

The **hidden skills** behind top GCSE English grades

5 skills students should master now to reach top grades by Year 11.

An examiner-informed guide for parents of GCSE students

“Doing fine” in year 9... Why this isn’t always enough.

Many students do well in Year 9. They understand the texts and produce solid work.

Progress often becomes slower in Year 10 and can plateau in Year 11, as GCSE demands shift from understanding the text to applying more sophisticated analytical skills in writing.

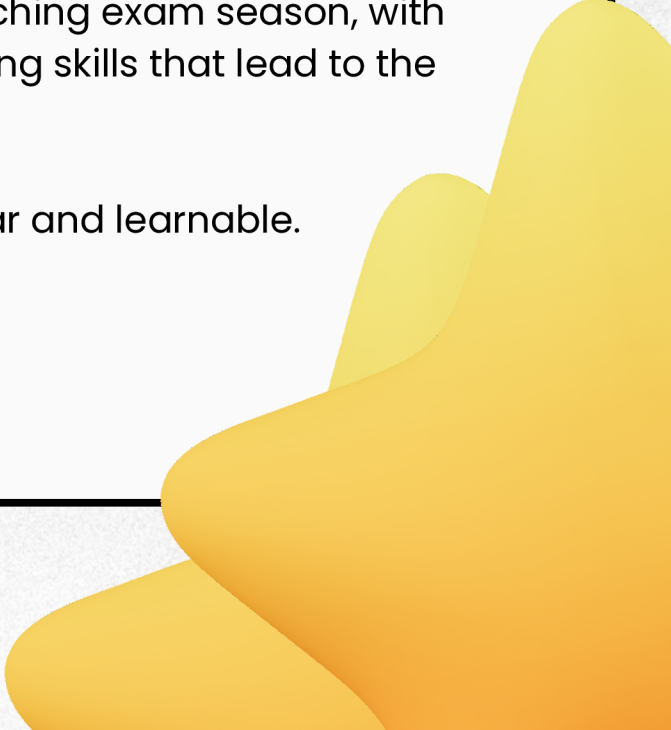
GCSE English rewards not only knowledge of the text, but the ability to communicate ideas with clarity, control, and precision. This requires a different set of skills from those that typically secure success in Year 9.

With lesson time largely focused on covering the set texts required for GCSE Literature, there is often limited opportunity to develop these higher-level analytical skills in a systematic way.

By the time the gap between knowledge and application becomes visible, students are often already approaching exam season, with limited time to refine the thinking and writing skills that lead to the strongest responses.

The skills that make the difference are clear and learnable.

They are outlined below.



1. Answering the Actual Question

Many students write thoughtful paragraphs but lose marks because the connection to the question is not made explicit.

Strong answers close the circle: they begin with a clear point and finish by explicitly returning to the question.

This makes the relevance of ideas unmistakable to the examiner, and relevance is rewarded.

Students often believe they have done this already.

In reality, this is one of the most common reasons marks are quietly lost.

2. Exploring Methods Using *'The writer uses... which...'*

Examiners do not reward the identification of techniques alone. They reward clear explanation of why a writer has used them.

One effective habit is structuring analysis using the phrase:

"The writer uses ... which ..."

This encourages students to focus on the effect of the writer's choices, rather than simply naming techniques, and helps secure analysis marks that are often missed.

Students who develop confidence with this structure are able to produce clearer and more precise explanations across a wide range of reading questions.

3. Demonstrating Range in writing

Examiners reward writing that shows range. This includes varied sentence structures, deliberate punctuation choices, and vocabulary used with precision.

Range does not mean complexity. Even accurate use of full stops, questions, and exclamations can demonstrate flexibility when used purposefully.

Students who deliberately use the skills they already know are often able to access higher marks without learning new techniques.

4. Slowing Down Description

In descriptive and narrative writing, students often rush. This can lead to ideas being repeated, underdeveloped, or quickly exhausted.

Stronger responses tend to do the opposite. They slow the opening of the scene, developing detail carefully, and return to description at key moments later in the piece.

This demonstrates control and deliberate craft, both of which are rewarded.

Students rarely need a better idea. They usually need to develop the one they already have more carefully.

5. Knowing the Paper: Timings and expectations

Many marks are lost through poor management of the paper rather than lack of understanding.

Students may spend too long on lower-mark questions, rush higher-mark responses, or misunderstand what each question requires.

Knowing the paper means understanding which questions carry the most weight, how long to spend on each one, and what a successful response looks like.

When students are clear about expectations and pacing, their performance becomes more consistent and marks are less likely to be lost unnecessarily.

A final note to parents:

In GCSE English, improvement often comes from refining how students express their ideas, rather than learning more content.

When students receive clear guidance on their written responses, small adjustments can lead to meaningful improvements in clarity, control, and confidence.

Many students are closer than they realise, and developing these skills over time can make a real difference.

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