

» Pearson

Balancing the canonical and contemporary in English

The conversation so far...



Through our *Let's Talk English* conversations, we've gathered insights from over 800 secondary English teachers, 1000 secondary students, 1000 college students and 1000 college tutors. Alongside this research, we've hosted 10 national forums, taken part in key industry events and brought teachers and school students together through regional events and visits across the country.

In this report, we summarise the discussion about the texts selected and taught in English Literature, exploring how teachers, students and sector voices think we can balance classic and contemporary texts and forms, ensuring the subject reflects both its rich heritage and the lives of students today.

At a time of widespread concern about the GCSE English subjects, this report is a very welcome contribution to the discussion. The figures from the survey are stark. If more than half of teachers think their current specification is not accessible or inclusive and only 13% of students can see how the course relates to them, then this is a clarion call for change.

The report offers a strong consensus on what teachers and students would like to see instead – a more balanced offer, of both canonical and contemporary texts that speak to each other and to the lives of students, reflecting their realities. This should also involve expanding the idea of the 'text' to include many forms beyond the book, both spoken and written.

This is not a call for ditching the canon. Rather, it suggests that in both text selection and pedagogic approaches, students need to find ways of recognising how the texts they study relate to them. As Dr Rudine Sims Bishop says, students need 'mirrors, windows and sliding doors'.

Assessment is, of course, key. The report is clear about the ways in which current assessment measures have shaped and distorted literary study, stripping out much of what students find most enjoyable and engaging. Text choices, pedagogy and assessment are the three legs of the stool – all three need to come together for much needed change.

Barbara Bleiman, Education Consultant, English and Media Centre

What we know

From secondary English teachers:

- **Only a fifth** say their current specification is **enjoyable to teach**.
- **More than half** (53%) say it **focuses on the wrong things**.
- Just **1 in 10** say it includes enough **diverse texts and authors**.
- **54%** say it's **not accessible** or inclusive.
- **0%** say it prepares students for a **digital future**.

From students, when thinking about learning in general, including English:

- Only 13% of secondary students say they could see how what they had learned related to them.¹ Just 14% could see how what they're learning is related to their everyday life.
- Nearly half (47%) say that learning about things they are interested in motivates them to learn.



Having recently completed GCSE English, 16–18 year-old college students told us:

- The vast majority (86%) want GCSE English to include content that feels relevant to their lives and futures.
- Just 12% said they enjoyed studying a post-1914 novel or drama, making it the least popular element.
- Only 14% said studying 19th-century texts was an enjoyable part of their studies.
- Just over one quarter (28%) said they enjoyed studying Shakespeare.

Students consistently highlighted a disconnect between the texts studied at GCSE and their lived experiences. While they want content that feels relevant and future-focused, elements such as post-1914 texts and 19th-century novels were among the least enjoyed elements of their English studies.

From college tutors:

- 78% say they would prioritise content that feels relevant to students' lives and futures if designing a new GCSE English Language specification.

There is consensus that the curriculum should embrace a greater variety of voices and forms, ensuring young people engage with both the classics and texts that reflect today's world, so they can connect literature across time.

From the education community:

“What do we really want students to gain from studying classic texts? These works are often canonised for their remarkable craft and the power of their storytelling, which can truly touch the soul. They often explore themes that remain profoundly relevant, and can develop empathy, emotional intelligence and a deeper understanding of yourself within society.”

Sarah Kruschandl, Head of English and Partnerships. Professional Tutor for Initial Teacher Training

¹ When thinking about the last week of school they attended.

It is widely agreed that English should balance heritage with relevance. Canonical works are vital, but students also need wide-ranging, contemporary and digital texts that reflect their lives and broaden their horizons. The Curriculum and Assessment Review highlights this balance – maintaining Shakespeare, 19th-century and post-1914 texts within GCSE English Literature, but calling for greater teacher autonomy to choose from a broader range of voices and perspectives so that every student can see themselves represented in what they study.

“Students deserve to hear voices representing their own life experiences. What they read needs to come from more diverse sources, and from other forms of communication. It would help them feel more engaged with the curriculum and be able to see the applicability of English in their own lives.”

Anthony Cockerill, Director of the National Association of the Teaching of English

What we’ve learned so far...

English should balance the classical and the contemporary

“It’s not ‘canonical texts or others’; it’s about texts in conversations with each other.”

