

OUTSTANDING TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

**FINAL REPORT ON THE OTLA PHASE 6 (ENGLISH) PROJECT -
AVOIDING THE ACRONYM**

The College of West Anglia

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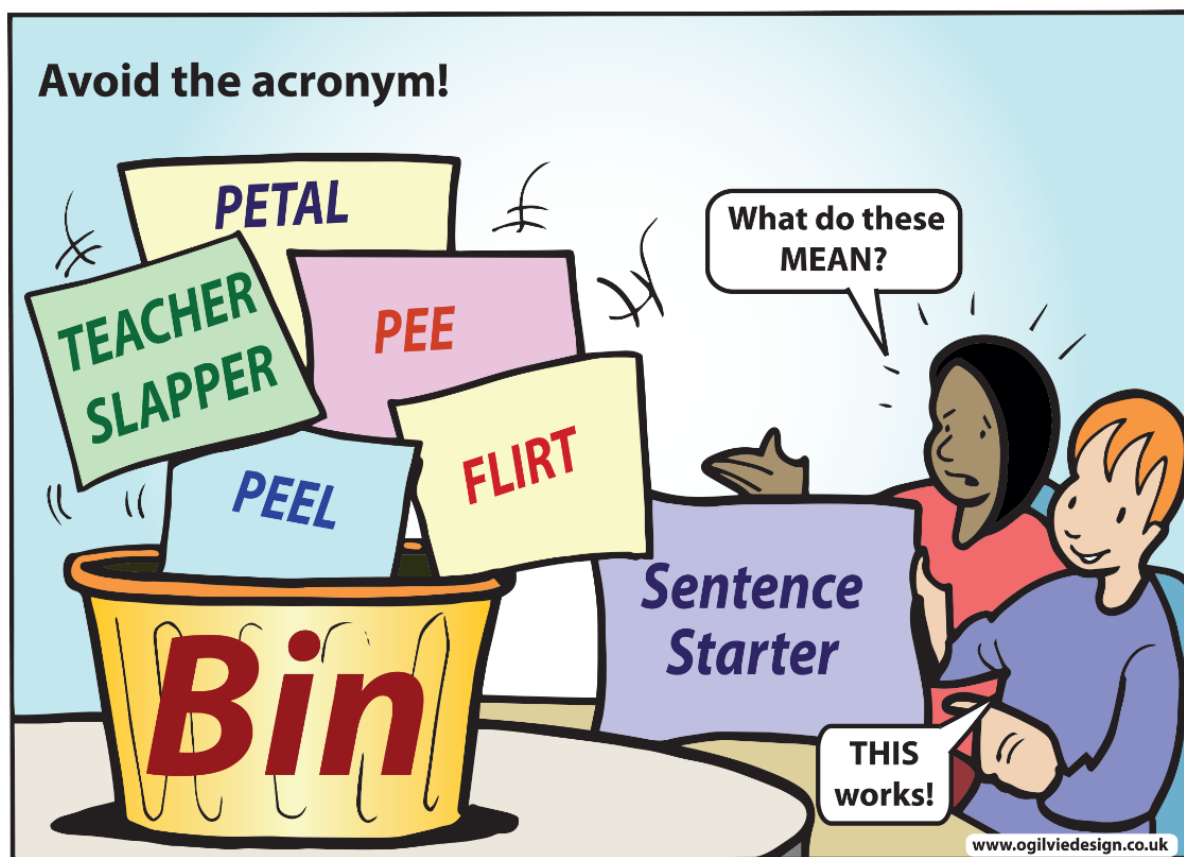


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Final Report - Avoiding the Acronym

The College of West Anglia



This project aimed to pilot the use of small, simple sentence starters to frame a response which we would also repeat for reading and use for all questions.

Summary

Anyone who has been an English examiner will know that students love to write an acronym at the top of their question paper. Unfortunately, anyone who has ever been an examiner will also know that this very rarely helps a candidate.

When marking, you almost become amused by the variety and absurdity of the range of acronyms used - my personal favourite was 'TEACHER SLAPPER' for use in poetry analysis. We all face challenges in teaching a 'resit' subject: one of the biggest is understanding what and how a student has been taught before.

At the College of West Anglia, we deliver AQA English language to over 600 students, each with a range of previous conceptions or often misconceptions. For many years, we wanted students to build on previous knowledge and allowed them freely to use whichever acronym had worked for them. However, we have increasingly discovered that the very tools designed to help students were often in fact confusing them.

