

Transactional Writing Guide

ANIMAL KINGDOM
More Emotional Than Ever

EMOTIONAL VIOLENCE RATHER THE BLOOD, GUTS OR, WORSE, SLAPSTIC

MY TOP FIVE STEPS FOR GETTING RID OF PLASTIC

1. Do not plastic. Stop shopping there. Stop buying there. Stop eating there. Stop drinking there. Stop... Stop.
2. Do not plastic. Stop shopping there. Stop buying there. Stop eating there. Stop drinking there. Stop... Stop.
3. Do not plastic. Stop shopping there. Stop buying there. Stop eating there. Stop drinking there. Stop... Stop.
4. Do not plastic. Stop shopping there. Stop buying there. Stop eating there. Stop drinking there. Stop... Stop.
5. Do not plastic. Stop shopping there. Stop buying there. Stop eating there. Stop drinking there. Stop... Stop.

ELITE22 TRAINING
CONAN DALBY

Get Ready to Race!

Sick of riding long and steady kilometers during the late phase of training? Conan Dalby explains how best to build your strength and boost your fitness as summer approaches.

Wells (Conan Dalby)

Get ready to race

Transition your training



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Letters to the Editor

Send letters via The Journal's new Virtual Newsroom at www.journal-nr.com

passion for her fellow man. I am sure that if Ruth is elected to the council, the city will have a councilperson that will be hard working and will put the welfare of the city first.

Can't always rely on volunteers

By Elissa Carroll
Harpers Ferry:

A little more than a year ago, several residents living in the Shannonsville area of Jefferson County organized the Blue Ridge Litter Lookout (BRILLLO) group.

On April 21, in celebration of Earth Day, volunteers once again completed a litter pickup and approximately 80 bags of trash were collected.

The clean roadsides do not last very long, and once again, Mission Road is being littered with beer cans, bottles, fast-food wrappers, tires and everything else imaginable. The book by James Q. Wilson "Broken Windows" certainly applies to Mission Road. The theory being that if a window is broken and not repaired, many more windows will be broken. This theory also seems to hold true for litter. Once that first beer can or fast food wrapper is tossed, others begin tossing their litter along the roadside.

West Virginia county and state officials need to help resolve the problem rather than rely on volunteers to "manage the problem."

Community service of picking up litter needs to be added to DUI sentences (and) considering the number of alcohol containers that are collected, this only seems right. Why not use our non-violent offenders to pick up litter on a regular basis, install video cameras in highly littered areas, educate our youth, and yes, pass the bottle bill.

- How do I aim for my target grade?
- What are the features of each text type?
- How do I interpret the tasks?
- What do good texts look like?

Transactional Writing

Transactional writing means texts which aim to communicate ideas, persuade or advise. They are real-life texts which many people use daily, perhaps as part of their job. In the GCSE English Language exam, transactional texts are:

- Letters
- Talks
- Guides
- Articles
- Reviews
- Reports

This guide (see, transactional texts are everywhere!) will aim to explain the key features of each of these texts as well as make clear exactly what the examiners are looking for to award different grades. It will also show you how to interpret details in task descriptions so that you don't risk missing out all-important details.

Layout Features

Most of these texts are set out in a similar way. Articles, reviews and guides should have a clear heading and may use subheadings. You must never try to use columns or include pictures or diagrams. If you were writing these texts as part of your job, you'd just write the words and someone else would sort out the layout.

Letters do have strict layout features and you must get this right: your address top right; the date below that; the recipient's address below and on the left; Dear... below that; your signoff at the end (see more on that on the letters page).

Reports should begin with the heading: '*A report to _____ about _____*' and you put your name at the bottom - but don't use 'yours sincerely' because it isn't a letter. You should introduce yourself and say what research you did then present your findings. It's best to use a heading for each different issue or finding.

What skills are the examiners looking for?

