



Mel Dixon, Resources Officer, English Teachers' Association, outlines ways to use textual concepts to connect all the segments of the English syllabus and provides a sample unit of work for Stage 2 students.

Preparing to work with textual concepts in K-6 English

Why you should use textual concepts to teach English

English Textual Concepts provide ways into texts that raise the complexity of the learning. The project has been developed by the NSW Department of Education in collaboration with the English Teachers' Association to guide teachers in creating effective programs that target the essential nature of subject English. It is not about having a different syllabus

but about making explicit what is already in the syllabus, locating pathways to allow scaffolded learning across a year level or a stage or across the few years of schooling. This is a particularly powerful way of connecting those transition stages. It means that you can go beyond a basic literacy approach and create more critical and engaging classrooms where students are happy learners. This article will give some guidance into ways you can use textual concepts and includes an outline of an approach to a specific text, *A river* by Marc Martin.

How you can use *English Textual Concepts*

The English syllabus is already very complex with outcomes, objectives and content statements and the idea of adding yet another list of requirements may be daunting: Textual concepts should, however, be seen as a way of connecting all the segments of the existing syllabus. While it does not exclude integrated across-the-curriculum courses, it is advisable that you design units of work that are specifically English and then consider how these can work within wider cross-curriculum units. One step at a time!

What *English Textual Concepts* includes

Textual concepts are about the way we communicate through texts: written, spoken, digital, and visual. They are about how meaning is created through the diversity of texts available to us. Literary texts (including narrative films) are as important in the process of communication as non-literary texts, allowing us to access social and cultural values through stories of different people, real and imagined. They are part of the breadth and depth of reading, listening and viewing we want to see happening in the classroom.



English textual concepts are different to abstract concepts but they co-exist in learning. We can still form a lesson around an abstract concept such as friendship but studying this through a textual concept such as perspective, or point of view or style, adds an extra dimension that takes the student away from themselves and makes them see the world through different lenses. Critical thinking requires this movement away from self to the outside world and seeing through different eyes. This is what *English Textual Concepts* facilitates.

The *English Textual Concepts* programming package acknowledges that skills are important in any classroom and includes what are called processes. The processes in this program are: connecting, engaging critically, engaging personally, experimenting, understanding and reflecting – all

implicit in the content statements in the syllabus and also in the objectives. These are not hierarchical or differentiated skills but can be implemented at any time in the learning and applied for all students. For example, you may start a unit with experimenting, asking students to imagine and create a world or a language that is different; you may start with engaging critically, setting out a problem that they can discuss before they encounter the text. It is when you enlist as many of these processes as possible in one unit of learning that you develop versatile and resilient thinkers and learners.

Processes and questions

The different processes in the *English Textual Concepts* program remind us of the different questions we need to ask our students to create critical thinkers. Table 1 gives some examples of the kinds of questions or activities for which each process can be used.



Connecting	Understanding	Engaging critically	Engaging personally	Experimenting	Reflecting
<p>How does this connect to me?</p> <p>How does this connect to other texts?</p> <p>How can I connect ideas or text elements across texts to create a new text?</p>	<p>What questions</p> <p>When questions</p> <p>Where questions</p> <p>Questions on the text: literal and inferential</p> <p>Ask: Find the words that say</p> <p>Which images match these words?</p>	<p>Questions about the text: aim for evaluative and inferential questions</p> <p>Move from What, When and Who questions to Why and How questions</p> <p>FROM</p> <p>What does he mean by...?</p> <p>What do you think the character likes?</p> <p>TO</p> <p>Why has the author ...</p> <p>How has the author ...</p>	<p>You questions</p> <p>Exploring and perhaps reconsidering personal values</p> <p>Activities: Reading aloud</p> <p>Ask questions about their preferences; what they liked in the text; what they remember</p> <p>Relate this to their own lives</p> <p>Agree/ disagree table</p>	<p>What if questions</p> <p>Changing the point of view</p> <p>Activities: - Changing the character - Changing the setting - Copying the form and structure but creating an original document - Changing the mode</p>	<p>From</p> <p>What have I learnt?</p> <p>To</p> <p>What have I learnt about HOW I learn?</p>

Table 1 Possible activities and questions for different processes include responding and composing

Know the resource

Know the available resource by going through the website and the documents in the website. Check your understanding of any term by looking at the definition to see how it is supported by the syllabus statements.