As a large English department of 10 staff, we decided to avoid the use of such acronyms and use simple sentence starters to aid students instead. We wanted to

use these to help students to think more clearly about how to approach and start a question.

Rationale

One of the first English lessons we deliver attempts to explore the previous experiences that students have had with English language in their secondary schools. As part of this lesson we actively encourage students to be honest about what worked for them and what they struggle with.

These first few lessons present teachers with a mass of information and highlight common issues that all colleges face: the muddle between English Language and Literature; the feeling that “I didn’t need to revise as it was English”; a lack of belief in reading and the plethora of approaches to structuring a coherent exam response.

Every year, there is a distinct connection between these issues: confidence. As such, teachers often feel lost and unsure of where to begin in re-teaching a large and complex qualification. The information from students is discussed in the staffroom with collegiate exasperation and then battled with throughout the year. We wanted to focus on one of the specific issues faced by our students and re-direct their knowledge.

As part of these sessions, we noticed that we had collected approximately 8 different common acronyms used by students, with ‘PEE, PEEL, PEEZL’ used most often. We also noticed that common letters were used in acronyms but often meant different things. For example, an ‘R’ in ‘PEARL’ could mean ‘relate to context’ whereas it could also often mean ‘repetition/rhetorical question’ in another (Appendix 1).

We had used acronyms ourselves when teaching writing and allowed students to use the one they felt most comfortable with. But we still faced the problem of ‘How do I start this?’ and students would often write very little in exam responses. As a result, our intervention aimed to pilot the use of small, simple sentence starters to frame a response which we would also repeat for reading and use for all questions.

Approach

Although we operate across several campuses, we are lucky to be able to meet as a whole team every Friday afternoon to complete training. We used some of the Friday sessions to plan our project in four stages.

Creation of resources

- Met as a team to discuss one key area to focus on
- Discussed some common acronyms and how they were being used
- Collected data from students about which acronyms they used, and asked them to ‘translate’ them
- Created some sentence starters:
 - ‘The Writer uses language to’ or ‘I agree with’
 - ‘For example, they have used the word/phrases.’
 - ‘This makes me think/feel/imagine’

- Issued scaffolds for each question as we taught each question, including them in our pre-planned lessons (Appendix 2)
- Explicitly taught the scaffold by introducing, modelling and getting students to identify them in their own work

Adaptation of resources

- Examined a cross sample of student exam responses
- Discussed how we had taught these to ensure consistency
- Agreed how to teach a scaffold and how to communicate the reasoning behind it with students
- Adapted the sentence starter of: 'This makes me think/feel/imagine' to 'This suggests' as we found that the word 'feel' did not always apply to every question

Application of resources

- Used the scaffolds with students in every lesson (as we worked on exam questions in every lesson)

Collection of data:

- Collected data and feedback from students via:
 - a short questionnaire (Appendix 3)
 - discussion
- Observed teachers using the sentence starters in class
- Gathered feedback from staff throughout
- Identified that on average, students gained 1.6 marks on each question from using scaffolded sentences

Professional learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices

The most notable change to teaching, learning and assessment practices in the team was the heightened awareness of students' previous learning. This led to an increase in professional dialogue across the team and created further questions about how we could adapt teaching to maximise the transition from previous education.

Teachers are now hoping to create another action-based research project on the use of reading age data to further inform our first lessons with them.

Additionally, the use of a scaffold style task meant that staff had to clarify instructions, build relationships with students and model writing. Whilst this is deemed to be good practice anyway, it did refresh staff and reiterate the need for instructions to be clear and explicit.

Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices

Using a common set of sentences across all lessons allowed students to clearly understand the importance of the scaffold. In addition, students were able to make links and refocus, building their confidence. In one lesson, a student appeared to be

overwhelmed when asked to apply newly learnt knowledge to an exam question, but then asked their tutor 'Will we have those sentences again?' and responded with an enthusiastic 'yay' when told that they would be displayed shortly.

Using a repeated strategy also provided a clear signpost to students that an exam response was needed at that part of the lesson and therefore also required improved written output. This demonstrated to teachers that they need to review all lessons (including those used for Functional English) to ensure that students always approach writing with clear preparation.

Collaboration between colleagues improved greatly, sparking debates around the value of including an analysis of other misconceptions and confusions in our initial assessment. It also led us to discuss peer marking as we had asked students to highlight the use of the sentence starters in a critique of their work. Staff felt that getting students to read and analyse their own responses was incredibly effective.

