

# HOW TO TEACH




*Novels, non-fiction and their artful navigation*

# English

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EDITED BY PHIL BEADLE

Independent  
thinking press 

First published by  
Independent Thinking Press  
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK  
www.independentthinkingpress.com

and

Independent Thinking Press  
PO Box 2223, Williston, VT 05495, USA  
www.crownhousepublishing.com

Independent Thinking Press is an imprint of Crown House Publishing Ltd.

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First published 2019.

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British Library of Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978-178135312-7  
Mobi ISBN 978-178135330-1  
ePub ISBN 978-178135331-8  
ePDF ISBN 978-178135332-5

LCCN 2019932889

Printed and bound in the UK by  
TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

# FOREWORD BY PHIL BEADLE

English teaching can sometimes, and sadly, be the province of the unthinking trope: the thing the majority does that is both quite silly and very rubbish. Particular bug-bears of mine are students being taught stock phrases that stack up like meaningless tautologies, making exam answers comprehensibly silly. Writing 'This clearly shows' about poetry (it clearly doesn't) and scribing parades of de-contextualised conjunctive adverbs as discourse markers (furthermore nothing, moreover less) being only the ones that have got my goat this week.

It is a shame that an honourable profession filled with teaching's finest accepts this waffle as being in any way deserving of anything other than lots of red pen. And such practices lead one into the direction of a search for an answer. What does anything mean? Who am I to trust here? Where is the voice of seasoned reason?

Chris Curtis entered the periphery of his editor's sight perhaps eight or nine years ago with a blog called *Learning from My Mistakes*. This title encapsulated, for me, a trustworthiness and humility that has become the alkaline to the acidity of my own arrogance. Chris does not delude himself into regarding himself as any form of pale English teaching deity. He's just a bloke (though a lovely one). But he's a bloke who's been teaching English for quite a long time, who does so to the best of his abilities and who is always on the lookout for new ways of saying things.

The sum total of that experience is included in this book. The beauty of having the thoughts of an experienced head of English for younger teachers is that Chris has thought quite deeply about some of the tropes of our profession; he has fallen down many of the same holes, made all the same mistakes, screwed up in the same manner as you, dear reader. The process of his path towards something significantly greater than competence has been taken with soft steps and, through this manner of being, Chris located a hunger in his gentility and has become that rarest of things in English teaching: an original voice worth listening to.

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Chris has ideas that you can use. They are good. They are interesting. They are clever. Sometimes, they are funny. He is beholden to no one other than his students and his colleagues, in an unheralded school in an unheralded part of the country, who he 'clearly shows' that he dearly adores.

And the beauty of those ideas is that they don't take a great deal of setting up. Chris is a busy head of English; he hasn't got time for the overly wieldy. Also, you can use those ideas without having to buy into some grand ideology. I've used some of them this year in a school near the bottom of the league tables and even the recalcitrant and reckless gain enlightenment as a result. Chris Curtis has learned, and continues to learn, from making daily mistakes. Now learn from him and go and make different ones.

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# INTRODUCTION

When my editor and I discussed this book, I told him that I wanted to write about a practical and honest approach to teaching English. I am not a guru nor Jedi master. Nor am I one of those overpaid CPD consultants, sporting a shiny suit and spouting inspirational quotes. I am a bog-standard teacher who finds suits horribly constricting, and, on any given Tuesday, probably have mayonnaise down my tie. In terms of building my educational camp, I am less bothered about the paint and soft furnishings than I am about the bricks and mortar.

I am writing this as a teacher who has thought about his practice, and about how it can be improved to help the students learn as well as they might. This book is therefore nothing more (and nothing less) than a collection of practical approaches you can use in your classroom. I have used them all in mine and, in this book, I discuss the thinking behind them and how they could be adapted. Plus, they are quick and easy and you don't need to invest a whole weekend in preparation. You'll not need to spend the school's budget to fund them, and you'll not have to wade through numerous pages of waffle to find just one idea.