Each textual concept and process is organised under:
What it is: offering a definition

Why it is important: justifying its use

Progressions statements: the order the concept is scaffolded over different stages

Related syllabus content: all the relevant syllabus content points are listed with an identifier that includes Stage/ Objective/ Reading/ Viewing/ Listening (etc) and its Australian Curriculum reference if relevant.

How to start an English Textual Concepts program

This is a big idea but it can be made easier by taking small steps.

First consider: *How do you use texts in the classroom?*

Do you have multiple copies of one text for the whole class to use?

Do you use small numbers of one text and prefer to do small group work?

Are students expected to work on their own choice individual reading?

Do you select one text that you read aloud to the whole class?

These questions will have an impact. *An English Textual Concepts* program is best implemented by offering opportunities for all these reading experiences. Even a picture book acts as a text bringing the class together in learning and is facilitated when each student has a copy of the text. Students cannot develop their reading and comprehension skills if they do not have the physical text in front of them.

Then consider: *How do you usually start your program design?*

From outcomes?

From a text?

From an idea?

From objectives?

Most outcomes appear in each textual concept so you can cover any outcome by choosing a textual concept; you may choose to focus on the concept content statements that belong to a particular outcome.

Texts can often direct us to a specific textual concept that we can follow. A text may suggest some concepts by its structure, subject matter or other elements but always check the concept against the

definitions of the concepts as your perception may be different to what the syllabus is requiring. A text can have amazing characters so we might focus on the concept of character; another may have a great story so we follow the concept of narrative, another may offer a strongly persuasive argument so we might focus on argument, and so on.

As idea-driven units are usually thematic, you may want to look at the textual concept of Theme and how that is developed in a text. If the thematic unit is being used to link different subjects, then we need to consider carefully how the idea is developed in each subject by referencing the relevant outcomes in those subjects. Checking the learning against the textual concepts definitions and content statements will ensure that you teach the requirements of subject English.

The objectives are embedded in every concept and their content statements – you do not need to start from these but, if this is your preferred way in, go to the processes as they align comfortably with objectives.

Start with one unit but, as you prepare units over a year or stage, map out which concepts you have already taught. Once a few units are in place you will find it easier to start with the concepts to ensure that you have covered the big ideas that these concepts offer.

Editor's note: A unit refers to a block of work targeting one text or idea. A program can refer to a unit program or term or year or stage. It offers an overview of what is happening in a course of study.

Preparing a unit on the book *A river* by Marc Martin

The following example starts with a book and then works through concepts to develop a unit.



Step 1: Choosing the concepts

The book *A river* is immediately striking and desirable to teach because of its visuality. It is also important to look closely at the language to find a direction for a unit. At first glance the image of the river snaking through each page creates a connection between the pages and also suggests the metaphor of a snake, so the concept that comes to mind is imagery. A picture book is also about the words so we need to cross-reference to see how the words work with the text. It is easier if we write the transcript of the words on a separate sheet. The transcript can form the basis for an activity (Figure 1) for the class later on.

Page	Words – underline the words that link to the image	Describe the image that matches the words
1	There is a river outside my window.	
2	From where I sit I can see it stretching into the distance in both directions.	

Figure 1 Student activity sheet for connecting words and images in a picture book

As we read the words we see some interesting ideas developing. The words, like the images, are tracing different places. However, the initial image of the snake does not seem to be reinforced by the words, though it is suggested by the phrase *in an endless stream of busyness*. Instead, we see a series of prepositional phrases moving us to different places: *Through the city, under bridges, beyond the fields, into the jungle, and across the sleeping city*. There is little written figurative language to reinforce the visual snake imagery. There is, however, a great number of verbs and participles about movement, such as, *goes, flows, carries, floating and tumbling*. When we return to the images, we see that the two end pages show the narrator's point of view in the bedroom looking out the window and creating a frame for the imagined events in the book – a contrast of the real and the imagined. Although this could be a Stage 1 whole class reading book, its language suits a Stage 2 close study.

The previously identified ideas of prepositional phrases, the visual metaphor of a snake, the framing of the imagined by the real, and point of view lead to the concepts of: *Point of view; Codes and conventions and Connotation, imagery and symbol*. Access the [textual concept book](#) portfolio (online) and explore the definition and the content statements for Stage 2 to locate the best statements for study.