Evidence of improvement in learners' achievements, retention and progression

Learner feedback showed that 98% remembered the teachers using the framework and 75% felt that it was useful in helping them to start an answer which had previously been a problem for many of them. 68% felt it helped to structure a response whilst 76% expressed positive aspects that they liked about using the scaffold, including 'helps to understand what to include/do'.

As well as this, we analysed a random sample of twenty 16-18 year old learners and compared results from one assessment point (without the use of the scaffold) to another assessment point where staff had used it. Although the data taken from the second assessment point captured the use of the scaffold in its early stages, we saw an increase of 32 marks in the overall score.

Staff consistently commented that relationships with students had benefitted from using clear and repeated guidelines. As the scaffolding sentences could apply to any previous exam boards that the students had studied, they also felt that this made their learning easier. Students also spoke positively of discussing their prior learning experiences and enjoyed having the freedom to voice their thoughts on their previous experience of English teaching.

Whilst we need to continue to tweak the phrases used, and the way in which we approach exam questions and how we utilise previous knowledge from students, it is clear that the framework supported them in starting and approaching an exam question.

Learning from this project

Clear gains:

- Students enjoyed the scaffolded sentence starters: they felt less confused, more willing to write and enjoyed the way they were repeated across lessons. Most remembered the sentences clearly in comparison to struggling to remember an acronym.

- Better teaching was observed with teachers as the sentence starters needed clear explanation. It evoked further discussion and ideas on how to build upon previous learning experiences faced by students.

Further Developments:

- To embed use of sentence starters into all writing tasks, in all lessons across GCSE English.
- To review and update our induction/ initial processes so that we can more fully capture student views on what has helped/hindered in prior learning of the subject.
- To continue to work on peer assessment with a view to getting students to fully understand how they have applied a framework and how it has affected their exam responses.

Appendix 1 – Some common acronyms used

S	Structure	F	Form	P	Point
L	Language	L	Language	E	Evidence
I	Imagery	I	Imagery	E	Explain
M	Meaning	R	Repetition	Z	Zoom
E	Evidence	T	Theme	L	Link
Y	Your Response				
P	Personal Pronouns	S	Structure	S	Structure
E	Emotive Language	L	Language	M	Meaning
R	Rhetorical Questions	A	Alliteration	I	Imagery
S	Statistics	P	Personal Pronouns	L	Language
U	Use a metaphor	P	Point of View	E	Effect
A	Alliteration	E	Emotive language		
D	Direct Address	R	Repetition		
E	Exaggeration				
T	Theme	P	Point	P	Point
E	Exaggeration	E	Evidence	E	Evidence
A	Anecdotes	A	Analysis	E	Explain
C	Character	R	Relate to Context		
H	Hyperbole	L	Link back to Question		
E	Emotive Language				
R	Rhyme				

Appendix 2 - Examples of how the sentence starters framework was used

Question 4

To what extent do you agree?

- I agree that, because...
- For example, the writer uses the method (insert quote)...
- This suggests / makes me feel ...



How does the writer use language to present Susie?

The writer uses language to present Susie as...

For example, they write... (quote)

This suggests that...

Repeat.