Barbara Bleiman, Education Consultant at English and Media Centre

Canonical works still matter in helping students connect with the stories, ideas and traditions that have shaped literature over time. However, when taught in isolation, **these texts can feel disconnected from the lives of young people today**. To keep English relevant and engaging, many argued for **placing canonical texts alongside modern works**. This way, the classics become part of a bigger, ongoing conversation, helping students connect the past with their present and future.

Contributors also stressed the need for a **wider range of authors, characters and viewpoints**. Texts that reflect different identities, cultures and lived experiences – alongside the traditional canon – allow every student to **recognise themselves in what they study** while being exposed to perspectives beyond their own.

Canonical texts need different ways in

“Why not have young people producing adaptations of the play they’re studying? Why not have them study it in production on screen on the stage, or exploring how it’s adapted by other cultures? It’s more interesting and requires the kind of thinking that’s been lost in today’s transmission-style teaching.”

Andrew McCallum, English and Media Centre

While there’s agreement that canonical works should remain part of English, participants highlighted that **how we teach them matters just as much as whether we teach them**. Shakespeare’s plays, for example, were written to be performed – yet many students are expected to analyse them without ever seeing them brought to life on stage or screen. As one

contributor pointed out, plays are “**universally understood**” through their visual aspects, regardless of language, and seeing a performance allows students to interpret it in their own way.

Bringing in film adaptations, creative reimaginings and different interpretations alongside the text makes these works **more accessible and engaging** for everyone. This approach turns the study of classics from an exam-driven exercise into an **open exploration of meaning and interpretation**, bringing the subject back to life.

English should broaden what counts as ‘text’

“When students work with contemporary texts, they often feel a greater sense of agency and ownership – it becomes less about memorisation and more about response.”

Robert Eaglestone, Professor of Contemporary Literature and Thought, Royal Holloway, University of London, Lead on Cross-Sector Educational Policy at the English Association

There was also recognition that **the definition of a “text” should be widened**, beyond novels, plays and poetry. Students should have the chance to study forms that reflect the language they encounter every day – from graphic novels and podcasts to spoken word, film and drama. By broadening what counts as a text, **we can recognise the full range of ways language shapes culture and communication**.



Watch [Anthony Cockerill](#), Director of the National Association of the Teaching of English, call for texts that reflect different identities, backgrounds and worldviews – and for a curriculum that also embraces real-world communication, from media and drama to spoken language.

Areas that need further discussion...

While most agree that English should celebrate both the canon and contemporary voices, there’s still debate about what that balance should look like.

Can TikTok and *The Tempest* share the same classroom?

“Kids are happy to speak on TikTok – it gives them visibility and has reward through the validity of likes and engagement. What if we built on that in the classroom?”

Yamina Bibi, English teacher and education consultant

Beyond broadening what counts as texts, discussions also turned to the technology students use every day. **The way young people read, write and communicate is changing** – from social media and online forums to gaming platforms and AI-generated texts. Conversations explored how far these digital forms, which shape pupils’ daily lives, should also be reflected in the classroom and how they, too, might sit alongside canonical classics.

Is it the text – or the way we assess it – that really shapes engagement?

“When I first started teaching, we taught Shakespeare with pretty much free rein. At some point, it changed – suddenly, it had to fit into the assessment objectives. We stopped teaching Shakespeare in production, stopped exploring adaptations or seeing it in conversation with other writers. We even stopped watching it. It became an exercise in ‘do you know the context?’ ‘Can you do the language analysis?’”

Bennie Kara, Co-founder of Diverse Educators

Teachers and sector voices described how **assessment pressures can strip away the richness** of canonical works, turning them into lists of facts to learn rather than stories to explore. Many worry this leads to disengagement, with students missing out on the characters, ideas and complexities that make these texts worth studying in the first place.

And this is not simply solved by adding more contemporary texts. Many felt the real issue lies in **how texts are currently assessed** and, therefore, taught. When the emphasis remains on rote learning and formulaic analysis, even the most relevant and modern works **risk being reduced to memorised quotations and tick-box exercises**. What matters is giving students the chance to explore and respond to any text – old or new – as literature, not just as exam content.

Where we go next



The conversation about canonical and contemporary texts has shown just how strongly teachers, students and sector voices feel about what young people study in English.

Balancing the classics with modern works, broadening the range of voices and recognising new forms of text are all areas that demand continued debate and collaboration.

We'll keep these conversations moving forward – exploring how English can stay true to its rich heritage while also reflecting the realities of today's world.

Find out more and share your perspective at go.pearson.com/letstalkenglish.

*GCSE English refers to both the GCSE English Language and Literature specifications across all awarding bodies