

Should we change schools? Activities for GCSE English

Learning goals – read this, if you want to know why you are doing this work

- This module of work will help you with coursework for **speaking and listening**. (For this, in the AQA GCSE specification A, you have to do at least three pieces of assessed work. They count, together, for 20% of your total marks.) You should love your teacher, as he or she is the examiner for all of your coursework – that's 40% of your total marks at GCSE.
- The recommended focus of the work is the **speaking and listening** activities of **discussing, arguing** and **persuading** and of **explaining, describing** and **narrating**.
- The activities can also be used as a starting point for further coursework in **speaking and listening** (all clusters of skills) and in **writing** (original writing).

The lesson outline

The lesson has a **starter** activity, followed by the **main** activity in several parts, and ends with a time for the whole class to reflect on the learning (a **plenary** session).

How you should work in this lesson

You will be expected to speak and listen – and if you do it well, your teacher will want to give a mark (reflecting your grade) and record that for your assessment. Remember the **listening** part, and think about how you can **show** that you are doing this, as well as speaking.

Apart from that, the only rules are to be considerate of others. Use your preferred learning style:

- If you like to make spider diagrams, flowcharts or mind maps on paper, please do so.
- If you like to draw pictures, please do so.
- If you work best with short lists and bullet points, do this.
- If you have a computer, mobile phone or other device that you use for preparing work, then please use it, or them. (In some classrooms, you may not be allowed to do this.)
- And if you want only to talk, and keep things in your head, that is also fine: **it is possible to do good work without writing** – broadcasters and performers do this quite frequently.

At the end of the lesson, your teacher may invite you to hand these things in, rather than take them (or throw them) away. The purpose of this is (with your permission) to make copies of them, and put examples on Web sites for teaching and learning. You can add your name, or keep them anonymous.

Starter

The government department that makes the rules for education (the Department for Education and Skills, or DfES) is planning to change the way education happens for people aged from 14 to 19. That's you. To do this, they are finding out the opinions of teachers, school leaders, parents – and students. Please spend a minute thinking about the things that you would most like to change, and those that you would most like to keep as they are. At the end of that minute, you will have some time to discuss your views.

Your teacher may also ask you to spend a short time (two minutes at the most) writing down, at speed (don't worry about neatness), a list of the best ideas that you thought of. Then you can show that to other pupils, to help you discuss more freely.

Note that while this has been set up as a task for you to do in class, it makes use of a real-world situation – the British government really **is** reviewing what it calls 14-to-19 education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

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Main activity

First task

To help encourage a lot of discussion, please suppose that the government's Department for Education and Skills has made a Web site, which will feature short contributions from young people. These can be

- posted on a message board,
- sent as txt messages from phones, or can be
- sent in (uploaded) as short audio recordings (no more than a few minutes long).

Note: The DfES has not yet invited such contributions, but that is no reason for you not to make them. You or your teacher may find ways to publish them more widely.

You are going to spend some time in **groups**, discussing different ideas, then choosing **one or two** that will fit into a short spoken presentation. If you have the use of suitable equipment, you can record this in digital audio format, so that others can hear what you have to say later. (There's a lot more that you can do with any recordings that you make.)

You are free to say **anything** – but the editor of the Web site will decide whether or not your views are worth publishing. That gives you a problem to solve.

- If you say only very safe and obvious things, then your contribution will be too boring to use.
- But if you are too outrageous, they may not publish it, either.
- Your style of speaking needs to be suitable for publishing widely.

That means that you have to think about your audience – a general audience of people who use the Web site and have an interest in education: parents and teachers, but also the people who will decide what changes will happen. You are trying to persuade them, or at least tell them how things are for you.

This guide contains a list of subjects that might be suitable for your comment. There will almost certainly be some other subjects that are missing from the list, so you should feel free to add these to it. There are too many for you to spend a long time on all of them. When you are discussing, you should have a copy of this list (on paper, or in digital form on a suitable display device) as a prompt, unless you are able to remember the things on it.

When you have discussed your ideas, you will choose what to put into your spoken comment – you can also choose whether to

- write this out,
- make some notes,
- rely on your memory, or
- just speak without notes.

You can work with a partner, so that one asks questions, and the other replies, as in an interview.

Second task

When you have prepared your comment, you can present it in one (or more) of several ways.

- **Whole class:** Your teacher invites each of you in turn to make your comment. In this case, most of the time, you will be **listening** to others – but you can show your understanding by responding to what the others said, in speaking or writing later.
- **Small group:** You do the same, but in small groups. This will allow you more time to respond to others. But it means that your teacher can only assess one group at a time (unless you have some way of recording it).
- **Making a recording:** Using a computer with a soundcard and microphone, and digital audio recording software, you make a recording of your presentation. So that listeners will know this later, you should give your name at the start of the message, using a form like this: "Hello. My name's [your name], I'm [number] years old and I live in [town, county, region, country]."

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Reflecting on the learning (the plenary session)

In the last part of the lesson, you can do one or more of the following

- Listen to others' recorded comments
- Choose one person's comment that you agree with most, and give the reasons for your agreement.
- Listen while your teacher or another student summarizes the common themes (the things that most pupils commented on)
- Think about ways to follow this work up with presentations for speaking and listening, for reading, and for writing.

