

OPENING  
DOORS  
to a  
RICHER  
ENGLISH  
CURRICULUM

for ages 10 to 13

BOB COX  
with Leah Crawford and Verity Jones  
Illustrated by Victoria Cox



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# Introduction

The ‘Opening Doors’ series has been supporting the teachers’ passion for quality texts since 2014. At home and abroad, the books have been signposting richer approaches to English in schools keen to exploit the learning opportunities afforded by a depth of challenge for all learners. We have had the pleasure of hearing from many teachers about their pupils’ delight in discovering famous writers, their growing relish for learning about a variety of literary styles, and their increasing access to literature and cultural capital. Of course, this applies to all abilities and in some schools this has led to the word ‘ability’ being reviewed because ‘Opening Doors’ strategies work on fundamental principles through which *all* learners can be challenged. The highly ambitious approaches offer fresh goals and continual curiosity, but the scaffolds and interventions include and inspire everyone. Each step can represent new knowledge and learning gained in chunks as appropriate for each pupil.

It has been vital that the access strategies enable all pupils to discover just how quirky, fascinating and full of wonder great writing can be. There are big ideas in the extracts and poems we choose for ‘Opening Doors’, and this is important. The originality and beauty of the text leads the classroom discussion, while metaphors, adverbs and prepositional phrases, for example, are taught and modelled in context. Pupils are immersed in reading journeys via quality texts, while the dialogic talk, philosophy and teaching of new knowledge combine to create rich learning experiences.

As we have toured schools in the UK and abroad, evidence of the positive impact of challenging texts on pupils' work has grown – there are some examples on the Crown House Publishing website.<sup>1</sup> Have a browse and then make links with the first two books – you could even use the pupils' work as a resource in your lessons.

Teachers learn more themselves every time they explore a challenging new text, and there is a tendency to aim higher as a habit. Once we aspire to something almost out of reach, we might just get there! This goes for teachers and pupils: risk-taking becomes endemic and the acquisition of new vocabulary becomes a daily habit. Some of the new words are only half-grasped initially, but it still represents an important encounter for pupils. Children may have to meet vocabulary in various different contexts over time for the meaning to become fully assimilated. Our own adult relationships with new vocabulary may suggest a similar journey.

In this book, and in its companion for the 6–9 age group, we want to show how the use of quality texts is not a separate strand of the curriculum or special content for a project day. It can be an integral part of the whole curriculum, with continuity and progression built in. I (Bob) have been working with co-authors Leah Crawford and Verity Jones on both of these new books, which has been a real privilege. Together, we have provided fifteen units of work (thirty across both volumes) which will give you lots of ideas for building the metalanguage and new knowledge of texts needed to raise standards in the most exciting way possible.

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1 See <https://www.crownhouse.co.uk/featured/opening-doors-to-famous-poetry-and-prose-pupils-work>.

*Opening Doors to a Richer English Curriculum* will support your vision for English, but it will also offer the core principles and detailed units of work that will enable it to be realised. A curriculum with a combination of quality picture books, children’s fiction and literature provides a much more appetising diet than is sometimes offered in schools. With effective transition to Key Stage 3, this will become a journey where reading for challenge starts to become the greatest pleasure any child can encounter – nurtured by sensitive and knowing teachers. We have always thought that what teachers do best is to make new learning possible for all. As Timothy Shanahan (2017) observes, ‘start kids out with complex texts that they cannot read successfully; then teach them to read those texts well’.

We have included a great range of texts both as the core of each unit and as link reading. We have incorporated some contemporary texts to show how past and present co-exist and how various literary styles can be taught using similar principles, all of which are open to further adaptation. Non-fiction gets a mention too, as many schools have started to apply the key principles for depth to all text types. For the first time, we have also suggested key concepts around which the curriculum can be built, with the units providing examples with which you can work. Developing concepts through which English can be taught will offer you the chance to plan a rich map of learning – one that the whole school will understand. One of the things we have enjoyed most about the ‘Opening Doors’ series is seeing teachers grow in confidence as the books signpost the way to their own innovations.

We are very much in favour of the ‘continuing’ part of continuing professional development (CPD), and we want to support teachers’ growth and their love of learning. Growing a richer English curriculum

will enable the most natural, reflective and evaluative CPD to take place in your classroom every single day. The extra challenges afforded by richer texts will stimulate your own learning far more than standard texts. As teachers, we have to think harder, set more profound questions, play with vocabulary and teach specific concepts – but we get so much more back from our pupils, and there are no dull routines!

## Summary of the key principles

As befits a brief introduction, we can only list here the major principles and strategies that have emerged from our work in schools. This is not a model for teaching English, but it is a framework to use as part of your own curriculum design – shaped by you and fit for purpose in your school and with your children. See the framework example on pages 6–7.

### Access strategies and ‘beyond the limit’ link reading

We call this series of books ‘Opening Doors’ because access is fundamental to new learning. Without the teaching strategies to unlock learning potential, it is likely that new language, genres and styles could be intimidating. But teachers release a whole world of possibility by demonstrating how meaning can be grasped and new literary satisfactions experienced. That’s the joy of challenge!