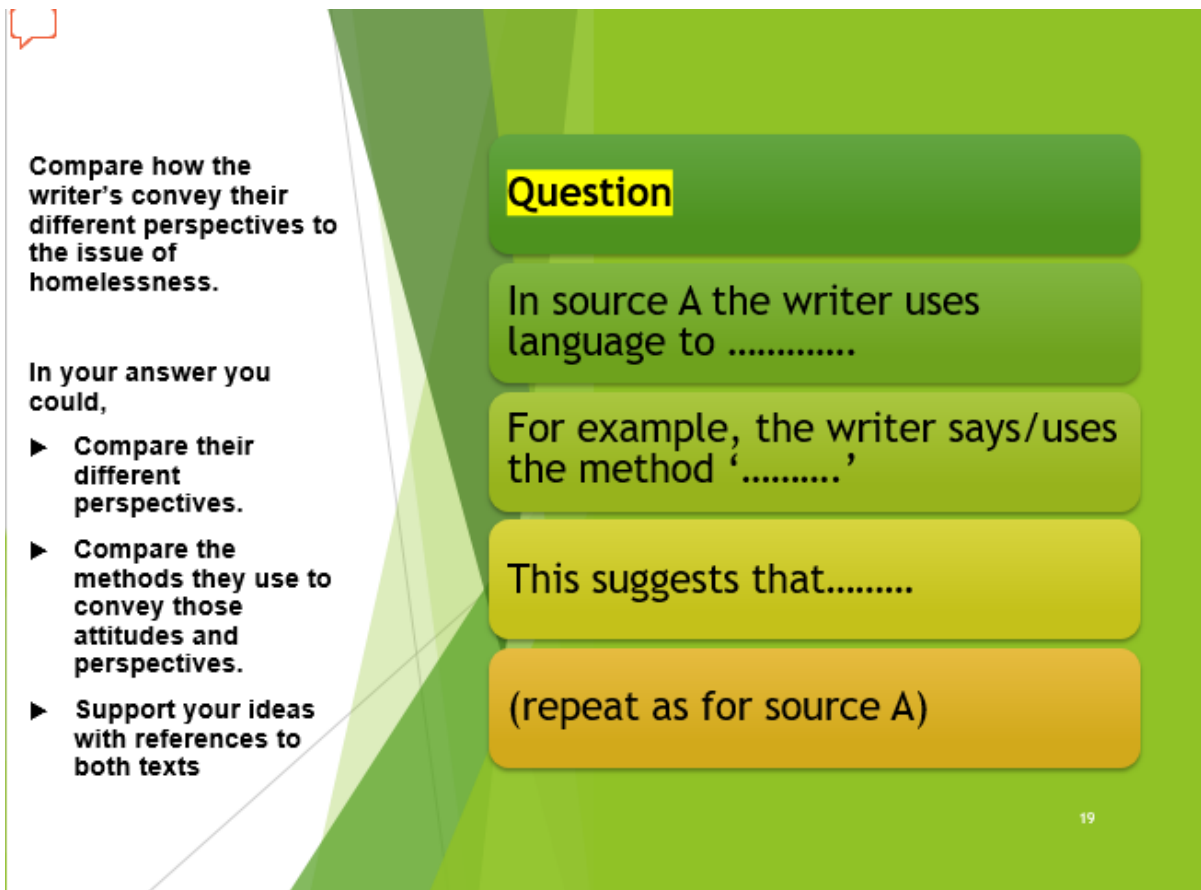
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Compare how the writers convey their different perspectives and feelings about the flat earth theory?

The writer of Text A believes/thinks/feels...

For example, they use the word/phrase...

This suggests...



Compare how the writer's convey their different perspectives to the issue of homelessness.

In your answer you could,

- ▶ Compare their different perspectives.
- ▶ Compare the methods they use to convey those attitudes and perspectives.
- ▶ Support your ideas with references to both texts

Question

In source A the writer uses language to

For example, the writer says/uses the method '.....'

This suggests that.....

(repeat as for source A)

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Paper 1: Exam Question -How to structure our answers for the Evaluation Question

Paragraph 1	I agree with the statement that....
	The writer creates a sense of panic and anxiety...
Paragraph 2	The writer does this <u>in order to</u> ...
	For <u>example</u> they have used the words/phases ...
	This suggests...
Paragraph 3	Another way the writer creates a sense of panic and anxiety is...
	The writer does this <u>in order to</u> ...
	For <u>example</u> they have used the words/phases ...
	This suggests...

Appendix 3 - Questionnaire used with students

CWA Writing Questionnaire 2019

This questionnaire is designed to help us understand what students find difficult about writing in exams and in class. Thank you for taking the time to complete it!

1. What do you personally find most difficult about writing answers to questions?

2. Out of 5, how difficult do you find it starting to write an answer? (1 – easy, 5 – very difficult)

3. This year in class, we have used frameworks to help you start and structure your answers. For example, for writing tasks we have put things on the board like this:

The writer uses language to...

For example, they have used the word/phrase...(quote)...

This suggests...

Do you remember seeing a framework like the one above in your lessons?

