

THE PERFECT ENGLISH LESSON

ofsted

David Didau Edited by Jackie Beere



Praise for *The Perfect Ofsted English Lesson*

The debate about the perfect OFSTED lesson rages in schools up and down the country yet the need to rise above the formulaic and embed the quality learning experience for young people has never been greater. This welcome addition to the literature on school improvement, and that is what this book is, gives the reader the opportunity to enter David Didau's mind and classroom, and to see, smell and touch what outstanding learning is like when the competence and confidence of the teacher works in partnership with the curiosity and creativity of the student. The dashboard checklist to please the visitor who sits at the back of the classroom is relevant, but it is not the key to sustaining outstanding learning throughout a child's secondary education. The techniques and strategies that you will read in this book, drawn from the experiences of teachers David has worked with as well as those ideas that are his own, will help teachers of English reflect on what really matters when they teach the subject that has become along with Maths, the pivotal subjects in the curriculum for all school leaders.

David Carter, Executive Principal,
Cabot Learning Federation

The key to an outstanding English department is a relentless focus on the quality of teaching and learning. In this book David Didau offers a cornucopia of creative, practical and highly effective teaching and learning strategies. As a keen member of the #SOLOarmy, it's great to see a beginners guide to using the SOLO taxonomy, written in a clear, accessible style, with humour. As Head of English, I certainly will be purchasing a copy for each member of my department!

Rosanna Thorslund, Head of English,
St.Thomas More Catholic School, Blaydon Upon Tyne

The Perfect Ofsted English Lesson (or David's book) immediately gets to the heart of the learning. An essential read for all English teachers - not just to impress Ofsted inspectors! It is just as appealing and useful to dip into, as it is a thought-provoking read.

Bev Sharp, English Advanced Skills Teacher,
St Bede's Catholic College, Bristol

I have been in education for 26 years as a teacher, Head of Department, Senior Leader and Principal and have read many books regarding the practice of teaching. The very best of them offer practical advice on improving practice within the classroom that will directly impact on the learning of young people. This book does just that.

David Didau has produced a succinct, well structured and accessible piece of work that will be of use to beginning teachers and those who have taught for many years. Its great advantage is that it does not talk down to the reader, does not assume anything of the reader except one thing; that you are a teacher and therefore committed to improving your practice and to furthering pupil progress.

This book, although targeted towards English teachers, would also be of enormous use to any teacher. It lays out what an effective lesson looks like. It is deeply rooted in proven practice and Assessment for Learning and takes the reader through the key processes of lesson planning, lesson starters, learning objectives, pupil engagement, effective questioning and why the end of the lesson is as important as any other element. David explains the nature and reasoning behind formative assessment, peer and self assessment and the importance of knowing where the student is in their learning.

There are no fancy magic tricks in this book, there are no easy soundbites. Teaching is hard, David recognises this, but this book makes it easier to make an effective impact on students. Please don't be fooled by the title, this is no bow to Ofsted nor a clever way to fool them, this book is about teaching and how to do it properly. It is intriguing, engaging and that often overused phrase 'essential reading'.

If you are a teacher, not just an English teacher – you need to read this book.

Dave Rees Principal of Erne Integrated College

I've been a keen follower of David's 'Learning Spy' blog for some time now and so when I heard that he was going to write this book, I was very excited by the prospect, but also a little worried ...

Is there such a thing as a 'perfect' English lesson?

Well, I needn't have worried. If anyone could describe what makes a 'perfect' lesson, then it would have to be David. In this little gem of a book, David weaves the magic that will have even the toughest class under your spell whether you're an NQT or a little jaded and on the lookout for some new ideas.

He does all of this with charm and wit and a clear expectation that those things that are worth achieving need to be worked at – both by teacher and pupil. Uncovering the Holy Grail of pupil progress through SOLO Taxonomy along the way and giving some very useful and easy to implement practical tips. He also dispels some common myths about observed lessons and demonstrates that the best learning comes through collaboration, something that he is not afraid to do himself, drawing readily on the experience of others.

