

Getting ready to study A Level English Language



Are you thinking about studying English Language at A Level?

The activities in this booklet will give you a taste of what might be in store for you as a student of this subject and you might be surprised quite how different it is to the English you've been doing so far in your time at school.

Some of the activities ask you to step back and think about the nature of language and communication (in all its forms – not just writing), while others encourage you to try out some different ways of approaching your learning – whether that's reading, writing, discussing or listening to others. The activities will prepare you for the kinds of work you would do on an English Language A Level course and will hopefully be interesting in their own right.

We've selected some of these activities from a great resource from the English and Media Centre called: *Leaping into Language: moving from GCSE to A Level English Language*. Some of the activities are short, others might take a couple of sessions to complete, while others are much longer term – following a language podcast or reading a chapter in a book about language.

Have a go – get stuck in and note down any questions or thoughts you have. We cover a really wide range of texts in English Language so be alert to language all around you.

2. Leap into Language – Language Profile

One of the most interesting aspects of studying language is that you learn more about your own language use, so let's make this first task all about you...

- Create a 'language profile' of yourself by answering the following questions and then writing them up as a set of bullet points that highlight what you think are the most interesting and important aspects of the language you use:
 - What's your earliest language memory? Can you remember a nursery rhyme, song or picture book from when you were very little?
 - Have your family or extended family kept any records – video, audio, family memories – of any of your earliest words?
 - Have you kept any old school books from when you were learning to read and write?
 - Where were you born and where in the UK, or the wider world, are your family from? Go back a few generations if you like and think about any other languages that your family members might speak, or other places your family members might have lived.
 - Are there any words or expressions only you or your family use, which others don't really understand?
 - Do you or your friends at school use language in any ways that you notice as being different from other people around you? These could be other people in your year, your teachers, your family, whoever.
 - Do you listen to or watch anyone on TV, online or in films or music videos who uses language in a way that interests or annoys you?
 - Do you ever look at or hear someone else using language in a way that you find is totally new or strange to you?
 - Have your teachers or family ever talked to you about the way you speak?

One of the most useful resources for language on this course is **you**. Language is made up of so much more than the words we see printed on a page, so when you are thinking about language, come back to these ideas here to keep the range wide. We are often told there is a right way and a wrong way to use language, but the more you study about language, the more you'll realise that it's more complicated and interesting than that.

And you'll also start to build up a bigger picture of the different influences on your own language identity as this course goes on – all the factors that influence who you are linguistically and how you can choose to behave with language in different situations.

4. Do We Need New Words?

The English language is always generating new words. New words can be created out of nothing (**neologisms**) or be formed by using other words – or parts of words – together in new combinations (what are called **compounds** and **blends**). Sometimes initials of words in a phrase might be used (**acronyms** and **initialisms**) and you might also see parts of words being added to the front or end of another word to give it a new form (**prefixes** and **suffixes**). Most A Level English Language courses look at how and why new words are formed, but there is also debate about whether we need new words and when (or whether) they should appear in dictionaries.

- Look at the list of some of the new words that have appeared (or suddenly become much more popular) in English over the last few years.
- Have you heard of these words before? Have you used any of them? Tick the relevant columns for each word.
- Choose two words from the list that you think are an important addition to the language. Try to come up with a sentence or two explaining why they are so important.
- Then choose two words from the list that you think are pointless and insignificant. What's the problem with these words and why do you think they shouldn't be included? Again, write a sentence or two explaining your thinking.
- Are there any other new words – or new meanings for older words – that you have heard about? Perhaps you could make a note of new and interesting uses of words over the next few months.
- What are your predictions for the most popular and widely-used words for the next 12 months?
- If you are interested in looking at the history of new words and slang terms that have appeared in the language, follow some of the links on pages 30-36 but in the meantime, [this article by one of the world's most respected slang lexicographers](#) (i.e. people who compile dictionaries of slang), Jonathon Green, is a very good read: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-27405988>

Recent New Words

Word	Definition	Have heard/seen this word being used	Have used this word myself
Floss	A dance in which people twist their hips in one direction while swinging their arms in the opposite direction with the fists closed. Popularised by the game <i>Fortnite</i> .		
VAR	Video Assistant Referee. A system used in football to assist refereeing decisions.		

