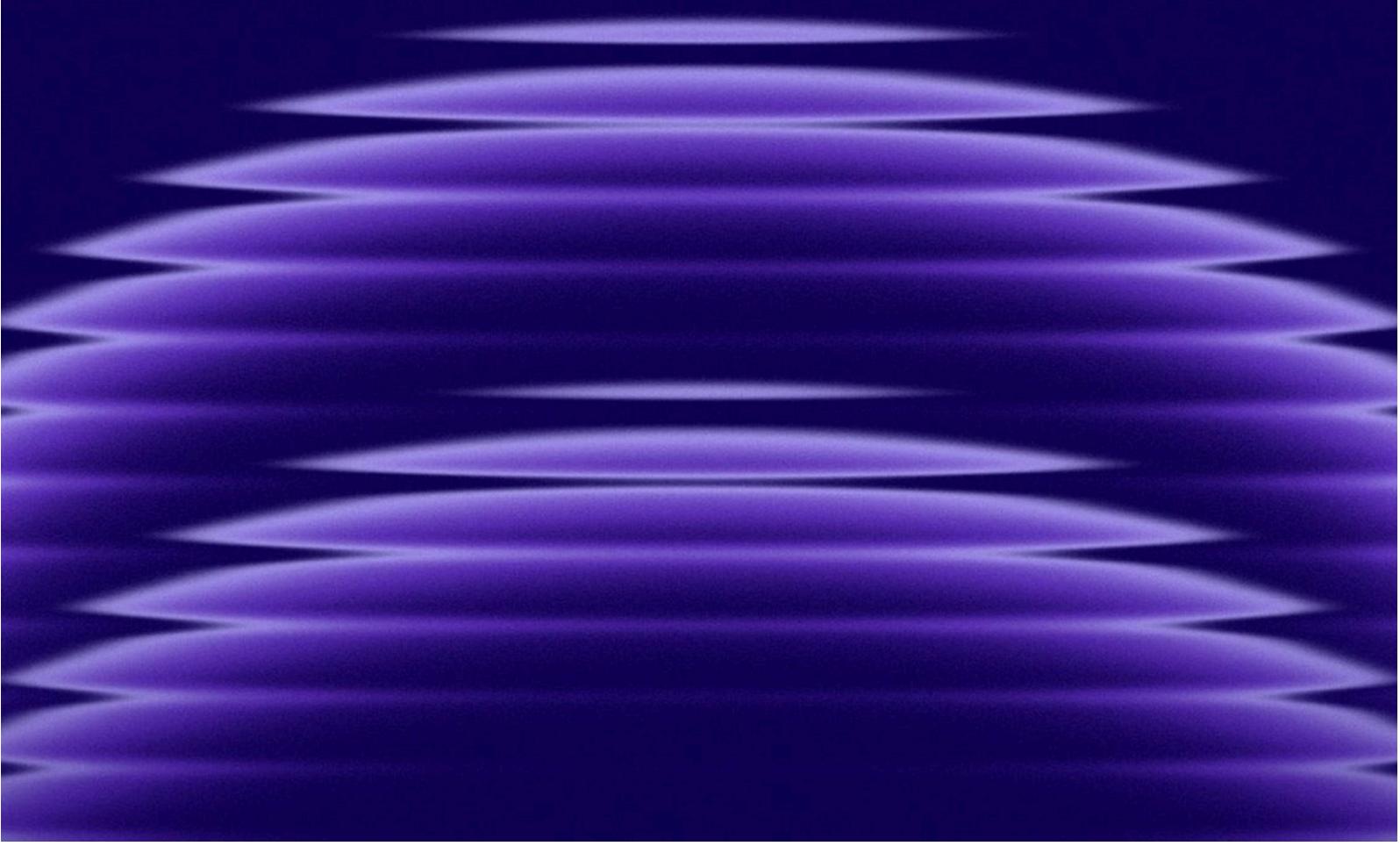




# Reassessing Assessment in GCSE English

The conversation so far...



