demanding novels aimed at the higher ability which are enjoyed by both boys and girls. Less confident readers in

Year 7 are supported by buddy readers in Year 9 and students from a sixth form college.

Gareth D Morewood, the SENCO said, 'we work in close partnership with the English faculty to provide bespoke, daily support for the most vulnerable students which dovetails with the mainstream curriculum'. The needs of the weakest readers are identified with tools to assess both cognitive and phonic skills. A computer-based programme is used to develop phonic skills and a student newspaper is used to increase comprehension skills. Nine of the ten Year 7 students who entered on level 3 have progressed to level 4. These students are also supported by innovative training for parents and carers in the use of phonic card games to develop reading and social skills.

Monitoring and evaluation

Data analysis is carried out each half term to chart student progress in all year groups. Since this was introduced at Key Stage 3, staff have identified and acted on emerging issues more quickly. This analysis informs a termly review with each teacher to account for the progress in their classes and the impact of action taken.

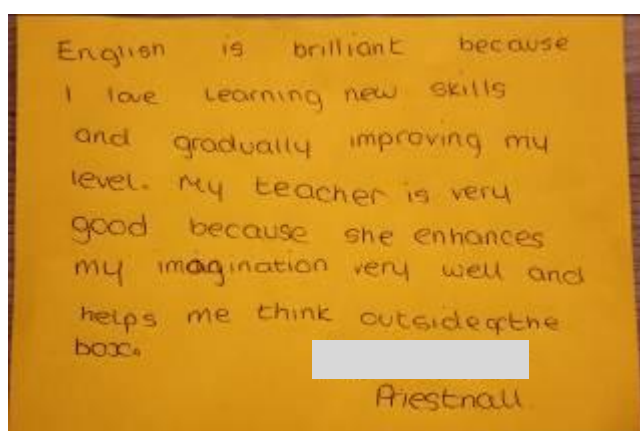
Each half term students' books from one year group are monitored. This is very helpful in ensuring the consistency of marking and assessment and adherence to policies. The [Year 7](#)

[book monitoring](#) shows the encouraging nature of positive feedback to teachers and the focus of targets for improvement.

Well-constructed surveys of student views provide quantitative responses to specific questions about teaching and learning. Importantly, students also give their written opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of the units of work. The department's analysis of the [Year 7 survey](#) is detailed and self-critical with clear actions for improvement identified.

A Year 9 student poetically captured the impact of English teaching on her learning; 'I like English because it is like looking at the clouds. Every time you look again, you see something new'.

Achievement



What is the impact of this activity on achievement? In 2013, 83% of the cohort gained a GCSE grade at C or above in English and 31% of entries gained an A or an A* grade in English Language; both figures are significantly above average. GCSE results in English Literature, taken by most students, are even higher. Students of all abilities make outstanding progress over key stages 3 and 4. In 2013, 85% made the expected progress in English compared with a national average of 69%. Furthermore, 42% made

more than expected progress compared to 30% nationally.

The school's background

[Priestnall School](#) in Stockport is a larger than average 11-16 secondary school. It is in an area that is less deprived than average. About one in five students is from a minority ethnic background which is average.



Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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