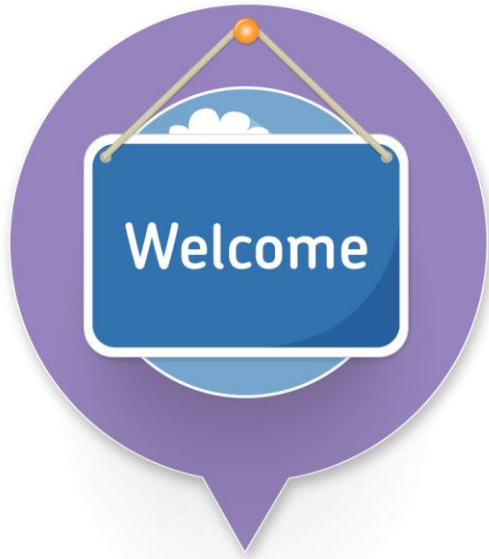# GCSE English Language
Virtual communities

Autumn 2021

Welcome

AQA

Introduction and aims

This presentation explores the idea of threshold concepts, and the importance of structure for the co-teachability of GCSE English Language and English Literature.

Aims

1. To consider threshold concepts as a way of thinking about English Language and Literature
2. To consider the importance of 'structure' as a threshold concept
3. To discuss how (and when) we teach 'structure'
4. To think about narrative 'structure' in terms of time and space
5. To examine the idea of 'narrative dynamics' and apply it to a reading of a fiction text

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The purpose of this session is to introduce delegates to the idea of threshold concepts (Mayer and Land, 2003). The idea of core or threshold concepts is an appropriate one given the absence of exams over the last two years. Moreover, a recent NATE report highlights the need to think more widely about the English curriculum, particularly at KS3, which in some places is still used as a GCSE-lite curriculum.

In this session we will focus particularly on structure as a threshold concept. Structure is important – it appears in the assessment objectives for both GCSE English Language and Literature. Whilst it appears specifically as a question on Paper 1 English Language, we shall be looking at the benefit of spending more time on structure and how it aids the co-teachability of Language and Literature.

Lead in to next slide: on the next slide we are going to look at a number of what we might consider core skills for success in both English Language and Literature.

What are the core skills for success in GCSE English Language and Literature?

Use phonics to decode words	Employ semantics and context to understand texts	Ability to spell complex vocabulary	Write for a range of genres and purposes
Understand the nuances of metaphor	Be able to analyse media texts and moving images	Manipulate sentence structures for impact	Understand and apply literary theory
Understand the generic features of fiction and non-fiction texts	Speak confidently in a range of contexts and for a variety of purposes	Summarise and synthesise texts	Understand the principles of structure (narrative, poetry, non-fiction)
Use subject terminology when responding to texts	Write with grammatical accuracy	Be able to adopt a role in drama performances	Construct coherent paragraphs
Legible handwriting	Craft coherent narratives	Read with fluency	Be able to infer meaning
Ability to spell tier 1 vocabulary	Construct a coherent argument	Understand how writers represent the world	Use sophisticated vocabulary for effect
Be able to evaluate texts	Language analysis	Be able to compare texts	Create media texts

Essential	Desirable	Enrichment

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For this activity, we want you to think of core concepts in English.

On the screen, there will appear three boxes, labelled:
Essential
Desirable
Enrichment

I would like you to categorise each 'skill' into an appropriate box. Allow 3 minutes on this.

Spend 2 minutes taking some feedback and note the variety of responses. Of course, the debate continues as to 'what is English?', with traditionalists seeing it as solely the remit of the written or formally spoken text, whilst others, 'progressives', would like to incorporate media and film.

Lead in to next slide: some of these elements might be described as threshold concepts.

Threshold concepts

A threshold concept is akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress.

'Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge 1 – Linkages to Ways of Thinking and Practising' *in Improving Student Learning – Ten Years On* by Meyer J H F and Land; edited by Charles Rust. The Oxford Centre for Staff Learning and Development (OCSLD), Oxford Brookes University, 2003

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Allow 2 minutes to read the slide.

At this point, it is important to note that the idea of threshold concepts is still relatively new, with many academics and educators often unable to agree on what makes a threshold concept! For this presentation, we will refer to core and threshold concepts as interchangeable terms.