1a. Progression statements for Stage 2

Codes and conventions

Students appreciate that codes of communication are rules which provide access to information and ideas as well as opportunities for expression.

Students learn that

- there are choices of language and structure for expressing information and ideas
- codes and conventions vary according to mode, medium and type of text
- all texts go through stages of refinement of language and structure for accuracy and effectiveness.

Point of view

Students learn that point of view influences interpretation of texts.

Students understand that

- different points of view affect a story
- different modes and media convey point of view in different ways

- meanings of stories may change when viewed through the eyes of different characters in the story or different responders to the story.

Connotation, imagery and symbol

Students understand that imagery is one way of connecting with an audience

Students learn that

- figurative language has an effect on meaning
- imagery may be expressed through comparisons
- there are different types of figurative language in different types of texts and media and for different audiences and purposes.

Although not supported in the written language, figurative language can be part of a class discussion and may be used for assessment

1b Content statements

Look at the specific content points under the progressions. There are a few relevant statements, especially about prepositional phrases and framing, in the book.

Point of view

S208BRV2UA4 explore the effect of choices when framing an image, placement of elements in the image, and salience on composition of still and moving images in a range of types of texts (ACELA1483, ACELA1496)

S201ASL1RC5 retell or perform part of a story from a character's point of view

Codes and conventions

S209BGPVUA3 understand how to elaborate on ideas in texts through the use of prepositional phrases

S209BGPVUA4 understand how adverb groups/phrases and prepositional phrases work in different ways to provide circumstantial details about an activity (ACELA1495) S209BGPVUA5 understand that the meaning of sentences can be enriched through the use of noun groups/phrases and verb groups/phrases and prepositional phrases (ACELA1493)

1c. Choosing outcomes: The assessable outcomes (find the letter O and the number following in the 4th position in the coded identifier) are therefore Outcomes 1, 8 and 9.

Step 2: Determining assessment

Wiggins and McTighe (1998) remind us that it is important to teach with an end in mind so that the teaching is focused. Assessment is important in this process. Given the chosen content statements, the assessment might be a creative retelling (spoken or written) of a trip away as this would include both point of view and prepositional phrases. ICT can be added and students could use a PowerPoint of slides to support their retelling of their journey. In order to also include the idea of framing, the directions to students for writing the story could be that they begin and end in the same way or in the same place. The journey could be from a real place to an imagined

place signalled carefully though the words or images. Keep this in mind and build knowledge and skills accordingly.

Step 3: Developing focus questions that match the processes

The processes are the *learning to ...* phase, providing evidence of learning but this learning is better guided with questions.

Develop a big overarching question, such as:

What are the ways composers use visual and written language to create a narrative that moves from the real to the imagined?

Questions in the classroom guide student learning. They can move between literal questions on the text to more evaluative and inferential questions on ideas behind the text. Table 2 begins with processes to create a variety of learning experiences. These processes are connected to the assessable content statements and outcomes so that the learning is purposeful. There is a balance of responding and composing to keep students constantly involved in their learning.

The lessons

1. Pre – reading

These two main ideas — the topic of rivers and the idea of framing — will engage the students before reading and foreshadow what will follow. Introduce these ideas with two different activities and ensure that writing is a part of the process from the start. Include technology so that it is embedded in the lesson in a meaningful way.

Discussion: engaging personally

What rivers do you know?

Who has been on a boat on a river?

What do you see from a boat on the river?

Draw a boat on a river (representing).

Write a description of the scene from the boat.

Activity

Ask students to look out the class window from their desk and describe what they see. Move up to the window and describe what extra things they can see. Move outside and describe what extra things they can see.

Add technology

Ask students to sit in a spot and write everything they see. Then frame a picture with a mobile phone or a camera. Compare this to what the camera sees.

2. Reading: close study of text

Good questions are at the core of the close study but they have to be accompanied by activities so that students are constantly reinforcing the learning through all the modes represented in the objectives (reading, writing, speaking, listening, representing, and viewing).

The following examples are not in a set order.