I'd recommend this book heartily to every teacher (NOT just English teachers) and encourage them to try out the tips within. They work ... I know ... I've tried many myself to great effect!

David Doherty, Assistant Principal and Teacher of English,
Cowes Enterprise College

Using his own love of teaching as fuel, Didau aims to reignite the enthusiasm of English teachers everywhere; his belief that every English lesson can be outstanding is inspiring. This book is an encouraging reminder that, with hard work, effort and an understanding of the fundamental pedagogies of our classrooms, we too can achieve perfection in our lessons. He provides English teachers with a wealth of ideas, techniques, hints and tips which have all been tried and tested in his own classroom. Being a current Head of English, he is well aware of the pressures which everyday teachers face. In short, this book is not merely wishful thinking but a realistic interpretation of what needs to be done to achieve perfection. Following the typical format of a lesson, the chapters are user friendly and brimming with adaptable ideas. The text is easily accessible and can be either followed directly or used to harvest ideas for upcoming lesson observations. As well as interesting tips for classroom tasks, Didau also offers a range of strategies to encourage deep thinking as well as demonstrating how excellent assessment for learning can lead to perfect English lessons every time.

Lisa-Jane Ashes, (AST) Author and
Creator of Reflections of a Learning Geek

If you can't learn from this book, it's probably because you're just four levels above Outstanding.

Kristian Still, Assistant Vice Principal,
Hamble Community Sports College

No one ever told me that being a teacher would be easy. No one ever told me that being a teacher of English would be even harder though. Language is a complex thing – the English language all the more so – and in our constant pursuit of academic excellence in the classroom there are times when we fall short.

Reading David Didau's book, after being a loyal follower of his unmissable Learning Spy blog, I clenched my fist in victorious appreciation on several occasions when that light bulb of possibility flashed above me. Mr Didau breaks down the English Lesson into four perfect parts – it is called `The Perfect English Lesson` after all – and with it, clarifies the true nature of what we should be doing in the English classroom.

Despite being in the classroom for 13 years, I found myself scribbling down an idea on almost every page. David's short book describes the creative and challenging ways we should be engaging our students and advancing their knowledge and skills in English. It glows with enthusiasm and bounds with energy; but, most importantly, it is crammed with wonderful ideas and useable tips which will change your practice tomorrow.

It did for me. Yesterday, I changed my approach to starter activities and had visual learning journeys on the board as students came in. Increased focus and engagement from the word go. David walks the reader through the practical importance of Carol Dweck, Dylan Wiliam and a host of other

educational big hitters but it his own creative approach, coupled with an insistence on high expectations and even higher standards in the learners in his classroom, which shines through in every sentence.

There are not many books like this around and, while being a small book, fills a very large hole admirably. More importantly it is a book which makes me want to be better.

For the newly qualified English teacher, this book is perfect. For the experienced English teacher, it is no less so. There's a wealth of experience within these pages, but also love, joy, and compassion from a classroom practitioner on whom we should all model ourselves. Perhaps if we follow his advice we may find ourselves falling short just a little less often.

Kenny Pieper, English teacher in
a Scottish Secondary School

In an age when there's a tendency to clutch after ready-made gimmicks for every lesson, there's something hugely invigorating about David Didau's book. He reminds us that great English lessons are about relationships as well as content, but that they need to demonstrate our students' progress. He provides a range of ideas and approaches which can be customised to our own personalities and style to help us to teach lessons that aren't just outstanding against some Ofsted tick list, but genuinely outstanding. Recommended.

Geoff Barton, Headteacher, King Edward VI School

David's book arrives at a particularly opportune time. Changes in Ofsted criteria mean that we all have to up our game and focus on what really works in the classroom to promote outstanding progress. After 15 years of teaching and a lot of self-reflecting along the way, I have been looking to other professionals with bright ideas. I have found exactly that in David's book! His book is a treasure trove of teaching nuggets that make sense. He shares some sound teaching principles and some simply brilliant ideas. I have already implemented many changes in my lessons. I particularly like the way he integrates SOLO into his lesson planning and delivery, and the way the taxonomy is shared with and used by students. And it works! Another gem is the idea of learning journeys to spice up old boring LOs!

