

Time to stop 'PEE'-ing?



Developing academic writing in KS3 English beyond the 'PEE' formula

Louisa Enstone explains what she learnt when she decided to abandon the 'Point, Evidence, Explanation' formula.

Photo of Louisa teaching an English class by M. Utton

Question time

"Why do we even write essays Miss?"

It was Friday period 5. I was an NQT trapped in a classroom with eight Year 11 boys. We were analysing the language describing Crooks' room in *Of Mice and Men* (again) and I was again explaining how we needed to be able to write this up as a 'PEE paragraph' in the exam.

The question was valid. Not in that moment, not from that pupil: he wanted to fluster me (and it worked). But it was valid all the same. I was 30 years old and, before this, had never heard of anything called 'PEE'. I don't remember being taught a 'PEE paragraph' in school. I don't think I was even taught how to write an essay. And now here I was surrounded by pupils who talked about writing a 'PEE paragraph', like a journalist might talk about writing an article, or a poet a poem. Like it was a thing. Surely a 'PEE paragraph' wasn't a thing?

For my first year of teaching I saw 'PEE' as a necessary part of my developing practice. It was an easy and predictable way to get pupils from point A and to point B without causing anyone (including myself) to burst into tears.

That summer I marked GCSE Literature papers; despite not teaching in UK secondary schools, I was already an experienced Language examiner. The poetry anthology papers crystallised for me the problem with 'PEE'. Paper after paper read like a gap-fill exercise.

"The poet uses 'XYZ technique' to display 'question word'. This is shown by 'quote'. The word 'quote' suggests ... This makes the reader feel ..."

You get the idea.

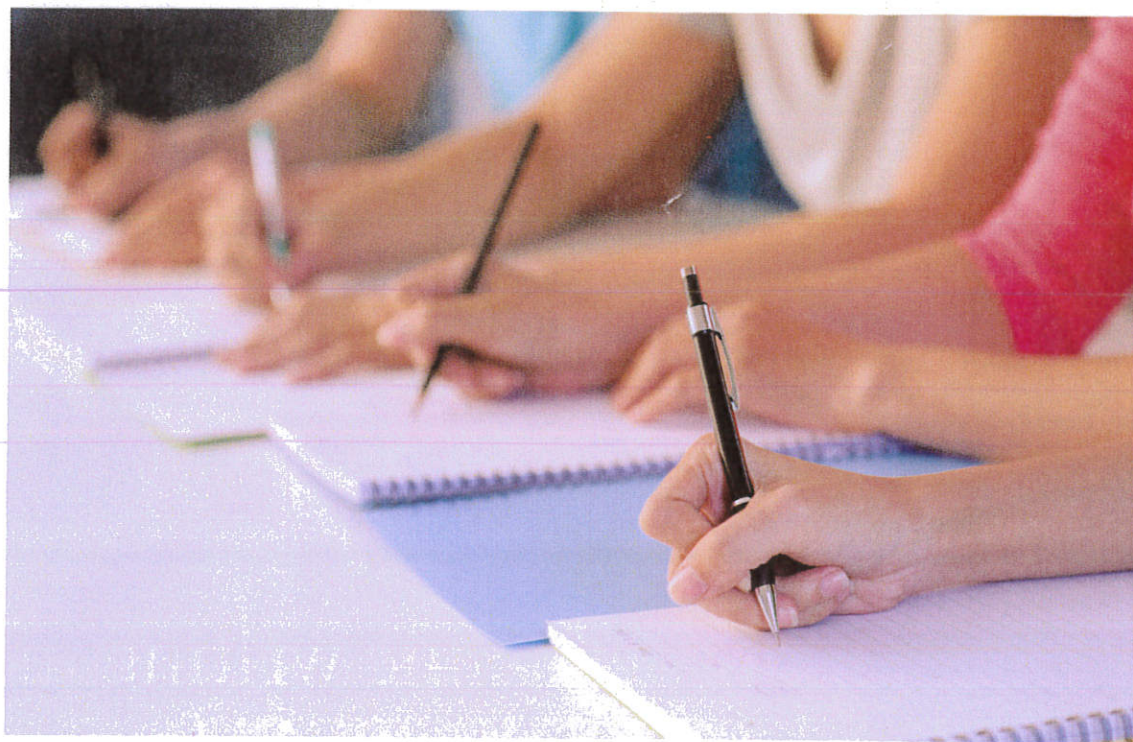
As an examiner, I was disheartened by the lack of knowledge and understanding demonstrated by these responses. As a classroom teacher, it felt at times as though the only reason we were reading literature was to generate these meaningless 'PEE paragraphs'.