Follow up tasks

Here are some suggestions for follow-up activities, which support assessment at GCSE/Key Stage 4 of the National Curriculum.

Two kinds of coursework in one

If you write and present your work in a multi-media format (for example a Web page with linked media files, a digital movie or graphic presentation), then you could be assessed both for **speaking and listening** and for **writing**. (Rather as you would be, if you **wrote** a script **for** a short documentary film and appeared **in** the film as the presenter, or **wrote a script** for an animated feature, then **did a voice-over** for narration and/or some of the dialogue).

Speaking and listening

This activity can expand into something more ambitious. Here are just a few possibilities. They are all suitable for your teacher to assess as coursework.

- Collect comments as digital audio files (mp3 and Real Audio), and publish them on a school network or Web site. (You should get the permission of the speakers to do this – if you are the speaker, then you can give yourself that permission, or give it to your friends or your teacher.)
- Use the comments – or get more by interviewing, and recording your own speaking – to make a longer presentation. This could be in a suitable form for a radio broadcast (perhaps in the style of features on speech radio stations, like BBC's *Radio 4*, *Radio Five Live* or *The Asian Network*). If you record and edit this spoken presentation using digital audio software, you can publish it on a school Web site, or broadcast it using Internet radio technology. The broadcast could focus on **explaining**, **describing** and **narrating** or on **discussing**, **arguing** and **persuading** (or even, possibly, all of these). That really depends on the purpose of the presentation – but it will affect the way you make it.
- You could use digital audio resources in a multi-media presentation – using digital movie editing applications or presentation graphics software.

Reading

If you wish, you may prepare for the speaking and listening task by finding out more on this subject, using media texts such as useful Web sites. When you use them, try to be aware of the difference between facts and opinions, and the way that the writers use language and media effects.

This may help you with preparation for written coursework on media. It will also help prepare you for the reading question on the GCSE exam paper (AQA Specification A, Paper 1, Section A), which asks you to show understanding of media and non-fiction texts.

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Writing

This activity has lots of possibilities for **original writing**. Here are a few. If you do this task for the AQA GCSE Specification A, you need to try to write to **explore**, **imagine** and **entertain** – but that can mean **exploring** different ideas about education, **imagining** other viewpoints, and writing on any subject in an **entertaining** way. (That's an encouragement, to be funny, moving, ironic and so on.) You could do three or four of these, and put them together as parts of a single assignment for written coursework – this is a good way to show the examiners the range of different things that you can do:

- Write a script for a radio broadcast, using comments, interviews and so on. Do this in the appropriate style, showing who is speaking, what he or she says, the use of FX and so on. (There are many guides on the World Wide Web that will show you how to do this.) You can **explore** your experience of education, **imagine** other possibilities, and tell the listeners about these in an **entertaining** way.
- Write a feature for a magazine, which presents the views of teenagers about how schools should or should not be changed: **explore** the current situation, and **imagine** alternative, future (or past) ways of organizing education. Make sure you have suitable design and layout for your intended audience – perhaps the magazine is for young people, for teachers, or parents. **Entertain** them, if you can.
- Write a letter or e-mail message to the government minister for schools. (Get contact details from the Web site of the Department for Education and Skills.) The purpose of your message is to give your own views or those of your class about education for 14 to 19 year-olds – **explore** how it is now and **imagine** how it might be different. Decide how far you should try to **entertain** your reader, too.
- Write a description, **exploring** what it is like to be a pupil in your school at the present time. Make this an **entertaining** personal account for a reader in the future – say a hundred years from now – so that he or she can compare school now with what it may have become (if there still is such a thing) in a century's time. Alternatively, it could be for someone living in another country or culture now.
- Write a narrative (story) about a typical school day (or part of one), **imagining** it, as it would appear to your pencil case (if it could think) or other inanimate object. This should be an **entertaining** account of its adventures – though a lot of the time, it would perhaps not be doing anything at all...

Scenes from a school

This is an idea for some other creative or imaginative writing tasks, on the subject of school. You could write in different formats (a comic strip, a report, a photo-story and so on). You could also make them into a **dramatic** performance for **speaking and listening**, too. Base it on schools you have known or imagined, but don't let truth get in the way of a good story. Write about a page (a few hundred words or less) for each part. Make the reader laugh (or cry, or feel something). Do at least four of them, possibly more. Use your **imagination**, and try to **entertain** the reader.

