

OCR style

GCSE (9-1) English Language

Component 01: Communicating information and ideas – Practice Paper

J351/01 · Practice paper

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Text 1: 'Thirty Year 9s and a Dead Whiteboard Pen'

Original text written for Teach io in the style of a 21st-century newspaper opinion column. In this article, a newly qualified teacher describes her first lesson in a secondary school.

My first lesson as a real teacher began at 8.52 on a wet Tuesday in September, in a mobile classroom at the far end of the playing fields that smelt of damp carpet and somebody else's crisps. I had planned it for three weeks. I had a seating plan, a starter activity, a quiz on mini whiteboards and a joke about Shakespeare that I had practised on my flatmate. I had, I believed, thought of everything.

Then thirty Year 9s came through the door at once, like water through a broken dam, and I discovered that I had not thought of anything at all.

Nobody tells you how loud thirty teenagers are when they are not yet listening to you. It is not a single noise but a weather system: chairs scraping, bags thudding onto desks, a girl at the back singing, two boys arguing about a football result with the intensity of lawyers. I said 'Good morning' in the voice I had used at my interview. Nobody heard. I said it again, louder. A boy called Jayden looked up, said 'Morning, miss,' with enormous politeness, and went straight back to his argument.

The training course had warned us about this. 'Wait for silence,' our tutor had said. 'Never talk over them. Stand still. Look calm.' So I stood still and looked calm, or as calm as it is possible to look when your heart is going like a washing machine on spin. I waited. It felt like an hour. The clock above the whiteboard, which I later learned had been stuck at twenty past three since 2019, was no help at all.

And then, slowly, something happened. One by one they noticed me noticing them. The singer stopped. The lawyers lowered their voices. Somebody hissed 'Shh, she's waiting,' as if I were a bus that might leave without them. Within a minute, which is a very long time in a classroom, there was a kind of silence – not perfect, not obedient, but curious. They wanted to know who I was.

I would love to tell you that the rest of the lesson went to plan. It did not. The whiteboard pens had dried out. The Shakespeare joke was met with the blank pity usually reserved for a dad dancing at a wedding. A girl named Precious told me, kindly but firmly, that I had spelt 'necessary' wrong on the board. She was right.

40 But at 9.40, as they were packing away, Jayden – he of the
football argument – stopped at my desk. ‘That bit about Romeo
being a drama queen,’ he said. ‘That was actually all right.’
Then he was gone, out into the rain, leaving me holding a dead
whiteboard pen and feeling, absurdly, as though I had won
45 something.

People who have never taught imagine that the job is about
knowledge. It is not, or not mostly. It is about attention:
earning it, holding it, losing it and winning it back, thirty
times an hour, five hours a day. It is exhausting in a way
50 I had not believed possible. In my first half-term I fell
asleep at seven o’clock most evenings, still wearing my
lanyard.

Teachers are leaving the profession in worrying numbers, and I
understand why. The marking is endless; the pay is not what it
55 should be; and there are days when you drive home replaying
every mistake. Yet I keep coming back to Jayden, standing in
the doorway with rain on his hood. Nobody else has ever told
me that something I did was ‘actually all right’ and meant it
quite so completely.

Text 2: 'An Evening in a Ragged School', 1852

Original text written for Teach io in the style of a 19th-century magazine article. The writer, a gentleman volunteer, describes teaching at a 'Ragged School': a free charity school for the poorest children of a Victorian city, usually held in the evenings. 'Camphor' was a strong-smelling substance believed to protect against disease.

I had been warned, before I undertook the duties of a teacher in the Ragged School in Cinder Lane, that I should find the work disagreeable, and I confess that I went to it upon the first evening with no very cheerful expectations. My friends,
5 who are sensible men, assured me that I should be robbed, insulted, and very probably infected with a fever; and one of them, with great kindness, pressed upon me a little bottle of camphor, which he desired I would hold beneath my nose whenever the atmosphere grew too close.

10 The school is held in a long, low room that was formerly a hay-loft above a stable, and is reached by a wooden stair so steep and so rotten that I ascended it as a sailor climbs the rigging. It is lit by four tallow candles and a single smoky lamp, and warmed, when there is any warmth at all, by a stove
15 that devours more coals than the committee can well afford. There are benches for perhaps sixty; upon that first evening I counted above a hundred.

I wish I could convey to the reader the appearance of my scholars, but I doubt that any description of mine would be
20 believed. They were of every age from five to fifteen, and of every condition of raggedness. Some wore men's coats that trailed upon the boards behind them like the trains of duchesses; some had no shoes, and their feet were black and cracked with the cold; one little fellow, whom I afterwards
25 knew as Ned, wore nothing upon his head but a bandage, the history of which he would never explain. Many of them earn their bread by selling matches, sweeping crossings or holding horses in the street, and they come to us, I believe, chiefly because the room is warm and the lesson is free.

30 Of order, upon that first evening, there was none whatever. The noise was beyond anything I had imagined: a roaring, stamping, whistling uproar, in which my voice was as a single sparrow in a thunderstorm. I was pelted with orange-peel. My hat, which I had imprudently laid upon the desk, was carried
35 off and returned to me some time afterwards in a condition I shall not describe. When I attempted to read to them from the Gospel, a boy at the back, imitating my manner to admiration, read along with me in a voice of such solemn absurdity that the whole room shook with laughter, and I own that I was very
40 nearly obliged to laugh myself.

I went home that night resolved never to return. I lay awake until two o'clock, composing in my head a letter to the committee in which I regretted that pressing engagements prevented me from continuing; and I rose the next morning, I
45 scarcely know why, determined to go back.

I am glad that I did. Upon the third evening I abandoned the Gospel, which they had heard read badly a hundred times, and began instead to teach them their letters by chalking upon a slate the names of the very things they sold in the streets:
50 MATCHES, ORANGES, WATERCRESS. The effect was astonishing. The room fell, not silent – it was never silent – but attentive. A girl of perhaps eleven, who had until then done nothing but stare at me with a kind of fierce contempt, came forward and traced the word WATERCRESS with her finger, letter by letter,
55 her lips moving; and when she had done it she turned to the room with an expression of such triumph as I have seldom seen upon the face of any general.

I do not pretend that a fortnight has made scholars of them, nor that it has made a schoolmaster of me. The labour is
60 great, the reward uncertain, and the means at our disposal pitifully small. But I would say this to those comfortable persons who speak of the ragged children of this city as though they were a kind of vermin: that I have seen in that hay-loft more hunger for learning than in any college hall,
65 and that a nation which can leave such hunger unfed has no business to call itself Christian.