Threshold concepts are, at their most fundamental level, knowledge and skills that permeate the subject. One way of thinking about them is to consider each concept as being on a continuum that is important at all levels of learning. Later on we will think about structure as a TC, but if we think of metaphor as a TC, then it can be taught and understood at a simple level at KS1 ("you're an angel") to more detailed metaphorical concepts (extended metaphors) at a later stage.

Lead in to the next slide: on the next slide, we will look at the characteristics of a TC.

Threshold concepts

- Transformative

- Troublesome

- Irreversible

- Integrative

- Discursive

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Transformative: changes the way we think about our subject: it might have wide ranging historical consequences (Newton theorising on gravity, for example), or it might have more personal ones (a Y7 grasping Newton's theory); it changes how we think about our discipline.

Troublesome: alien, counter-intuitive, intellectually absurd. Ever had to explain to someone why, when we put the clocks forward, it stays lighter in the evening? Galileo condemned for heresy for supporting Copernican theory, etc.

Irreversible – it involves a paradigm shift in learning and cognition. We can never look or think about the concept again – we have unconsciously absorbed it (unconscious competence). You can't unlearn it and it is difficult to comprehend how you managed without knowing it (writing a fully formed sentence).

Integrative: brings together this new knowledge and allows us to link it to other disciplines or forms of knowledge.

Discursive: it develops the language of the student; introduces new vocab.

Optional: an example might be the concept of mise-en-scène in film studies. Firstly, it changes the way film is appreciated, evaluated and analysed (transformative). Secondly, it is troublesome - "So, you're telling me that things in the shot aren't just 'there'?" It can be irreversible: students never look at a film in the same way again. It

brings an enhanced appreciation of textual structure; improved reading of literature, even prepositional awareness (integrative). It has its own vocabulary (discursive, bounded).

Lead in to the next slide: we are going back to the 'do now' task on slide 4 and try to refine what we think are 'threshold concepts'.

Activity one

- Which of these concepts would you consider to be 'threshold concepts'?
- Choose **three**

Use phonics to decode words	Employ semantics and context to understand texts	Ability to spell complex vocabulary	Write for a range of genres and purposes
Understand the nuances of metaphor	Be able to analyse media texts and moving images	Manipulate sentence structures for impact	Understand and apply literary theory
Understand the generic features of fiction and non-fiction texts	Speak confidently in a range of contexts and for a variety of purposes	Summarise and synthesise texts	Understand the principles of structure (narrative, poetry, non-fiction)
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Ability to spell tier 1 vocabulary	Construct a coherent argument	Understand how writers represent the world	Use sophisticated vocabulary for effect
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Allow 5 minutes for this activity.

Lead in to next slide: we are now going to think about narrative structure as a threshold concept. This will be the main focus of the session.

Writing on threshold concepts

On page 4 of your booklet, you will find recent authors that have written about threshold concepts.

How do these compare to your selection of threshold concepts in the previous activity?

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Here's what some recent writers have said about threshold concepts. The only one that doesn't name them as such is David Didau, although he does refer to these terms in a blog he wrote about them some time ago.

Threshold concepts versus assessment objectives

Please refer to page 5 of the booklet to find assessment objectives for GCSE English Language and GCSE English Literature

1. To what extent are assessment objectives informed by threshold concepts?

2. Where do the assessment objectives and threshold concepts overlap?

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Optional activity

Let's focus on narrative structure as a threshold concept

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Why structure?

- Fiction
- Non-fiction
- Rhetoric
- Poetic form
- Moving images
- Drama texts
- Computer games
- Graphic novels
- Still images

- **Analysis**

- **Production**

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3 minutes

Ask group to put reasons for structure as a TC in the chat. Then reveal the lists.

Explain how structure is integral to a number of genres and forms. Understanding structure provides the skills required for analysis of and production of texts of differing generic types.

Lead in to next slide: you're not alone in identifying structure as a TC. On the next two slides you will see that a number of notable writers and academics have also identified structure as a TC.

Why structure?

Ian Warwick (in his essay *Some Key Threshold concepts for English* for London Gifted & Talented, londongt.org)

- mythos (conscious construction of plot)
- catharsis (empathy and understanding of character)
- ethos (a text's inherent values)
- mimesis (art as a distorted mirror on life)
- phronesis (the contextual significance of a text).