I have explored many ideas and thoughts in this book. Some you might agree with. Some you might not. However, I am always happy to discuss what works, what doesn't and why. Collectively, teachers should be asking these questions, and we should explore the impact of our decisions, considering whether commonly used practices are as effective as we think. That was my intention when I started writing a blog back in 2012. It was entitled *Learning from My Mistakes*, and my thinking was, why should an NQT have to make the same mistakes that I have?

For I have made mistakes in the classroom, and I hold my hands up to that. I don't mean simple errors like getting a student's name wrong or forgetting to use the 'correct' colour pen for marking. I mean mistakes like teaching a novel without thinking about the assessment from the start. I've taught texts that were too easy and some that were *possibly* too hard. We don't acknowledge the mistakes we make in teaching

often enough. There's a sense of pride in the profession: a male (or female) bravado that stops us fessing up to ourselves.

Why do NQTs make mistakes that more experienced teachers (forgetting that we too started from that point) might think are glaringly obvious? It's because we don't discuss them enough. Mistakes are seen as weaknesses, not as opportunities to learn something. If we don't explore them, how can we expect students to learn from theirs? What do we want our students to learn? How to talk about the mistakes made and find possible solutions to the problem. That's what I hope this book, and my blog, does. I am not writing this as a highly paid literacy consultant, from a gold chair perched on the lifeless bodies of former colleagues. I am writing this as a teacher who is going back into the classroom tomorrow. That is unless you are reading this during the holidays, then I will be back in at the start of term, probably with mayonnaise down my front.

So, what have I learned from my mistakes that I would pass on for others to avoid?

## 1. DON'T SPEND TOO MUCH TIME ON RESOURCES

When teaching *The Merchant of Venice* several years ago, I spent a good few hours making fifteen sets of three envelopes look just like the caskets that Portia's suitors have to open. The effect was spoilt in the sixty seconds it took me to hand them out. One student opened theirs and revealed to the class what was in them.

Put simply, the time spent on a resource has got to be proportional to the use you will get out of it. I have resources that I use again and again, such as a sheet listing opening sentences from various novels. I use this with Years 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11. If you want to spend time on resources – which can be fun in a strange way – make sure that you will get the due returns on them. A resource that can be used for all or most classes is better than a one-off for a poem you'll never teach again.

The lesson on *The Merchant of Venice* didn't amount to much as I had to hastily cobble together half a lesson to replace the discussion I was hoping the envelope activity would produce. It taught me that we can all too easily get caught up with



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making things engaging or fun when, in fact, the text itself is the puzzle. Shakespeare's riddles are the key resource, not my pitiful attempts to create props. Now, several years down the line, I'd probably put all the riddles down on a sheet of paper or on the board and add these questions:

- Which chest is gold? Silver? Lead?
- Which chest contains Portia's image and hand in marriage?

The riddles are engaging enough without half a tub of glitter and three hours' worth of prep. Engage with the students intellectually and you have got them for the lesson. Dumb down intellectual ideas and you'll have to work harder to maintain that level of thinking. *And* you'll have to create more resources. Intellectual engagement is free, paperless and easy to conjure up.

## 2. TECHNOLOGY IS A TOOL AND JUST THAT

I once lost a year's worth of resources due to a memory stick being put through a 40° cotton wash several times. I cannot describe the pain, anguish and suffering I experienced. I lost several units of work in the blink of a spin cycle. That's why – now – I back everything up and send it to my mum via email just in case I lose it.

Technology helps teaching, but it doesn't replace it. If your practice is too reliant on technology, then step away from it. Only the other week, I had someone use my room and change the settings on the computer so I couldn't use my PowerPoint of 'Ozymandias'. Plan B didn't work because the projector wouldn't show the YouTube video. I was left with a paperclip and a pack of lined paper and, in true MacGyver fashion, created a fairly good lesson. Without the technological fripperies we were able to focus on the text.

