A/A\* GCSE English

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Literature

Hints, Tips, and Examples to Help You Improve Your Literature Grade

A/A\* Literature Tips

*Adding skilful touches to your essays*

**Tip #1 – A Little Says A Lot – BE CONCISE**

Learn and practise carefully constructed sentences that cram in understanding – here is one for the poem Belfast Confetti:

Carson’s autobiographical account of the detonation of a ‘dirty’ bomb utilises a series of examples of orthographic imagery, creating a sense of the very foundations of his understanding falling apart like the buildings around him.

High-level technical and specific language, and a final clause that comments on the effect.

**Tip #2 – Plan carefully**

Select the ideas that you will use – while all your ideas may be relevant, not all will fit together cohesively to create an effective essay. A good essay takes the reader on a circular journey, and there are no stops or jumps – link your ideas carefully.

What do you think is the importance of the Inspector and how does Priestley present him?

Catalyst – mirror – conscience – prosecution lawyer – narrator – voice of reason – foil to Mr Birling

**Tip #3 – Write with an academic tone**

Example:

An Inspector Calls

Edna – Priestley not only employs the character of Eva Smith to respresent the oppression of the working class, he also uses the silent maid, Edna, in order to symbolise the silence of the working class: they were politically disenfranchised; morally subjugated and socially alienated from Edwardian Britain.

Tip #4 Evaluate

Give a qualified opinion on how effective the writing is at achieving the writer’s purposes – using adverbs.

|  |
| --- |
| effectively, skilfully, coherently, brashly, quietly, gradually, subtly, thoroughly, demonstrably, brilliantly, deliberately, increasingly, impressively, patiently, successfully, methodically, partially |

Cummings effectively creates a parody of a politician that incisively strikes out at the smugness and self-satisfaction of those who had no part in the war, yet claim its glory; although the finer points of his case are lost somewhat by the incoherency of the speaker.

Tip #5 Alternative Interpretations

Walk around a device or technique – see it from several angles – imagine the reaction from several different audiences. A good way to achieve this with heritage texts is to contrast the reaction of the original audience with the modern audience:

To a modern audience, Romeo and Juliet have become symbols of the grandness of love – sacrificing self and family honour to be with the one we love. However, it’s likely that Shakespeare’s original audience would have perceived the story very differently: from their perspective, the lovers get their just deserts for abandoning the role they play in their families and society to selfishly follow their own desires. Shakespeare may have intended the play as a ‘horrible warning’ rather than an example of love as it should be.

**A/A\* Poetry Responses**

Example 1

**How is love presented in IPUY and one other poem?**

Love is a concept explored in two different perceptive ways by Fenton and Duffy. Within the title, there is a clever play of words which leaves the reader unable to initially ascertain meaning. Paris, symbolically a place associated with love, is used to replace the word ‘love’ due to the man’s disillusioned state due to the damage from another. Quickdraw, potentially considered a spelling error drawing together two words ‘Quick’ and ‘draw’ immediately exposes the complex, disjointed and damaged relationship the woman is caught up in.

The symbolic interpretations are evident throughout the poems and Fenton exquisitely presents the damaged mind of the man through the ‘crack across the ceiling’. This could be interpreted as the psychological damage haunting him, above his head which he is unable to shake off. Likewise, the ‘Last Chance Saloon’ uses Western references to a last stepping point on a journey. Perhaps this could be a metaphorical reference to a last chance to resolve the relationship or the fact she has turned to alcohol to cope with her emotional turmoil which is reinforced through the adjective ‘hard’ when referring to the ‘liquor’ she drinks whilst caught in the turbulent situation.

Fenton’s ingenious craft comes to light with the sexually motivated innuendos seen in the euphemisms of ‘doing this and that’ and the fact he is in love with ‘all points forth’. The narrator is clearly unable to speak truthfully but the ‘hotel wall’ which is ‘peeling’ could symbolically represent him ‘stripping back’ his protective layers and becoming more open. Likewise, in Quickdraw the metaphor ‘the trigger of my tongue’ reinforces the desire to create pain and both poems clearly reinforce the pain that can arise through love and it can manipulate behaviours to damage, manipulate and causes sadness in others, highlighted by the enjambment ‘... blast me/ through the heart’ which shows the ongoing, relentless struggle of fighting the pain of a failed relationship. Fenton shows the same through the fact that he’s ‘angry’ and the verb, along with ‘bamboozled’ shows he is furious with what love has done to him.