David Didau (*Making Meaning in English* (2021)

- metaphor
- pattern and structure
- story/narrative
- argument
- grammar
- context.

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Slides 15 and 16: 1 minute, to reiterate that all four writers refer to structure and its variants

Why structure?

Paul T. Corrigan (in his article *Threshold Concepts in Literary Studies*): text, meaning, context, form, reading.

Alex Quigley (in his article *Designing a new curriculum – what are your 'big ideas'?* for theconfidentteacher.com):

- the role of myth and the story-teller
- narrative structure
- genre
- the concept of power (character relationships, gender, class etc.)
- phonic decoding and vocabulary decoding
- conscious manipulation of sentence structures for effect
- generic writing structures
- a recognition and application of complex patterns of language, imagery and plot.

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Lead in to next four slides: we are going to look at what the chief examiners have said about 'structure' in their reports

Perspectives on structure from chief examiner reports

- Read the extracts from various 'Reports on the exam' for GCSE English Language and Literature that can be found on page 12 of the Resource booklet.

- Consider the points made about candidates' use of structure as a method

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Put the report extracts in the handbook and on screen.

Progression in teaching structure

1. How do you ensure a continuity of academic progression from KS2 to KS3?

2. Now consider: when do you teach structure? Where does it appear in your curriculum?

3. How do you teach structure? What texts do you use?

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In small groups, I'd like you to consider the 'Progression in narrative' chart designed for a primary academy (https://www.oasisacademywatermead.org/uploaded/Watermead/Progression_in_narrative.pdf)

Take a moment to look at the discussion points. Take a screen shot if you wish.
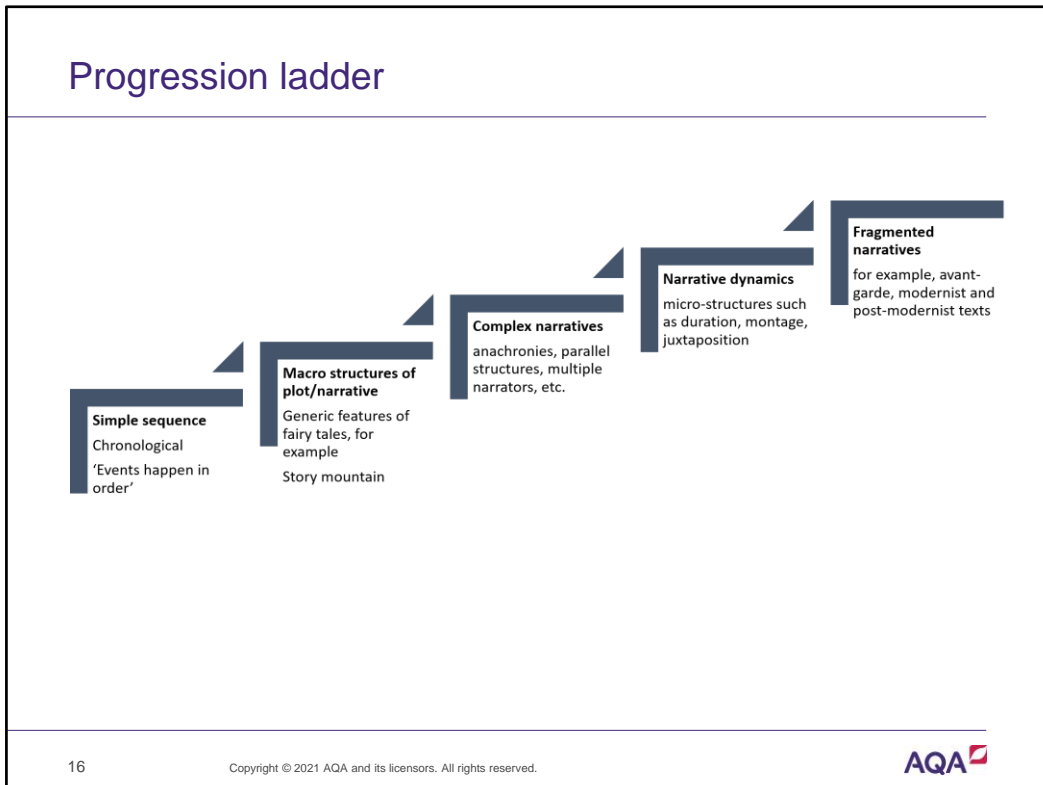
This is a progression ladder I've designed for the threshold concept of 'structure'. We could spend time discussing where the primary progression map fits into this. Ask:

what does a chronological approach to Paper 1 Question 3 reveal about the teaching, response to and the assessment of structure?