A computer doesn't make a lesson function. The teacher's brain does. And that only rarely breaks down.

### 3. PARENTS ARE NOT THE ENEMY

It's easy to forget that parents want the best for their children when you're constantly being bombarded with less than pleasant emails. Parents have fears, worries and anxieties for – and relationships with – their children. If a child is upset, they will naturally act to protect. Behind every parental complaint or issue is a reason. Understand the reason and you'll understand the parent.

One of the key difficulties in teaching is that we deal with so many humans: the young people we teach and the adults who love them most. The happiness of one is reliant and dependent on the other. And, dear reader, children are not always the most vocal of individuals. I'd advise all teachers to talk to parents. Chat with them and discuss issues. The problems I have had were usually caused by not openly discussing an issue so that it became something bigger at a later stage. Parents are people.

### 4. DON'T REINVENT THE WHEEL

I've spent thousands of hours making resources, and it has taken me over a decade to learn to use the people around me to help me get through the job. Teaching is hard, but all too often we don't utilise what's around us. A textbook can be part of the lesson. A colleague can help you plan and resource a lesson. It is about give and take. Give to others and it is easier to take.

The problem with teaching is the constant pace. It is just too fast and too busy. In the rush of things, it is difficult to be friendly and considerate. Occasionally, you can be too busy even to pee. Seek out resources and collaborate with others to make your work-life balance better. The job can swallow us up, and it is our collective responsibility to make sure that doesn't happen.

## 5. DON'T BOTTLE THINGS UP

Teaching is an emotional job. The majority of the time, we are trapped in a classroom with thirty human-shaped sticks of emotional dynamite. They could explode at any point and, as adults, we have to maintain a certain dignified restraint. We can't really burst into tears every time a student is either nice or unpleasant to us. Emotionally, we live on a knife edge. Here, it is good to talk, to discuss and to share thoughts and feelings. Do it over a drink. Do it after playing football. Just get it out of your system.

Oh, and one last bit of advice. Find a hobby and work hard to do it whenever and wherever you can. If you have no outside interests then you will become the job. That hobby might be reading, stamp collecting, painting, swimming, even naturism; but, whatever it is, keep at it and find the time for it. Don't let school make the things you enjoy become expendable. I have witnessed numerous teachers working both Saturdays and Sundays to keep on top of the job, which, after all, is just that – a job. Something that pays the bills. Regardless of how good or how bad you are, the cogs of the education machine will keep turning without you. It happens to us all. We'd like to think being a teacher is a vocation and a calling, but I haven't met that many teachers who'd be willing to teach for free.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Teachers are busy people and I've written this book with that in mind. It is a rarity for teachers to be able to sit down for a long time, and it is even rarer for a teacher to be able to sit down and read. Therefore, I've kept things quite concise. The time you spend trying to visualise an extended metaphor that is spread over several pages could be better spent on friends and family. So feel free to dip into chapters that are most relevant to something you are currently teaching or read from cover to cover.

Finally, just a quick note on the poems and literary extracts used throughout. These are mainly sourced from Project Gutenberg online editions as these are so easily accessible, and the precise wording quoted here matches these sources. However, please do check whether there are any slight textual variations between these and any other edition you might be using before exploring the text with a class.



# Chapter 1

## HOW TO TEACH POETRY

The ability to teach poetry is held up by many as the measuring stick of a good English teacher, and this is possibly why so many lesson observations or job interviews use poetry as the subject. If you can't teach an aspect of the English curriculum with a poem, then you may not be up to the job.

A poem is a grenade of ideas and techniques in one small, perfectly formed unit, the impact of which can be far-reaching. Established teachers will have hundreds of poems in their arsenal, ready to teach as one-off lessons or as part of a scheme of work. They are often the go-to option when inspiration has packed its bags and slumped away. (Or you've had a late night!)

My advice to all new English teachers is to make a folder of poems you can use in lessons. Like push-ups in PE, the poem is a staple exercise: easily resourced and quickly done. 'Come on, give me five stanzas.'

