

Beginning to study English language

This guide is written for students who are following GCE Advanced level (AS and A2) syllabuses in English Language. This resource may also be of general interest to language students on university degree courses, trainee teachers and anyone with a general interest in language science.

Advanced level courses

Advanced levels are qualifications issued in most parts of Great Britain for students (who may be studying in the UK or elsewhere). These qualifications are widely recognized as appropriate for students at the end of a period of full-time education and as an entry qualification for first degree courses in universities.

In England and Wales there are various courses for students of literature (typically English literature, media studies, theatre studies or theatre arts) and increasingly, courses for the study of language, or mixed language and literature courses.

Any such course is at best selective and representative. It is subject to quality control checks from UK government agencies and academic institutions, but is a kind of compromise. Why? Because any subject must be compressed into a series of manageable areas of study and assessment tasks (coursework or exams, usually).

This guide is designed to support students taking one of the several courses currently available in England and Wales, but may be suitable at points for students following other courses. This is **Syllabus B** of the **Assessment and Qualifications Alliance** (AQA), which includes two former A-level examining boards, the **AEB** (Associated Examining Board) and the **NEAB** (Northern Examinations and Assessment Board).

For many years it has been possible to take Advanced Supplementary (AS) level courses – meant to be equivalent to half of an Advanced course, but relatively few students took these courses. In 2000, the then **Department for Education and Employment** of the UK (now the **Department for Education and Science** or DfES) introduced a new curriculum, in which all Advanced courses would be assessed in modules. Students can take these modules at the end of a year of study, leading to an **AS** qualification or after two years of study, leading to a full A-level (now known as **A2**) award.

Exam boards

This guide contains selected information about courses of study that are administered by exam boards in the UK. But you can find out more from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), an agency of the UK government, or directly from the exam boards.

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

29, Bolton Street, London, W1Y 7PD

www.qca.org.uk

Assessment and Qualifications Alliance

Devas Street, Manchester' M15 6EX

www.aqa.org.uk

You can find alternative courses by contacting the other examining boards in England and Wales:

- Edexcel www.edexcel.org.uk
- Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR) www.ocr.org.uk

Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC) www.wjec.co.uk

Useful resources

Primary sources

Left to your own devices, students will often reflect popular prejudices or parrot what your parents say about “bad” English. If you collect your own examples or primary sources you can see what is really happening. Try to avoid simple confusions, like the student who thought that an episode of **Only Fools and Horses** provided examples of vernacular speech in Peckham, rather than an interpretation of a TV script, written by John Sullivan. In other words this text is **useless** for studying language and society but very **useful** for learning about original writing.

Any student **can** and every student **should** keep a file of examples, ideally organized by category (language and occupation, language acquisition and so on). These should include short transcriptions of things heard on TV and radio.

The language investigation(s) that you undertake should yield very good quality language data, which can be used for areas of study to which they are relevant. If they aren't relevant, then your investigation was not well chosen to start with. It makes sense to investigate a subject that you aim to study for your final assessment.

Radio and TV broadcasts

There are various radio and occasional TV broadcasts that support the study of language directly. These include regular features such as Radio 4's **Word of Mouth**, and special programmes like Jean Aitchison's 1996 Reith lectures or **Tuning Into Children**. Find out where and when these are broadcast by using radio and TV listings, including schedules for the **Learning Zone** and the **Open University**.

Dictionaries

The most authoritative description of the English language may be that found in a good dictionary. For this course, you may wish to use more than one. The dictionary is not primarily a tool for showing standard spelling forms. The most valuable parts are probably the introduction and various explanations and appendices. The individual entries are valuable as descriptions that give information about lexis, semantics, grammar and variation. A dictionary with information from a language corpus is especially useful. Longman's **Dictionary of Contemporary English** (ISBN 0-582-45630-4) and the **Shorter Oxford** (ISBN 0-19-861134-X) are excellent, as are several encyclopedic dictionaries (which include proper nouns), for example the **Oxford English Reference Dictionary** (ISBN 0-19-860046-1). Oxford, Chambers and Longman all publish very suitable dictionaries. You can often buy an otherwise expensive dictionary (such as the **Shorter Oxford**) by joining a book club. This need not be too expensive, if you stay in the club for the minimum period, and use up your required purchases on other reference books for study, or presents for friends.