I will keep dipping in and out and being thankful for this inspirational book. A strongly recommended book for entrants to the profession and seasoned teachers alike!

Thanks for sharing, David.

Helene Galdin-O'Shea, English teacher,
Media Studies Curriculum Leader

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Acknowledgements

Since 2008 I've had the privilege of leading an outstanding team of English teachers at Priory Community School. Many of the ideas in this book have come about through working with such a passionate, enthusiastic, creative and, most of all, well-organised bunch of people. Of these, special thanks must go to Jackie Beere for giving me the opportunity to write this book, Lisa Jane Ashes and Phil Beadle for allowing me to plagiarise some of their best stuff and Caroline Lenton and all at Independent Thinking Press for being so supportive.

A wise old bird once told me that all good teachers are thieves. I will admit to shamelessly snaffling any ideas I come across if they look interesting. That said, while I've tried to give credit where it's due I'm sure that there will be someone somewhere I've failed to properly acknowledge. Sorry.

Over my career I've had the opportunity to work with some incredible English teachers, but the one who's had to put up with the most is Rosie. My thanks.

Foreword

My first choice of career was journalism, writing first for a newspaper then for a computer magazine in London until a restless dissatisfaction with the commercial world took me into the classroom. I started teaching English in a secondary school in 1978. I had no English degree, a primary teaching qualification and had never taught English before. I was led to a cupboard full of books and told to pick one I might like to teach for the next few months. There were no schemes of work; no lesson plans, data, differentiation, engaging starters, collaborative activities or plenaries to measure progress. I made it up as I went along – and absolutely loved it!

Teaching English has always been characterised by opportunities to be creative and, quite rightly, enjoys high status amongst students and parents. It really is one of the most important subjects you do at school. In recent years that status has been ratcheted up several notches so that teaching English is as high status as it gets in secondary education. Along with that there is now extreme accountability at every Key Stage. Are your pupils making enough progress? Are they developing their literacy skills and using them across the

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curriculum? Are enough students getting level 4 in Year 6 or GCSE English grade C?

The sharp focus on the core subjects as a measure of school performance has made good English teachers highly valued and sought after – but has the learning experience for kids improved since those dim and distant days before the National Curriculum? A recent Ofsted research document ‘Moving English Forward’ suggests some English teachers slavishly follow lesson plans and a tick list strategy in their attempt to meet the examination (and inspection) criteria. But an outstanding English lesson is an opportunity to empower your learners, to awaken their interests and instil in them a love of reading. What David does in this book is capture some of the very best ways you can demonstrate those demanding outstanding Ofsted criteria in every lesson. The format he uses ensures that every question asked of an English teacher’s performance can be answered to the highest possible standard – all with a sense of flair and fun!

David is perfectly placed to present these ideas to you as an experienced teacher and Head of English. With an enviable passion for the subject, he is also an avid blogger and tweeter, who shares and grows his ideas about teaching and learning. The ideas in this book are tried and tested so that they can be applied to your own context with confidence. Many of them are relevant to all subjects and across all phases of education.

My teaching of English evolved over the years through trial and error into the kind of responsive, engaging teaching that

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David delivers every day and promotes in this book. Luckily for me I had time and space to grow – and make mistakes. English teachers today don't have that kind of luxury and so we need this book. Use it to guide you towards the essentials of the outstanding English lesson. Use it to add more strategies to your teaching repertoire. And tweak it to suit your context and your learners. This book can help your learners love our wonderful language and learn to use it with elegance and style to become powerful communicators.

Above all, use this book to make your English lessons outstanding and fun for your students – and for you too.

Jackie Beere
Tiffield, 2012

Introduction

Is there such a thing as the perfect English lesson?

I passionately believe that by understanding a few simple principles and working hard to follow them, you can deliver the perfect English lesson. The very best English lessons provide engagement, motivation and genuine progress in the crucial skills of communication. I aim to lay out before you a smorgasbord of proven and successful titbits which you can mix together and use as and where you see fit.