Example 2

Both Belfast Confetti and Mametz Wood present civilian victims through use of lists. In Belfast Confetti, Carson presents the items falling from the destructive dirty bomb ‘nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys’. This list of nouns suggests the magnitude of items falling, but also uses everyday items to perhaps suggest that this level of destruction is seen as normal in Belfast during The Troubles. It is also, possibly, to be seen as ironic as ‘Nuts’, ‘bolts’ and ‘nails’ are generally items that hold things together, but are being used as something to rip society apart. Although people live in Belfast, they have not chosen to be involved in this situation, yet this has become their way of life. Similarly, in Mametz Wood, we see unsuspecting victims of a fight that isn’t theirs. Although the farmers are not fighting in the war, they are affected by it. Sheers lists ‘a chit of bone... skull’ again listing the remnants of war and conflict. Although these farmers are not directly affected, the language used shows the respect offered to fallen soldiers. The adjective ‘relic’ suggests that the remains of the soldiers are in some way something to revere and idolise. Like in Belfast Confetti, these farmers are unable to go about their daily routine without constant reminders of the conflict. The plosive sounds in the metaphor ‘broken bird’s egg’ could perhaps suggest the stuttering inability to continue normal life in this place, or alternatively, could be a recreation of the sounds of the battlefield. Sheers could well be presenting the lasting echo on the land that war has cast. This is not dissimilar to Belfast Confetti’s use of metaphor in ‘All the alleyways and side streets blocked with stops and colons’ where again, the conflict has affected the citizens so deeply that they see the land as marked. Perhaps the ‘stops’ and ‘colons’ are not in fact, the police or army, but are the ingrained set of beliefs that certain religions do not go to certain places in Belfast, that they are physically stopped by a mental echo of conflict.

Example 3

**Grief in ‘Poppies’ and ‘Come on, Come Back’**

In ‘Come On, Come Back’, the poet Stevie Smith presents the theme of grief through the voice of the protagonist in the third person inner monologue poem. The character of Vaudeville is the abandoned consequence of an incident in a future ware, who is found to be alone and pondering her next move. The reader is told that after losing her memory, she can be found ‘weeping bitterly for her ominous mind, her plight.’ The dependent clause transports the reader to be by the girl’s side; given it is only the reader and Vaudeville present, we perhaps feel both a connection and detachment towards her. Therefore, when it comes to the idea of grief, we both empathise the loss of her mind with her, but can also distance ourselves from the grief, given that we only know her as ‘the gin soldier’. The action of ‘weeping’ fully intensifies the grief she feels in that moment, enhancing it further with the use of the adverb ‘bitterly.’ On the one hand, we could imply that she is bitter towards those who have caused this grief, those who have targeted and destroyed her. Yet, we could perhaps consider the bitterness could stem from the hatred she has for her own body for betraying her and enveloping her with the grief which she cannot ever fully come to terms with, due to the fact that she will never truly comprehend what she has lost.

Just as Vaudeville in ‘Come On, Come Back’ can never truly understand her grief and grab hold of it and tackle it, Jane Weird portrays a mother in ‘Poppies’ who also has a similar struggle. The reader understands that the son in the poem, who we never meet, has been sent to war and presumably been killed in action. Similar to ‘Come On, Come Back’, we meet the persona who is experiencing the grief. Weir states that when saying goodbye to her son, ‘all my words flattened, rolled, turned into felt / slowly melting.’ The triplet of verbs signifies the uncontrollable motion of the words she is speaking; she is maybe babbling incomprehensibly, becoming overwhelmed with the grief at the impending departure of her son, or she could possibly be losing the memory of what she said to him. She could have replayed the words over and over again when she was in the darkest depths of grief, and the natural numb feeling could have overtaken and blurred her final words to him. Furthermore, the phrase ‘slowly melting’ could hint at the prolonged action of her grief over time. The enjambment creates a pause, perhaps indicating the mother’s words physically melting from one stanza to the next. Moreover, the action of ‘melting’ extends the grief that the mother is experiencing.

Both poets have used language to portray how grief for both characters is everlasting, uncontrollable and misunderstood.

Example 4

**Compare the ways the poets present patriotism in ‘Flag’ and one other poem from Conflict.**

Both writers of ‘Flag’ and ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’ present patriotism through the use of repetition.

The repetition of the line ‘It’s just a piece of cloth’ in ‘Flag’ highlights the literal insignificance of a flag, as it is, indeed, a piece of cloth. However, metaphorically, it symbolises much more. This ‘cloth’ symbolises community and togetherness under which a whole country can unite, therefore creating a sense of patriotism. Furthermore, the use of the word ‘just’ emphasises these ideas.

Moreover, the power of the flag to unite a country is highlighted in line 3 of each stanza. For example, in stanza 3, it states ‘will outlive the blood you bleed.’ The personification of the verb ‘outlive’ highlights the immortality of the flag and the fact that the patriotism it creates will be there forever. This is emphasised by the high epistemic modal verb ‘will.’ This immortality is certain and definite, and this surety emphasises power.

In addition, the alliteration of the plosive sound of ‘blood you bleed’ further highlights the power the flag has to create a sense of patriotism in a country.