Grades	Key Features
7-9	<p>Indistinguishable from a real-life text</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wide range of varied points made which are realistic at all times • Small details included (e.g. good thing to eat from the menu at a restaurant) • Developed and convincing reasons/explanations for each point • Audience's needs fully met, including potential range of wide audience • No noticeable SPaG errors
5-6	<p>Convincing text</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A range of points is made (5?) and all ideas are realistic • Convincing reasons/explanations follow each point • Audience specifically referred to and range clear (e.g. separating individuals of 'family' for day out) • SPaG errors are rare
4	<p>Meets needs of task</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose is met • Key format needs met • Some range of points made and mostly realistic • Most points are explained • Points made are mostly relevant for the given audience • SPaG errors don't detract from meaning at all
3	<p>Shows some understanding of needs of task</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempts made to meet purpose • Beginning to meet format needs • Limited range of points and may be sensational or based on stereotypes (e.g. closing youth centre leads to crime spree) • Limited explanation/support of points • Some points are chosen for given audience • SPaG errors don't usually detract from meaning
1-2	<p>Lack of understanding of needs of task/serious errors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • points may be hard to follow • may use wrong format or misinterpret audience/purpose • unclear purpose • no links to audience • SPaG errors make it hard to work out meaning

Letters

Letters can be **formal** or **informal**.

Formal letters tend to be to newspapers, schools, councils or businesses.

Informal letters will be for friends or family members.

Make sure you know how to set out a letter (see the layouts page). The examiners are very strict about this so learn it well! This is also a life skill as most job applications require letters and those working in recruitment often reject candidates who they feel haven't bothered to properly set out a letter.

Top Tips

- You only need to write 'my address' and 'their address' - the full address isn't needed (this saves time and avoids SPaG errors)
- Although you only really need the recipient's address in a formal letter, you won't lose marks if you include it in an informal one. If you're not sure whether you need it, add it anyway to be on the safe side.
- 'Yours faithfully' is used when you haven't addressed the letter to a specific person (for example, you used 'editor'); 'yours sincerely' is used when you have used a name. If you can't remember, just always make up a name and use 'sincerely' – but learn how to spell it! If it were real life, you could always have Googled the name of the shop manager or newspaper editor. You don't need this signoff for an informal letter. 'Love' or 'from' will do, depending on the recipient.

Formal letters

- You need to think about your purpose carefully. No one ever wrote to a newspaper or company unless they wanted something. Perhaps you want a head teacher to change a rule or readers of a local paper to support your petition.
 - If writing a letter to a local newspaper, remember that the audience is the readers.
- Openings need to make clear why you are writing. For a newspaper, did you read an article which made you angry? Have you just heard of a local issue you want to share?

Informal letters

- The purpose will usually be to share a view or persuade.
- You should start with a friendly opening. Explain why you're writing, but also ask how your friend or family member is.
 - Show a clear relationship by remembering anecdotes. *'Remember when we were in Year 7 and...?'*
- Include light-hearted humour.
- Don't forget: this is actually still a letter in an English exam. Slang, abbreviations and anything else non-standard is not going to gain you marks!

Talks

A talk is the same thing as a speech, but the examiners always use the word 'talk' so I'm going to use it too.

Talks tend to be to your year group but they can also be for a wider audience, such as people in your local area.

For a talk, you just write the words you'd say. Don't use speech marks and don't include features like stage directions or reminders to pause. The examiners just don't want that.

You also can't do things like underline words for emphasis or use block capitals for shouting. Real speech writers, such as those who write politicians' speeches, just do the words. The speaker decides how they read it out.

Openings

You could choose to bore your audience by beginning with something like, *'Hello. My name is Joe and I'm here today to talk to you about...'* A much better option would be to grab their attention. A question is okay but how about a shocking statistic or controversial opinion? *'Good morning. Did you know that you've probably done seven things to destroy the planet since you got out of bed?'* Much better, right?

Save the introductions until you've got them listening.



Keep them hooked

We all know how easy it is to drift off when you're being talked to in a big group (except in English lessons, obviously). To keep your audience engaged, you can directly address them, ask them rhetorical questions or keep dropping in interesting or shocking details and facts.

Endings

Like with any transactional task, the idea is that it's something for real life. You wouldn't do a talk to a big crowd of people for fun - unless you were a bit unusual. Think about what you want to encourage them to do after your amazing talk has convinced them that you're right and end with that. *'Now you know how important this issue is, please go out there and make a difference! Pick up some litter; switch off those unused lights; choose a plastic-free lunch!'* is a lot better than, *'thank you for listening.'*

Guides

Guides used to be called 'leaflets' on the old foundation paper. Examiners don't tend to use that term anymore because it encouraged people to write with bullet points and to waste time using columns and adding pictures. Headings are all you need in terms of layout.

Essentially, a guide is just giving information or advice. You're writing as if you're an expert – so you might need to make up some facts and details, but that's okay – and as if you want to share your expertise. You might be giving your audience information on a great destination for a day out or advising them on how to keep fit.