4. How useful are frameworks like this for helping you to start writing an answer? (1 – not at all useful, 5 – very useful)

5. How useful are frameworks like this for helping you understand how to structure your answer? (1 – not at all useful, 5 – very useful)

Appendix 4 - Questionnaire results

Question 1	Knowing what to write/planning	Starting	Understanding the Question	Getting ideas on paper	Structure	Ending	Developing points/adding	Paper colour	SPaG	Time	Everything	Nothing
	15	8	5	8	5	1	5	1	1	3	1	3
Question 2	1	2	3	4	5							
	5	8	23	8	6							
Question 3	Yes	No										
	49	1										
Question 4	1	2	3	4	5							
	0	1	11	18	18							
Question 5	1	2	3	4	5							
	1	3	11	20	12							
Question 6	1	2	3	4	5							
	1	2	15	18	11							
Question 7	1	2	3	4	5							
	1	4	15	12	12							
Question 8	PEE	PEEL	PEEZL	Yes								
	19	18	8	6								
Question 9	Framework	PEE	PEEL	PEEZL								
	12	8	9	2								
Question 10	Helps start	Helps with structure	Easy to understand	Helps understand what to	Generally helps	Helps think about	Doesn't help start	Doesn't tell you what to write, only	Worry too restrictive	Already know PEE so prefer	Confusing having different	
	10	1	5	8	1	1	1	1	2	3		

Case Study 1 – Mia

Mia* joined the College in September 2019, re-taking her English Language GCSE with us for the first time.

Before the use of the framework:

What is your impression of the situation the two boys have found themselves in?

The impression I get of the situation the two boys have found themselves in is that they are in a dangerous place, the place that the boys are in is a 'jungle', the jungle ~~is a~~ can be ~~also~~ associated with lots of heat and lots of wild animals that can cause death, ~~by~~ ~~poison~~. This is because some animals use poison to keep themselves safe. This is a dangerous place for the boys to be in as it puts them at risk of hurting themselves or even death. The jungle can also be associated with heat, this is because in the source the jungle was apparently incased in

Improved work with the applied framework:

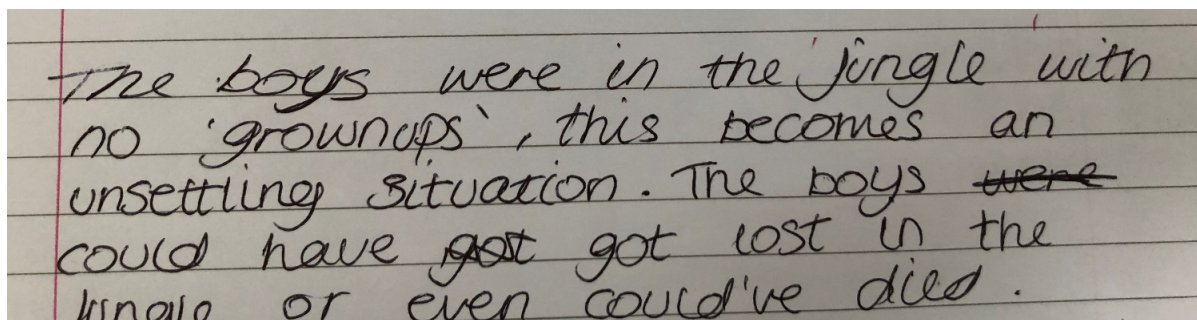
How does the writer use language to describe the war?

The writer uses language to describe the new tank. For example, the writer describes the tank as like an 'monster' ~~and~~ 'belched out smoke'. The word 'monster' suggests that the tanks are evil like which could also suggest that the tanks could be from the ~~opposite~~ ~~side~~ opposite side eg:- ~~the~~ enemy. Furthermore, the ~~word~~ ^{phrase} 'belched out smoke' ~~is~~ can also suggest that the tank could be like a dragon, this ~~would~~ makes me feel worried for the kid. ~~as~~ ~~he~~ ~~is~~ ~~only~~ this is because, he is only a child and isn't strong enough to fight it off.

Case Study 2 – Jamie

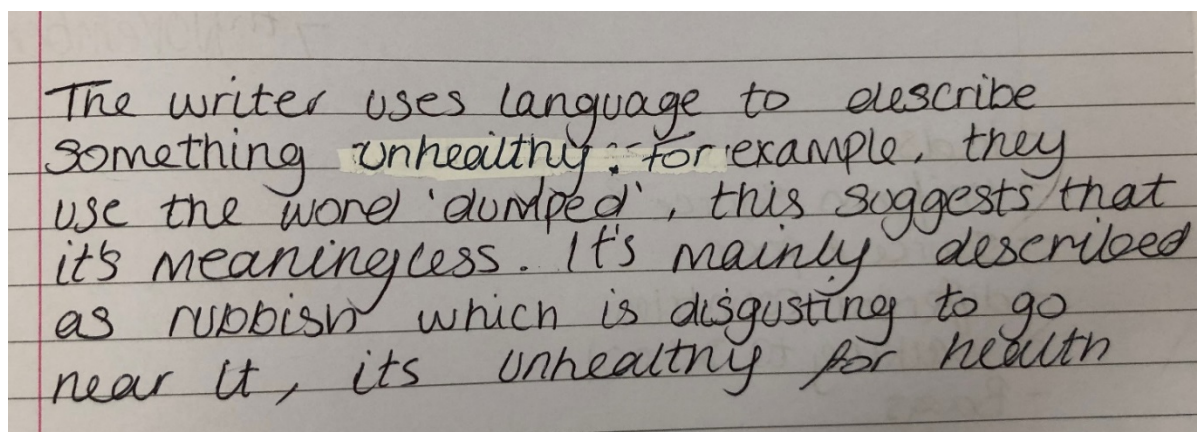
Jamie* joined the College in September 2019, re-taking their English Language GCSE with us for the first time.