In this book there are a range of access strategies: pictures, questions, links to existing knowledge/experience and slivers of text (adapting



the length of the material is far better than excluding anyone from the shared excitement). Each unit has a suggestion for a key strategy with a snappy title. This is designed to support the teaching of comprehension because it enables pupils to start learning about different ways to understand a text.

Of course, it is the link reading that will boost children's comprehension the most. We have worked with schools on linking a range of texts to the core objective and planning for whole-text reading as an expected part of the curriculum. Every term and every year, the objectives and texts get progressively harder, but always within the context of a broad choice. Whereas the term 'wider reading' has often been used, we prefer 'link reading' because it is planned into the curriculum for everyone (see pages 6–7 for an example of the big picture of the objectives and link reading). We also call this the 'beyond the limit' section to emphasise that it is the depth of quality reading expected by schools, linked with reading for pleasure acquired more independently, that will support accelerated progress.

Framework Planning Example

# Unit 3: A Fire in My Head

## ‘The Song of Wandering Aengus’ by W. B. Yeats

Key concept: *symbol source*

*Objectives* which prompt deeper learning journeys:

- 🍷 Can you understand how symbols can be used to suggest complex ideas?
- 🍷 Can you write an effective poem using symbol and metaphor?

Teach *functional English* as appropriate in this deeper context.



Develop a deeper understanding of symbol source via link reading:

- 📖 ‘Woman Skating’ by Margaret Atwood
- 📖 ‘How to Cut a Pomegranate’ by Imtiaz Dharker
- 📖 ‘The Door’ by Miroslav Holub
- 📖 ‘The Call’ by Charlotte Mew

Quality text to quality writing journeys:

Apply what you have learnt from W. B. Yeats to write a poem developing your own use of symbol:

- 📖 Seasons
- 📖 Day and night
- 📖 Forests
- 📖 Mountains
- 📖 An oak tree
- 📖 A sapling
- 📖 An item of clothing

In *Understanding Reading Comprehension* (2015: 51), Wayne Tennent argues that ‘when children come to the reading of written text they are not blank canvasses. They bring both life and linguistic knowledge to each reading experience.’ Schools that are building link reading and

simultaneously facilitating reading for pleasure are deepening the knowledge that can be applied to the next challenge.

## Taster drafts

The idea of a taster draft is for pupils to write early on in the process to help promote their engagement with, and understanding of, the text. The task is usually time limited and/or word limited. Pupils love the freedom this allows, and teachers love the chance to teach spelling, punctuation and grammar, as well as aspects of style, through the resulting mini-plenaries.

Not only is much of this early learning embedded for the long term, but pupils are also eager to hear the full text. We rarely read out the entire text to the children at the start of the activity, but after attempting their own writing they often beg to hear the famous writer's work. You can hear a pin drop as they listen to the reading. It's no surprise that further questions follow.

## Reading journeys

When we mention the word 'comprehension' to pupils in schools, we nearly always get a response which is at best neutral and at worst a shrug or scornful look of boredom. A few times pupils have even said that it is what happens at 2pm every Tuesday! Often there is a link between comprehension and being tested. This doesn't have to be the

case. Rather than being something done to you, it can be much more exciting – a reading journey or a dialogue about half-grasped vocabulary or the way a narrative has been expressed. Predictions, questions, new knowledge on technique and effect, and the sharing of ideas can all be part of a reading journey.

You may have your own term, but why not drop the word ‘comprehension’ if it elicits groans or negativity? In ‘Opening Doors’ books, we use a big ‘Opening Doors’ question, with support interventions deployed as appropriate to build skills and knowledge. The glossary also provides prompts for helpful terms and theories. Remember: in your classroom, decisions about the use of resources, questions and strategies pave the way to deeper comprehension for your pupils, so always think of yourself as a pioneer in opening up quality reading routes.

## Support questions

Each unit includes an ambitious set of questions, not as a test but to provide a basis for teaching and learning dialogues. The questions are aspirational – a goal for mastery – because all pupils are on a learning journey. Support scaffolds are suggested for those pupils who are struggling, and there are greater depth questions for those who are ready for them. Some pupils will be able to answer the main ‘Opening Doors’ question without much support, and even move on to the greater depth question if you are happy that their answer is thorough. Advanced pupils should not waste time on anything too easy.

Differentiation occurs through the learning stage, not separate content or objectives.

The radial layouts have proved popular as a tool through which differentiated interventions can be made appropriately for each pupil. Flexibility is vital, so it can be advantageous to create guided groups, according to need, so pupils can learn to the best of their ability at each stage. Some pupils may surprise you in being ready for harder work, while other pupils may need more advice and scaffolding. However, greater depth opportunities are always built into expectations.

### Excellent responses will (include)

You will find success criteria lists throughout the book, but please don't use them as an arid or discrete list. They are designed to enable teachers to explore just how deep they can go using literary texts. More challenging poems, for example, may need a lot of rereading – but the love of a poem can grow through familiarity. It is possible to prioritise one or two criteria and convert them into child-friendly language. In this way, teaching teams can have rich conversations of their own about language and its effect, about themes and about the appeal of the writing.