Processes and concepts	Focus questions: Ask both types		Responding and composing
<p>The processes might focus on a specific concept or can trace the same concept</p> <p>Engaging personally</p> <p>Point of view: framing</p>	<p>FROM:</p> <p>Specific textual questions</p> <p>What does the person see through the window?</p> <p>Which picture did you like best?</p> <p>Which picture captured a scene you have seen?</p>	<p>TO:</p> <p>Overarching conceptual questions</p> <p>How would changing position change what the character sees?</p>	<p>Short and extended activities</p> <p>Draw the scene outside your bedroom window and write a few lines as if you are the character in a book</p>
<p>Understanding</p> <p>Point of view: framing</p>	<p>What is happening in the scene?</p> <p>Where did the boat travel?</p>	<p>Could one river go through all these scenes?</p>	<p>How does framing change what we see?</p> <p>Give students a different shape or size frame which they can place on one of the pages of the book (they use the same page). Each group reports accurately about what they see. They then receive a different size and shape frame. Students to explain how the second frame changes what they see.</p>
<p>Understanding</p> <p>Codes and conventions: Prepositional phrases</p> <p>Verbs</p>	<p>Which words tell us where the boat is?</p> <p>Which words take us to places?</p>	<p>How can we use words to create movement?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use a transcript of the written text. Highlight the prepositional phrases and verbs to see how movement and places are discussed. 2. Give students partial sentences from the text and ask them to complete the sentences. 3. Cloze activity - remove the prepositions and students have to locate the correct one. 4. Give students lists of verbs and prepositions, phrases and a scene - they have to construct a description of travelling though the scene using some of their verbs and prepositions.

Processes and concepts	Focus questions: Ask both types		Responding and composing
<p>Understanding</p> <p>Images</p>	<p>What is an image?</p>	<p>What is the difference between word and picture images?</p>	<p>1. Students describe what the artist is showing in the pictures. They move between simile and metaphor.</p> <p>2. They look at different pages and create as many similes as they can starting with:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>the river winds like ...</i></p> <p>Then they can start with</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>the river is ...</i></p>
<p>Engaging critically</p> <p>Point of view: framing</p> <p>Codes and conventions: prepositional phrases</p>	<p>How do the words and pictures work together?</p> <p>Where is the frame in the picture?</p> <p>How does it affect what the character sees?</p>	<p>Which is more suggestive: words or pictures?</p> <p>Do we ever see the whole picture?</p>	<p>How do words also create a frame?</p> <p>Return to the book</p> <p>Which words indicate that we are seeing one person's point of view?</p> <p>How does framing work in the first few pages and the end page?</p> <p>Use worksheet below.</p> <p>Differentiation for G&T: students write an analysis of the visual techniques on a page (see worksheet)</p>
<p>Experimenting</p> <p>Allows for critical thinking to be demonstrated</p> <p>Imagery</p> <p>Codes and conventions</p>	<p>Which words and images tell us we are moving into the imagination?</p>	<p>What else could you use other than a river to take you into an imagined story travelling through places?</p> <p>What other thing than a river can we use to travel through scenes?</p> <p>How can a text take us between real and imagined worlds?</p>	<p>Performing</p> <p>Students can take people from real life to imagined places – they can work in pairs and act out the magic, moving from well-known to less well known ways. Will it be a wand? Will it be a dream? Will it be a train that suddenly leads to a different place? Will it be a full moon? Differentiation can be to provide students with the ideas which they act out so they own the ideas</p> <p>Changing the frame</p> <p>Imagine a different scene.</p> <p>Use a different method to travel (a road, pathway, a snail's silvery trail, the light of the moon, etc)</p> <p>Independent writing:</p> <p>Write your own story with a different series of places with pictures</p> <p>Scaffolding – use cloze activity below for scaffolding with students who need this</p>

Processes and concepts	Focus questions: Ask both types		Responding and composing
<p>Connecting</p> <p>Imagery</p>	<p>What scenes does the river flow through?</p>	<p>How does the image of the river connect all the pages?</p>	<p>Remove words from each page and ask students to match the words to the pictures</p> <p>Play a game with a ball of string. Half the class holds this string around playground and the other half follows the pathway and writes about how the string leads them - change halves.</p> <p>Students can draw their own scene with an image that links all the sections</p> <p>Students/teachers can find other texts about rivers and compare these (see samples below).</p>
<p>Reflecting</p>	<p>What have I learnt about words and images?</p> <p>What have I learnt about the way framing works?</p>	<p>What have I enjoyed doing most?</p> <p>What does this show about me as a learner?</p>	<p>Students should answer in discussion so you can model the expectations of reflection - then they write their sentences on their learning.</p>

Table 2 Processes, concepts and focus questions create a variety of learning experiences

Sample activities

These activities are only partially presented and serve as samples.