Through our Let's Talk English conversations, we've gathered insights from over 800 secondary English teachers, 1,000 secondary students, 1,000 college students and 1,000 college tutors. Alongside this research, we've hosted 10 national forums, taken part in key industry events and brought teachers and students together through regional events and visits across the country.

In this report, we revisit what these discussions revealed about assessment in English, sharing responses from teachers, students, education and sector leaders on what role assessment plays for them. We also look at the impact of the Curriculum Assessment Review (CAR) - and consider how it could take these conversations even further.

At Pearson, we recognise the vital role that English assessment plays in young people's lives. With a Grade 4 in GCSE English\* providing essential access to further education, training and employment, it is paramount that assessment in this subject is reliable, fair and trusted by students, teachers and the wider system.

We also recognise the significant influence that GCSE assessment has on teaching and learning across Key Stage 3 and beyond. High-stakes assessments shape curriculum choices, classroom practice and the experiences both students and educators have of English as a subject. Teachers have consistently told us how important it is that English supports the development of creative thinkers, critical readers and confident communicators - skills that matter not only for academic success but for life beyond school - and have reflected on the extent to which these priorities are adequately represented within the current assessment framework.

Against this backdrop, there are important considerations in how English is assessed. As an awarding body, we are acutely aware of the responsibility we hold when designing our specifications, sample question papers and mark schemes, in line with the parameters set out. The perspectives shared through the Let's Talk English campaign contribute to this ongoing reflection and provide a valuable opportunity to consider how GCSE English assessment can support high standards, reflect the breadth of the subject and create the best possible environment for English teaching and learning.

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

## What the conversation told us about assessment in English

---

For both students and educators, there is a clear desire to realign assessment with the core values of English: helping students think independently, express themselves clearly and engage deeply with language. Schools want today's assessments to open opportunities for deeper thought and communication.

**“If we flipped it — started with what we want learners to know and be able to do, then asked how they could show it — we'd design assessment very differently.”**

Leandri Dannhauser, Network Lead Advisor for English, Ark

## Some key areas of consensus:

### Assessment today does not fully gauge student skills or understanding

- More than **two-thirds (68%) of secondary teachers** believe current GCSE English assessments **do not fully capture students' skills**.

Teachers are clear that although analysis, evaluation, comparison and extended writing matter, the current system does not fully assess what English offers in terms of life skills. And while there is recognition that English Language is a skills-based subject, many feel the current format limits how well those skills can be demonstrated.



**“In literature, a great deal of time is devoted to memorising quotes and contextual facts — often through rote learning — rather than to the development of more valuable English skills.”**

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

Secondary students reflect this same concern, particularly in their desire for more meaningful opportunities to work towards improved communication:

- **35%** want to learn to **speak confidently in front of others**
- **27%** want **better communication skills** including how to interact with others

In addition, teachers described the current Spoken Language Endorsement as inauthentic and unrepresentative of students' real communication abilities - as in their capacity to debate, collaborate or communicate effectively in everyday situations. Moreover, as it does not count towards the overall grade, contributors warn that it risks being deprioritised by students, teachers and parents alike.

**“[Students] need to practise speaking and listening skills as well, not just written. I would like to go back to the days where we had 20% oracy and it was part of their English Language.”**

Forum participant

**Together, these messages point to a shared concern: when assessment overlooks key skills, such as critical thinking, collaboration, digital literacy and communication, students miss out on experiences and learning opportunities that truly matter for their futures.**

## Assessment today risks limiting creativity and deeper thinking

Teachers, tutors and sector leaders discussed how preparing for current assessment formats can leave little room for free, creative thought in class. Many feel students are taught to rely on formulaic answers to meet marking criteria, rather than to explore and reflect on ideas.

**“There’s not enough opportunity for students to get personally involved in the text through creative and re-creative writing techniques.”**

Thomas Karshan, Associate Professor of Literature, University of East Anglia

Contributors also questioned whether writing under timed conditions allows students to demonstrate genuine creative skill or imagination. The pressure to produce extended writing quickly was widely seen as limiting.