Audience

Your audience don't know much about your topic, otherwise they wouldn't read your guide. This means you need to include loads of specific facts and details. This is also a great text type to show off how well you can address a wide audience, which is a 5-6 skill.

Separate out possible audiences and give them their own sections, naming them specifically.

*Never tried running before? Well, here's my advice...
Looking for a way to entertain the toddlers? Look no further...*



Specific Details

This is another skill that's high up in the mark scheme. If you're lucky, you'll get asked to write about something you know a lot about and can use your own knowledge. If not, don't panic. You're only being tested on what you know about being a good writer so you can make up details to suit your needs – no examiner will mark you down if you've said the average person wastes £2000 of food each year when the figure is really only £200.

Go into as many layers of detail as you can. Don't say, '*Morecambe's new theme park has a great rollercoaster.*' Tell us that it's called 'Gargantuan', that it goes over a hundred miles per hour, rises as high as a hundred and fifty metres and that it was named as the greatest ride ever by 'Theme Park Fan' magazine in 2019!

Articles

Articles are almost always for magazines, but they'd be no different for a website. The examiners assume every school has a school magazine and they often use that as the text's type.

As with guides, headings are the only layout feature you need.

Articles can have a really wide variety of purposes, but what you write isn't a world away from a talk. Usually, you're giving information and aiming to persuade or advise in a light-hearted way. The examiners love using the term 'lively' and that just means not too serious and with a bit of humour and fun.

Audience

Rather like a guide, your audience is likely to be very wide for this text so think of the different readers and their needs and address them specifically.

Remember that a school magazine would be read by teachers and parents as well as students. (It would also be checked by teachers first so don't write anything which criticises the school or names teachers – in the real world it wouldn't get printed and examiners want real-life texts.)

This audience has chosen to read your article so you can assume they'd be interested in the topic already, but they might not know much about it.



Tone

The tone won't be totally serious. Remember that people read articles to be entertained, as well as to learn something or get advice. This means you want to keep them hooked. You can do that with humour, direct address and interesting facts.

Topics

As a rule, the topic of an article tends to be related to things the examiners feel are teenage issues. This can mean technology, school, parents, friendship, exam stress and more. This isn't a guarantee but it's what we usually expect for an article.

Magazines will usually publish things which are current issues (but remember the exam questions are written a year or so before you sit in the exam hall). Still, it can help to keep an eye on things coming up in the news – this also means reading articles and that's a good way to prepare for writing them.

Reviews

What you can be asked to review can vary on past papers. However, books and films always come up so you should plan one of those. Yes, this is the one transactional type which you can have planned in advance!

Reviews are just a type of article, so many of the details on the previous page apply here, too.

Details

Yes, I've said how important specific details are a lot already but they're absolutely crucial for a review. If it's a film, we need to know the genre, how long it is, who it's suitable for, which actors are in it and what it's about – without spoilers, of course. For a book, we need to know genre and basic plot as well as length and style of writing.

Again, you can make these up but you shouldn't invent a whole book or film because it's just adding to your workload in the exam. No one's marking you down if you get an actor's name wrong or say a book is the second in a series when it's really the third.



Positive or negative?

Personally, I always think a bad review is more fun to write. You can get a lot of humour in and make it genuinely engaging. That said, you could write a fully positive review and really push your enthusiasm for something you love. Most reviews, though, should find something to show both sides of the opinion. If you find that hard, just think of a type of person who wouldn't appreciate your favourite film or who might love that book you hated.

Explanations

No review will be successful if you don't fully explain what you liked or disliked about the book or film you've chosen. We don't all like the same things and your audience need to know whether they're likely to share your opinions.

'Jason Statham totally ruined this film,' doesn't tell us whether that's because his acting was awful, which might ruin it for everyone, or whether you just don't like him as an actor. Instead, tell us, *'Jason Statham totally ruined this film because he can't play a sensitive and thoughtful character. We're used to seeing him as a tough guy so when he tries to be sweet and tender it just seems funny.'*

Simple Ideas

Some people use their Literature set text, but that can get a bit boring as the examiner sees a lot of them. Easy review ideas include film remakes or adaptations from books. You can compare the original to the new version and also don't need to worry as much about spoilers.

Reports

A report is written as if you have researched an issue. You set out what you found to whoever commissioned the report and you might give a recommendation at the end.