Give for responses to this ladder in the chat. Point out that 'anachronies' refers to flashforwards (prolepsis) and flashbacks.

Lead in: on the next slide, I've highlighted the 4th step, which adds a layer of structural analysis that describes a closer analysis of movement between different elements of text without necessarily relying on chronology.
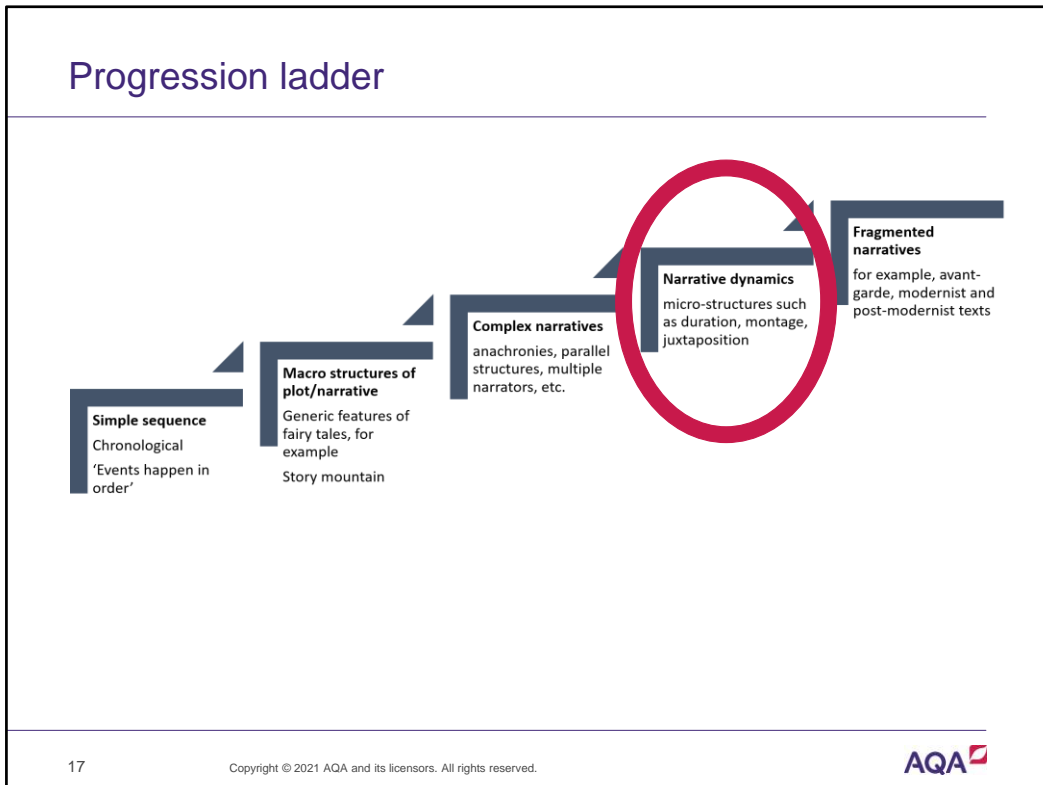
Lead in: for this next activity, I want to focus on what we will call 'narrative dynamics', the elements of which are represented pictorially on the next slide.
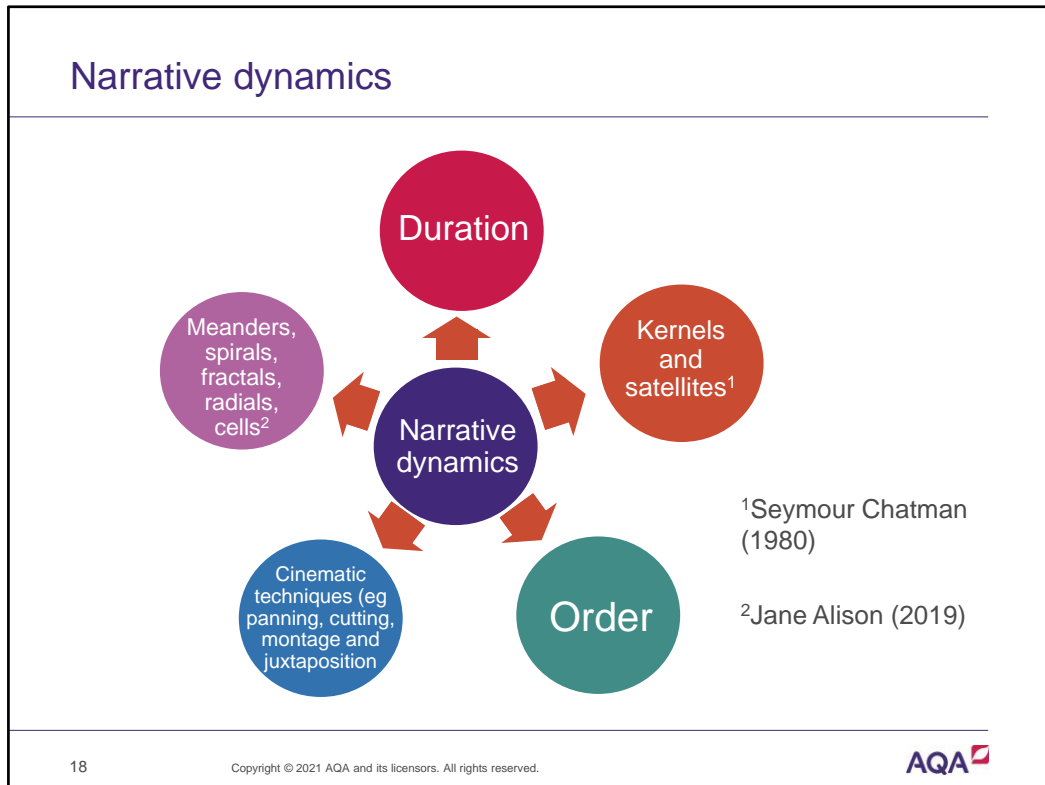
These ideas are taken from the two books referred to in the final slide. These two books are invaluable if you want to know more about narrative structure. The Chatman book is highly theoretical, but the chapter on kernels and satellites (an idea we will come to in a minute) is really fascinating. The Alison book is a fabulous read and in it she examines a range of texts that employ structural/narrative features that move away from traditional narratives without being too avant-garde.