Word	Definition	Have heard/seen this word being used	Have used this word myself
Gaslight	To manipulate or trick someone by pretending that they cannot trust what they see or hear until they doubt their own sanity.		
Twerking	A way of dancing that involves bending forward and shaking or thrusting your buttocks in a rhythmic motion.		
Dadbod	A term used to describe the typically flabby and unsculpted male physique that most dads have.		
Cancel culture	A way of describing the movement to 'cancel' - to publicly disapprove of and then attempt to ignore - celebrities or organisations because of their perceived immoral or unpopular actions.		
Climate strike	A protest in which people leave work, school or college when they should be attending to take part in a protest about climate change.		
Influencer	A person who uses social media to promote a particular way of life or commercial products to their online followers.		
Nonbinary	A word describing a sexual identity that does not conform to binary categories of male and female.		
Hamsterkaufing	Stockpiling food like a hamster storing food in its cheeks (from German)		
WFH	Working From Home		
Mansplaining	A patronising way of explaining something (by a man to a woman).		

6. Key Events in Language History

One of the most interesting parts of any A Level English Language course is exploring how the language we use today came to be. Even now, the language is changing all the time and is used by people in the UK (and beyond) in many varied ways. From its earliest origins in the 5th Century CE, English has gone through many changes and reached many historic milestones.

- This activity asks you to create a timeline of key events in the history of English. You might not know some of the dates for these events – and that doesn't matter at this stage – but you will still be able to start sequencing some of the main developments in the language.
- You can do this activity either by writing out the events in the order you think they happened or by printing the sheet and cutting out the tiles to place in a sequence.
- If you're writing the dates, put them in a sequence on a sheet of paper, with the oldest ones on the left and the most recent on the right.
- If you're printing and cutting them out, shuffle them around and try to place them in the order that you think they occurred, with the oldest events on the left and the most recent on the right. Add tiles to your timeline one by one, thinking about where to place each one, before settling on your final timeline.
- Once you have decided on the order of events, check the answer grid on page 45.
- How accurate was your timeline? Do any of these dates surprise you?
- Why do you think some of these dates are so significant to the history of the language? Choose three key events from the timeline and try to write a sentence or two about their significance.
- If you want to find out more about some of the key events in the history of the English language, have a look at the link to the British Library timeline and the Open University *History of English in 10 Minutes*.

British Library

[English Language and Literature Timeline](http://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/evolvingenglish/accessvers/index.html)

(<http://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/evolvingenglish/accessvers/index.html>)

Open University

[The History of English in 10 Minutes](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3r9bOkYW9s)

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3r9bOkYW9s>)

Events on the Language Timeline

First TV broadcast in the world	First spelling guide in UK
First printing press in the UK	First English settlement in America
First telephone call	First wood-cased pencil invented
First Bible translation in English	First newspaper printed in UK
First dictionary published in UK	Passing of Education Act that led to compulsory schooling up to age of 15
First BBC radio broadcast	Norman invasion of Britain
First Hollywood film studio built	First email sent
First SMS (text) message sent	Establishment of first university in the UK

10. Opinions and Arguments

Language gives rise to really strong feelings. Some people get furious about how words like ‘so’ are used to start sentences, while others get upset about ‘like’, ‘sort of’ and ‘innit’. And when you get into more sensitive areas such as race, gender, illness, disability and war, arguments really start to kick off. That’s because language is such a vital tool in expressing who we are but also how we represent others and how they feel about that. Language is rarely neutral and because we use it all the time – speaking, writing, online – we’re surrounded by it and immersed in it, so it’s always part of what we do and who we are.

Part of what you’ll do on the English Language A Level is to think about some of these opinions and views and work out what you feel about them and why. You won’t be asked to just pluck an opinion out of thin air, but to use your study of language to inform what you do and how you think. The course is designed to give you lots of ideas and evidence to base your opinions on.