My first attempts to teach poetry were comical. Once, as a student teacher, I attempted to cover three rather complex poems in a single lesson as the class' established teacher looked on smiling. Another time, I spent the best part of three lessons trying to teach just one poem really well. Three lessons on a six-line acrostic about animals is probably not the most demanding for a GCSE class. Understanding poetry, in itself, is a fine art: an art that's taken me years to perfect. Well, I say perfect; I really mean, be better than I originally was.

Here's the poetry manifesto I've written to share with students:

---

*You might not be a Victorian lady mourning the loss of a child. You might not be a famous playwright with an attraction to a woman who is not your wife. You might not be a poor young man who watches his friends die in a war. But each and every one of those experiences has connections to your life. You have loved and*

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*lost things. Poetry is about communicating experiences. Poetry teaches you how to deal with things. It might be a relative, a pet or a fluffy-ended pen you really liked to write with, but we can all recognise and identify with loss. Poetry shows you how others have dealt with a situation. Poetry is emotional and intelligent problem solving. Poetry teaches you that you have similar experiences to others in our society. Poetry explores how humans think and feel.*

---

The job of an English teacher is sometimes just to make students see the relevance of what they are doing. Teenagers rightly question why we do certain things. Why do we study Shakespeare? Why do we have to do poetry? Our job is about building that relevance into the lesson. We need to make that connection. That building of connections has been misinterpreted as a 'hook' or a 'starter' – or, even more dangerously, as a 'fun' activity. Fun is a word bandied about by parents, students and teachers. The danger comes when we seek simply to draw out the 'fun' aspect of learning, because learning is tough. If we wrap it up in a nice, fluffy, pretty way, we create a false impression of what real work is. Focusing on the relevance is a much better starting point.

In the classroom, teachers have to work on that relevance and connection. Yes, students have varied and different lives to us, but we need to work on building up their experiences. There has been a relatively recent focus-shift in education to the concept of cultural capital; the particular sort of cultural knowledge that one generally obtains through having experiences. Experience-rich and experience-poor students are immediately evident in any classroom: one child might make frequent visits to London; another might never have been. A recent GCSE exam question featured a woman working in London and leaving Oxford Circus. One student in my class wrote that the woman had just left a circus. A simple assumption to make. What caused it? A lack of knowledge caused by a lack of experience. Knowledge and experience are closely linked and our role, as teachers, should be to increase the former by increasing the latter.

Take a poem like 'Dulce et Decorum est' by Wilfred Owen. There are many different ways an English teacher might inform students' experience of the poem.

- 1 Making a personal connection – perhaps a student's relation is in the armed forces?

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- 2 Making an intellectual connection – do you know what really happens on the battlefield?
- 3 Making an emotional connection – how would you feel about fighting in a war?

Before you start with anything whizzy, creative or 'fun', think about the relevance of the poem to the students. Open their eyes. How does it feel to lose a child, for instance? Ben Jonson's 'On My First Son' explores this awful reality and, like much of the canon, we can use it to teach young people empathy with another's tragedy.

Often, the first step is to ask what the ideas or questions in a poem are. In English, as I often say to my students, we develop our thinking and we explore how others think. Where better to see that than in poetry? A poem is pure, undiluted thinking or feeling. A poem is an idea. A poem is a thought. A poem is a feeling bottled.

Why is it that humans turn to poetry in the happiest, or the saddest, of times? Let's get married – what poem shall we read? Tom has passed away – what poem shall we read? Our inability to express a thought or feeling is helped by poetry. I can't possibly express how sad I am, but this poem does, so you can see how I am thinking and feeling at this exact moment. This writer expressed what I can't possibly articulate. The emotional dimension of a poem is one we can easily ignore, but is hard to forget when you have been affected and moved. How many times do we ask students what a poem makes them feel? Not often enough, I'd venture. The fear is that students will default to the predictable 'it's boring' response. In a way, it sounds slightly unnatural. 'Eh, Jamal, Mr Curtis has gone a bit funny. He's talking about feelings.'