If you're reading this book looking for tips to slot into a looming lesson observation you'll find plenty. But beware: there are no silver bullets that can turn you into an amazing teacher overnight. The perfect English lesson is not a matter of one-off charismatic delivery; it's about hard work and effort. It depends on thorough planning based on sound assessment for learning. And it's about consistently being there and having high expectations of, and a passionate belief in, the children in front of you.

The Perfect Ofsted English Lesson

Malcolm Gladwell and Matthew Syed have both written about the role of concerted and deliberate practice. Gladwell cites 10,000 hours of practice as the figure required for world-class mastery of your chosen field.¹ That doesn't mean you have to have been teaching for ten years before you're any good, but it does mean that by continually challenging yourself to be the best you can be you will always improve.

Like me, you probably think of yourself as a good teacher, capable of delivering an outstanding lesson given a following wind and a good night's sleep. Along the way you've also probably taught some shoddy lessons of which you were understandably ashamed. The temptation is to nail these failures into lead-lined coffins and never think of them again. But, although the process can be painful, they are worth dissecting and learning from. Samuel Beckett asked in one of my all time favourite educational exhortations, 'Ever tried? Ever failed? No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.'²

The fact that you're reading this book shows that you want to learn to be an outstanding teacher. The good news is, if you care about it enough and work hard enough you *will* be outstanding – maybe not in every lesson but often enough to keep on trying. Assessment for learning guru Dylan Wiliam said we should 'ask teachers if they have anything to learn.

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1. Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (Penguin, 2009); Matthew Syed, *Bounce: The Myth of Talent and the Power of Practice* (Fourth Estate, 2011).
 2. Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (John Calder, 1983), p. 7.

If they say yes, work with them. If they say no, fire them.³
Remember: there is no failure, only feedback.

What makes English different?

Whilst all lessons share similarities, English lessons do contain some important differences. Unlike other subjects, English is not primarily about learning a body of core knowledge; it's much more about learning and practising skills.

We teach students mastery of their own tongue; we expose them to great cultural works; we give them time and space to articulate their nascent feelings. And we try to teach them about apostrophes. Where else, other than English lessons, are students at once creative and analytical? Where else are they exposed to such a breadth and variety of experiences?

As an English teacher you should strive to hone the hard-edged skill of analysis whilst simultaneously encouraging the fluff of creativity. There's some disagreement about whether you can actually teach creativity as a skill, but we can certainly expose young people to it and encourage them to use it – and we can absolutely give them knowledge of the 'rules' of whatever area we wish them to be creative in. Having a thorough grounding in these rules will give students the ability to know when to break them, which is one definition of creativity.

3. Dylan Wiliam, *Stopping people doing good things*, keynote address to the 18th National Conference of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, 21st Century Schooling/Excellence for All, Birmingham, UK, 23–26 November 2010.

The Perfect Ofsted English Lesson

This might seem over-simplistic, but the skill of writing is all about creativity whilst the skill of reading is firmly rooted in the ability to analyse. No one would suggest that reading and writing should be taught in isolation, and neither should creativity and analysis be seen as discrete entities.

Ofsted have commented that there is ‘too little emphasis on creative and imaginative tasks’⁴ in the teaching of writing. As English teachers we know this is something that we need value more highly. We know there’s little joy in analysing poetry without having a stab at writing some. And it’s dangerously negligent to get students to unpick the work of professional writers without then giving them the opportunity to use some of these tricks and techniques in writing of their own. This, of course, is the thinking behind the teaching sequence for writing: first you read it (analysis), then you write it (creativity).

The balance is easily lost. The pressure on schools to focus on exam skills means that ‘Strategies that seek to engage students with the text [are] neglected in favour of approaches that [are] directly aimed at developing those skills needed for the type of analytical, literary-critical essay required in the GCSE examination.’⁵ Our old friend Point Evidence Explain (PEE) is a particular offender, with students often being required to focus on a formulaic response that can remove any chance of truly connecting with a text.

4. Ofsted, *Moving English Forward: Action to Raise Standards in English* (15 March 2012). Ref: 110118. Available at <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/moving-english-forward/>, p. 25.