Therefore, the repetition of the juxtaposition of lines 2 and 3 in every stanza highlights the fact that a flag is literally ‘just a piece of cloth,’ but metaphorically symbolises so much more. This would make the reader feel awed.

Likewise, repetition is also used in ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’ to present patriotism. The repetition of the lines ‘Into the valley of death / Rode the six hundred’ connotes the idea that patriotism is powerful and can encourage men to die for their country.

Example 5

In both poems structure is used to convey a sense of despair and hopelessness; conveying to the reading the attitude that war is destructive and unnatural. For example, Owen uses the form of an elegy to mourn the loss of life of soldiers brutally ripped from the earth in an untimely manner. The poet laments the death of the unnamed soldier: ‘move him into the sun –‘ The use of the caesura denotes Owen’s sadness, perhaps he is pausing because he is too sad to continue his sentence. It could also be indicative of a moment of silence, for remembrance of his fallen comrade. The imperative sentence conveys a sense of finality – the soldier is dead and tragically this instruction will not help in any way mirroring the futility of war. Owen continues to portray war as a brutal horrific exercise through the use of assonance ‘touch awoke him once.’ The repetition of the ‘O’ sound mirrors not only the sounds of weeping men but also the horror of world war one where technology was used to mass produce death. Hughes also use caesuras in order to show the horror of war. However, instead of creating a pause out of respect, the caesuras here show the experience of the soldier mid-battle ‘Suddenly he awoke and was running – raw/in raw-seamed...’ The caesura here shows that the soldier is unsure of his purpose symbolising the uncertainty and meaninglessness of war. By starting the poem with the adverb ‘suddenly’, Hughes creates a sense of urgency and panic so the reader feels sympathy for the soldier as well as this it conveys and anti-war message. This is happening now and it needs to be stopped. The use of enjambment and repetition adds to the frantic nature of war. The poem is written in free verse again to convey a sense of panic. Where Owen uses structure to convey as sense of heartache and mourning, Hughes employs structural techniques to mirror the thoughts and feelings of a soldier in battle. Both convey a strong anti-war message through the eyes of the soldier, one mid-battle and one experiencing the effects.

Example 6

Cummings creates a bold image of a filibustering politician of the type he despises in the satirical take on the way politicians present themselves. Enjambment helps to create the sense of a man on his soapbox, unwilling to allow another view: ‘what could be more beautiful than these heroic happy dead’. He refuses to allow space for another to disagree, and this rhetorical question creates the assumption that the audience will concur with his jingoistic views. Cummings parodies this arrogant tone, undermining the character’s certainly with near-incoherent phrases that run into each other: ‘oh/say can you see by the dawn’s early...’ By contrast, Owen, on the frontline on experience in the trenches, presents his own uncomprehending reaction to the ‘futility’ of the deaths of soldiers: ‘Are limits, so dear achieved, are sides/ Fullnerved, still warm, too hard to stir?’ The stuttering pace created by the commas reflect a man hesitating in once-held faith, in the face of tragedy – not the smooth, practised patter of Cummings’ politician. The rhetorical question is held out in desperation, a plea to save a fallen comrade. It may be offered to an unseen God, ‘if you are real, show yourself’, or an echoing call to humanity, unanswered and in itself, futile. While Cummings spears a bland, thoughtless politician, uttering meaningless platitudes on the glory of a war he has never fought, Owen’s lines record the chaos of a man questioning his own faith in humanity and God in the face of tragic loss. Both poems reflect the change in tone of poetry following WWI, with the decline in romantic, idealistic views of conflict being replaced by world-weary cynicism and realistic presentation. Owen leaves us with the question of every tragic conflict before or since ‘what made fatuous sunbeams toil/ to break earth’s sleep at all?’ Suitably, his haunting verses and their creation-inspired musing on the purpose of life leave us with an unanswered question.

Language

Hints and Tips to improve your language grade, and a little bit of recommended reading

AQA English Language A/A\* Tips

**Writing Skills**

Punctuation and Structure

* Full range of punctuation used accurately, not as an afterthought, but as an integral part of the writing
* Paragraphing for effect, including one sentence/ one word paragraphs
* Full range of sentence structures, remembering that simple sentences and minor sentences can be just as effective as complex sentences.