Being a teenager is difficult. Over the years I have taught a fair few angry ones (regardless of gender) and what always strikes me as telling is how each and every one of them is usually struggling to articulate what they are thinking or feeling. As a result, they either fight the system or fly from the classroom. We know that many of our students are struggling with identity, pride, peers, sexuality, feelings, thoughts and life choices at this point. For this reason alone it is so important that we explore the articulation of emotions. I recall my own teenage years, and some adult ones, where I felt something, but couldn't define it. The wider world doesn't help either. Society seems to be telling young people that there are two valid categories of emotion: love and hate. We love things and so post them on Facebook with glee, or we hate

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things enough to raise a pitchfork and join a mob in protest. We have become binary. Things are either positive or negative, good or bad, joyous or depressing. There are no stages in between. Poetry can be a daily source of emotional literacy to help students understand that there are thousands of different emotions we might experience at different points in our lives. When teenagers are struggling, the English teacher provides an opportunity to articulate and name those feelings. It comes as no surprise that we are often fondly remembered.

We can teach students about the emotions at the heart of poetry by asking them questions:

- What does the poem make you feel?
- Which bits of the poem do you like?
- Which bits of the poem do you not like?
- Where do your emotions change in the poem?
- Why do your emotions change in the poem?
- Have you felt this emotion before?
- What does the poet want you to feel at the start of the poem?
- What does the poet want you to feel by the end of the poem?

Our relationship with literature has been affected by our society's inability to express emotional nuance. We often allow students to dumb down emotional responses as well. How many times have we heard phrases like, 'it makes the reader want to read on' or, 'it stands out'? Students will easily spot techniques and maybe even the ideas at the heart of the text, yet they will rarely mention the emotional impact. They'd rather see the components than the whole and how it relates to them. So, teachers need to look at how students form relationships with texts. Those connections should be paramount, and they should be emotional. Students need to understand that a poem is an emotional journey.

Take one of the poems used in the recent AQA GCSE English literature exam: Carol Ann Duffy's 'War Photographer'. It is primarily about emotions and is slightly ironic in the way it explores how people in England aren't emotionally connected to terrible



# Never underestimate your duty and power as a teacher of English.

English teachers help students to think and feel. They prompt them to reflect on their actions. They hold a mirror to society and inspire students to see how they can make it better.

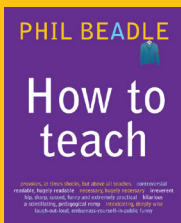
## What other subject does that?

This insightful interpretation of what makes excellent secondary school English teaching is the work of a man whose humility fails to hide his brilliance and provides educators with a sophisticated yet simple framework upon which to hook their lessons. Covering poetry, grammar, Shakespeare and how to teach writing, Chris Curtis has furnished every page of this book with exciting ideas that can be put into practice immediately.

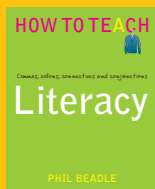


**Chris Curtis** is an English teacher and head of department with over a decade's experience in education. Chris is forever reflecting on which aspects of his teaching work best for his students and, as an avid reader and blogger, is a big believer in sharing practical ways to tackle difficult problems in the classroom.

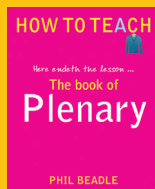
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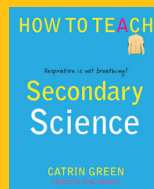
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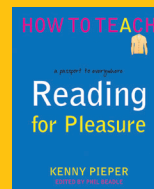
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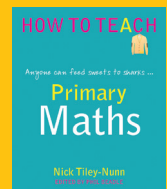
ISBN: 9781781350539



ISBN: 9781781352410



ISBN: 9781781352670



ISBN: 9781781351352

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ISBN 978-178135312-7



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