**“Producing creative writing under timed conditions feels deeply unnatural and does not reflect how writers actually work.”**

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

Students support this sentiment, with many saying they would value more opportunities to develop creative skills:

- **37% of secondary students would focus more on creative skills in lessons** if they were in charge of designing how students learn and are assessed in school.



Their perspectives reflect that the current model prioritises exam technique and speed over imaginative, reflective and real-world subject content that today’s school communities value.



[Watch Thomas Karshan](#), Associate Professor of Literature at the University of East Anglia, share why GCSE English should make more room for creativity and imagination.

## Assessment formats today could be more inclusive

While all agreed that written exams are a reliable format, contributors question whether a system built almost entirely around them is enabling every student to be successful. Many described the model as restrictive and repetitive, with the same skills tested multiple times. Teachers in particular emphasise that students engage with ideas, texts and different forms of communication in far more varied ways than most current assessment systems recognise:

**“That’s just not the world students of today live in. They’re being restricted by not having us move with their times.”**

Rebecca Hawkins, Oasis Trust English Subject Lead

A related concern was around the heavy reliance on unseen texts under timed conditions, with contributors saying this often increases anxiety for students, rewarding exam technique rather than authentic understanding.

**“Students get grades by being taught how to approach the exam – what’s measured is their ability to complete the paper, not the skills and knowledge they actually have.”**

Brian Doyle, United Learning

Students, too, spoke about the emotional impact and pressure they feel during an end-of-year exam, with many describing the experience as overly dependent on memory.

**“Exams come so long after we’ve learned the topic – it’s very stressful and more like a memory test.”**

Student, Oriol High School

Among students who had recently completed their GCSEs, feedback was revealing:

- **83%** of college students want **reduced pressure in exams.**
- **70%** would **prefer digital or tech-based assessment options.**

College and resit tutors explained that the volume and format of GCSE English assessment can be a major barrier to success, particularly for students who have experienced repeated failure.

- **89%** of resit tutors want **reduced exam pressure.**
- **76%** want **reduced overall assessment time.**



Across all groups, there was strong interest in exploring a broader mix of assessment types that would allow students with different strengths to shine.

- **47%** of secondary teachers would support the inclusion of **non-exam assessments.**

Suggestions included pre-release materials, open book exams, viva-style spoken formats and discussion-based approaches for those who feel confident doing so, along with models that spread assessment over time. Crucially, teachers stressed that alternative formats do not mean lowering standards: rather, they allow students to demonstrate knowledge in ways that feel authentic to them.

**“It’s not about making GCSE English easier – it’s about making it more accessible for all students.**

Leandri Dannhauser, Network Lead Advisor for English, Ark



[Watch Leandri](#) reflect on how lengthy, written exams can disadvantage students, limiting how they show their true abilities.

## Assessment today may be impacting student motivation

The effect of the current assessment system was also discussed in terms of student motivation and enjoyment. With many students seeing English primarily as a pathway to a grade rather than a subject that develops transferable skills for further study, employment and life, fostering a love of the subject is a challenge.

Over a third (34%) of secondary students say that the most important reason for learning is the outcome of an exam or test - suggesting that assessment has become the defining feature of how many young people experience English.

This significantly overshadowed other motivations for learning, such as understanding the world around them (27%), building self-confidence (24%) and enjoying life-long learning (16%).

A major theme across conversations was the importance of assessment texts that feel **relevant** to students' lives - with 86% of college students wanting GCSE English to include content that feels relevant to their lives and futures.

**“Those 19th century texts are quite difficult for students to relate to. Without wider knowledge of the world, they're disadvantaged. Their cultural capital ends up determining how well they can do and that's not what the assessment is meant to measure.”**

Melissa Bowes, Advanced Practitioner for English at Luminare Education Group

Teachers and tutors also reflected upon the disconnect growing between the forms of communication students encounter daily - digital media, multimodal texts, contemporary non-fiction and social media - and what they meet in GCSE English, where these have largely disappeared from English Language content. When students cannot see their identities or experiences reflected in what they learn, engagement and confidence can drop.

