

Mr B's  
A\* in GCSE English  
Fun Pack



# Ten indicators of A\* potential in English

If you're talented, you shouldn't see getting an A\* as a bonus – something that's just happened and taken you beyond an A. You should have a determination to get one, since it ranks you in the top 10% of English students in England.

So you need to know what to do to get an A\*:

## READING

1. You will be confident in analysing language, knowing that this means answering the questions 'why?' and 'how'
2. You will be tentative in your responses, using words like *seems, may be, suggests, implies, infers, seems to demonstrate*
3. You will comment briskly on what the text is about, then who it is by and for, and then (the important stuff) comment with laser-like detail on the 'how' of presentation (a bit) and language (a lot)
4. You use commas within but not between sentences, and colons and semi-colons
5. You don't use the first word that comes into your head; you realise that language is rich and that we make choices about whether to say "the big event" or the "major / significant / momentous / important / ground-breaking / event" based on context and audience

## WRITING

1. Be able to write formal and impersonal prose that is not pompous but which holds the reader's interest and clarifies things
2. Be able to write confident, rich prose which draws the reader in, making us wonder quite which word will happen next
3. Use a range of punctuation to add nuances to your work – commas, semi-colons, colons, dashes.
4. Be able to judge the audience and genre, and write in a style that is appropriate
5. Use long and short sentences, big and small words, and write sentences in time and untimed conditions that always interest us, but sometimes provoke and sometimes mystify us

## TO DO ALL THIS YOU SHOULD:

- read a lot (eg *'The Week'* and, always, have a novel on the go): I do mean a lot
- write a lot (eg a daily diary)
- think as you're writing about the effects of your writing
- take risks rather than rely on formulas
- enjoy the feeling of being able to interpret the world (through reading) and express viewpoints (through writing)

# What characterises an A\* student in English?

## Reading

Skill	Example
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shows confidence in <b>analysing language</b> – big stuff to small stuff (audience, purpose, genre, layout – sentence types and structure – and words (formal/informal, general/specialist, figures of speech)</li> </ul>	<i>The author employs a style that surprises the reader. Her use of words like “quite” and “almost” suggests that she is taking a detached and analytical approach to hunting: it is as if she does not want to lower herself to their level. The fact that she addresses the reader as ‘you’ draws us in to the world of the text and provokes our interest. Once she has grabbed our attention, she won’t let go.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Embeds of very short, well-selected <b>quotations</b></li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Every point addresses the <b>questions</b> ‘why?’ or ‘how?’</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Has light-touch use of <b>technical terms</b> rather than demonstrating a tick-list mentality</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Makes <b>tentative</b> rather than firm statements – exploring rather than stating ideas (‘might, may, seems, appears, suggests’)</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relishes the <b>vocabulary</b> of a text and teases out the associations of words</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Links ideas to <b>prior reading</b> – ‘the text reminds us of ... / has echoes’</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Writes</b> about reading in an authoritative style (‘we’, not ‘I’), combining short and long sentences, Latinate and vividly familiar words</li> </ul>	

## Writing

Skill	Example
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ability to write impersonally, clearly and securely, with impressive accuracy by <b>self-regulating</b></li> </ul>	<p><i>Dear Mr Barton</i></p> <p><i>Be assured that I’m writing this with my shirt fully tucked in, wearing no unnecessary jewellery, and – of course – in shoes rather than trainers. I am assuming from the school’s uniform policy that such attention to detail will help me to do better in my English exam.</i></p> <p><i>That, after all, seems to be the philosophy of the English education system - including your school – that wearing uniform somehow somehow makes us better students, perhaps even better people ...</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understands that <b>punctuation</b> is not an after-thought but integral to thinking (eg parenthetical commas and dashes)</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses <b>semi-colons</b> to separated linked or contrasting clauses, not the comma splice; and commas for parenthesis</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Will have a mixture of <b>precision and interestingness</b> in writing, with a rhythm which demonstrate a familiarity with good prose style</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrate the way <b>effective writers</b> sometimes clarify and sometimes mystify</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Will have <b>lexical variety</b> that avoids repetition, including adept deployment of pronouns</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understands the <b>power of simplicity</b> when juxtaposed with complexity (rather than complicatedness)</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Writes with <b>fluency and panache</b>, and a sense of personal voice and commitment</li> </ul>	

There’s probably other stuff too. To achieve this, these students read a lot and write a lot and, when reading and writing, are aware of the effects they are seeing and creating. They don’t just ‘do’ these things: they **consciously** do them.