You’ve not started the course yet, so it’s a bit mean to ask you to do this now, but the good thing about language is that you already know a lot about it and will perhaps have some strong opinions about it already. In this activity, you are asked to offer some views about issues related to language. You can do a version of this activity on your own, but it will be more fun and work better if you can share ideas and interact with other students via the platform recommended and validated by your school.

- Read the five statements in the table below and on a scale of 1-5 make a note of how strongly you agree (5) or disagree (1) with each. Try to write a sentence or two in the final column to explain your view.
- If you can share ideas and interact with others, check your scores and see if you have agreed with your classmates. What different views have been offered?
- Why not keep a note of your own scores and see if your views have shifted by the end of the course?

Statement	Your view 1-5 (strongly disagree =1, strongly agree =5)	Your reasons
If English changes too quickly, we won’t be able to understand each other.		
People who use slang sound stupid and uneducated and it’s best to avoid it completely.		
Some accents are just better than others; that’s a fact of life.		
There are some words that are so offensive, they should just be banned.		
When you’re communicating online, it doesn’t matter if you make mistakes or don’t follow the normal rules of grammar; as long as people can understand, that’s all that matters.		

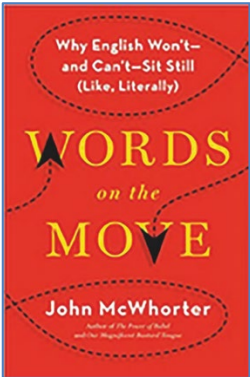
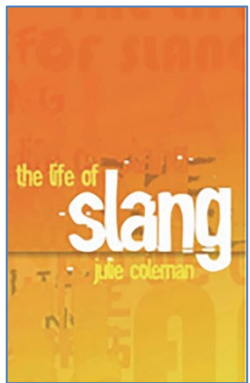
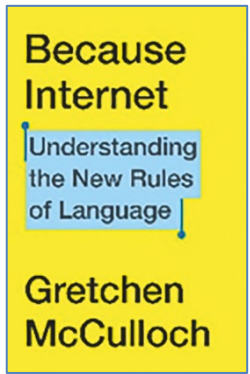
14. Language on the Page




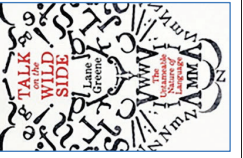
A lot of really good books have recently been written by academic linguists and general language experts for the general public about what language is and how it works. We've suggested a few recent favourites below.



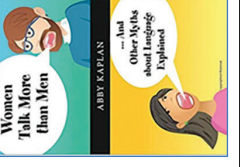

We're not expecting you to read all these books – but we won't stop you if that's what you want to do.

- Choose one or two and use the links here. Most of these will take you to the 'Look Inside' pages on Amazon which give you a sample to read, while others will take you to extracts or an Audible sample. A few take you to a review or an interview.
- Dip in and out of a few of them, looking for what they say about some of the main issues to do with English, making a note of some key quotations you could use further down the line.

Some Reading Suggestions

<p>John McWhorter: <i>Words on the Move</i> https://preview.tinyurl.com/wordsmove</p>	
<p>Julie Coleman: <i>The Life of Slang</i> (Short interviews about the book) https://youtu.be/DIqk6MdLWRw https://youtu.be/HkAwIVoNUx0</p>	
<p>Gretchen McCulloch: <i>Because Internet</i> https://tinyurl.com/cosinternet</p>	

<p><u>David Shariatmadari: <i>Don't Believe a Word</i></u> https://tinyurl.com/notbelieve</p>	
<p><u>Henry Hitchings: <i>The Language Wars</i></u> (A review) See page 61 in the accompanying <i>emagazine-Resource-Pack—Language</i>.</p>	
<p><u>Lane Greene: <i>You Are What You Speak</i></u> https://tinyurl.com/vocabsticklers</p>	
<p><u>Lane Greene: <i>Talk on the Wild Side</i></u> https://tinyurl.com/talkwildside</p>	