Like letters, reports have quite a specific layout so check the guide so you know what it should look like on the page. They're often school-based so might ask you to give a report on the range of subjects available at GCSE, the state of the sports facilities or the quality of canteen food.

Audience

A report's audience is really specific. Often, it's a school head, principal or governors. It could be a local council or a business.

Whoever it is, the audience is someone who wants to know the specifics of your research. They want to make changes or improvements and you're there to give them a clear picture of the issues.

Writer

Reports aren't written by random people. If it's based on a school topic, you should pretend to be the head boy or girl or member of the school council. If it's outside school, just ask yourself who would be involved in this issue and be trusted to research and present their findings.

Specific details

Yes, I'm back on this topic! Details are needed in a report because you're giving the audience a clear idea of the issues. You need to make it look as though you have done real research but – and you should already know this by now – you should make the details up to fit your point.

You also need to say where you got these details. Don't say things like, *'78% of students felt that they had a wide range of choices when taking their opinions,'* because that figure sounds like it's plucked out the air. Instead, add something like, *'the senior student team surveyed a range of students in years 9, 10 and 11 and found that...'*

A word of warning on survey results: some people massively overuse them and don't include other details. This costs marks because you're not using a range of techniques. As well as survey results, for this example, you could have quotes from students and teachers, you could compare the number of subjects offered at schools in the local area and you could look at which subjects universities counted towards entry requirements.

Formality

A report is the most formal text type out there. Use your most respectful tone and keep emotion out of it. You're presenting the facts of the matter to someone in a position of power.



How to interpret the tasks

The examiners always say they're not trying to catch people out, but you wouldn't know it from looking at some of the transactional writing tasks. They can have lots of little details which are easy to miss when you're in the middle of an exam and worrying about timing.

No matter how keen you are to get writing, you **must** stop and read carefully. Highlight key question words and double-check that you haven't missed a little detail. It's really sad, but good writers can score zero for AO5. Look at the examples below to see what I mean.

Your local council plans to save money by closing a local swimming pool. Write a letter to the local newspaper giving your views on this idea.

This is a really common type of question to get wrong. People tend to write as if they're writing to the council, not a newspaper. Phrases like, *'you can't do this to residents of Lancaster!'* suggest that the local paper is to blame. In addition to that, the actual readers of these letters are the newspaper readers, so just other local residents.

Write a lively article with the heading: Being a Teenager in the 21st Century.

This past question caught a lot of people out because they wrote about the stress of sitting exams, issues with bullying, friendship and relationships. All of those things were problems for teenagers in the previous century, too. Read the whole question carefully, and you'd realise that the examiners are looking for details of things which have only existed for the last couple of decades. Issues around social media, technology, new career paths and the media's perception of 'millennials' would all work well here.

A lot of people struggle to exercise enough in their day to day lives. Write a guide explaining ways they can keep fit and healthy.

'Go for a run after work. Join a local football team; go to the nearby gym!' These might all seem sensible ideas, until you look more closely at the question. Look at the first part – this guide is for people who are struggling to exercise. These people would be unlikely to suddenly start playing sports. Instead, think of simple, everyday ways to stay active. You could suggest using a Fitbit to check daily step counts, walking to work instead of driving, using stairs instead of lifts or escalators.

A guidebook is looking for suggestions of good days out for all the family. You decide to write in about a place you know well.

When this question was on the exam, a significant number of people wrote about holidays in caravan parks or visits to Barcelona. The question, however, asks for suggestions for a day out. Anything about a holiday destination would score barely any marks. Instead, think of cities or towns in the UK with a lot to offer. Another issue here is the mention of 'all the family'. If you just mentioned a theme park, you wouldn't have the correct audience.

Exemplar text: formal letter

My address

Their address

3rd April 2019

Dear Ms Peel, editor of Lancaster Guardian,

As a child growing up in Lancaster, one of my great pleasures was exploring the wonderful green spaces of the city. I was lucky, I now know, to grow up in a place which had the best of both worlds: the amenities of a small city alongside fields, woods and riverbank. Imagine my horror, then, when I learned that yet another area of natural beauty was to be flattened to make way for yet more housing.

For readers not yet aware of this travesty, you should know that the council have sold off Freeman's Wood, which stands beside the river, and the plan is for this land to be built upon. Now, I well know the desperate need for homes in this country, but there are suitable and unsuitable places. Building here will affect wildlife, local people and the environment as a whole.

