

## **Response of the United Kingdom Literacy Association to the English Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling Test materials published by the Standards and Testing Agency, June 2012**

UKLA recognises that spelling, handwriting, punctuation, effective vocabulary choice and apt sentence construction matter. Accurate spelling and punctuation enable children to communicate their meaning more clearly to their readers. A clear and fluid handwriting style allows them to write better and more fully. Effective writing demands careful vocabulary choices. Skilful use of a range of sentence structures enables children to encode more subtle and complex meanings.

Children who are learning to write need to master all these aspects of the complex process of writing. But they also need to learn:

- to interest a reader and address different audiences,
- to write for a range of purposes in a range of genres,
- the power of language as a creative instrument,
- to use writing as a tool to aid memory and thinking,
- to engage productively with the many forms of digital writing, including multimodal texts.

These less easily testable compositional aspects cannot wait until the secretarial and grammatical features have been mastered. Substantial research evidence shows us that the most effective way of learning both the secretarial and the compositional aspects of learning to write is through approaches that integrate communicative purpose and technical skills from the earliest stages (Knapp et al., 1995; Medwell et al., 1998; Louden et al., 2010).

Analyses of numerous studies of the teaching of grammatical features outside a writing context have failed to show any significant improvement in children's writing (Hillocks, 1986; Andrews et al., 2006). No research study has shown any improvement in the writing of primary children through grammar teaching, in or out of a writing context (Myhill et al., 2012).

Some of the sample questions ask children to identify or correct errors in grammatically bizarre sentences. These artificially constructed errors bear little resemblance to the errors children tend to make in their writing. Very few, if any, would write a sentence like: "I am putting on my shoes and will have been for a walk in the park right now." Correcting such sentences seems likely to induce confusion rather than indicate competence in tense choice.

We have already seen the narrowing of the Key Stage 1 reading curriculum that has resulted from the Phonics Check. The introduction of this new high stakes test and the use of its results as a measure of pupil progress in writing and also of schools' effectiveness are likely to have a severely adverse effect on teaching and learning in this vital area of the primary curriculum.

UKLA therefore strongly opposes the introduction of the proposed test for children at the end of Key Stage 2 (10 and 11 year olds) on four grounds:

1. the test is based on the false assumption that knowledge of the secretarial aspects of writing, grammatical knowledge and some lexical knowledge either add up to learning to write or provide an essential gateway to this learning;
2. in isolating these easily assessable 'surface features' and testing them out of context, the test will not assess whether children use these features effectively in their own writing;
3. presenting children with artificially constructed errors is particularly likely to confuse children rather than reveal their competence as users of correct and appropriate forms;
4. the test and the use of its results will inevitably lead to a narrow focus on these aspects of language knowledge, at the expense of other vital elements of learning to write.

We strongly urge that the imposition of this test be reconsidered and are most concerned that its implementation will lead to a marked drop in the standard of writing of England's primary school children.

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