<p><u>Dan Clayton (ed): <i>EMC Language Handbook (2nd edition): Key Thinkers on Key Topics</i></u> https://tinyurl.com/emclang</p>	
<p><u>Deborah Cameron: <i>The Myth of Mars and Venus</i></u> https://tinyurl.com/mythmarsvenus</p>	
<p><u>Abby Kaplan: <i>Women Talk More Than Men... and Other Myths About Language Explained</i></u> https://tinyurl.com/womenmentalk</p>	
<p><u>Lynne Murphy: <i>The Prodigal Tongue</i></u> https://tinyurl.com/prodigaltalk</p>	

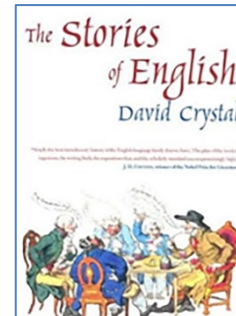
[Jane Setter: *Your Voice Speaks Volumes*](https://tinyurl.com/voicevolumes)

<https://tinyurl.com/voicevolumes>



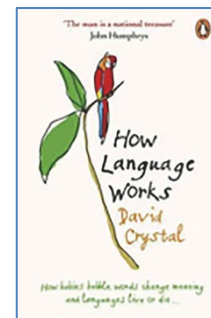
[David Crystal: *Stories of English*](https://tinyurl.com/crystalstories)

<https://tinyurl.com/crystalstories>



[David Crystal: *How Language Works*](https://tinyurl.com/crystalworks)

<https://tinyurl.com/crystalworks>



15. English Language for Your Ears

In the last few years, more and more linguists have been getting their ideas and interests out to the public through radio programmes and podcasts. In some cases, these are linked to big publishers and broadcasters (the BBC in the UK and Slate in the USA), while others are independently produced. There's now a really good range out there and plenty to choose from.

- Have a browse through the suggestions here and listen to one or two in more detail. Most of the radio programmes can be accessed directly through the link provided and the podcasts through the links or via an app like Spotify.
- If possible, use the platform recommended and validated by your school to share what you listened to with friends. Which podcast would you most recommend and why?
- Follow up the suggestions from your classmates.
- Keep listening to any of the podcasts you enjoyed (or try out some others), follow the ones you like on Instagram or Twitter and let the presenters know what you thought. Many of these podcasts will engage with their listeners and pick up ideas that you want to discuss, so get involved.

The BBC's [Word of Mouth](#) programme presented by Michael Rosen, has a huge archive of previous programmes all available for download. Some recent highlights have been selected for you here:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qtnz/episodes/player>

- [A Debate About American English](#)
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08g5533>
- [Will Emoji Be the Future of English?](#)
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08ffvp6>
- [The Language of Lying](#)
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000dfpy>
- [Romani Language](#)
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00050qw>
- [Black British Identity and Black-related Words](#)
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0004l93>
- [Solving Crime with Language](#)
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00027n6>
- [Language, Gender and Trans Identities](#)
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09r4k4l>

[Lexicon Valley](#), presented by John McWhorter can be found here and a few particularly relevant ones have been highlighted below:

<https://slate.com/podcasts/lexicon-valley>

- [Women's Language](#)
<https://slate.com/podcasts/lexicon-valley/2020/03/vocal-frywomen-language>
- [Like, Sort Of...](#)
<https://slate.com/podcasts/lexicon-valley/2019/11/politeness-in-the-english-language>
- [Language on the Internet](#)
<https://slate.com/human-interest/2019/07/john-mcwhorter-and-gretchen-mcculloch-on-because-internet.html>

The BBC's **Seriously** podcast isn't just about language but you'll find a few interesting language programmes on there, including this one featuring Susie Dent on American English:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08qxd02>

Another BBC programme, **The Verb** often has language issues up for discussion. A few selected episodes are:

- [Puns and Wordplay](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000dj45)
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000dj45>
- [Sports Writing](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000c2ls)
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000c2ls>
- [How to Write Out Sexism](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0002zyh)
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0002zyh>

Other podcasts include the following:

The Language Revolution



<https://thelanguagerevolution.co.uk/>

Accentricity



<https://www.accentricity-podcast.com/>

The Vocal Fries



<https://vocalfriespod.com/>

The Allusionist



<https://www.theallusionist.org/>

Lexitecture



<http://www.lexitecture.com/>

Lingthusiasm



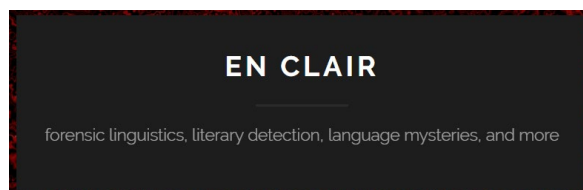
<https://lingthusiasm.com/>

Talk the Talk



<http://talkthetalkpodcast.com/>

en clair



<http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/enclair/>

Becoming an A Level Language Student - a Quick Guide

Examiner and university lecturer Dr Marcello Giovanelli tells students embarking on an A Level language course what to expect and how to make the most of the course.

If you're reading this then you may well have just started your A Level studies in English Language. Congratulations on choosing an exciting, modern and engaging A Level course! However, the transition from GCSE or iGCSE to A Level can be a demanding one, and so in this article, I'll share some key principles of A Level language study with you that will help you to bridge the gap and get the most from your studies. Together, these form a 'quick guide' to becoming an A Level English Language student.

1. Learning a Metalanguage and Avoiding Impressionism

Given that you may not have had to do much explicit language work at KS4, you will find that you need to acquire a new terminology to deal with the kinds of analyses that you will undertake at A Level. We call this type of language about language a metalanguage. For English Language, most of this revolves around what we term levels of language (discourse, grammar, semantics, lexis, phonology), or what are currently known as linguistic methods or frameworks in examination board specifications. As a beginning linguist, it's important to start using these terms confidently and accurately to ensure that all descriptive linguistic work (any analysis that identifies and explores language features) that you do is as precise and clear as is possible, and avoids merely making impressionistic and speculative claims that are not rooted in language analysis.

As an example, look at the text (above right). This was written by a mid-day supervisor and attached to a biscuit tin in a school staffroom. It was motivated by her anger towards a member of the teaching staff persistently going through the tin trying to find chocolate biscuits.

A non-linguist might comment on this text in quite an intuitive way by identifying the angry 'tone', perhaps making some comment on the order that's being given, and even arguing that the use of the word 'please' makes the order seem more polite. However, because there's very little language analysis going on here beyond simply identifying words, the comments feel impressionistic and idiosyncratic; they are not grounded in a recognised and accepted way of talking about the content and structure of language.

On the other hand, knowing even a little bit about how language works can be incredibly enabling, helping with the analysis and making you sound more competent and professional in your work. For example, using the knowledge that events can be grammatically presented using either the active or passive voice not only enables an analysis to take place using a shared and accepted metalanguage, but can also lead to a more intricate analysis. In this example, the mid-day supervisor has chosen to write in the passive 'they are getting broken' rather than the active 'someone/name of person is

breaking them'. Since the use of the passive voice downplays the agent (person responsible) for the action of the verb, we can argue that using this form is generally significant. In this instance, we might deduce that the supervisor wants to avoid attaching a sense of blame to the breaking of the biscuits. Being able to discuss the grammar (or any other aspect) in this way is likely to lead to a much better analysis.

2. The Importance of Context

At A Level, engaging with context means moving beyond simple GCSE notions of audience and purpose. Now what's really important to remember is that by context we are referring to a range of factors both within and outside of the text, paying close attention to situations where a text is both written or spoken (the context of production), and where it is read or listened to (the context of reception). Returning to our 'biscuit tin' text, we could identify a whole range of contextual factors that would be important to comment on.

In terms of the context of production, the fact that the text producer is a mid-day supervisor and not a member of teaching staff is significant since it is likely that she will have a less powerful role in the school, and consequently will need to be careful about not offending someone of a higher status. This goes some way to explaining her motivation for using the passive voice that was discussed earlier.

