GCSE
ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Virtual communities

Resource booklet

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Threshold concepts
Writing on threshold concepts

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.
David Didau doesn't refer to threshold concepts here, but he does refer to these terms in his blog.

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 storyteller
• 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.

Threshold concepts versus assessment objectives

From the **GCSE English Language Specification**, Section 4.5, 'Assessment objectives'
- AO1:
  - identify and interpret explicit and implicit information and ideas
  - select and synthesise evidence from different texts
- AO2: Explain, comment on and analyse how writers use language and structure to achieve effects and influence readers, using relevant subject terminology to support their views
- AO3: Compare writers' ideas and perspectives, as well as how these are conveyed, across two or more texts
- AO4: Evaluate texts critically and support this with appropriate textual references
- AO5: Communicate clearly, effectively and imaginatively, selecting and adapting tone, style and register for different forms, purposes and audiences. Organise information and ideas, using structural and grammatical features to support coherence and cohesion of texts
- AO6: Candidates must use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation. (This requirement must constitute 20% of the marks for each specification as a whole.)

From the **GCSE English Literature Specification**, Section 4.2, 'Assessment objectives'
- AO1: Read, understand and respond to texts. Students should be able to:
  - maintain a critical style and develop an informed personal response
  - use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations.
- AO2: Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.
- AO3: Show understanding of the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they were written.
- AO4: Use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.

Kernels and satellites

An example from Macbeth

Kernel: Macbeth contemplates killing Duncan

Alternatives:
• he doesn't kill Duncan
• he gets Lady Macbeth to kill Duncan
• he waits for a more opportune time.

Why now? By killing off Duncan at this point in the narrative, Shakespeare:
• reveals the ruthlessness of Macbeth
• reveals Macbeth's unnecessary haste
• places Macbeth in a vulnerable and suspicious position ("in our house?")
• provides dramatic irony (the scene follows on from the execution of Cawdor).

Satellites within the kernel
1. Macbeth sees the dagger, which precedes the murder.
   Impact: reinforces the supernatural theme; enables Shakespeare to make connections between Macbeth and classical predecessors of equal notoriety; creates a scene of stasis and anticipation which again ramps up the tension.

2. The murder occurs off-stage.
   Impact: this amplifies the horror of the act (it also follows the conventions of Greek tragedy); showing the murder is unnecessary – we already know about Macbeth's brutality; Shakespeare needs us to sympathise with Macbeth – showing the murder of an 'innocent' might remove this affective response.

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?

Narrative dynamics

Type of duration	Speed	Definition	Example
Gap (ellipsis)	Fastest	No text/much story time	'white space'; new chapters; the jump-cut or edit in film
Summary	Fast	Little text/much story time	Exposition; summary of narrative events to move the plot forward; montage in film;
Scene	'Real time'	Text time = story time	Dramatic scene; dialogue, choreography, slivers of description
Dilation (stretch)	Slow	Much text/little story time	Words take longer to read than the event would (classic example; Ambrose Bierce's 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge')
Pause	Slowest	Much text/no story time	Diversion from narrative flow; authorial intrusion or contemplation

A detailed structural reading of The Silk Factory

Please refer to the November 2020 Paper 1 Explorations in Creative Reading and Writing Insert, which is available in the pre-event download folder

Paragraph 1

This paragraph mixes the elements of summary and scene. The writer states explicitly that Rosie sees a 'stranger child'. This unsettling opening sentence foreshadows the events to follow and provides a central point from which the narrative radiates. What follows digresses and meanders away from this revelation, flowing quickly then slowly before looping back to the child later in the passage.

Paragraph 2

This is a 'real-time' scene told from Rosie's perspective. It is important to notice that Rosie's vision is dulled by the old glass. The writer spends some time emphasising the visual distortion created by the windows. Objects are 'out of shape', and nothing is as it seems. The phrase 'shrink and stretch' can be seen as a meta-narrative statement which describes perfectly the way that the scene's real time dilates, especially with the digression in the following paragraph which draws attention entirely to the garden. The enigma of Rosie's trauma provides a narrative hook that partially explains her state of mind, as well as hinting at the possibility of her sighting of the 'stranger child' as a supernatural or psychological phenomenon. Cinematically, the cut from Rosie looking at the children to the image of her hands in the water provides a moment of narrative distraction and the final sentence is a classic trope of the supernatural genre: the sudden appearance of a figure who was not there a moment ago.

Paragraph 3

This paragraph is a typical example of narrative dilation. The writer shifts attention away from the child in this paragraph and instead focuses on the garden. It is fenced off and secured with a padlocked door, so there is no clear opening for the child to have entered the garden. Furthermore, the nettles and branches reinforce the garden as a restricted space, whilst the image of the tree, with its gnarled and malformed shape, creates a sense of malevolence. The mysterious garden wall harks back to fairy-tale narratives such as 'Rapunzel', or Oscar Wilde's 'The Selfish Giant': it creates an enigmatic space of exclusion, of mystery and fantasy, a screen on which one can project one's own desires, dreams – or nightmares! Structurally, the text sets up a similarity between Rosie's hands in the sink and the tree's 'knuckles in the earth', perhaps hinting at Rosie's potential collapse into darkness. Note that the writer has deliberately delayed providing the reader with further information on the child to enhance expectations and reinforce its mystery.

Paragraph 4

This paragraph quickens the narrative dynamic once more and offers a real-time scene.

Reading this paragraph cinematically is also useful. The sequence acts as a pan, moving along from the girl sitting amongst the daisies (and once again, an image of hands provides an important motif around which the passage seems to circle) to Cara who is also moving amongst the plants.

