

Establishing your foundational English curriculum in Year 7

Too often, with a revision of senior English curriculum being announced, I see schools madly alter their junior curriculum to match the language and expectations of Year 12. But I've honestly never understood why this is something schools feel compelled to do! There are six years of teaching between Year 7 and Year 12, and apart from the fact that Year 12 requirements change every 3-4 years anyway, I feel schools are doing a huge disservice to their junior students by thinking that a mini-Year 12 response is the best approach to curriculum development. From my experience, once teachers clearly understand the foundational literacy skills students required to establish success in future grades (and life generally!) then they understand how important Year 7 is as a year to lay a consistent framework of curriculum that can be consolidated and embedded rather than re-envisaged each year.

So, what are the foundational literacy skills that all students need in order to be proficient readers, writers, speakers and listeners? Table #1 summarises the key skills holistically: many could transfer across columns (*vocabulary* could sit in all three sections, as could *syntax* for example) and many could be further split into more isolated skills (there are many elements to *structures and features* or *audience and purpose* for example) but as specific areas for explicit teaching, these cover, what I would deem the critical skills a student requires.

Reading	Writing	Speaking/listening
Decoding	Encoding/Spelling	Intonation
Fluency	Punctuation	Pace/volume
Vocabulary	Handwriting/typing	Gestures/ facial expressions
Comprehension/ inference	Sentence structure/syntax	Body language
Analysis	Flow/depth/sophistication	Accountable talk
Synthesis	Brainstorming/planning	Active listening
Text structures and features	Drafting/publishing	Observational skills
Background knowledge	Revising/editing	Audience and purpose

Table #1

It is interesting to then contrast this table with the expectations of students in Year 12. Not considering the specific tasks (as these change) but rather focusing on the key expectations of senior students I propose that Year 12 students are asked to:

- critically read and analyse a variety of complex texts
- write in purposeful and insightful ways in response to specific purposes
- speak confidently to a specific audience and purpose

If you agree that these three things cover every aspect of the Year 12 curriculum, and you compare these three requirements with the skills highlighted in Table #1...do you feel that if your junior curriculum explicitly focused on teaching these skills, that by the time students reached Year 12 they would have all they needed to achieve success?

I find it backward to ask a Year 7 to write an analytical essay, and potentially fail, because they can't write an analytical paragraph...or even an analytical sentence! Just teaching the structure of an essay every year until a student reaches Year 12, doesn't ensure they will be able to write a quality essay. But if you spend the time consolidating and extending students' understanding of sentence and paragraph structure, of formal language, vocabulary and critical literacy skills - then students will have the foundational tools they need to cope with any task that is thrown at them by the time they reach senior school.

So if we can agree that teaching foundational literacy skills should be the priority and focus of junior curriculum, what does that look like? The first thing to consider is the importance of knowing what students know and what they don't, so you know what to explicitly teach and what to consolidate and extend. This requires levels of diagnostic testing; some whole class and formal, others individual and informal, but all important.

Some of the literacy areas that I prioritise assessment at the whole class level include:

Fluency: this is such an easy diagnostic test and provides huge indicators in students' decoding, and vocabulary skills as well. It takes one minute to conduct (a student is asked to read a certain text aloud for exactly one minute) and the results are easily calculated (the number of errors made is subtracted from the total number of words read). The final WCPM (words counted per minute) can be then cross-referenced with target rate norms, easily accessible on the internet (just watch for northern hemisphere grade expectations!)

Another element to consider with fluency is whether students' internal reading fluency matches their oral reading fluency. Many highly proficient readers struggle to read out loud and while it can be a worthwhile skill to develop, our main focus is that fluency is not something that is contributing to decreased comprehension skills.

The final element to consider with fluency is not simply how fast or accurately they can read, but also their prosody. Listening to students read at the very start of the year is a fabulous way to consider the impact of student expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness and pace. Expression and phrasing in particular can be key indicators of whether students are not 'reading' or understanding punctuation, connotation or inference more specifically.

Some ways to support low fluency in your cohort include:

- allowing students to read the same text multiple times
- providing opportunities for students to read aloud, in different situations and for different audiences (partnered and small group work over choral reading)
- pre-teaching difficult vocabulary prior to reading aloud

Spelling: testing spelling shouldn't be about putting a label or year indicator on students' ability, but rather, uncovering the specific gaps in their spelling understanding. A key indicator of poor spelling can be gaps in students' phonemic awareness (PA) and if there is a student who is significantly struggling with spelling, investing the time for a PA test can be life-changing!