Language

* Consistent, ambitious vocabulary for effect (avoiding repetition unless for effect)
* Higher level extended language devices used effectively with no clichés- these won’t keep you ‘as cool as a cucumber’. You should add complexity rather than complicatedness, you should add sophistication rather than slang, you should add panache rather than pathetic, overused, worn out phrases. (e.g. extended metaphor, symbolism, hyperbole, irony and satire)
* Cohesive devices (e.g. discursive markers, clear use of pronouns to avoid ambiguity)
* Shaping the text to clarify, but sometimes mystify. (This comes with planning your writing.)
* Purposely crafted writing with flair, subtlety and conscious awareness of audience, text type and purpose.
* Creates a sense of personal voice that is consistent throughout with an appropriate tone
* Use Standard English (even if its 4 ur m8s, ur bein testd on English, innit)

**Reading Skills**

* Be confident in your analytical skills (if you believe what you’re saying, the examiner will as well)
* Understand the explicit and implicit meanings of texts
* Embedding of short, well-selected quotations
* Well- developed inferences and tease out the associations and connotations
* Analyse at text level, sentence level and word level
* Make structural inferences wherever possible
* Use high level technical terms, but don’t have a tick-list mentality
* Makes tentative rather than firm statements- exploring rather than stating ideas (e.g. perhaps, possibly, could, may, potentially, maybe)
* Give alternative interpretations wherever possible
* For question 2, make perceptive comments about images and headlines; link these comments to the text
* For question 4, focus on comparison and cross- referencing of language between the two texts

READ THE QUESTIONS PROPERLY!

Develop an A-A\*Vocabulary

How many of these words do you know?



Recommended Journalists and Publications

When it comes to your language exam, you may be asked to write a certain style of text. In order to familiarise yourself with these styles, it’s important to read a broad range of writing.

Useful Publications:



*The Guardian* is a broadsheet newspaper, featuring newspaper articles, opinion pieces by well-known writers (and the odd celebrity), and reviews. It is quite liberal in its political bias, but uses both formal and informal tones, dependent on the piece of writing. Best of all, unlike some UK newspapers, all of its articles are free to read online!



*The Huffington Post* is an online news platform (a blog, in other words) that features breaking news articles and opinion pieces, much like *The Guardian,* however it also features comedy articles, pieces written by ‘young voices’, and a whole section focused on parenting. It targets a huge audience, and is the perfect place to look for inspiration if you’re worried about how to approach writing about diverse topics.



*National Geographic* is probably most known for its incredible photos of wildlife and exotic landscapes, however its articles are just as significant. They focus on groundbreaking topics, such as climate change, relating them to the reader in a formal tone that varies slightly depending on the topic and author. You can read some of the magazine’s current articles online.



*Radio 4* is obviously not a magazine or newspaper, however the quality of interviews, occasional feature pieces, and comedy programmes are great source of knowledge of the outside world. Not only that, but keeping up to date with the news will allow you to both recognise satire in writing, and to include it in your own – a high level skill!



*The Telegraph* is a national broadsheet newspaper whose online site covers a multitude of topics, varying from political articles, to ‘Luxury’ articles, which discuss the best wine served on airlines. It is a brilliant resource if you’re unsure of how to approach complex topics, or topics you haven’t heard of before.

Recommended Journalists:

The following articles are by successful journalists – the sort you should be emulating in your own work!

***Barbara Ellen*** *is a British columnist for the Observer magazine, often commenting on culture and society.*

Making it harder to be a nurse? Oh, bravo, Mr Hunt

**Nursing bursaries have been axed and health secretary Jeremy Hunt is defending the indefensible**

Barbara Ellen, Sunday 6 December 2015

There have been protests at the news that [nursing bursaries](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3334382/Fury-Osborne-axes-student-grants-nurses-imposes-apprenticeships-levy-biggest-firms-hit-wages.html) are to be replaced with loans and tuition fees. If this sounds eerily familiar, then it shouldn’t. The government appears to be relying on an atmosphere of old news relating to past rows about regular student loans and tuition fees. Don’t be fooled – this is a totally different situation.

In England, there’s currently a system of income-assessed and non-income-assessed bursaries that help thousands of poorer students enter such disciplines as nursing, midwifery and physiotherapy. (In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, there are non-income-assessed bursaries.) The fact that the government wants to axe bursaries, replacing them with fees and loans, initially seems in line with how all students are treated. Some might ask, why should student nurses be dealt with any differently? Short answer: because student nurses *are* different.

As nursing bodies and unions have pointed out, nurses are not comparable to “ordinary” students. Student nurses aren’t just studying (going to classes, reading books, writing essays), they are also training on the job – working 50% of the time. When they are on their practical placements, they can be working full-time, without the usual breaks. This means that student nurses would be highly unlikely to have either the free time or the energy to supplement their income, as a university student could. Which changes the nature of the bursary from being a welcome extra to what has been described, rightly, as a lifeline. Under the new rules, a student nurse graduating in 2020, who previously would have been granted a bursary, would end up with loans estimated at around £50,000, when the nursing starting salary is usually less than £23,000.

Jeremy Hunt’s arguments are that the money (a potential £800m) has to be saved somewhere, the plans (if “done right”) could lead to 20,000 more nursing posts by 2020, and this is the only way to avoid escalating the nurse shortage.

