# Education, education, education
# Chapter 13: the English question

*No more Latin, no more French/No more sitting on a hard school bench*

If there's one slogan that's always quoted when anybody's trying to attack – or defend – the expansion of British higher education since the early 1960s it's "More means worse". Here, for example, is the Tory politician Lord David Willetts plugging his book in praise of universities* in his (and my) Oxford college magazine: "Before the Robbins Report of 1963 about 5% of young people in England went to university – now we are close to 50%...Kingsley Amis, the original edusceptic, argued at the time that 'More means worse'." And here's my old friend and Oxford contemporary Professor Sir Roderick Floud attacking Amis directly in a lecture entitled "More Means Better: Fifty years of higher education": "British higher education, like much else, began to change in the 1960s. The report in 1963 of the Robbins Committee... produced the first six new – plateglass – universities. Meanwhile Anthony Crosland as secretary of state for education created the parallel polytechnic system. In response came the *cri de coeur* by the English novelist Kingsley Amis that 'more will mean worse'...expanding the number of students would reduce their quality...only very few – such as the tiny proportion of the population who then went to university, were clever enough to benefit from it."**

**A University Education*, OUP, 2018, discussed in *Christ Church Matters 41*, Trinity Term 2018

**19 June 2014 www.gresham.ac.uk

Well, at least Roderick gets the quotation right in his text whereas Willetts makes the common mistake of changing the tense in the quote so that a specific doleful prediction by Amis becomes a highly dubious – in fact nonsensical – general statement. But it looks as though neither of them has actually checked the source of the quote which is to be found in a long and rather rambling article by Amis in the July 1960 issue of *Encounter****. It was in fact published when Roderick was still at school and the Robbins Committee had yet to meet. So it could hardly be a reaction to Robbins – more a warning shot.

***"Lone Voices: Views of the 'Fifties", Kingsley Amis, *Encounter*, July 1960
www.unz.com/print/Encounter

I must admit that I hadn't read the piece myself until recently but what stands out from it is that Amis, then a lecturer in English literature at Swansea university, is doing what the title suggests – looking back at the 1950s rather than forward to the 1960s. He takes pot-shots at various trends and trendsetters – "Hoggart-wash" is a palpable hit – but reserves his heavy artillery for advertising: "The majority of advertisers are as dishonest as they can get away with being." Advertising is also guilty of attracting "too many people of demonstrable literacy" whereas "where they are really needed is in teaching". That is the nub of his argument: not that his students are stupid but that they have been failed by the system; they have fallen into "the pit of ignorance and incapacity into which British education has sunk since the war". The result, he says, is that some of his students are barely

literate (he sarcastically cites “unsteadiness with hard words like *goes* and *its”*) and often ignorant of poetical terms like metre and canonical poets like Alexander Pope.

So if Swansea’s existing English literature students are ignorant and barely literate in Amis’s opinion, it’s not surprising that he warns against increasing their number. But – there are several buts. First, if we can imagine ourselves back in 1960, is the literacy problem unique to English literature students or do the university teachers of other subjects face it too? Do traditional Swansea university courses in maths, metallurgy and engineering falter because their students aren’t properly prepared for them? Do Eng lit undergraduates at, say, Birmingham and Liverpool struggle with their literacy and knowledge of poetic terminology in the same way as Swansea students are said to do?

And finally, wouldn’t Amis’s local problem be solved, or at least eased, by a remedial English course for Swansea literature students and any others that have been badly served by their schoolteachers? If this idea sounds a trifle far-fetched, please read on because that is what I ended up providing, essentially, for post-A level journalism students in the 1980s and 1990s.

As far as I know these questions were never asked because nobody bothered to engage with Amis’s argument. People merely reacted to its angry, melodramatic conclusion. Here is that conclusion, by the way, just as *Encounter* printed it: “I wish I could have a little tape-and-loudspeaker arrangement sewn into the binding of this magazine, to be triggered off by the light reflected from the reader’s eyes on to this part of the page, and set to bawl out at several bels: MORE *will mean* WORSE.”

Typographical variation used like this is the print equivalent of those abusive ALL IN CAPITALS scrawls once sent by post to newspaper offices or nowadays left on car windscreens to draw attention to the driver’s alleged adultery and/or poor parking – often in green ink and punctuated by multiple screamers (never less than three) like this: !!! Although Amis rejected the tabloid “Angry Young Man” label linking him with writers like John Osborne and Colin Wilson, he was clearly capable of more than mild irritation.