In terms of the context of reception, we can imagine that this note would be seen by whoever was in the staffroom and happened to come across the biscuit tin, and that this could take place at many different times. It's relatively easy therefore to see that there are as many possible contexts of reception as there are potential readers, and that each reading will be motivated by who the reader is, the conditions in which they read (carefully, in a rush, whether they have had a good day or are fed up), whether they are actually guilty of breaking the biscuits and so on. Equally, context needs to be understood as a dynamic entity rather than a static one; the situation and circumstances in which a text is understood can change quite considerably. For example, the person responsible for breaking the biscuits might suddenly react in a very different way when he realises the message is aimed at him. In this instance the context that surrounds the reading, and therefore influences it, can develop and evolve as the reading itself takes place.

There are two important points worth emphasising here. First, the relationship between context and language features is both a complex and incredibly important one. Writers and speakers make language choices that are influenced by contextual factors, and readers and listeners interpret what they read and hear within the specific situations in which they find themselves. Second, the richness of contextual detail and its importance in the process of making meaning means that it's often better to think of any data you engage with in your studies not as a 'text' but as part of a larger communicative act called a discourse event that has real participants with intentions, beliefs and emotions engaging in an act of communication. All of these influence what gets written or said, and how that gets interpreted.

3. Ideas about Language

Another key skill that you will develop as you progress through your studies will be your ability to read and engage with ideas about language study. This will move you beyond seeing yourself as someone who analyses language to someone who actively explores ideas and concepts that researchers and academics have grappled with. Whichever specification you are following for your own studies, being able to understand the various debates surrounding language topics, and integrating these into your own analyses of data is an important skill that you will need to master. In your analysis of the 'biscuit

tin' text, you could draw on a number of theories related to how people communicate with each other (interaction and politeness theories), how status at work affects the ways in which language is used (language and occupation, the discourse of the workplace), and how technology might be influencing the ways in which we communicate in non-electronic forms (language change, attitudes to language). The best way to become competent at working with ideas like these is to try to explore them in the light of any data you are looking at in class. To what extent do you find that your data supports or challenges established research ideas that you have read?

4. Read Around the Subject

Of course, one of the best ways to explore issues and ideas in language is to read as widely as you can around the subject. emag is a great place to start for language articles that have been written specifically for A Level students, and your teacher will be able to guide you towards suitable ones. Beyond emag there is a wealth of material. As a start, you might try David Crystal's *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language* (Cambridge University Press) for a good reference book and overall guide to language topics, Louise Mullany and Peter Stockwell's *Introducing English Language* (Routledge) for an excellent, albeit quite advanced, guide to the study of language and linguistics. *Language: A Student Handbook on Key Topics and Theories* (ed. Dan Clayton, English and Media Centre) offers an excellent collection of essays by leading academics on A Level language topics.

It's also a good idea to use the internet to keep up to date with news stories and the latest debates involving language. Whether it's schools banning students from using non-standard English, how the latest innovations in technology are affecting the ways that we use language, or what the latest research in child language learning is, there's always something to interest the language student. Regularly visiting the online pages of tabloid newspapers will lead to no end of stories to read and discuss in class. To make things easier for yourself, you could subscribe to a blog which collects the latest news for you such as Dan Clayton's peerless EngLangBlog <http://englishlangsfx.blogspot.co.uk>

5. Become a Data Collector

Another important part of becoming a student of language is learning how to become a researcher of language. In fact your career as a collector of language data begins the moment you start your course. The wonderful thing about language data, of course, is that it's everywhere: in the conversations we have with friends, the TV we watch, the books, magazines, social media pages, and tweets we read, the websites we browse, the computer games we play and so on. Make a point of collecting interesting examples of language you see, either in hard copy form or using the camera facility or a scanning app on your smartphone. Record conversations of both real (do ask for permission!) and represented (on the TV and radio) speech, practise transcriptions, start a scrapbook, and share ideas with your fellow students via a blog or your school or college's VLE. Get used to working with data and start applying learning in class to your own examples that you collect. You've got an exciting two years of study ahead of you!

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Print