The 'cut' back to Rosie bending forward to look through the window draws our attention once more to the quality of Rosie's perspective – she chooses one of the clearest panes to gaze through. Narrative time dilates once again to allow for a lingering description of the child whose other-worldly strangeness is reinforced in several ways:

- the other children seem unaware of her presence;
- she has her back to Rosie which creates a physical barrier to recognition;
- her hunched frame and unkempt appearance connect her to the dishevelled state of the garden;
- her costume appears to be of another time but is also linked to Cinderalla – a fairy-tale character and thus a further hint at the girl as a figure of imagination.

Paragraph 5
The rhythm slows with time paused for narrative contemplation. The writer makes explicit mention of the inaccessibility of the garden, further reinforcing the mystery of the child's appearance.

Paragraph 6
We are now back to 'scene' and real-time. The restricted first-person perspective positions the reader firmly with Rosie's point-of-view. We can neither confirm or deny the child's physical presence, and the earlier description of the glass is a reminder of the distorted lens through which Rosie observes these events. Once again the image of hands is foremost and this time an explicit link is made between Rosie and the girl – she too is left-handed. The child's eeriness is further enhanced by her furtive movements. Again, she is compared to the natural world which reinforces her connection to the garden and its mystery.

Paragraph 7
The short paragraph, a combination of summary (we are 'told' about the child), dilation (Rosie's observation is instantaneous), reaffirms the child's mysterious nature, whilst the distress that Rosie sees is also a reflection of her own trauma, as referred to by the writer at the start of the passage.

Paragraph 8
The first sentence of the paragraph occurs in real-time, a sudden impulsive movement that shifts narrative gears – and once again the hands motif is repeated. However, the narrative then shifts to an odd combination of narrative summary in the conditional voice that suggests a reflective mood. Rosie's intent in this paragraph is undermined by the modal verbs in the conditional clauses: 'she would go gently', 'she could persuade' contrasts with the sense of uncertainty created in the reader's mind by the grammatical structures.

Paragraph 9
The dynamic in the final paragraph returns to 'scene' with events happening in real-time. The immediacy of the final sentence and the abruptness of the child's disappearance contribute to the mysterious nature of the events.

	Type of 'duration'	Example	Impact
1			
2			
3			
4			

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

Reports on the exam

Report on the exam 2019: GCSE English Literature

- 'Much more attention was paid to how writers have structured their texts and the impact this has on meaning … There is a possibility that because terminology related to structure is less common, students are able to discuss structure with clarity and fluency, using simple terminology such as 'at the start / this changes when / in contrast…''
- 'As an illustration of how students could use the structure of the text to powerful effect, many noted the parallels between Macdonald's beheading in the extract and Macbeth's beheading in the final scene of the play, drawing pertinent conclusions to support their own interpretations.'
- 'Exploring aspects of structure gives students an additional avenue to pursue, and can open the text in a different way, looking at a broader picture, rather than focusing solely on the intricacies of word level analysis.'
- 'As long as students appreciate that the text has been deliberately ordered by the writer, to avoid a merely narrative retelling of the story, this can be a very productive line of enquiry for them.'
- 'Recognise that 'methods' means anything the writer has done deliberately … [eg] the structure of the text – the order of events, the juxtaposing of events, the use of characters as conscious constructs, contrasts or foils, so that what one character does illuminates and reflects on the actions of other characters, characterisation – how characters develop and change over the course of the text and how the writer portrays this.'

Report on the exam: Explorations in creative reading and writing – English Language 2019

- 'As the passage was linear in structure, students were engaged by the movement from outside to inside the van, and the use of pathetic fallacy at the start, understanding how it then becomes important to Alice's situation at the end. Many students were able to discuss these 'shifts' with some confidence, with many able to discuss contrasts between Hartop and Alice, as well as the link between the weather on the outside and the atmosphere/relationships inside the van.'
- 'Students are more successful if they note a structural feature at a specific point in the text and then comment on how it has developed from earlier or how it contrasts with the start or the end.'

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?

Further reading on threshold concepts

Cousin, G. (2006): An introduction to threshold concepts. (Available at: https://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/Cousin%20Planet%2017.pdf)

Didau, D (2015): Using threshold concepts to design a KS4 English curriculum. (Available at: https://learningspy.co.uk/english-gcse/using-threshold-concepts-to-design-a-ks4-english-curriculum/)

Land, R., Cousin, G., Meyer, J., and Davies, P. (2005): Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (3): implications for course design and evaluation. (Available at: https://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/ISL04-pp53-64-Land-et-al.pdf)

Meyer, J. and Land, R.: Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: Linkages to ways of thinking and practising within the disciplines. (Available at: http://www.etl.tla.ed.ac.uk//docs/ETLreport4.pdf)

Quigley, A (2013): Designing a new curriculum – what are your 'big ideas'? (Available at: https://www.theconfidentteacher.com/2013/11/designing-new-curriculum-big-ideas/)

https://www.nate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/A-Thematic-Curriculum-for-Key-Stage-3-English-Anthony-Cockerill.pdf

https://www.tes.com/news/can-paying-more-attention-threshold-concepts-transform-your-planning

https://mrbunkeredu.wordpress.com/2015/11/09/are-threshold-concepts-the-new-growth-mindset-or-why-we-need-blockers-in-the-staffroom/

Early Careers Framework link:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/978358/Early-Career_Framework_April_2021.pdf

Notes

Contact us

Our friendly team will be happy to support you between 8am and 5pm, Monday to Friday.

Tel: 0161 953 7504
Email: english-gcse@aqa.org.uk
Twitter: @AQAEnglish

aqa.org.uk