People

Be careful with this one – some “experts” may be mouthpieces for views of language that are now discredited. But people who really know things can be a great resource. You may be able to attend lectures in a nearby university, or get some guidance by e-mailing a teacher or researcher or lexicographer. If you are a teacher, you can join a mailing list or other online group, such as the Language List. Find this at: <http://www.boardman99.freeseve.co.uk>

The OED (**Oxford English Dictionary**) welcomes contact – it relies on ordinary people to record early occurrences of new forms, and give the context where they found them. You can contact the OED via its Web site, at: <http://www.oed.com/>

Journalists (especially technical writers), advertising copywriters and broadcasters, and any other people who write for a living may be able to help you and give you pointers for your own work in original and editorial writing.

Recommended books

Are there any books that are helpful or essential for students? There are many helpful books but students will probably not have time to read them all, or even to read any one in its entirety. What follows is a very small selection of books that I can recommend, with some comment.

- David Crystal **The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language**, ISBN 0-521-42443 (Cambridge, 1987) and **The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language**, ISBN 0-521-59655-6 (Cambridge, 1995)

Language science is still a relatively young academic subject. There is so far no official and internationally recognized set of theories, terms and descriptions, such as the SI (Système Internationale) provides for natural science. The nearest thing to a comprehensive and authoritative reference work is to be found, with some differences of emphasis, in Professor Crystal's two encyclopedias. They contain more than enough information on all subjects covered by the current A-level syllabuses (and much more besides).

- Howard Jackson and Peter Stockwell: **An Introduction to the Nature and Functions of Language**, ISBN 0-7487-2580-6 (Stanley Thornes, 1996)

This is a relatively short book, with clear and well-structured explanations of important areas of language theory – ideal for teachers and for students who want to revise effectively in limited time.

- George Keith and John Shuttleworth: **Living Language**, ISBN 0-340-67343-5 (Hodder, 1997)

Two A-level examiners wrote this book. It is very good at introducing subjects in a clear and non-threatening way. Explanations are not always rigorous and examples are rather arbitrary. This text is excellent for able students who will move beyond it to support their work with their own research – but teachers will know that not all students are so autonomous.

- Shirley Russell: **Grammar, Structure and Style**, ISBN 0-19-831179-6 (Oxford, 1993)

This book was written to support the former AEB's syllabus, the forerunner of the current AQA Syllabus A. It is certainly less easy for students than Keith's and Shuttleworth's book, but is more scholarly and rigorous. The explanations of grammar will be beyond many students, but for those who can follow them, these sections would justify the purchase of this book alone. Shirley Russell also gives more structured explanations of how to improve writing in practice.

- Jean Aitchison: **The Language Web**, ISBN 0-521-57475-7 (Cambridge, 1997)

This is the print version of Professor Aitchison's superb 1996 Reith Lectures, which the BBC may be persuaded one day to re-release on broadcast again. The book is suitable for continuous reading, and is a powerful antidote against popular but mistaken views of language, which Jean Aitchison exposes as "flat earth" theories. It is helpful for learning about language acquisition, lexis and semantics.

- Simon Elmes: **The Routes of English** – only available from BBC Education Production, PO Box 20, Tonbridge, TN12 6UU. For current details of prices. See

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/routesofenglish/index.shtml>.

These are very readable books, which accompany the recently broadcast series. Each comes with companion CDs. They are helpful for learning about language change and sociolinguistics (language and social contexts, for this syllabus).

- G.W. Turner: **Stylistics**, ISBN 0-14-021643-X (Pelican, 1973)

This is another readable if demanding book that introduces the concept of stylistics and is full of practical advice on how to read or interpret texts. It is helpful for understanding how language works in specific contexts and to support editorial and original writing.

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