**"It's ironic that years ago, before the rise of social media, we taught media texts explicitly - and now students are immersed in them, we've replaced those relevant texts with 19th century literature. Modern ideas and texts that students can engage with from different cultural standpoints are vital for re-engaging pupils with English."**

Forum participant

Participants stressed that improving the identity of English is what matters, to bring purpose and enjoyment back into the classroom.



[Watch Tom F. Wright](#), Head of English at University of Sussex, discuss how GCSE English has lost joy and dynamism - and why restoring this matters for students' futures.

## What the Curriculum and Assessment Review says – and what it means for English

---

The 2025 Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR), and the government’s response to this, echo many of the themes raised in our Let’s Talk English conversations.

### English skills for life

The Curriculum and Assessment Review highlights the importance of **communication, spoken language and media texts** within GCSE English Language, framing these as essential skills for young people. It notes the importance of equipping students “to meet challenges presented by our fast-changing world.”<sup>1</sup>

**“Expressing oneself fluently and communicating well is crucial for life and work, and an important vehicle for social justice.”**

Government response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review

The Review also recommends giving English Language its own identity, distinct from literature, to allow for a clearer focus on these skills.

### Assessment methods in English

While participants throughout the discussions expressed strong interest in broader assessment formats, CAR states that externally set and marked written exams should continue to form a core part of assessment, as they ensure reliability and help avoid bias, with non-exam assessment used ‘only when it is the only valid way to assess essential elements of a subject’. Both the review and government response note that this also helps mitigate discrepancies across schools, including those related to the use of generative AI.

Within the English section of the Review, specific challenges with the current assessment model were identified, however, including “substantial duplication” between English Literature and English Language, “with the study of literary texts a significant feature of GCSE English Language”.<sup>2</sup> It suggests the **need for clearer distinction** in what each GCSE assesses, avoiding repeated testing of the same content in the same ways.

### Reducing assessment volume

The Curriculum and Assessment Review recognises that the current KS4 exam load is excessive, recommending a reduction in overall GCSE exam volume by at least 10%. The government’s response builds on this, committing to **reduce total examination time** by an average of 2.5–3 hours per student across all subjects, while maintaining standards, fairness and credibility.<sup>3</sup>

This focus on reducing overall exam times aligns with concerns raised across our campaign around the pressure associated with lengthy, high-stakes assessments.

---

<sup>1</sup> Curriculum and Assessment Review, Building a world-class curriculum for all: Final Report (November 2025), p.10

<sup>2</sup> Curriculum and Assessment Review, Building a world-class curriculum for all: Final Report (November 2025), p.76

<sup>3</sup> Curriculum and Assessment Review, Building a world-class curriculum for all: Final Report (November 2025), p.135.

---

## Improving motivation

While both the Curriculum and Assessment Review and the government support maintaining the established body of English literature – “including at least one play by Shakespeare, one 19th-century novel, poetry, and fiction or drama from the British Isles from 1914 onwards” – both also propose increasing flexibility for schools to select the texts and authors most likely to engage their students.

Many awarding organisations offer a broad range of texts that reflect students’ identities, interests and communities – creating space for authentic personal responses and engagement, however, the cost and resource implications of introducing these ‘new texts’ can at times be a barrier.

**“A ‘dry’ curriculum diet in GCSE English has contributed to a reduced enthusiasm for English at A Level... Greater representation within, and diversity of, GCSE texts would engage students more effectively.”**

Curriculum and Assessment Review, Building a world-class curriculum for all

## Where we go next

There is clear agreement across the sector – from policy makers and education leaders to teachers and students – that change is needed to the assessment of English. As curriculum reform progresses, attention now turns to identifying what will have the greatest impact within the parameters set out by the Department for Education and Ofqual. Central to this is a recognition and celebration of the purpose of English, ensuring that assessment reflects the full range of skills the subject develops.

The challenge ahead is to ensure that the concerns raised through these conversations are not lost but instead shape a collaborative effort to create GCSE assessments that are more meaningful, more reflective of students’ strengths and less stressful overall.

**Find out more and share your perspective at [go.pearson.com/letstalkenglish](https://go.pearson.com/letstalkenglish).**

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