I was walking alongside the wood just last summer and was astonished to round a corner and come face-to-face with a deer. A beautiful and wild creature just a metre away from me! How many people live in a city and experience that? The deer, I learned, reside in the wood. If it was destroyed, where would these elegant and rare creatures go? There is literally no space nearby besides housing estates and farmland so they would have no home and it would be our fault for allowing this disgraceful plan to go ahead. Aside from deer, there are foxes, badgers, rodents and an uncountable range of bird species which make their homes in these woods. We've forced them there by building everywhere else. I urge readers to stand up and not to allow them to lose their final sanctuary.

Also important are the people of Lancaster. I can't be the only one who adores this place because it has a mix of countryside and city on the doorstep. Perhaps readers will correct me, but isn't this what makes Lancaster a unique city? The woods provide a valuable place for children to explore and learn about nature, for them to play and exercise – essentially, time away from those screens! Take the woods and you take a vital experience from our children's lives.

Let's imagine readers still think houses are more important than wildlife or children. What about the damaging impact of building sites? There's already two huge estates near Freeman's Wood; thousands live there. How will they feel if there are trucks and equipment going by all day long? How will they feel if the noise of building lasts from morning until night? How will they feel if the dust and emissions drift over their homes for years?

I say, we must stand up for our woodland. We must stand up for nature, for children and for local residents. I urge all readers of this newspaper to contact the local council and to protest against this outrageously damaging plan.

Yours sincerely,

Margaret Allwood

Exemplar text: informal letter

My address

Wednesday 27th March 2019

Dear Jake,

I can't believe I'm writing this letter to you. How can we be old enough to think about careers? I still feel like we should be trying to pass notes in Miss Abbot's class back in Year 7. Do you remember when you got caught and cried because it was your first detention?

Anyway, let me get to the point. I saw your Facebook status about wanting to join the army and thought I'd better get in touch. I didn't want to just comment because this is quite an important thing so I'm putting my thoughts into this letter. At first I was a bit shocked, to be honest. I mean, you're doing something that could get you killed and I'm getting scared about going to college and having to get two busses. Now I've had a think about it I actually think this could be the best thing you've ever decided. You've always been the most mature of my friends and you've always got bored really easily. I know that led to you getting into trouble every now and then but I know you and I know you're not a bad person. Some teachers might say you don't take things seriously but I've seen what you're like when you really care about something.

Physical fitness certainly wouldn't be a problem for you. I've never known someone enjoy keeping strong, fit and active like you. I'm sure there's a difference between going for a run before school and what you'll need to do in the army but I've never seen you give up on a challenge. I will never forget that time Mr Morris told you he didn't think you had the upper body strength for shot putt. I can't see anyone beating the distance you got in our Year 10 sports day!

Be honest, Jake, you've never liked being told what to do, but maybe things will be different in the army. I know you used to get annoyed by teachers moaning about your shirt and tie being a mess but I think if you've made the choice to wear a uniform you'll treat it with real pride. I'd better get finished because I know reading isn't something you enjoy, but I wanted to let you know how I felt and you know I'm rubbish at saying things like this. Good luck at the interview and make sure you let me know how you get on.

See you soon,

James

Exemplar text: talk

I'm here today to talk to you about the curse of the mobile phone.

I know, I know, you're all thinking I must be mad to think they're a bad thing. You might even think I'm a hypocrite because you've seen me using my phone enough times. Well, if you listen to what I have to say then maybe you'll understand where I'm coming from.

As a sixteen-year old, I can't remember life before mobile phones. My mum goes on about how they didn't have anything like that when they were teenagers but, for me, mobile phones are part of life. I got my first phone when I started high school but I was definitely not the first of my friends to have one. That gets me onto my first point, I suppose.

Nowadays I see little kids walking home from primary school with the latest iPhone. The latest iPhone costs about six hundred pounds! I don't think I owned anything that cost a tenth of that amount when I was five or six. There's no way my parents would have trusted me. People claim it's less safe today than it was ten years ago but I still have to wonder why they need a phone at that age. They get walked to and from school by parents and they're not allowed out on their own so who do they need to phone? But what about us teenagers? Of course, we really do need to be able to get in touch with home when we're out. Well I would ask you, do we really? To be honest, there are times when I wish I didn't have my phone because my mum can call me to ask me stupid things when I'm out with my friends and I can't ever be late home or she's pestering me to find out where I am. If I switch my phone off she goes mad and claims she thought I'd been murdered!