To my mind, when looking to make NHS cuts, hitting dedicated, struggling student nurses seems to be an astonishing place to start. Those promised 20,000 extra nursing posts seem quite a flimsy prospect (even to Hunt, if that telling “if done right” is anything to go by). The nurse shortage argument is the most baffling of all. How could this, a crisis largely caused by past cuts to investment in nursing training, and exacerbated by hiring expensive agency nurses as cover, be helped by making it infinitely more costly and difficult for nurses to train?

Contrary to Hunt’s claims, it looks likely that poorer nursing students would be put off by fees and loans. It bears repeating that this is not equivalent to normal, underprivileged students, most of whom, while challenged enough, at least don’t suffer the double whammy of full-time practical work placements, and very little time off, in which to attempt to supplement their income or save.

In effect, the government is making it even tougher for disadvantaged student nurses to get into the profession. When regular students were first hit with fees and loans, it was almost as though a culture of resentment and begrudgement was encouraged and cultivated. (“Why should hardworking taxpayers finance the careers of other people’s children… yak yak, blah blah?”).

I always disagreed with this view (helping young people get started – what better use of taxes?). Now it’s even more shocking to see student nurses sucked into the ethical mire. This is how the NHS is attacked and undermined – with sudden, furtive swipes, this time by shamelessly peddling the fallacy that student nurses have exactly the same challenges as regular students – when they don’t. Recently, junior doctors forcefully fought back against Hunt and the public backed them. Let’s hope that the same support is forthcoming for the student nurses.

***Charlie Brooker*** *(1971 - ) is a British journalist, broadcaster and satirist. He wrote for the programmes Brass Eye and The 11 O’Clock Show in the early 2000s, before creating and writing the drama series Black Mirror since 2011. He is also one of the four creative directors of Zeppotron. His writing and humour has been described as acerbic, savage and controversial, with consistent ‘satirical pessimism’.*

This awesome dissection of internet hyperbole will make you cry and change your life

**Exaggeration is the official language of the internet. Only the most strident statements have any impact. Oversteer and oversell, all the time**

Charlie Brooker, Monday 6 October 2014

The other day I was talking to a music fan who’d recently gone to see one of Kate Bush’s widely praised live appearances. Naturally I was keen to hear a first-hand account of this era-defining event, so I asked what it was like.

“The first half was great,” she said. “But the second half got a bit boring.”

 Well that was jarring. For weeks I’d been told by seemingly everyone on the internet that witnessing Kate Bush live was a life-changing event; a transformative experience of staggering magnitude. Attendees described a sort of positive version of the climactic ark-opening sequence from Raiders of the Lost Ark, of thousands of people simultaneously overpowered by a work of supernatural genius. Apparently these people didn’t simply attend a rock concert – they were French-kissed by God. So majestic was the performance, all the molecules in their bodies were disassembled and temporarily rearranged into a pulsating jellyfish of pure enjoyment, basking helplessly yet blissfully on the shores of Lake Kate, before the stunning finale finally healed and reformed them and sent them on their way. They crawled from the venue on all fours, uncontrollably weeping and soiling themselves all the way home. Hours later, once they’d finished shaking, they went on Twitter and explained how even the typographical layout of the ticket stub had made them cry nine times. And yet here was someone shrugging at it all.

And make no mistake, the person I’d spoken to was a bona fide Kate Bush fan herself, yet one who described feeling so disconnected from the feverish level of excitement and sense of occasion other audience members were displaying – even on their way in, before a note had been sung – she was left feeling almost like an imposter. I suspect that partly explains the shrug. It’s too big a build-up. Nothing can match that level of expectation.

Perhaps the impossible-to-live-up-to tidal wave of praise came about in part because Bush had been clever enough to ask people not to stand around like mindless absorption pods, dumbly filming the gig on their smartphones. Maybe, with those smartphones tucked away, a sizeable percentage of the audience was being shocked by the reality of their first non screen-parlayed experience of the past five years. It must be like eating salt and vinegar crisps for the first time after weeks of a sense-numbing heavy cold: the sheer rush of unmediated reality almost takes your face off.

But maybe the praise reached deranged heights because nothing’s allowed to simply be “very good” or even “great” any more. We’ve ramped up the hyperbole: it’s amazing; it’s awesome. We focus on the personal impact: it’ll rock your world; it’ll change your life. You’ll be so stuffed full of wonder you’ll split at the seams.

Generally, as a species, we used to avoid these kind of exaggerated emotional outpourings. Still do, in person. But online, people routinely claim to have been reduced to tears by YouTube clips, Facebook posts, newspaper articles, and inspirational gifs. You cried at that? Honestly? Pics or it didn’t happen. And if your face leaks that easily, step away from the keyboard and call a plumber.