However, I’ve seen no evidence that in 1960 university teachers as a whole found their undergraduate students badly prepared. As far as Oxford and competence in English are concerned there are clear reasons for this: not only was an O-level pass in English language compulsory for Oxford entrance – so were passes in Latin and a modern language, usually French. And whereas English grammar lessons at school might be cursory or inept, an O-level student could hardly learn enough Latin and French grammar to pass in those subjects without acquiring a smattering of the English equivalent. So by passing those three key O levels, English, Latin and French, you gained – and so could demonstrate – a degree of competence in your own language.

For Catholic children, when I was growing up in the 1940s and 50s, there was also the catechism, which laid out the essentials of the church’s doctrine and incidentally helped to school us in English grammar. We started learning the catechism at the same time as we were learning to read and write, so it made a strong and lasting impression. “Who made you?” it began, and the answer, which we learnt to say out loud and then memorise, was “God made me” – not, you’ll notice, just the one word “God” but a full sentence. Alas, when I checked the current Catholic children’s catechism recently, I found that the full sentence had been replaced by the single word “God”. Whereas we learnt from the beginning that formal speech and writing required sentences: God expected to be spoken to properly, with due deference and respect for the conventions.

(Not so, of course, in the old Welsh school story where the teacher asks the class: “Who made the world, children?” and the answer is a thunderous chant of “Aneurin Bevan”. When the teacher asks again the class swot puts up a tentative hand: “Please, miss, was it God, miss?” As emphatically as before, the children shout out “Bloody Tory”.)

There was a downside, of course, to the old emphasis on Latin. It could result in a lifelong attachment to shibboleths like don’t end a sentence with a preposition or start one with a conjunction or “never split an infinitive”. To this day the prose of some of my contemporaries shows this particular scar. Here’s Sir Simon Jenkins, once editor of the *Times*, commenting in the *Guardian* on the prime minister’s policy on farming: “he faces the prospect of having de facto to nationalise an entire industry.” (2 March 2020)

As it stands, “having de facto to nationalise” is both clumsy and confusing: it’s a bit of a mouthful and it risks linking the Latin phrase “de facto” with “having” rather than with “nationalise”. Rewritten as “having to, effectively, nationalise” Simon’s sentence becomes clear and accessible to readers who didn’t attempt, never mind pass, O-level Latin but are used to reading idiomatic modern English.

The “split infinitive problem”, by the way, was solved long ago by academic linguists, notably the Danish scholar Otto Jespersen who redefined the infinitive as the simple verb form – “nationalise” without the preposition “to”. According to this elegant solution a “split infinitive” is simply not possible. To illustrate: *I made him do it* and *I wanted him to do it* both include the infinitive *do* but only the second includes the preposition *to*. So the *to* is an optional add-on, dictated by idiom not grammar; it can’t be an essential part of the infinitive. Newcomers to English may find this distinction difficult of course – which explains why they some of them will continue to say “I made him to do it” even after they’ve mastered more complicated constructions.

Long before Jespersen, Samuel Johnson said confidently of Milton that he “was too busy to much miss his wife”*. Then George Bernard Shaw rebuked the *London Daily Chronicle* in 1892 for applying the false rule banning splitting, while Raymond Chandler became quite angry in 1947: “When I split an infinitive, God damn it, I split it so it will stay split.” In fact it’s easier to find really good writers who do sometimes “split” than ones who consciously decide not to.

**Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, 1779-81

Back in the 1950s English teachers spoke and wrote in the conventional version of English called “standard” as well as insisting that pupils speak and write it. You could get away with regional dialect in a short story, say, but not in an essay. There was school slang, of course, but that didn’t belong in written composition. In speech there were of course regional *accents* – used by pupils and teachers alike – but non-standard variants of grammar were ridiculed rather than respected. In the classroom you couldn’t say, still less write, “I could of danced all night” or “I don’t know nothing” without being seen as a figure of fun, a yokel, an ignoramus. Thus the consensus, conformity, convention encouraged “standard” English.

What is useful about Amis’s angry complaint is that it contradicts the conventional narrative that all was well with the teaching of English in state schools until the 1960s when the progressives came along and ruined it. However, on his main point Amis was wrong: there didn’t need to be any “more”

for things to get "worse" in many aspects of English; that was going to happen anyway in the 1960s as "progressive" child-centred doctrines increasingly dominated the classroom, Latin and French lost ground and English lessons in particular became more informal and less structured and coherent. But his outburst raises another question: was he right to say that British education *sank* to a "pit of ignorance and incapacity" *after* the end of the second world war? Or was what happened in the late 1940s and 1950s a continuation of what went before – more of the same?

There was one important end-of-war change of course: the 1944 Education Act as well as establishing the tripartite system of grammar, technical and modern schools (see Chapter 12) guaranteed free secondary education for all, thus widening access and increasing participation. So after 1945 "more" might well have led to "worse" in secondary education – for some people anyway – without a deliberate change of policy. In fact if expansion hadn't led to some overall decline in quality, in the chaotic post-war conditions of the 1940s with ex-soldiers rapidly retrained as teachers, it would have been a miracle.

