

Better Writing: Better Grades, Basic Writing Skills UK Ltd, £19.99

Oh dear. Here's one of those education resources that tries to shock us into action. "School leavers lack basic skills. Too many cannot read, write or add up properly, business leaders" is the dire warning on the front of the CD-case, quoted from BBC News.

Accentuating the negative is rarely a good motivator in education, as we have seen from the naming-and-shaming approach to league tables. Yet who can resist the promise of "better writing, better grades"? If we're looking for a strapline that will motivate our pupils, this may be a reasonable one. In practice this software for PC and Mac (though it rapidly ground to a clunking halt on my Apple Powerbook) is a simplistic and old-fashioned set of exercises.

Lesson 1 includes learning how to put capital letters on the names of days, working out where to put the apostrophe in words like "weren't" and (bizarrely) spotting whether a verb can be classified as describing a state or an action. Thus the example "He ran in the Dublin City Marathon last year" gets us to identify that "ran" is an action (whereas "was" would be a state). If I get the multi-choice question right I am deemed "excellent". Later I find that I am able to put the correct verb form

(“was”) in the gap in this sentence: “His fathera Manchester United supporter” And so it goes on for screen after screen.

Now as a self-motivated and aspirational pupil this may well build my self-confidence. But whether it has much relation to my skills as a writer, I’m not convinced. Of course we want our pupils to write better English, and many of us recognise that GCSE currently fails to deliver a precise enough benchmark for clear, accurate writing. We await with interest the new courses in functional English.

But let’s not be panicked into buying software like this. Just put on some old clothes and go delving at the back of your English Department’s stock cupboards. You’ll find books that do this kind of thing just as effectively, by which I mean – to torture some grammar - no less ineffectively.

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