All this babble about being blown away, overcome, and reduced to a state of stunned amazement used to be the preserve of creepy people in adverts, the kind of grinning fictional gimps who’d burst into song if they enjoyed their fish fingers. At least they were being paid to exaggerate their opinions. We’re just trying to fit in, which is infinitely sadder somehow.

We’re trying to fit in because exaggeration is the official language of the internet, a talking shop so hopelessly overcrowded that only the most strident statements have any impact. Hence the rise of Buzzfeed-style click-bait headlines: The Late Leonid Brezhnev Just Invented the World’s Most Awesome Dance Move. What This Teacher Tells Her Class Will Change Your Life Forever. You Won’t Believe the State of this Guy’s Asshole. And so on.

The same digital ecosystem that gave rise to click-bait headlines is working its magic on the rest of us. Something about the way the online world has coagulated around social networks that subconsciously convert everyday conversation into a form of entertainment – with a follower count providing a running score – is turning us into click-bait people. Perform, entertain, exaggerate. All oversteer and oversell, all the time.

And of course in this increasingly binary world, if good equals amazing, bad equals catastrophic. Any disappointment, any setback, anyone who steps out of line – all instantly labelled the Worst Thing Ever. Displease the hive mind, and the same people pretending to shed sentimental tears over a kiddywink’s school project on YouTube will only stop screaming for your blood when the next hate figure stumbles into view.

I never thought I’d say this, but I sort of miss “meh”. “Meh” used to be the standard internet response to anything even 1% less than astounding. “Meh” was obnoxious: the sound of personal entitlement and sneery dismissal; the noise a spoiled child emperor makes when the pyramid his slaves have built turns out to be half a metre lower than he expected. But it was infinitely more honest than pretending to cry.

It’s enough to make you weep. Or rather not weep. And pretend you did.

**David Mitchell** (1974 - ) is a British actor, writer and comedian who is known most prominently for his TV work on Channel 4’s *Peep Show*, BBC’s *That Mitchell and Webb Look*, and more recently as a regular guest on comedy panel shows. He writes comment pieces in The Guardian and The Independent.

Want to tell the world what you really think? Say it with a stamp

**Opinions are in short supply these days, so it was heartening – if surprising – to see the Royal Mail chipping in with one**

David Mitchell, Sunday 8 June 2014

You may be surprised to hear that, when writing columns, I try, if at all possible, to avoid venturing opinions. If at all possible, I hasten to repeat (which is another of my column-writing techniques). I realise the job necessitates a certain amount of opinion-venturing – it's a good week for me if I get through the thousand words conceding only one or two. But, if I can avoid any more, I will.

This wasn't always the case. When I started writing in this newspaper, I sprayed my views around with the innocent joy of a toddler who's yet to contemplate the possibility of not being loved, and as if they came from a source as bottomless as the water table. But I soon realised that I was simultaneously using up a finite resource and randomly annoying articulate interest groups more effectively than a Home Counties fracker. And mine is not the sort of gas that keeps anyone warm.

I don't think I have particularly weird or extreme opinions – on good days, I reckon I come across as pretty reasonable. And that's the key to the problem: I seem reasonable and most people think of themselves as reasonable. Before I opine, they would probably presume I was in agreement with them. But, if I open my mouth, they may find otherwise. Every time I say something I think, a new swath of well-disposed readers have their assumption or hope that I thought as they did swept away.

Lots of people – maybe most people – are broad-minded enough not to dismiss someone just because he or she has said one thing with which they disagree. But, as an attitude to life, I wouldn't say that approach was on the rise in the current climate. To the many raised and furious voices of the internet, straying from their view of whatever thing they're monomaniacally obsessed with is heresy. In that context, agreeing to differ about a medium-sized issue counts as quite a sophisticated approach to life. A bit permissive, even. It smacks of the impure.

I'm not the only one to have noticed this. Most politicians definitely have. Their job is ostensibly even more about the purveying of opinions than columnists', but these days they obsessively save their views for special occasions. Rather than risk alienating anyone at all, the current strategy for political success is to be serially photographed in mundane settings – pubs, cafes, high streets, etc – in the hope of seeming reasonable, and then issue bland statements saying you're concerned about something concerning. Clues about what they really reckon are barely more forthcoming than they are from the Queen – and much less so than from Prince Charles.

So I was surprised, and heartened, by two opinions that were voiced last week by people who didn't really need to. One was Richard Dawkins, who's already very much on record with one personal opinion, so I thought he was really spoiling us when he apparently said, at the Cheltenham science festival, that fairytales and believing in Father Christmas were bad for children. For those of us who seek to take the mickey out of him, this could hardly have been more fun if we'd scripted it. "There is a God!" I thought.