I began to second-guess myself and my teaching practice. What followed, and later became an obsession lasting nearly 5 years, was a series of questions that I was determined to answer. Here are just a few I wanted an answer to: *'What is an essay? What is its purpose? How do we judge what makes a good essay? Can that judgement be empirical or will it always be subjective? What impacts the way we write an essay? How do we teach essay writing?'* It became important for me to answer these questions well. The response *'to pass their GCSEs'* was no longer good enough.

The problem with essays

English teachers are intuitively aware that essay writing is a form of writing that students are less confident with. It is an expert form, requiring expert thought, understanding, processing and then expert articulation to succeed. Essentially students take a text that they don't know too much about, listen carefully to what the teacher says about the text, add in some thoughts from fellow students, then regurgitate this into a written form that doesn't always marry itself to the ideas produced. And all this for an audience who helped them work out what to write in the first place. This mimicry is a poor proxy for learning and yet the 'PEE'-style of essay response seems to encourage it.

"It felt at times as though the only reason we were reading literature was to generate meaningless 'PEE paragraphs'."



Another problem is that essays are generally the remit of academia. No one reads essays for pleasure – at least not at the age of 12 or 14. Academic prose is obscure and unknown to students, yet we expect them to be able to write it well without giving much thought to the process of writing – beyond the dreaded 'PEE' and other generic sentence stems which aid the thought-to-paper process. We dedicate entire schemes of work to creative writing, yet academic writing is merely a by-product of often content-heavy literature schemes. We would never dream of studying just one poem for a month in order to use it to improve essay writing; that would be unheard of.

But perhaps it shouldn't be. When we ask students to write persuasive, informative or descriptive texts, we give them exemplars. At certain times of the year, my classroom is awash with speeches: Obama's speeches, the famous speech of Queen Elizabeth I, or the fabulous Kenneth Branagh/Tim Collins speech as he is about to invade Iraq. With this in mind, I looked again at the purpose of essay writing in the GCSE specification.

Here are some of the skills, knowledge and understanding expected in extended written responses:

- To show understanding of the text, character, idea
- To answer an exam question
- To demonstrate an ability to think in depth
- To offer different interpretations of a text
- To discuss
- To analyse
- To write analysis in a logical, coherent and cohesive manner
- To explore language, form and structure
- To evaluate
- To discuss how writers impact their readers
- To explore how literature reflects society or history

It's a pretty big ask. You can see why, when our students walk into the exam room and are faced with 8-mark, 10-mark, 25-mark questions, we, the teachers, have felt the need to reduce this to the easiest possible strategy.

Grassroots classroom research

Around this time, I started looking for academic research on essay writing in English classrooms. There is surprisingly little. Research projects in English focus on writing (often creative, or sub-sectors such as boys and writing) and reading: here I hoped to find something useful, but was disappointed. There is a lot of research on teaching reading or teaching literature texts in the secondary classroom but very little on how students respond academically to these texts.

Dissatisfied as I was with the lack of evidence, I bullishly decided to embark on my own classroom research project. Luckily, I was able to set this up fairly easily – naïve as I was. I began with the following premise: teaching over-simplified essay writing structures (PQE, PEA, PEE, PEEL, etc.) at KS3 prevents convincing and sophisticated written expression and limits opportunities for the creation of individual, detailed and powerful arguments in KS4 and KS5. The idea was to prove that pupils in KS3 who are *not* taught 'PEE'-style structures and *definitely not* taught 'PEE'-style sentence openers can write excellent essays.

Two classes of similar ability in Year 7 were my idea guinea pigs. The control group and test group each had 32 pupils, roughly the same ratio of boys to girls, and roughly the same SATs levels on entering Year 7. One hour of lesson time a week was ideal for my 'experiment' and, while it should be noted that other English lessons with their main teachers did take place, the project plan was maintained for all their English teaching.

So what was this plan? Pupils in the control group used our in-house 'PEE' essay structure and sentence starters to write any analytical responses. The rationale of the control group was to allow validation of the success and usefulness of simplified essay structures. The test group, however, had no structured input for their responses to literature texts. They were allowed to explore freely what could and should be discussed. Pupils then worked together to discuss how a writer's response should be organised and written up.