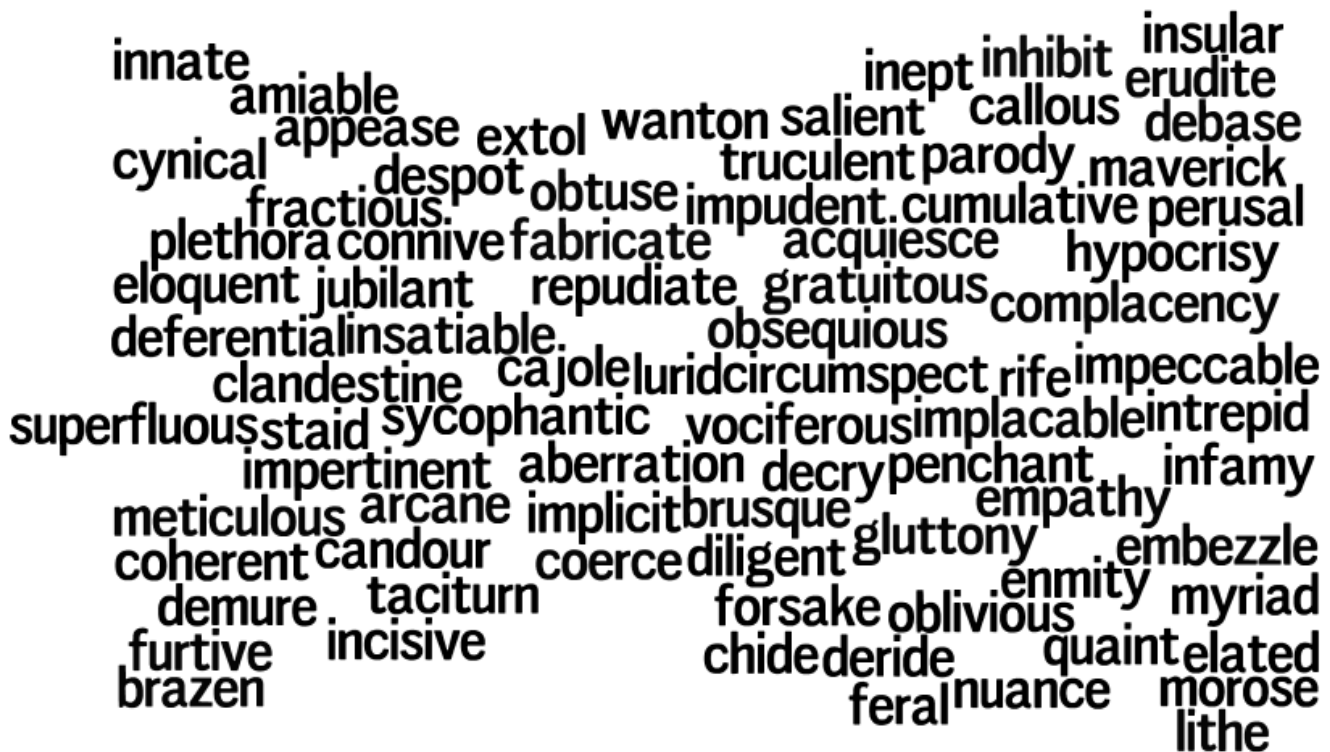
# Mr B's Writing Tips



- 1 Use **paragraphs** for effect – eg long / very short and drop paragraphs.
- 2 Create **sentence variety** by using short and long sentences.
- 3 Create **sentence variety** by using different **sentence functions** – declarative (statements), interrogative (questions), imperative (commands), exclamatory (er, exclamations).
- 4 Shift unexpectedly between formal and informal **vocabulary**.
- 5 **Personalise** writing with anecdotes.
- 6 Depersonalise it by avoiding 'I'.
- 7 Expand **noun phrases** to add interest.
- 8 Make it **sensuous**, especially visual.
- 9 **Surprise** me.
- 10 **Read** a lot.