But, according to Dawkins, I was wrong. The next day, he killed the joy as usual, condemning the media for twisting his words. "I did not, and will not, condemn fairytales," he insisted. He accepted he'd said that it was "rather pernicious to inculcate into a child a view of the world which includes supernaturalism" but then clarified: "The question is whether fairy stories actually do that and I'm now thinking they probably don't." Smashing. Just when the poor media think they've winkled a genuine opinion out of someone, it disappears like so much fairy dust.

However, the other of the week's opinions was even more surprising. It came from Royal Mail and it concerned fish stocks. The Mail is issuing a 10-stamp set depicting various species of fish. Five of the stamps are marked "SUSTAINABLE" – the herring, red gurnard, dab, pouting and Cornish sardine – and the other five "THREATENED" – the spiny dogfish, wolffish, sturgeon, conger eel and the (presumably now not so) common skate.

Where's the opinion here? you may ask. Aren't these just informative facts? It depends on your definition of a fact. One definition might be: "something that may be asserted on BBC News without their having to balance it out by giving broadcasting room to someone who will assert the contrary". By that definition, of course, it isn't a fact that the MMR jab has no link to autism, so I suspect that what the Royal Mail is implying is perfectly true. But the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations considers it arguable at best. And thinks it an argument Royal Mail should have kept out of.

I'm glad, but also amazed, that it didn't. It's been privatised – it has no obligation to the public good, and will gain nothing by changing people's fish-eating habits. And it's not as if, had the fish stamps not all been marked "SUSTAINABLE" or "THREATENED", anyone would have called for Royal Mail to 'get off the bloody fence' about the sustainability of fish stocks. Try as I might, I find it difficult to avoid the conclusion that someone took this inevitably divisive decision purely because they thought it was a good thing to do. Bravo.

It's obviously also a worrying development. Now a precedent has been set that stamps can express an opinion, who's to say that future views will be so noble, or expressed for such (as far as I can tell) unimpeachable motives? Will there be advertising on stamps? Or, more plausibly, and also more insidiously, will they become the equivalent of those newspaper reports that are generated by a press release about a corporation-sponsored survey? Maybe a manufacturer of Red Gurnard Bites has yet to emerge from behind this initiative?

Even if the views remain sincere, that doesn't mean they'll stay apolitical. If you make your living from commercial fishing, I suspect you'd say that Rubicon has already been crossed. Who will be editorially responsible for the stamps' content? A journalist? A regulator? A respected intellectual like Richard Dawkins?

That would make for a cheery Christmas issue: a painting of some children sledging with "SUSTAINABLE" written across it; a choir of angels marked "A PERNICIOUS LIE"; and a jolly Santa captioned "A LIE – BUT PROBABLY NOT PERNICIOUS". I'm not going to tell you what I think about that.

**Dom Joly** (1967 - ) is a British journalist and broadcaster, born in Beirut, Lebanon to English parents. He has been a columnist for The Independent since 2001 after shooting to fame in 2000 with the hidden-camera comedy programme *Trigger Happy TV.* He has since starred on comedy programmes on Sky, and has been writing travel books since 2009.

The heart-warming joy when your children disown you

**The playground gatekeeper assumed I was a brazen child-snatcher happy to boast of my hobby**

Dom Joly, Monday 26 October 2015

Half-term panic had set in. The kids were starting to get surly and aggressive. In desperation we got in the car and drove to London for a “day out”. It still depresses me that now I don’t live in London, I have become a naff visitor as opposed to a hip resident. This is the price you pay for bumpkin life.

My daughter visits London with only one thing in mind – Bubbleology. She is obsessed with these Taiwanese fruit juices with bubbles and tapioca and other strange and wonderful things in them. Anybody from her school who goes to the capital must return bearing a multitude of these drinks that they then dispense like pubescent dealers.

I peeled away from the family “fun” and headed into work for as long as I could wing it. At about three in the afternoon I got the three-line whip call to join them. “We’re in Hyde Park….” My wife sounded suicidal.

By the time I got to the park, I’d received a text telling me that they had moved on from wandering aimlessly around the boating pond. They were now in the Princes Diana Memorial Playground for Filipino Nannies.

I approached the locked gate.

“Do you have children?” barked the gatekeeper. “No, just browsing…” I replied jovially. Big mistake. I was told to remove myself from the area. I tried to explain that I was joking but the gatekeeper was not for turning. “My kids are in there,” I whimpered.

“You didn’t say that the first time.” She fixed me with a death stare. “I was just making a little joke.” I tried to look penitent but was eventually forced to pay a Filipino nanny to go and find my wife – the only mother in the place.

I should have known but I just can’t help myself. If I had just smiled and said that “yes, my kids are in there already”, I’d have been allowed in. The gatekeeper clearly assumed that I was some sort of brazen child-snatcher happy to boast of my hobby.