Mobile phones can do all sorts of other things, though. In our pockets we have a little device which lets us surf the internet, take and send pictures to each other in seconds and fill up boring moments. However, I'm not sure these are good things either. It's too easy to be able to snap a photo of someone and send it on to others and what one person finds funny, another might think was hurtful. Cyberbullying goes beyond texting nasty messages and now we all have mobile phones we can have an embarrassing photo passed round school, or even the world, in minutes. We've all sent a text or email and then wished we hadn't but there's no undo button when we pass something on using our phones.

So, what I'm saying overall is that I think we should see our mobile phones as a bit of a curse. I'm not saying we should all throw them in the bin – I'm certainly holding onto mine – but perhaps we could think about whether we really need to be using them as much as we do. I think we also need to think more carefully about what we're using them for. Mobile phones make things really easy but maybe they make bad things easy as well as good things.

Thank you for listening and I hope I've given you something to think about. Maybe you'll think a little bit more about how attached you are to that little device of yours.

Exemplar text: guide

Lancaster: The City For Everyone

Nestled by the stunning Morecambe Bay coastline and just a short journey from Manchester and The Lake District, Lancaster could be described as a 'hidden gem' if not for the fact it's so easy to find so obviously a perfect destination for all.

Allow me to take you on a one-day tour.

Arriving by car is easy as the city is linked to the M6 and has ample parking. If you had taken the train, you'd have found direct links from London, Manchester and Edinburgh and the station is right by the iconic castle.

As it's such a lovely day – Lancaster benefits from a mild climate being by the coast – you might decide to begin with a walk in Williamson Park. Here you find beautiful woodland walks, wildlife-watching areas and the unique and historic Ashton Memorial. Feeling hungry? The park cafe offers a wide range of snacks and light meals and it's even dog-friendly, just in case you brought Fido along. Kids will love the mini-beast cave and butterfly house and can even enjoy meeting our very own meerkats!

Heading into the city centre, you might be looking for a post-lunch shopping spree. Despite being a small city, you find a wide range of big-name shops as well as unique boutiques. Lancaster, you discover, has the best of both worlds.

The afternoon is wearing on and you fancy something a bit different. Lancaster has it! I would recommend the recently-opened Escape Rooms where the whole family can compete to be the first to solve the puzzles and escape from a choice of three themed rooms.

By evening, I hope you are ready for a dizzying range of bars and restaurants. Lancaster's chefs can offer everything from Mediterranean cuisine to gourmet burgers. Satisfied, you head out to experience the city's incredible nightlife. Lancaster is famous for its culture so be ready to see live bands, stand-up comedy and poetry readings. The world-renowned Dukes Theatre will certainly have a film and a play to tempt you.

I wouldn't now blame you for wanting to stay and experience more of what Lancaster has to offer – and there is much more. From budget bed-and-breakfasts to luxurious hotels, you're spoiled for choice if you choose to recharge and head out tomorrow to do it all again.

Exemplar text: article

In my day we only had 180 emojis!

Look, I know it sounds crazy but there will come a time when we utter the words: 'in my day...' Every generation does it and we'll be no different. What will we talk about, though? What will we tell the younger generation about life as teenagers at the start of the 21st century?

Technology is a huge part of our lives today and one of those things our parents and teachers tell us they never had. If they wanted to find something out, they had to go to a library and look it up or they had to use their brains to figure it out themselves – or so they say. We're used to having the world a couple of finger taps away and I think it's incredible. The only problem is, technology can mean we are drowning in a sea of information all the time. I had to find out something about photosynthesis for homework and Google came back with three million results! How can I possibly know which ones are the most useful? At least when our parents looked it up in a book they probably just had one page to read.

It's not all bad, though. Technology makes our lives safer and easier. I literally can't imagine how people got around before smartphones. I can find a train timetable, book a ticket and seat and plan my route from the station all using the little device in my pocket. If I get lost somewhere, one tap of a screen pinpoints my location through the magic of satellites, or at least I think that's how it works. What will they have in the future? I suppose phones will just teleport our own kids to where they want to be and we'll be left there saying 'in my day we had to walk to wherever our phones told us to go!'

The older generation complain that our attention spans are too short because we're so used to fast information and multitasking. I admit, when I sit and do my homework I also have Facebook open, several website tabs and my phone will be sending me Snapchat messages every few minutes. That doesn't mean I can't focus on something when I need to, though.