# 5 Steps to an A\* Vocabulary

1. Use analytical verbs:	<i>suggest, imply, describe, demonstrate, convey, seem</i>
2. Use modal verbs and adverbs to show tentativeness:	<i>V: might, could, may, should A: probably, perhaps</i>
3. Use pronouns and determiners that add authority rather than personalise ideas:	<i>we/us/our (Avoid 'I' and 'me')</i>
4. Use occasional passive constructions to add detachment:	<i>it can be seen that, it might be thought, it could be argued</i>
5. Build a vocabulary that adds precision and subtlety to your expressions:	<i>See the word cloud below: 80 words you ought to know</i>



The secret of how to be a confident A\* student ...

(Roll of drums ....)

Read a lot. That's it.

(Preferably read books, quality newspapers and magazines, which ideally contain fictional or non-fictional writing built around ideas and which demonstrate complexity, elegance and clarity).

Remember that I post examples of really good (in my opinion) persuasive and polemical writing on my blog:

**Weekly reading:** [http://blog.geoffbarton.co.uk/site/Blog/Entries/2013/11/30\\_Weekly\\_Reading.html](http://blog.geoffbarton.co.uk/site/Blog/Entries/2013/11/30_Weekly_Reading.html)

**How to write:** [http://blog.geoffbarton.co.uk/site/Blog/Entries/2014/4/5\\_How\\_to\\_Write.html](http://blog.geoffbarton.co.uk/site/Blog/Entries/2014/4/5_How_to_Write.html)

# The WHAT? WHO? HOW? Approach to Reading: **WHAT TO SAY ABOUT LANGUAGE**

## WHAT:

- What is the text about?
- What type of text is it (informative, persuasive, entertaining)?

## WHO:

- Who wrote it ?
- Who is it written for (general audience, specialist, younger/older)?

## HOW:

### Structure:

- Chronological (a story) or non-chronological (a report)? Why?
- Short/long paragraph? Why?
- How are ideas linked (connectives like 'firstly'; pronouns like 'he')

### Sentences:

- Statements, questions, commands? Why?
- Short or long? Why?
- Formal or colloquial?

### Words:

- Formal ('is not') or informal ('isn't')?
- Personal ('I'/ 'you') or impersonal ('it')?
- Serious or humorous?
- General ('ill') or specialist ('hyperkeratosis')?
- Accessible ('clumsy') or inaccessible ('maladroit')

### Other stuff to look for:

- Register (fancy word for tone): common, colloquial, literary, scientific? Why?
- Figures of speech: alliteration, metaphor, simile, personification? Why?

The **language** used by A\* writers is precise, analytical and tentative:

Analytical	Tentative
<b>Verbs:</b> seems, implies, suggests, describes, conveys, reveals	<b>Modal verbs:</b> might, may, could, ought
<b>Connectives:</b> although, despite, because, whilst, as, however	<b>Adverbs:</b> perhaps, possibly
Use <b>Latinate verbs</b> (more complex) rather than phrasal (two part) verbs: 'Considered' rather than 'thought about'; 'invented' rather than 'made up'; 'reviewed' rather than 'looked at'	

# The WHAT? WHO? HOW? Approach to Reading: **WHAT TO SAY ABOUT LAYOUT**

## **WHAT:**

- What are your first impressions of the layout?
- What is it designed to do (catch attention, reassure, surprise)?
- What features make it typical or untypical of a leaflet/website, etc?

## **WHO:**

- Who do you think it's by (individual, company, special interest group)?
- Who might it be aimed at (age, gender, specialist)?

## **HOW:**

### **LAYOUT**

- Organisation
- Chronological or non-chronological?
- Hyperlinks? Summary boxes?
- Amount of text / images?
- Colour-scheme?
- WHY?

### **IMAGES**

- Of what? Why?
- Close-ups, landscapes?
- Faces, smiles?
- Animals, people?
- WHY?

### **TEXTUAL FEATURES**

- Headings?
- Serif (formal/traditional/authoritative) or sans serif (informal)?
- Subheadings?
- Icons / logos?
- Bullet-points?
- WHY?

### **Mr B says...**

**WHAT is fine**

**WHO is good**

**HOW is better**

**WHAT/WHO/HOW + WHY is best of all**

Good luck!  
Geoff Barton  
[www.geoffbarton.co.uk](http://www.geoffbarton.co.uk)