A good diagnostic spelling test is one that highlights the key problem areas that can then be explicitly taught. Is it spelling shifts when adding suffixes for example, or classical Latin/Greek elements that aren't being employed? Is it blends or vowel clusters that are throwing them or confusing affixes (like <ence> and <ance> or <ible> and <able>)? Once you can see common errors, then you can tailor your explicit teaching to look at the spelling generalisations (rather than rules) and the etymology and morphology that supports that specific spelling.

Punctuation: while fluency is a reading test and spelling is a writing test, assessing students' ability to understand and use punctuation supports both reading and writing. As such, testing should involve indicators for how deeply students understand the purpose and impact of punctuation as well as their ability to be able to draw upon that knowledge when they are writing. Now I'm not a big fan of testing for testing's sake, or testing too much in isolation, so for punctuation, I will often assess the reading in combination with a comprehension test and the writing in combination with a handwriting or syntactic awareness test. Using one opportunity but looking at it diagnostically through different lenses is not only more time efficient in

your classroom, but is a more authentic way to see students' ability to apply their understanding in real contexts.

Syntactic awareness: similar to punctuation, I want to assess students' ability to understand the syntax of a text and be able to apply that understanding in their own writing. While I am definitely not advocating for students to sit around labelling parts of speech in random sentences, I will begin by conducting a short test of their understanding of the metalanguage around syntax (do they know the parts of speech, clauses/phrases, subject/predicate, subject/verb agreement etc) as I want to make sure that we have the same language to talk about language throughout our class. From there I will embed some syntax assessments into a comprehension test and into a writing task as well.

Comprehension: One thing to understand about diagnosing and explicitly teaching comprehension is that primary teachers teach from level 1 upwards (see figure #1) and secondary teachers teach from level 8, but have to work backwards until they discover the gaps that are preventing students from understanding increasingly complex texts. While figure #1 seems linear, we understand that it is not quite so black and white: a student can have amazing inferring skills but still struggle with vocabulary or decoding skills for example, and as I mentioned, a student with strong analytical skills but struggles with spelling may have some phonemic awareness gaps that impact their decoding of new words.

It is important to understand that any level of comprehension can (and should) be assessed:

- orally or in writing
- at a sentence, paragraph and complete text level
- using increasingly complex texts (once a level is deemed 'achieved')

Handwriting: the final element that I will assess at the whole class level in Year 7 is handwriting. While some students have print-perfect script, others are still struggling to form letters or keep their writing legible. This is important to consider because if students' working memory is being filled with handwriting stress, they have less space to concentrate on deeper level analysis or responding to the task. Our working memory can only hold from 4-7 things at any one time, and when students are struggling with spelling, handwriting and basic grammar, there is little wonder they forget basic punctuation or key elements of the learning that you know you taught exceptionally well!!

Handwriting can be assessed in conjunction with any writing task - then you can flag any student that requires scaffolding and support regarding handwriting. Mini-lessons are a great way to support these students: five minutes focusing their attention on keeping the letters the line, or the same size, spacing between words/letters etc. Give them time to focus on it without other distractions and then slowly bring in further thinking requirements.

Although these tend to be the key areas I ensure to assess early in a new year, I make sure: through reading, writing, speaking and listening tasks throughout the first term (and beyond) - that I assess ALL the foundational literacy skills we outlined in table #1. I need to know what I need to explicitly teach, what levels of scaffolding I need to put into place, where and how I can extend students further and then later in the year I need to be able to pass this information on to their subsequent English teacher who will be teaching them the following year.

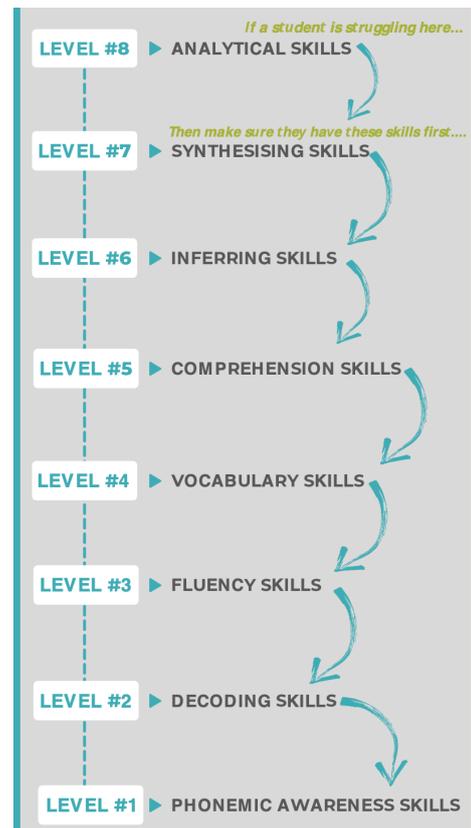


Figure #1

So now we know WHAT to teach and HOW to find the gaps in our students, we circle back to the original purpose of this discussion: **how do we embed such understanding into a consistent curriculum framework?**