I don't see how information can get any faster in the future unless there's a way to just upload things directly to brains. What happens then if you've tapped the wrong button? Could you end up speaking French when you just wanted to learn how to play the guitar?

In all, I know we're incredibly lucky to have all the opportunities and information that we have today. I know our parents didn't have the video games, social networks or access to information that we have, but they had things their parents didn't have as well. And our own children will have things we can't even dream of, which will have us claiming everything was simpler back in our day. I think it's just natural.

Exemplar text: review

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* seems an odd book to study in an English classroom in the twenty-first century but it's been a staple on the curriculum for decades now. It's not your typical piece of English literature, focusing on two world-weary farm workers in 1920s America, but there is something about it which just grabs you and won't let go.

As I've said, the plot involves farm workers in California in the 20s. If you've ever studied History, you'd know that's when America suffered The Depression. Our heroes, if you can call them that, are Lennie and George. Lennie is a child-like man, clearly incapable of looking after himself or of fully understanding situations. George, for reasons which are explained in the book, looks after his simple friend. The world they face is harsh, cruel and completely lacking in hope. I did say it was during The Depression, right?

The title comes from an old poem where we're told that the best laid plans of mice and men often go wrong. And boy, do they go wrong quickly. Lennie is completely incapable of understanding the consequences of his actions and George is left desperately trying to save his friend. Understanding why he'd do that is one of the things that makes this book such a joy, but also so very sad.

Steinbeck writes very simply and one reason this book has been taught for so long is that anyone can pick it up and understand it. It's one of those books with a simple but gripping storyline which can also offer you so much more if you take the time to read between the lines. It is as relevant to today's world as it was to the world in which it is set. The basic themes of friendship, dreams and loneliness will never cease to matter, unfortunately.

It's the characters who make this book. Lennie is the kind of person who would drive you mad in real life but his heart is absolutely in the right place. He does wrong but he doesn't know he's doing it. You can't help but want to rip him from the pages, give him a hug and tell him it'll be alright. George seems less likeable but his loyalty to his friend and his selflessness at the end – don't worry, I'm not giving out spoilers – make him equally real and likeable. Added to these is a mismatched group of workers who have nobody and expect nothing in life, but that doesn't make them dull.

Of Mice and Men has one of the things some novels lack: a truly absorbing and wonderful story. If anyone failed to be gripped as events unfold then I'd be checking for a heartbeat.

Exemplar text: report

A report to the governors into work experience in Year 10.

This report has been commissioned by the governors to identify the best way to offer work experience at Ripley St Thomas. Three options were put forward by the senior student team: a Friday afternoon placement, Easter holiday placement and two-week placement in the summer term, after exams.

On the surface, pupils being on a regular placement each Friday might appear to be an attractive option as it would give pupils a regular and realistic experience of work. However, this would be the option which would result in the largest loss of learning. Pupils would miss a total of 190 hours of lessons, equal to an entire option subject. It is, therefore, clear that the choice is not a viable one as the impact on pupils would be to narrow their career choices by removing a GCSE option. We believe this would cancel out the benefit of the work experience programme.

The next decision which was investigated was to use the Easter holidays for the placement. There were found to be many benefits to this idea. Most importantly, it would not take up any school time and, therefore, pupils would not be missing any work from lessons. Another benefit would be that it might teach pupils that school holidays are not a part of most working lives as the government states that employers need to only offer 28 days of holiday per year. However, these benefits would also be why the plan would be unpopular. Pupils are likely to be unhappy to lose their holiday time and it could cause them to be unfocused in their placements. Some might be tempted to not attend and they would miss out. This option could also make the work experience seem like a negative thing or even a punishment. The new GCSE exams mean that pupils are often given a great deal of revision work in holidays - we found that all the core subjects set Easter homework this year - and pupils may find it difficult to do this as well as attending work placements.

Running the placement in the final two weeks of the summer term was the final option proposed. When the senior student team surveyed pupils, this came out as the most popular option. Whilst it would mean some loss of school time, it would only account for 50 hours, so much less than the Friday placement plan. In addition, many pupils felt that the final weeks were often not the most productive in school, with a lot of lessons being based around videos or project work. Year 10 would have finished their summer exams just before this time so it seems unlikely they would do very much work in school.

After careful consideration, we feel that the summer placement would cause the least disruption to pupils' education whilst also being popular. Although there are no options without any problems, the senior team felt that this was the most sensible.

Catherine McCaw
Head Girl