5. Ofsted, *Moving English Forward*, p. 16.

Introduction

The perfect English lesson must strive to be a balance of these two components and to make them explicit. For every topic you intend to cover take time to consider this: where can you get students to analyse and how can you get them to be creative? Once you start thinking in this way, English teaching opens up a stunning vista of possibilities and your lessons will become more varied and challenging.

Myths about great teaching

The 2012 Ofsted report, *Moving English Forward*, identifies a number of ‘myths’ which many English teachers seem to mistakenly believe will impress inspectors. These include:

Myth 1: Lessons need to be fast paced

Actually faster is not better. While slow, ponderous lessons may result in students losing concentration, rattling through your lesson at breakneck pace is unlikely to result in much learning either. We should concentrate on the pace of the learning rather than the pace of the activities we’ve lovingly planned.

Myth 2: Lessons need to be packed with a range of activities

Not so. Many English teachers have been misled into believing that Ofsted want activities to last no longer than 10 minutes. Yes, this will keep students busy, but cramming activities into your lesson will not result in them learning

more. In fact they're likely to learn less due to the lack of time available for consolidation. Instead lessons should have a clear focus on what it is that students need to learn and provide them with the opportunity to make progress in whatever this is. No one would expect a piece of controlled assessment to be shoehorned into 10 minute bursts; activities need 'to last only as long as is needed to ensure effective learning'.⁶

Myth 3: Lesson plans need to be massively detailed

Most schools insist on planning pro formas being completed for observed lessons. This is not in itself a bad thing, but if lessons are planned in excessive detail it's easy to lose sight of what it is students are meant to be learning. The advice from Ofsted is clear: plans should be simple, straightforward and concentrate on what you expect students to learn and how you'll make sure they've learnt it.

Myth 4: You should not deviate from your plan

Whilst the three- or four-part lesson structure may be a useful starting point, we need to have the confidence to change and adapt our plans if students' progress is better or worse than anticipated. An inspector will always be pleased to see teachers going off-piste if it means that students are given more opportunity to learn and make progress: 'The key con-

6. Ofsted, *Moving English Forward*, p. 13.

sideration should be the development of pupils' learning rather than sticking rigidly to a plan.⁷

Myth 5: Learning needs to be reviewed every few minutes

There is a widespread belief that progress should be reviewed every 20 minutes come what may. But students need time if they are going to produce anything worthwhile. The temptation is to rush the 'actual work' so that we can get on with assessing progress. The belief that progress needs to be reviewed every few minutes is actually getting in the way of learning. We *know* this is wrong but often feel pressured to make it part of the 'Ofsted show'. Ofsted are very clear that this is unnecessary: 'significant periods of time were spent by teachers on getting pupils to articulate their learning, even where this limited their time to complete activities and thereby interrupted their learning!'⁸

In fact, what inspectors want to see are English lessons where students are given time to work independently for extended periods with teachers working less hard than their students. Ofsted criticise the fact 'that pupils rarely [have] extended periods to read, write or discuss issues in class'.⁹ The perfect English lesson must devote time to developing these crucial skills.

7. Ofsted, *Moving English Forward*, p. 14.

8. Ofsted, *Moving English Forward*, p. 14.

9. Ofsted, *Moving English Forward*, p. 14.

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THE PERFECT *Ofsted* ENGLISH LESSON

is designed to help bring out the best in all English departments during that all-important Ofsted visit. Packed full of ideas, strategies and simple yet effective innovations, this book is an essential part of the toolkit of every English department – and not just for the inspection either!

“The techniques and strategies that you will read in this book will help teachers of English reflect on what really matters when they teach the subject.”

David Carter, Executive Principal, Cabot Learning Federation

“Provides a range of ideas and approaches that aren’t just outstanding against some Ofsted ticklist, but genuinely outstanding.”

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David Doherty, Assistant Principal & Teacher of English, Cowes Enterprise College

David Didau has been teaching since 2000, has lead a successful English faculty and has just taken up a new post as Director of English and Literacy. He blogs about learning at learningspy.co.uk and writes irregularly for the Guardian Teacher Network.

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