1. Cloze activity

You can either remove prepositions /verbs/ endings of the prepositional phrases / other parts of the text. Students use their imagination to guess suitable phrases.

Differentiation: give jumbled answers to help them.

A further alternative is to ask students to alter the scene by changing the river to a road.

There is a road outside my window.
From where I sit I can see it stretching into in both directions.

Sometimes I imagine myself along , swept away in a towards

2. Worksheet

In Table 3, the middle column models a level of detail that requires close visual literacy and may need to be scaffolded more. It also shows that we use prepositional phrases to inform and describe about a real setting not just an imagined setting.

Words	Images - write a description of the scene that accompanies the words Refer to colour Composition Point of view (above / below) Type of shot (Wide /close up)	Questions
End page	<p>Wide shot</p> <p>A double page eye level shot shows a bedroom in soft shades of browns, blues and maroon with a bed to the left. A box of toys and then a bookcase are next to the bed to the right of the bed. In the foreground there is a mat with toys. Go further to the right to see a girl at a study desk writing. She is facing a window with a river winding through the town below. Her mobile hangs in front of the view. The scene continues to the right where we see a low cabinet with a globe on it and in the right hand front corner a cat is looking at us. We are behind the girl looking into the room.</p>	<p>For the whole passage: Prepositional phrases Underline all the prepositional phrases on every page. Referents and cohesion Highlight every it and say what it is connected to (Is it the boat or the scene or the river or something else?). Circle all the words that are about senses (sounds/ sight/ smell/ touch/ taste)</p>
Title page		
Page 1 There is a river outside my window. From where I sit I can see it stretching into the distance in both directions.	The shot has zoomed into the window frame and what is seen through the window by the girl so we are following her point of view. We are looking through the girl's eyes.	Which words are about point of view? How does the image show point of view?
Sometimes I imagine myself floating along the river, swept away in a silver boat towards the horizon. Where will it take me?		Which words tell us that the story will become imaginative?
It goes through the city, under bridges and past speeding cars that zoom by in an endless stream of busyness.		Write a list of places the boat goes through and what is seen in each place. Are these sights the expected sights or is there anything different?
It flows beside the factories with their machines grinding and plumes of smoke rising into the sky.		Look at the words to show travelling: goes, flows ... What other synonyms for travelling/movement words can you find in the whole text?

Table 3 Examples for using prepositional phrases to describe visual literacy

3. Related text activities

Text 1: *I am* (a poem by Mary Duroux, 2010)

I am

the river

gently flowing,

as I wind my way to the sea

Change the point of view from the person to the river. Use the poem extract above as a stimulus. Look at the visuality of the lines shaped like a flowing river. Students can return to the book and change the point of view and become the river – What story would the river tell as it flows from place to place? This can be a story or a poem. Students perform their poem or story to the class.

Text 2: *The big river* (by Steven Herrick, 2004)

The big river

rolls past our town,

takes a slow look,

and rolls away.

Editor's note: This is an extract from Herrick's novel, By the river. This Young Adult novel is not suitable for Stage 2 but the extract should stimulate ideas.

Consider personification. Identify the features that make the river a person. Go back to the picture book *A river* and personify the boat. Work in groups and rewrite the story as a poem.

Integrated cross-curriculum units

This unit appears to be a good match for the Geography [Outcome GE2-1](#) *examines features and characteristics of places and environments*. It should not replace the Geography unit nor should the Geography unit replace this English unit – a higher level of learning can be achieved if the subjects retain their integrity. Nevertheless, the images in Marc Martin's *A river* can be used as a wonderful springboard to the Geography learning. Once this unit is completed, students can approach Geography with the language of prepositional phrases for writing and an understanding that our view of places is influenced by where we stand.

This is the strength of the English syllabus and a textual concept approach – it takes students beyond functional literacy to a critical literacy that creates enquiring and perceptive minds, open to the full implications of different forms of communication and ready to change the world.

References and further reading

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