Take a minute to explain the different elements of the diagram:
Duration we will come to later. Chatman and Alison use this phrase to refer to the relationship between 'real time' and the narrative events being recounted.
b)   Kernels and satellites we will look at on the next few slides
c)   Order is precisely that: the order in which events appear in the narrative and the relationships between them
d)   Cinematic techniques is again something we will look at in the next section, but reading a text with 'the television in the head' can provide students with a strategy to visualise the text and consider which elements the writer wants us to focus on
e)   There is no time here to look at Alison's concept of meanders, spirals, fractals, radials and cells, but these terms are used by Alison to describe narratives that deviate from normal narrative and perspectival forms.

Lead in: we will take a few minutes to define Chatman's idea of kernels and satellites.

Narrative dynamics 1: Kernels and satellites (Chatman, 1980)

- ***Kernels***: 'narrative moments that give rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events. They are nodes or hinges in the structure, branching points which force a movement into one of two (or more) possible paths ... [They] cannot be deleted without destroying the narrative logic.'

- ***Satellites***: 'the workings out of the choices made at the kernels ... Their function is that of filling in, elaborating, completing the kernel; they form the flesh on the skeleton.'

Taken from Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse* (pages 53–56).

You will find an example based on *Macbeth* on page 6 of your booklet

Story and Discourse by Seymour Chatman, Cornell University Press, 1980

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Give delegates 1 minute to read the slide.

Chatman assigns a hierarchy to narrative events – some are more important than others. Major events are called kernels: they advance the plot by raising and satisfying questions. The creative team at Pixar refer to each of the scenes within a film narrative as major beats – these make up the 'spine' of the story. The equivalent then is the kernel.

However, within these scenes are what they call 'minor beats' – these are moments in the scene that develop the detail, and each of these 'major beats' will have an internal structure of its own. Chatman's equivalent is the satellite.