"We dedicate entire schemes of work to creative writing, yet academic writing is merely a by-product of often content-heavy literature schemes."

Over a period of 15 months, these classes studied short stories, poetry, and extracts from Shakespeare. For each text the initial teaching phase was the same: comprehension, discussion of setting, character, events and ideas. Great care was taken at each stage not to pre-teach analysis or to 'elicit' ideas and inferences that would match the essay response; I actually wrote my whole script for each lesson so that I didn't unconsciously pre-empt any later activities with each group.

Once the content of the text was delivered and explored there was a distinct divergence. The control group's experience might look very familiar: the essay question was presented, a detailed planning sheet discussed and then filled in, an exemplar paragraph was read and annotated and sentence stems given. All in all, planning and teaching of 'the essay' took two hours and the write up one hour. Pretty standard.

The test group controlled their own experience. The timings, content, and discussion were entirely theirs. The essay question was presented and then there was a blank page. The pupils discussed what could and should be included. This alone took nearly two hours. Their ideas were numerous and wide-ranging. We followed then with a discussion (very carefully scripted input for myself again) on how this could be written up. Again this debate was open, with students' responses ranging from 'neatly' to discussion of how they were told to respond to Year 6 SAT paper responses. No right or wrong ideas were identified by me. Everything was acceptable. Each individual pupil then made their own judgement as to which elements of the essay content and essay write-up they wished to use. This process was repeated every time for each different text.

This process was excruciating for me. It was painful not allowing myself to guide this class. There were many times when I raged at myself for the cruelty of setting pupils up to fail. How could they possibly do well with no exemplars, no guidance, no success criteria? However, each time, I gave every pupil two targets to improve their essay writing. For the test group: I wrote a specific set of targets that linked to the skills we hoped to see develop: academic style and phrasing, detailed analysis etc.

My findings: the good, the bad, and the ugly...

When considering these results, it's important to remember that these pupils were high ability and highly engaged.

Data collection 1, Autumn term

The control group outperform the test group with over 50% of achieving Level 5 or higher. The test group sees just under 20% achieve a Level 5. It is perhaps not a huge surprise that students who have been taught a definite structure and sentence starters perform better. The APP rubric also perhaps pushes us towards a highly-structured response because we have so many boxes to tick.

Data collection 2, Spring term

In the second set of results, the two groups are broadly comparable. In the control group, 20 pupils achieve Level 5 and 1 achieves Level 6, and in the test group, 18 pupils achieve Level 5 and 2 achieve Level 6. This assessment is on a poem; perhaps it is easier to talk about. Maybe we are second-time lucky and the students are improving.

Data collection 4, Summer term

The control group has stagnated and some even show negative progress. The test group, however, is storming ahead now. More pupils are achieving Level 5 and Level 6. Why? Well partly because the test group are now writing long and detailed responses. They are not constricted by the words Point, Evidence, Explain. Their classroom discussion is of a higher quality because, it seems, they are in control, and thus their ideas for writing are also more interesting.

Data collection 5, Autumn term

The test group outperforms again, writing this time on Dickens. Every student in the class is now writing at a Level 6. The control group continues to make progress; however, it is slower and more limited; they also hate writing 'PEE' paragraphs and audibly groan at the mention of them. This is not the case with the test group.

Data collection 6 – Spring term

The control group have stagnated. Those pupils who finished Year 7 on Level 5 are barely reaching Level 6. Their essays, despite endless practice, targets and exemplars, just sound the same each time. The test group are beginning to sound like GCSE students.

“Unconstricted by the PEE formula, students in the group were now writing long and detailed responses, their classroom discussion was of a higher quality, and their ideas for writing were more interesting.”



Conclusions

So: what can I tentatively conclude?

1. PEE formulae can lead to complacency.

Throughout the project, survey responses showed that students in the control group felt more confident with their written responses than those in the test group. This is perhaps unsurprising. Students enjoy the ease of structure, the logic, the predictability of the planned thinking of PEE. Yet this confidence level continued even after students' results began to plateau, indicating that these success criteria provide a false sense of security.

2. PEE formulae can limit the length of responses.

Students in the control group wrote less in their written responses than students in the test group. Control group responses were on average 5 lines long. Test group responses were on average 9 lines long. The control group's written responses were limited by the available sentence openers. At no point did the control group take the initiative to write more sentences without some kind of prompt or guidance.