Before the use of the framework:



The boys were in the jungle with no 'grownups', this becomes an unsettling situation. The boys ~~were~~ could have ~~got~~ got lost in the jungle or even could've died.

Improved work with the applied framework:

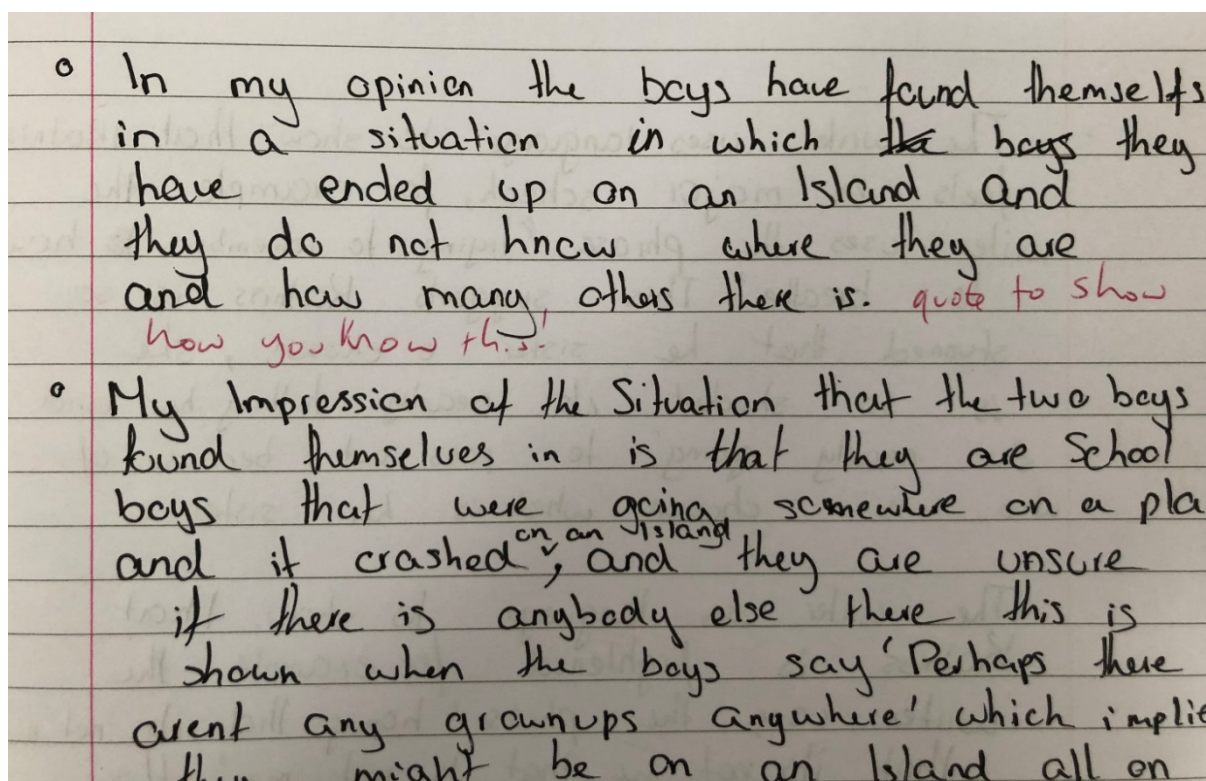


The writer uses language to describe something unhealthy: - for example, they use the word 'dumped', this suggests that it's meaningless. It's mainly described as rubbish which is disgusting to go near it, its unhealthy for health

Case Study 3 – Karin

Karin* joined the College in September 2019, re-taking their English Language GCSE with us for the first time.

Before the use of the framework:



Improved work with the applied framework:

