

Literacy across the curriculum: Aston Manor Academy

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Brief description

The development of students' literacy skills across the curriculum has been a significant focus of the school's work for a number of years. Explicit planning for, and teaching of, the literacy skills developed initially by English teachers is supported by a senior leader and the literacy coordinator.

Overview – the school's message

'Our motto is "All Different, All Equal, All Achieving"; the drive to promote and develop literacy is, therefore, at the heart of our strategy for improving skills and standards for all students. Our cross-curricular literacy task group was formed over eight years ago, in recognition that students' attainment in language and literacy is a major factor in their capacity to learn in subjects across the curriculum. Our message is that individual subjects create different language demands, which need to be identified and addressed within those subjects. Therefore, all departments have an important role to play in supporting students' language development. For this reason, training and provision of staff inset, including coaching, is an integral part of our work.

Our major literacy focus over the past two to three years has been the teaching of writing. The literacy coordinator has worked as a specialist coach, developing writing mats which address the specific needs of a variety of subjects. Further resources have been produced by members of the literacy task group, as well as individual subject teachers. The work of the specialist coach to develop the confidence and skills of teachers across the curriculum, so that they in turn become 'Literacy Champions' within their own subject area, is a key focus for future development.'

Heather Roberts, headteacher

The good practice in detail

In 2011, a significantly higher proportion of students than average made expected progress in English between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4. In addition, the 2011 value-added measures for humanities, languages, science and mathematics were also significantly above average. Just under half the students speak, or are learning, English as an additional language.

Leadership and ethos

The long-established ethos of developing literacy is emphasised by the mantra 'Skills Matter at Aston Manor'. The impact of this work is evident not only in students' very good achievement in English throughout the school, but also in the similarly strong progress in subjects across the curriculum. The senior leader, who oversees literacy across the curriculum, established many elements of the approach when she was subject leader for English. The fact that there continues to be a literacy coordinator, eight years after the post was first established, confirms the high profile given to literacy in the school. The expertise of these key players is recognised locally and beyond, as the school often hosts visits from leaders and teachers from other schools, in Birmingham and wider afield.

The current focus on improving students' writing arose because analysis of attainment data has shown consistently that students arrive in Year 7 with weaker writing than reading skills. The English department led the way by emphasising the teaching of writing during their lessons, and this has been consolidated across the curriculum. Students are also supported in developing reading strategies across the curriculum, such as skimming and scanning, as well as more close reading of texts.

The senior literacy leaders have produced a 'Writing Matters' booklet which supports students in developing their writing skills in a number of subjects. The school identified this as a contributory factor to the rise in students' attainment in writing. This booklet contains:

- helpful definitions of key subject terms
- examples of aspects of grammar and punctuation
- suggestions of connectives that could be used
- strategies to support spelling
- examples of words that have different meanings in different contexts, such as the general definition of 'power' and the mathematical definition.

Sharing good practice

The school has a range of systems to build and share good practice in the teaching of literacy across the curriculum as well as monitoring its impact. A 'Literacy Task Group', with 'Literacy Champions' from every curriculum area meets regularly. Members of the group trial and evaluate strategies and activities, team-teach with subject colleagues to develop expertise, and contribute to whole-school dissemination of good practice. The group has produced writing mats (explored in more detail below) and evaluations of the school's marking policy, and has ensured that there are literacy-related objectives in specific lessons in all subjects. In November 2011, all senior leaders conducted literacy learning walks as part of the whole-school monitoring and evaluation cycle, again emphasising the high

importance of teaching to support literacy. The impact of recent work in marking for literacy was evident during the learning walks. The activity also highlighted the school's need to increase opportunities to develop students' speaking and listening skills.

Literacy in the D&T classroom and beyond

Emma Gough, the Design and Technology (D&T) Literacy Champion, explains how a focus on literacy has improved the quality of students' work in her subject: 'Before I developed my teaching to include aspects of literacy, my Key Stage 3 students were writing weak evaluations at the end of units of work. I noticed the contrast between the quality of their oral and written evaluations. Many of the written evaluations had numerous spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors but, as well as that, students were not expressing their subject knowledge well or using sufficient technical vocabulary. For example, instead of writing "I sewed the material", they would often just write something like "I did stuff with the material". Or instead of "I prepared the dish", they would write, "I got the food ready". I worked with the literacy coordinator to prepare a writing structure for evaluations, which included a focus on topic sentences for each paragraph, the use of connectives and choosing the most appropriate verbs. We then team-taught a lesson where we shared with the students a "bad" example and asked them to identify why it was weak and what could be done to improve it. We modelled a "good" example and got the students to pick out the positive features. The students were used to this approach in English lessons and by being explicit about literacy in my teaching they were able to make connections and transfer skills developed elsewhere. This really made a difference to the quality of their evaluations and our results at key Stage 4 have improved.'

Emma now team-teaches and coaches other D&T colleagues to help them develop their own practice and confidence in incorporating the explicit teaching of literacy in their own lessons. The [evaluation-writing structure](#) that was devised has been adapted for other forms of writing. This means, for example, that students are now using the first person when writing recount texts and starting instructional writing with appropriate verbs.

D&T is not the only subject to have an explicit teaching focus on supporting students to apply their literacy skills. In humanities lessons, students are helped to consider the most effective connectives to use when writing an argument or presenting a case study. In ICT, when students are giving presentations, they are required to use Standard English and speak clearly and coherently. Science lessons provide opportunities for students to apply reading strategies such as skimming and scanning when researching. Many subjects also have developed [writing mats](#) that students can access during lessons. These double-sided resources follow a common format and include generic reminders to ensure that students consider issues such as: presentation; the purpose for writing; structure and paragraphing; accurate use of punctuation and spelling; and relevant subject-specific vocabulary. On the flip side are subject-specific criteria that can be used as part of the regular self and peer assessment that take place. Each mat reinforces the idea that 'Skills Matter at Aston Manor' and poses the question to students: 'In which other subjects do you use these writing skills?'

Marking for literacy

The school's common approach to marking for literacy is displayed in all classrooms and some corridors. Students understand the policy and are positive about the fact that teachers in subjects across the curriculum are consistent in supporting them in this way. Often, as well as identifying spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors, teachers include literacy-based areas for improvement in their written comments. For example, in history, students

are reminded to structure their paragraphs in a logical sequence and to reconsider their choice of connectives to support the development of their argument. There is also a consistent approach to what the school calls 'Green Pen Matters'. Students use a green pen when they are editing or correcting their own or a fellow student's work, and again there is an emphasis on accurate use of spelling, punctuation and grammar. The quality of teachers' marking for literacy is monitored by senior leaders as well as departmental heads. In subjects such as D&T, individual teachers are given feedback and then a summary of findings is presented to the whole team.

Intervention

Leaders, including the literacy coordinator and special educational needs coordinator (SENCO), have a clear picture of students' attainment in English on entry to the school. Close work with primary schools means that plans to support pupils with the weakest reading and writing skills are in place and ready for their arrival in Year 7. Provision to support younger students includes one-to-one tuition with the SENCO and higher level teaching assistants (HLTAs), small class sizes for English, and the use of well-regarded commercial packages. Progress is reviewed regularly and adjustments made to the intervention provision as necessary. If students require additional support as they move through the school, a similar range of provision is available.

The positive rates of progress students make are a clear indicator of the impact of these intervention strategies. Parents and carers are also involved in improving their children's literacy skills; for example, workshops are organised on topics such as 'Supporting your child with literacy at home'. Those students learning English as an additional language are also well supported across the curriculum in developing their literacy skills. They, like their peers, benefit from the explicit teaching of writing skills and the reinforcement of reading strategies across the curriculum.

Student views

Students have a clear understanding of the importance of well-developed literacy skills.

One Year 9 boy described how important it was to be able to read a job advert and identify the criteria that he would need to demonstrate. He then went on to speak about the importance of writing in a persuasive and technically accurate way when presenting his application as well as the importance of speaking confidently, fluently and in standard English during an interview. These skills would 'make him stand out in a crowd'. A sixth form student explained that knowing how to write in a structured and logical way supported her work in English, history, science and other subjects. In addition, being able to recognise 'signpost' connectives such as 'however', supported her ability to follow and understand an argument in her sixth form studies.



The school's background

[Aston Manor Academy](#) is slightly smaller than the average-sized secondary school. It converted to academy status in July 2011. The academy serves the Aston, Handsworth and Nechells areas of inner city Birmingham.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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