- **Third-person narrative:** relate a typical scene in, say, the girls' toilets at break, a corner no teacher can see, the back of the bike sheds, smokers' corner (the girls' toilets, again?).
- **Dialogue (play script):** use this for the luxurious scene in the staff room, where teachers drink coffee (neat or laced with strong liquor), moan about horrid children, feed their faces and visit the executive toilets, with the gold-plated taps.
- **First-person narrative or monologue:** the speaker/writer can be, say, the head or deputy, an unusual teacher, the caretaker, a student, or even the school cat. "You won't believe the day I've just had..."
- **A report:** write a record of achievement for an unusual pupil – a genius, the school bully, the adult pretending to be younger so he can qualify for medical school (this really happened) and so on. (Perhaps the school cat again...)
- **A page from the school prospectus:** find ways to praise the school's doubtful charms (tell lies).
- **The school song:** a bit of a challenge, but you may be able to write one (use a well-known tune).
- **An exchange of txt messages between two friends:** you can use standard English for some linking narrative, but give the txts as they would be, with special characters and missing vowels. Remember to keep to 160 characters or fewer in each txt....
- **Ransom note:** the kidnappers offer money to anyone who will take back the extremely scary teacher or pupil whom they have kidnapped by mistake!

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Prompts for discussion

Use these headings when you are working out your ideas for a spoken presentation.

- **The subjects taught:** Are they the right ones? Is the time spent on each one right? What should we add or remove?
- **The assessment system:** Should we change this? Do we need to assess students as often as we do now? Should we/can we assess differently?
- **The school day:** Should the starting and end times change? Should there be more or fewer lessons? Should they be longer or shorter?
- **Homework:** In the 21st century, does that name even make sense? Is it just work that you do when you can? Should it be possible for students to get all the work done in a normal day, like adults, rather than spend all day at school, then have to work at night, too?
- **School attendance:** Should the rules on this change? (Do you know what they even are?) Should you be able to “attend” remotely, using communications technologies? Should school-attendance be compulsory? At what age should attendance become optional?
- **Sports, clubs and activities:** Should schools try to provide opportunities for drama, sport and other activities, or should it just stick to learning, and let people do these things in their own way and their own time? American schools don't leave sport to teachers – they have professional coaches. Is this a good thing?
- **The places where you learn:** Are classrooms a good idea, or should we use other kinds of building and rooms? Now that we have computer networks in many places, should we do some (or most or all) of our learning from places other than school (home, a library, a community centre)?
- **Rules and agreements:** Should schools have rules? If so, should the rules be general or specific? How can they be supported? What should happen when people break them?
- **Reports and records of achievement:** Are these a good idea? A bad idea? A good idea that has gone wrong? Or something else? Are there other ways to inform parents and carers of your achievement? Should the reports be written for the learner at a certain age, or always for parents and carers?
- **Consultation with parents and carers:** Is there a better way to do this than the present system? Should it be more like consultation with other professionals (doctors and lawyers)? Should pupils always be present if and when teachers talk about you to parents and carers?

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Guidance notes for teachers

The activities and the Key Stage 4 curriculum

The activities on this study guide fulfil substantial parts of the National Curriculum's programmes of study for English in **speaking and listening** and in **writing**. They have some relevance to the programme of study for **reading**. They also fulfil requirements for the use of ICT in English.

They also match closely the coursework components, and the related assessment objectives (which are taken from National Curriculum attainment targets) for the AQA's GCSE English Specification A.

The activities suggested in this guide could lead to at least one (possibly more) units of work for speaking and listening in the two contexts of **group interactions** and **individual extended contributions**. They give students opportunities to work individually, in pairs and in groups.

The follow-up activities for writing are suitable for tasks in original writing. The task could easily be extended to cover the media component (of the AQA Specification A), by relating it to any articles on the subject, as these appear in magazines, newspapers or on Web sites.

Using ICT

The task is designed for use with suitable ICT tools and resources. These could enable pupils to take part, who were not physically present in the classroom. They also extend greatly the possibilities for publishing and sharing the pupils' work as learning objects for others to use, and for exemplification of standards. (For example, in the process of inter-school assessment for speaking and listening – usually this assumes that the students' work was a live performance and is no longer available for others to evaluate. Saving it in digital form means that it can be available for an inter-school assessor.)

Use of the ICT resources would give a teacher an extra task, on top of the usual multi-tasking – and this may be an unwelcome addition. So it may be a good idea to do one or both of these things:

- Make use of ICT technicians and classroom support assistants (teachers' aides) to help with recording students' work.
- Let the pupils (where appropriate) be the technicians and manage their own recordings – they should know (or find out) how to save data files to their own storage areas on school networks.

Many of the tasks that require the use of computer software are best done out of formal lessons. The lessons are suitable for the teacher as the expert in the English curriculum to present the tasks generally, to give guidance and feedback, and to evaluate students' work – which can be an opportunity for those who wish to revise and improve their presentations. (The teacher can give a mark for the first version, which the student has already achieved. But can revise this upwards, if the student produces an improved presentation.) The English teacher does not need to be an expert user of the technology.

The requirements for this activity are quite basic – a computer (PC, Mac, thin-client device, handheld or other platform) with audio capability, a microphone, speakers or headphone and digital audio editing software. These resources should be available for teachers in English state schools now.

It is desirable for the computer to have a storage device or be connected to a network with storage space for data files. If the teacher has the use of a display device (projector onto whiteboard, large TV monitor and so on), then the task becomes more suitable for whole-class teaching, and for the pupils to learn about ICT in English.

Web sites

Digital versions of this guide will soon be available on

- <http://www.eriding.net/> and
- <http://www.universalteacher.org.uk/>

You can obtain free digital editing software from

- <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>