It’s not the first time that I’ve got into this sort of trouble. I once popped into the swimming gala at my kids’ old school. I sat next to a gang of mums and tried to work out which of the swim-capped children were mine. “Which one’s yours?” asked a mother. “Oh, none of them, I’m just here to watch.” The mother froze in horror and rapidly got together in a huddle with some other mums who all started to stare me out.

Back in Hyde Park, my wife was eventually found and came to the gate with my kids. I greeted them over the fence. The gatekeeper asked them whether they knew me? My kids didn’t miss a beat. “No… we don’t know this man.” My daughter turned away and looked frightened. “Mummy… it’s him again… the bad man….” My boy clung to my wife’s legs.

The gatekeeper moved towards a telephone and I gave up. I backed away and headed off towards a nearby pub as rapidly as I could without looking guilty. I was secretly quite proud of them. I have raised them well.

**Oliver Burkeman** is a columnist for The Guardian. Born in the UK, Burkeman is now based in Brooklyn where his writing focuses on social psychology, productivity and happiness. Outside of his journalistic work, he has also written *The Antidote: Happiness for People who Can’t Stand Positive Thinking* which is a book that explores the upsides of negativity.

Does creativity scare you?

**For many, the thought of expressing themselves creatively is frightening**

Oliver Burkeman, Friday 16 October 2015

According to Big Magic, a new book on creativity by Elizabeth Gilbert, the reason you haven’t written your novel yet – or taken up weaving, or bonsai-cultivating, or otherwise given expression to the art inside you – is almost certainly fear. This is a staple of self-help culture I’ve always found hard to take. Receiving a life-threatening medical diagnosis is scary; not having the cash to feed your family is scary. Running out of oxygen while exploring the underwater Mexican cave system known as the Temple of Doom is, I imagine, scary, too. But opening your notebook to jot down some ideas for a short story? Calling that “scary” feels melodramatic – a parody of the Anguished Artist. It calls to mind the (presumably apocryphal) tale of Salvador Dalí kicking a blind beggar in the street. “What did you do that for?” came the howled reply. Dalí: “Because you don’t have the pain of seeing!”

Yet my scepticism, I’ve reluctantly concluded, was misplaced. For many, the thought of expressing themselves creatively really is frightening. (Anyway, who am I kidding? I’ve often felt panic at the sight of a blank page.) And this isn’t especially surprising, since creative work is a collision point for numerous deep-rooted fears: of ridicule, of social rejection, of discovering you lack talent – not to mention the fear of stirring up emotions you’ve been expertly repressing for years.

Hang-ups about creativity reach far back into childhood: parents can all too easily squelch a child’s imagination, and research indicates that teachers generally dislike more creative pupils, however much they claim otherwise. Indeed, some neuroscientists argue we’ve evolved to distrust creative ideas: except in a crisis, there’s little survival benefit to trying something new.

The real question, then, is not whether creativity provokes fear, but what to do when it does. Far too many authorities urge you to conquer it: to “kick resistance’s butt”, in the macho words of Steven Pressfield, author of the bestseller The War Of Art. But as with any emotion, launching an all-out attack on fear is counterproductive. That just puts it centre stage, and risks reinforcing the notion that creativity must – and should – be one endless, bare-chested struggle.

It may be true, as Pressfield writes, that fear can be a useful sign: “The more scared we are of a work or calling, the more sure we can be that we have to do it.” But it doesn’t follow that creativity counts only if you hate it. As Gilbert puts it, “Too many artists still believe that anguish is the only true authentic emotional experience… Heaven forbid anyone should enjoy their chosen vocation.”

Cheesy as it sometimes feels, I much prefer Gilbert’s approach, which essentially involves treating fear like an annoying younger sibling, or a beloved though rather trying family pet. The trick, if you can do it, isn’t to ignore fear, or destroy it, and definitely not to obey it, but to make space for it. She uses the odd but useful analogy of a road trip. Fear always comes along for the ride, and that’s fine – but that doesn’t mean you need to let it anywhere near the steering wheel.

Help Yourself!

Revision is tough. We know. To make it easier for you (so you don’t get stressed on a Saturday because you can’t get in touch with your class teacher), here’s a list of the best places to find help with your English work.

The Walkden High English Department is online! This means that you can get advice and revision materials from your own teacher, rather than from an unknown online source.

**Our blog address is:** <http://whsteamenglish.edublogs.org/>

 **We are on Twitter as:** @WHS\_TeamEnglish

Other useful websites for language and literature revision are:

**Shmoop:** <http://www.shmoop.com/>

*Don’t forget!* Shmoop has information on social and historical context as well as revision material for the specific novels you have studied.

**BBC Bitesize:** http://www.bbc.co.uk/education

*You can revise Literature and Language on BBC Bitesize.* It has resources for all the texts we have studied as well as techniques for tackling the language paper.