Reading and literacy FAQs

Published: March 2012
Introduction

Ofsted introduced its new inspection framework in January 2012. We have written answers to some frequently asked questions (FAQs) because of the new framework’s strong emphasis on reading and literacy.

If you have other questions, please email us at schoolsfaqs@ofsted.gov.uk and we will try to answer them. When a number of people ask the same question, we will update these FAQs.

The FAQs

1. What sort of evidence will inspectors be looking for when considering the leadership and management of reading?

   In all schools, inspectors will follow the outline guidance in the evaluation schedule. They will be trying to judge how well leaders and managers foster a culture of high expectations in terms of reading so that every single child is a good reader by the time she or he leaves the school. This culture comes, first of all, from the headteacher.

   Inspectors would want to find out whether leaders and managers know enough about reading – both to challenge where teaching is not good enough and standards need improving and to provide practical support for teachers. Inspectors would also want to be assured that leaders and managers have clear, simple, consistent procedures and recording systems to track pupils’ progress in reading. For example, in a primary school, do leaders and managers know who the weakest readers in each year group are and what is being done to support them? Do they also make it clear where responsibility lies for these pupils’ progress?

   Inspectors would want to know how quickly failing or struggling readers are identified and supported. Who is responsible for this and takes the overview across the whole school? If it is the literacy/English coordinator or the special educational needs coordinator, what support does this teacher have to do this work effectively?

2. How would inspectors go about evaluating provision and pupils’ outcomes in literacy across subjects in secondary schools?

   First of all, inspectors will generate hypotheses about pupils’ literacy levels, including those for different groups, from any available data but especially the latest RAISEonline. In the school, they would observe a range of lessons, in English and in other subjects, to identify and judge the impact of particular activities and approaches that have been designed to improve pupils’ literacy skills. Inspectors might also review pupils’ work, listen to some of them reading or speak to them about their learning, including literacy.
If inspectors have concerns or identify areas they need to investigate further, either from data or from their observations, they might focus on what is provided for particular groups of pupils or classes, including withdrawal classes or intervention sessions. They would also expect to review any data on these pupils’ progress and achievement to judge the impact of what has been provided.

The range of activities and approaches which inspectors might consider is covered in Ofsted’s literacy training materials: http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/reading-writing-and-communication-literacy.

Pages 43–44 provide a sample of the sorts of questions inspectors may ask. Pages 34–36 provide the background to expectations for literacy across the curriculum and some suggestions of what inspectors might see schools putting in place to support pupils’ literacy skills.

Inspectors would also discuss with leaders and managers the school’s systems for monitoring pupils’ literacy skills from the time they join the school and the extent to which the school is aware of any groups or individuals who are struggling with literacy.

Finally, if inspectors have highlighted behaviour or attendance as an inspection trail or area of concern, they may wish to satisfy themselves that poor literacy skills are not a contributory factor.

3. How will inspectors be using the new, separate tables for reading and writing in RAISEonline?

The new reports in RAISEonline now show national transition data from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2 for reading and writing separately, as well as English, and mathematics, in 2011. (Previous years’ reports remain unchanged.) This means that inspectors will have a much better picture of pupils’ progress in reading from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2. They will also be able to see very clearly whether there are particularly marked differences in attainment between reading and writing at Key Stage 2.

4. What sorts of evidence will inspectors be looking for in judging how well teaching develops pupils’ reading at Key Stage 2?

Inspectors would want to ascertain the range and volume of books (and other material) that pupils are reading within and beyond English lessons, how often pupils read, and the school’s systems for monitoring pupils’ progress – not just whether they can now read but whether they are continuing to develop as readers. For instance, inspectors would want to see how well pupils can use their reading in other subjects, not just in English.
5. Will inspectors be aware of the different reading schemes and phonic programmes that schools are using? How will they know if a programme is a synthetic phonics programme or not?

Inspectors will focus on outcomes for pupils and not on the schemes and programmes that schools are using. If reading and writing are good at the end of Year 2 and Year 6, and there is evidence from the phonics screening check for six-year-olds that pupils are being taught to decode effectively, inspectors will not need to look for additional evidence. However, if outcomes are not good enough, inspectors will want to look at what is being done to raise standards. That would include looking at the leadership and management of reading and the quality of teaching. The resources teachers are using would play a small part in this judgement, although clearly they are important in helping pupils to learn.

It is important to remember that neither the framework for inspection nor the evaluation schedule sets any expectation that schools should be using a ‘synthetic’ phonics programme. The evaluation schedule says simply that inspectors ‘must consider ... how well teaching enables pupils to develop skills in reading, writing, communication and mathematics’. However, the new Teachers’ Standards (to take effect from September 2012) say that teachers who teach early reading are required to demonstrate ‘a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics’.1

6. What would inspectors do if they observe a teacher teaching phonics who has a different regional accent from the pupils’ accents?

The teacher needs to be aware of and sensitive to the differences. As long as she is careful in how she chooses words to illustrate the sounds and listens acutely to pupils, the differences should not pose a problem. In fact, the differences between the teacher’s pronunciation and those of the pupils may help to develop children’s awareness of different sounds.

7. If an inspector is listening to a young pupil reading and the pupil gets stuck on a word and stops reading, what would the inspector do?

The inspector would behave just as the teacher would do. She or he would encourage the pupil to say the sound represented by each letter (or groups of letters), blend the sounds to make the word and then try to read the whole word again. If the word is not phonically regular and it is not a word the pupil has been taught yet, the inspector is likely to tell the pupil the word, since it is important that pupils are not left to struggle with decoding for too long.

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1 The new Standards apply ‘to all teachers regardless of their career stage’. For further information, see: Teachers’ Standards (DfE V1.0 0711), DfE, 2011; www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/reviewofstandards/a00192172/review-of-teachers-standards-first-report.
8. How would inspectors be able to judge whether a pupil is reading a book that is at the right level for her or him?

There are at least two ways in which inspectors might do this. First, inspectors will simply use their professional judgement when they listen to a pupil reading. But they could also judge the number of words that the pupil reads accurately. If a pupil makes only one error in every 10–20 words – that is, she or he is reading with 90–94% accuracy – this indicates that the challenge of the book is about right. More than 10 errors in 100 words suggest that the book may be too difficult. With pupils whose decoding skills are secure, inspectors will also ask them about their understanding of what they have read.

9. How would inspectors evaluate the quality of teaching and learning in guided reading sessions?

Guided reading gives the teacher a chance to work closely with small groups of pupils who should be at a similar stage in their reading. Inspectors would evaluate the objectives for that session, the quality of the teacher’s questions, her or his responses to pupils’ reading, and the way in which she or he supports individuals. However, it is important that all the pupils in the class have worthwhile tasks, even if they are not working directly with the teacher. The inspector’s judgement would not be just about the guided reading itself. Some schools devote additional time to ‘group’ or ‘guided’ reading, which can add up to two or more hours a week. If this time is not well planned and/or the activities are not well matched to all pupils’ reading needs, inspectors are likely to take this into account when judging the quality and impact of the reading curriculum overall.