

Developing whole-school critical literacy practices: advice for primary teachers

What is critical literacy?

As primary teachers, you are already adept at developing your pupils' advanced reading skills, including inference, analysis of language and evaluation of texts, in line with the National Curriculum. Embedding critical literacy practices when reading texts will enable pupils to further challenge what they read, building on their existing comprehension skills and what you already teach.

Critical literacy should be taught as a whole-school, cross-curricular approach to encourage pupils to be active participants in the reading process, as opposed to passive absorbers of information. As a result, improving your pupils' critical literacy skills will help them to:

- Challenge what they read by asking critical questions
- Explore how texts position them as readers by analysing the language authors use
- Examine how texts/authors construct power relationships
- Analyse how texts/authors make assumptions or construct stereotypes
- Explore how texts represent, underrepresent or misrepresent groups of people
- Explore differing points of view and perspectives in regards to social issues

Why is it important to embed critical literacy practices across the curriculum?

All texts are embedded with different values and beliefs and reflect the culture within which they are written. Critical literacy skills equip pupils with the ability to decipher the messages within texts and thus empower them to be able to actively accept or reject them. This is particularly pertinent when we consider young people's access to online information as well as printed texts.

Children and young people today are growing up in a globalised world and are processing information from a wider variety of sources than ever before. It is essential to ensure that children and young people are given the opportunity to develop the appropriate critical literacy skills to be able to navigate the world around them. (National Literacy Trust, 2018)

How can I embed critical literacy practices across the curriculum?

Critical questioning of all texts across subjects

Developing critical literacy practices involves developing the way we approach, share and read texts with pupils. In addition to improving pupils' comprehension skills as outlined in the National Curriculum, we can improve pupils' critical reading skills through asking, answering and discussing critical questions across all fiction and non-fiction texts – within all subjects.

For example, as well as examining fictional texts or newspaper articles in English lessons, critical questioning can support pupils to examine the trustworthiness of primary and secondary sources, including photographs, in science or humanities lessons. Critical questioning can also support readers to explore the representation of historical events or figures across different sources.

Included in this pack is a list of **critical questions** to help your pupils explore texts in a more critical way. You'll notice that many of the questions encourage pupils to justify or explain their thinking, using textual evidence to support their answers. This demonstrates how critical questions can build on and support the teaching of reading comprehension skills such as inference and language analysis.

The pack also includes [critical literacy discussion cards](#) which could be used in reading lessons or small group discussions. After reading a text, pupils can use the cards to prompt discussion and to share their ideas with each other. Discussion is a key aspect of the reading curriculum and also addresses many requirements in the development of speaking and listening skills. It is important to support pupils to engage effectively in discussion, particularly when answering questions that can lead to debate.

Critical exploration of the news and the digital world

When engaging your pupils with the news and the media, particularly online, critical reading and thinking skills are vital.

Experiencing online information through a critical lens allows pupils to decipher the message in a text, identify the author's agenda or bias, and interrogate the points of view represented. This supports pupils to judge the trustworthiness of online information and, in turn, recognise misinformation.

These are vital skills when considering the current climate and prevalence of fake news, which is perpetuated through the use of digital and social media.

The work the National Literacy Trust has done on the Commission on fake News and Critical Literacy in Schools has shown that fake news and critical literacy are a serious issue: half of children and young people are worried that they wouldn't be able to tell if a news story was

true or not, which has decreased their trust in the news¹. The knock-on impact on children and young people is to increase anxiety and fear, and to potentially skew their world views. This is not simply an issue for children and young people on a personal level; it also has an impact on society as a whole.

Did you know that:

- 1 in 5 children believe everything they read online is true²?
- 35% of teachers said pupils cited fake news or false information online as fact in their work³?
- In a survey only 3.1% of primary school pupils were able to identify all six news stories they were presented with correctly as real or fake⁴?
- 6 in 10 teachers are worried fake news is negatively impacting pupils' well-being⁵?

Practical ideas

When reading the news....

- Analyse the trustworthiness of the news story and consider if it might be fake news. *How do we know that a news story is trustworthy? What clues might tell us that a story is not trustworthy? Provide pupils with a range of real and fake news stories – can they identify the true stories? Older students could look at using a fact-checking website, such as fullfact.org.*
- Explore the points of view represented in the news story. *Whose voices are heard? Whose voices are silenced? Whose point of view is favoured? Consider how the story would be different if it were told from an alternative viewpoint. Consider why the author chose to represent the story in this way. Compare articles that report on the same story and consider how their presentation of viewpoints differs.*
- Distinguish between facts and opinions. Examine the difference between the use of factual language and opinion language within the context of news articles. *Does the author attempt to disguise opinion using the language of fact?*
- Analyse the author's intended purpose, audience or message within the news story. *Who do you think the story is for? How is the author trying to make you feel? How is the author trying to influence you? What does the author want you to believe or think? Compare different articles reporting on the same story. Can you detect author bias? How does this affect your own opinion of the articles?*
- Invite students to evaluate the views presented within a news article against their own values. *Do they agree or disagree with the article? Does it confirm anything they*

¹ Ibid.

² Ofcom (2016) [Children and parents: media use and attitudes report, 2016](#)

³ NASUWT (2017): <https://www.nasuw.org.uk/article-listing/schools-failing-to-protect-teachers-online-abuse.html>

⁴ National Literacy Trust (2018) *Fake news and critical literacy*

⁵ Ibid.

already thought or believed? Does it change or try to change their opinion in anyway? Consider how different people may respond to this article.