3. PEE formulae can limit the quality of responses.

Students in the test group used more imaginative or descriptive vocabulary in their responses than the control group.

4. Greater freedom can enhance the quality of responses.

By writing more, students had more opportunity to try out their newly acquired analytical language.

Students in the test group used 10% more analytical words (from a prescribed list set before the project) than students in the control group. The test group responses

were longer and therefore students had more space to use analytical and critical language.

And Finally ...

I have not stopped using 'PEE' completely. It can undoubtedly be a useful tool for many pupils and at different times. What is clear however is that when we rely wholly on them, we can risk limiting pupils' ability to write well. This classroom research project has proved two things to me: that there are other ways to teach essay writing (and to assess reading skills) and that 'PEE' itself is not the problem – it's the way we use it.

My new ideal world involves a focus on teaching each element of an essay paragraph explicitly and precisely, emerging from discussion of reading response:

- Reading texts and making great thesis statements about them
- Reading texts and analysing imagery in detail
- Reading texts and exploring the writer's intention
- Reading texts and discussing the influence of context.

Now our Year 7 classes (and Year 8 and Year 9) spend whole weeks just focusing on these skills, writing these individual sentences. I had one Year 8 class who didn't write a complete essay paragraph – all stitched together – until the summer term of Year 8. We spent five half-terms getting each bit right. Then they wrote something fantastic, alone, with no scaffolding – and it was detailed, analytical and academic. Now, in Year 9, this class can write analysis at the drop of a hat – and you know what? They love it.

Louisa Enstone

teaches English at Darrick Wood School, Orpington, and won the NATE Research Award last year.

Five tips for teaching the writing of essays

Do Year 7 pupils really need to be able to write a 'PEE' paragraph by the end of their first term? Consider the skills that you are teaching them: comprehension, inference, analysis, and articulation. Each of these skills needs hours of lesson time to secure. Here are some ideas for teaching essay writing without jumping straight in with a PEE table.

1. **Teach formal argument writing first before even attempting a literature essay.** In this way, you can focus on the tone and style of an academic piece of writing – but the content can be familiar to students. We ask students to formulate arguments for living a life of simplicity instead of a life of luxury. Here you can teach pupils a variety of ways to express their thinking.
2. **Teach each essay paragraph skills explicitly over a number of weeks, without ever putting an actual paragraph together.** Consider using visual representations of character, symbols, and literary devices to prove their understanding and inference skills. Hone each skill – for example analysis of language – until pupils are secure with the act first.
3. **Focus on the creation of well-written, detailed, and sophisticated 'points' or thesis statements.** Take *Oliver Twist* as a character, for example. You may start with '*Oliver Twist is poor*'. This is purely an observation directly from reading the text. Almost anyone who reads *Oliver Twist* would be able to make this observation. As students of literature, we need to be able to get beyond this. *Why is he poor?* Because he was an orphan. *Why was he an orphan?* Because he was born in an orphanage. *Why was he born in an orphanage?* Because his mother was poor.

Why was she poor? Because she couldn't afford to pay for a better life. *Why?* Because it was hard for the poor in Victorian times to make enough money to improve their own lives. We had to go through 5 steps to get to the root of our idea. Only then can we create a thesis point that says: '*In the Victorian era, the poor were victims of a rigid class structure that ensured their life chances and opportunities for success were consistently inhibited.*'

4. **Avoid the dreaded 'PEE' table.** It is very tempting to create a quick table for pupils who are learning about 'PEE' to fill in. There are several issues with these tables. Often we make them tidy and symmetrical, but they are by their very nature limiting. Those hard, black lines give a pupil permission to write very little (four big words). Rather consider teaching your pupils to draw their own open ended spaces to write or plan in. Start with circles or bubbles: leave one end open and see how much you can squeeze in. Reward those who overflow.
5. **Students do not always have to write an essay paragraph to develop textual understanding or confidence in expressing a response.** Give serious consideration to other forms of assessing these key skills, using written and visual responses, and long and short answers; and from MCQs to a character's head shape filled with quotes and analysis. In Year 7, these allow me to assess the progression of these skills with more precision than an essay paragraph which requires multiple skills in conjunction with each other. I can pick out which of my pupils are moving beyond inference, moving into simple analysis, experimenting with detailed analysis.

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