In your handbook, you can see an example of how this has been applied to a decisive narrative moment in Macbeth. Whilst there is no time to explore this here, you can see from the example there that a discussion of kernels and satellites with students encourages them to think about WHY a writer has structured the text in that way. There is also an activity that you can use in class or with teachers in your department.

Lead in: we will now apply some of this knowledge to a reading of two texts. The first is from Lord of the Flies, and the second is the source used in November 2020 paper 1, an extract from The Silk Factory.

Kernels and satellites (Chatman, 1980)

Now consider one of the Literature texts that you teach and apply the principle of '*kernels*' and '*satellites* to a particular scene, chapter, or sequence.

1. Decide on a particular scene within the narrative that might be characterised as a **kernel** (for example, Macbeth's decision to kill Duncan).
2. What are the authorial decisions that the writer could have made at this moment in the narrative?
3. What might have been the narrative impact of these alternative decisions?
4. What do these alternatives reveal about the reasons why the writer took the path they did?
5. What are the satellites within this kernel and what is their narrative impact?

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Narrative dynamics 2: duration

Please refer to the table on page 7 of your booklet

 AQA

Give 2 minutes to read the slide

Lead in: for the final activity, we're going to read the extract from 'The Silk Factory' used in November 2020's paper 1.

The Silk Factory

Consider the source from the November 2020 Paper 1 Explorations in Creative Reading and Writing Insert

- Think about the 'duration' of each paragraph. How does each contribute to the narrative dynamic?

- Complete the table on page 10 of the booklet for the first 4 paragraphs of the source.

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Give 10 minutes in groups to discuss.

The Silk Factory

	Type of 'duration'	Example	Impact
1			
2			
3			
4			

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Take feedback

So what?

How might the study of narrative dynamics improve student responses to language and literature?

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Read the slide and move in to the next slide for a summary

Summary

- Threshold concepts can provide an effective framework for curriculum planning

- Structure is a threshold concept

- Teaching of macro-structure is important, but…

- Exploring micro-structures and narrative dynamics will deepen students' understanding of literary texts

- Teaching narrative dynamics through film helps students apply a visual schema to written texts

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Threshold concepts can provide an effective framework for curriculum planning

Structure is a threshold concept

Teaching of macro-structure is important, but…

Exploring micro-structures and narrative dynamics will deepen students' understanding of literary texts

Teaching narrative dynamics through film helps students apply a visual schema to written texts

Structure: further reading

- *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, by Seymour Chatman (1980)

- *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative*, by Jane Alison (2019)

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Any questions?

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Event materials

The electronic materials from this event will be available to download shortly. If you aren't able to download them at this time, they will be made available to you in the customer portal of our online booking system.

Once we receive notification that you have attended the course, you will be sent a certificate of attendance email. When you receive the email, please log in to your account and the materials will be available on the 'my resources' tab on the welcome screen.

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Please explain to the delegates that it may take a few days for the materials to be made available as we need to receive confirmation that they have attended (ie when we receive the attendance list). Once we have this confirmation, we can send a certificate of attendance email and the materials will be available in the portal. It is important that, if a delegate has attended in place of another colleague (ie they are not the named person on the attendance list) then they must let us know their name, school and email address so that we can send them a copy of the certificate email and provide access to the materials. Please send in the attendance list as soon as you can.
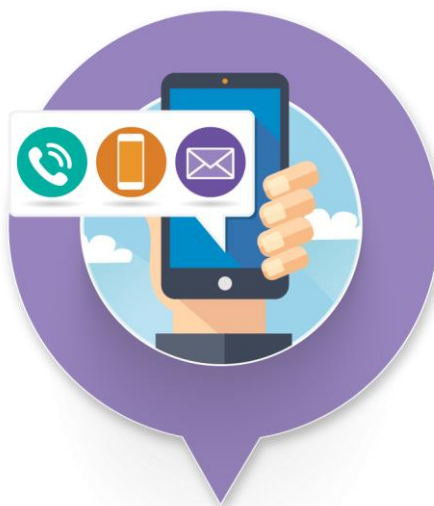
Our relevant Twitter accounts are:
@AQAEnglish (English subjects)
@AQAMaths (Maths subjects)
@AQA (Any other subjects).

Thank you