Firstly: you want to look at the current curriculum you have at Year 7 and consider whether:

- it explicitly teaches the foundational literacy skills *cumulatively* and with gradual increases in sophistication and complexity.
- it embeds diagnostic testing to inform practice and identify specific gaps in cohort skills and knowledge. A good curriculum will then have the flexibility for teachers to teach to these needs rather than to a more generalised expectation of student understanding.
- it will focus on and support the *transferability* of skills: across lessons, units, years and (ultimately) subjects.

From here, then the school can consider how Year 7 data and curriculum can inform Year 8 and Year 9 curriculum each year. The transition into senior school expectations can be considered at a curriculum level through Year 9 and particularly through Year 10 curriculum and assessment.

	Term One	Term Two	Term Three	Term Four
Unit	Foundational Unit <i>(Reading and writing for communication, diagnostic testing)</i>	Text Study <i>(Responding creatively, literary features)</i>	Writing for Different Purposes <i>(podcast, article and application)</i>	Narrative analysis <i>(written review, panel discussion, analytical response)</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Getting to know you survey - What English means to you - How do we communicate? - Diagnostic testing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fluency - Comprehension - Spelling - Grammar: <i>syntax, PoS, punctuation</i> - Handwriting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What makes something 'literary' - Annotating creative passages - Difference in language features between persuasive, informative and imaginative writing - The impact of literary devices upon a text - Writing with literary devices (<i>sensory imagery, personification, onomatopoeia, simile</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Different types of texts: genres and text forms - Different purposes for writing: Informative, persuasive, comparative, reflective, procedural - Compare and contrast structures and features: podcast, article, application 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is a narrative text? - Film v Play v Novel - Opinion writing v evaluative writing - Structures and features of a review - Cinematic devices v literary devices
Unit	Issues Study <i>(Persuasive and informative texts, speaking with intent)</i>	Text Study <i>(Responding analytically, formal features)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The impact of audience and purpose on text types. - Writing for specific audiences and purposes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opinion v analytical writing - What is writing cohesion? Connecting ideas across paragraphs
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is an issue? - The two sides of the debate - Persuasive writing structures and features (speech, advertising, letter) - The language of persuasion - Informative writing structures and features (article, brochure, letter) - The language of fact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What does 'analytical' mean? - Difference between formal and informal language - Difference between spoken and written language - What is a paragraph? Different types of paragraphs for different purposes 		

Table #2

Table #2 is a basic overview of a theoretical Year 7 curriculum. What you will notice is it covers as many different types of texts, audiences and purposes, allowing a holistic and overarching approach to reading, and writing as well as speaking and listening throughout the year. Notice there are speaking tasks built into each unit authentically but purposefully! It also allows opportunity to explicitly explore the foundational skills without being too caught up in the summative task. The natural discussions around comparing different language features and structures of a text sit at the forefront in comparison to content-based information. Obviously, there will be activities around identifying character, theme, setting etc in any text

study, but that isn't the critical focus of the unit. The text is the one thing that changes from unit to unit, from year to year, so the emphasis of teaching and learning should be heavily tilted towards skill development rather than understanding and remembering certain text analysis.

Implementing curriculum and teaching changes need to be considered in line with current college expectations and priorities. But if I was working with a group of teachers I would begin by brainstorming the foundational skills with staff. Allow honest conversation around their current experience and understanding of these skills and the science around how people learn to read a write. Many experienced teachers were taught during the Whole Language approach to literacy, resulting in generations of people who don't have basic understanding of syntax, spelling and punctuation rules. It is important that staff have the professional development and support before they are asked and expected to teach such concepts. They will also need enough time to plan, implement and reflect upon each unit. You will also want to consider working with your Literacy Leader to ensure the language and approaches you are employing are reflected through the whole school language around literacy.

Overall:

- Understand the foundational skills students need to find success throughout their college journey and into the future.
- Balance the Year 7 curriculum with diagnostic testing and establish common metalanguage to ensure you know where the gaps are and everyone is speaking the same language.
- Rather than think about a top-down approach, set up a bottom-up approach where you are setting up the language, skills and knowledge students need from Year 7 and beyond Year 12.
- Create a curriculum document that embeds the explicit teaching to support staff in building consistency and effectiveness of literacy teaching in their classes and across your school.