



The Times Guide to English

Peter Inson's guest post

So often it is fiction that is recommended as reading material; for some boys in particular, non-fiction can be a more attractive source. For me it was Scouting for Boys, The Farmer's Weekly and Trains Illustrated. To my students I have recommended Neville Shute's autobiography, Slide Rule; not only is there an explanation of the construction of an airship, but also the political and economic history surrounding the first Labour government's involvement in the R100 and R101 project. Yes, they will stare at pictures and diagrams, but understanding such things is important, so important that we expect engineers, like Neville Shute, to write effectively about them. Sports and fashion sections, for example can also attract interest but, I would suggest, early weaning from life style and celebrity pieces will help to avoid self-limiting addiction.

It helps parents to know what makes good reading material. Look for the length and complexity of sentences, used where the subject requires complexity. Avoid writing formed mainly with monosyllabic words: praise rather than flatter, paint rather than decorate. Be aware that to read The Sun a reading age of about eight will do whereas for The Times something over seventeen is required.

Three of my favourites make splendid teaching texts. They include The Wind in the Willows and Lord of the Flies. Every English teacher should try starting Great Expectations by telling the class to make themselves really comfortable – encourage them to put their heads down on the desk. Read quietly until Magwitch transfixes Pip with, "Hold your noise," which should be bellowed forth as loudly as possible. The students will sit up, shocked and then amused that you have played such a game with them, and they will continue to listen to you.

So, why is good English important?

It is far more than a school subject; it is the means of showing and communicating our understanding of all sorts of things, in other school subjects and elsewhere.

Summary skills enable us to extract the main points from a piece of writing and convey them quickly and easily to a large number of people and this can be of great economic importance – in a large organisation for example.

Studying the construction of written material will help us to order and express our ideas more effectively, not only when we write, but when we speak.

Writing and speaking more clearly makes it easier for others to understand us. If we cannot be bothered to speak and write clearly, why should others take any notice? Good English is part of good manners.

Reading your own work aloud is an important way of checking what you have written. When we read our work silently we can “read over” our errors because we know what we intended to write. Young people must overcome childish embarrassment and read their work aloud.

In class my teenage students had a weekly period of compulsory reading. They read in silence and could only reject something, and choose an alternative, once they had read ten pages. This satisfied their sense that they were entitled to choose what to do with their time, and kept them usefully and cheerfully engaged. Short stories are invaluable: Graham Greene’s *The Case for the Defence* and *The Destroyers*, and Roald Dahl’s anthology, *Tales of the Unexpected* stand out.

Peter Inson has been a headmaster and an examiner for O and A levels and the IB. His novel, “dunno” tells the story of a disaffected teenager’s efforts to grow up and won an Arts Council award. Heinemann published his IGCSE English Language text book which is still selling.