- Explore the portrayal of one news story across different newspapers or websites. Evaluate the similarities and differences between them. *How do the headlines differ? Do you think the authors have different agendas? Which one do you agree/disagree with? Which one did you prefer to read and why?*

When writing news....

- Review a news story and then ask pupils to retell it from an alternative point of view.
- After analysing a number of fake news stories in your lesson, get pupils to create a fake news advert, leaflet or campaign with top tips and advice to help other pupils to become fake news detectives.
- A great way to empower pupils and to help them get their voices heard is to encourage them to write a news article about a local, community or school issue that is important to them.
- After reading a number of opinion pieces, get pupils to write their own opinion based article, mirroring the language used. *What language does the author use to argue their point? How does the author try to persuade you that their point of view is right?*
- Take a look at the different ways newspapers and news websites write their headlines. *What language do they use? How does their use of language differ? Why might they use this particular language?* Get your pupils to write headlines for news stories, experimenting with how they can use language for different effects (e.g. negative and positive spin).

When discussing news....

- Hold weekly discussions about the news, using key stories pupils have heard about or found interesting during the week. Discuss the different ways they found out about the news stories and evaluate the reliability of their sources of information.
- Familiarise your pupils with the downloadable *How to Be a Fake News Detective* poster and hold weekly fake news quizzes. The National Literacy Trust (literacytrust.org.uk/fakenews) and BBC Newsround (bbc.co.uk/cbbc/quizzes/real-or-fake-news-quiz) have some great fake news quizzes to get you started.
- Create a 'real or fake?' display in the classroom and ask pupils to continually add to the board after they have read or heard a piece of interesting real or fake news. They could add a post-it note to share their feelings or questions about the text. [See downloadable primary poster.](#)

Critical questions

Here are some examples of critical questions that will help pupils to question, analyse and challenge what they read in order to decide whether they agree or disagree with the information presented to them.

Examining different points of view:

- Does the text include different points of view? What are they?
- Whose point of view can you hear?
- Whose point of view is missing?
- How would the text/story be different if it were told from _____'s point of view?
- Why might _____ and _____ have different points of view?

Examining stereotypes:

- Do you think the text stereotypes anyone? Why do you think the author has done this?
- How do you think the author feels about _____ (e.g. women)? Why?

Examining power:

- Who has the most power in the text? How do you know?
- Who doesn't have any power in the text? Why not?
- Are the people with power behaving fairly?

Examining author intention:

- What do you think the author wants you to feel? How do you know?
- What do you think the author wants you to think? How do you know?
- What words or phrases has the author used to influence you?
- Which character do you like? Why? How has the author made you feel this way?
- Which character don't you like? Why? How has the author made you feel this way?

Challenging the text

- Is there anything you would like to change about the text? Why? How would you do this?
- Do you agree or disagree with what the author has written? Why?
- Would you recommend this text to others or not? Why? If yes, who?

Directory

This is a useful directory of some of the organisations that may be helpful to you in implementing critical literacy approaches or exploring the news with your students. We are constantly adding to this list and welcome your suggestions if you find something you think will help.

- [NewsWise](#) is a free news literacy project for pupils aged 9–11 run in partnership by the Guardian Foundation, the National Literacy Trust and the PSHE Association. The project offers free workshops, journalist visits, online resources and a unit of work,

aiming to develop pupils' understanding of the news, ability to critically navigate the news and confidence to report their own news.

- [The Guardian Education Centre](#) offers an array of resources to support the teaching of news literacy in the classroom including lesson ideas and display materials. The centre also offers free full day workshops, events and conferences for teachers and pupils.
- [First News](#) is a UK newspaper produced for young people, offered in print or through online films. The paper tackles topical issues in an honest, yet understandable way. The newspaper also provides weekly teaching resources based upon current stories.
- [The Burnet News Club](#), provided by the [Economist Educational Foundation](#), offers resources to support the running of a school news club, helping to develop pupils' critical thinking skills and encourage active discussions about current affairs.
- [The Week Junior](#) is a current affairs magazine for 8-14 year olds, making news and events accessible and exciting for young people.
- [The Day](#) is an online daily news service for schools, colleges and young people, also offering free teaching resources and online training to support in getting the best out of the website.
- [Media Smart](#) offers free educational materials for schools to support pupils' critical literacy skills when engaging with media and advertising.
- [Irish News Critical Literacy Project](#) provides a structured approach to developing critical literacy skills through the Northern Irish newspaper.
- [BBC Newsround](#) offers a child-friendly guide about fake news and how to spot it. The website also includes a [fake news quiz](#) to test your skills at identifying inaccurate information.
- [Child Net's 'Trust Me'](#) resource offers lesson plans and teacher guidance to support with the teaching of Fake News in the classroom.
- [The Association for Citizenship Teaching \(ACT\)](#) is the subject association for citizenship representing teachers and others involved in citizenship education, and have published lots of citizenship resources for use in the classroom.
- The PSHE Association have provided a [resource to support discussion about terrorist attacks](#) in the primary classroom. Also a [PSHE Association Character Curriculum Planning Toolkit](#) which looks at ways to develop key 'character aspects', including self-awareness, values, and interpersonal and social effectiveness.
- ASCEL have produced a [guide to activity taking place around the UK](#) supporting children to stay safe online and avoid fake news.
- Thinkuknow have produced [Play, Like, Share](#) animated films helping children to spot pressurising and manipulative online behaviour, how to respond safely and get help.