But, as far as the teaching of English is concerned, it's clear that Amis was mistaken to imply that before 1945 all was well. According to two academic linguists in a learned article* and accessible online, the decline goes back for decades. They write: "In the first half of the 20th century, English grammar disappeared from the curriculum of most schools in England...the decline... in schools was linked to a similar gap in English universities, where there was virtually no serious research or teaching on English grammar."

**The English Patient: English Grammar and teaching in the twentieth century*, Richard Hudson and John Walmsley, *Journal of Linguistics*, Volume 41, No 3, November 2005

The argument they develop goes like this: in the first part of the 20th century "little serious work on grammar was being pursued in Britain, still less on the grammar of English. The work which was published was produced primarily by freelances or practising teachers and was orientated to the needs of schools, journalists or civil servants." They also quote a report published in 1921 which said that it was "impossible at the present juncture to teach English grammar in the schools for the simple reason that no-one knows exactly what it is".

"After the 1920s," they say, "grammatical activity sank to an all-time low...pressure was also growing to place more weight on literature at the expense of grammar. From the teachers' point of view, there was increasing uncertainty as to the purpose and use of grammar, and even as to its very nature... Under the pressure of English Literature there was felt to be no room for language study in an 'English' curriculum." And by the 1960s a progressive/humanist movement took every opportunity to deploy all the arguments it could find against grammar: most children disliked it; children below the age of about 15 could not learn grammar, and even if they could it was no use to them.

A striking illustration of this attitude appeared at a celebrated Anglo-American seminar on English teaching held at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire in the summer of 1966, which attracted more than 50 specialists in the subject from Britain, the US and Canada. It emerged that there were some differences in existing practice between the two continents. According to one participant: "In many British schools the Americans found no written curriculum existed"; at best, what they found there was "a list of literary works to be read sometime during the year". But there was consensus by the

end of the seminar over what was to be done in future: classroom English was to become, if it wasn't already, an instrument of personal growth rather than an arid exercise in accuracy and grammar, as another participant made explicit*.

*JN Hook, *A Long Way Together: A Personal View of NCTE's first 67 Years,*1979, and John Dixon, *Growth through English*, 1967, both published by the National Association for the Teaching of English

Hudson and Walmsley say that the decades from the 1930s to the 1970s "witnessed a growth of militant philistinism as a consequence of the essentially materialistic arguments put forward by the literature specialists – namely, that grammar could only be tolerated if it could empirically demonstrate that its teaching had a beneficial effect on pupils' language skills...

"Despite increased unease that standards of language were falling significantly and noticeably in the universities and that the educational system was failing the children in its care (Schools Council 1968: *passim*), representatives of the new 'humane' culture were happy to go on record as knowing nothing whatsoever about the grammar of their native language...In the 1960s there was no university tradition of research on English grammar, so *a fortiori* there was no tradition of linking this research to school teaching, nor was there any tradition in schools of linking teaching to university-level research.

"English teaching, both in primary schools and in secondary schools, was dominated by literature and the search for creativity in writing. Grammar was mere mechanics, which children could be taught as and when it was relevant, or which they could just be left to pick up for themselves... the demise of grammar was part of a larger package of educational changes which eventually turned out to be a dead end as it left a significant number of school leavers with hardly any reading and writing skills at all: in 1999 it was calculated that seven million UK adults were functionally illiterate."

Between 1968 and 1977 I gradually became aware of what was happening in English teaching in British state schools, particularly in London. My step-daughters were pupils at local primary schools, then at a comprehensive; my wife was, first, a student in a teacher training college, then a primary-school teacher. And what I learnt was deeply depressing: "creativity" – whatever that might mean: fairy stories? narrative flair? extra adverbs? – was the name of the game; accuracy and correctness were unimportant; structure, clarity and coherence were virtually ignored. Grammar and punctuation were reduced to a few infantile expressions and instructions: "a sentence must have a 'doing word'" (what we used to call a verb); "spoken words in a story need 'speech marks'" (a babyish oversimplification of inverted commas/quotation/quote marks); "when you pause for breath put a comma in" (ignore logic and hope for the best). As for spelling there didn't seem to be any plan at all: the dominant idea seemed to be that learning lists of words and having tests would put the children off so best not to insist; if all went well, they'd learn to spell in the end if they spent enough time reading books (tough if they didn't, of course).

Part of the primary school problem was the questionable literacy of some of the teachers. At our local Church of England primary, established 1648, in leafy, affluent Clapham the head teacher's circulars were a standing joke shared by parents on Saturday mornings during junior football on the common – you had to smile, though it was through clenched teeth.

At Garnett College of Education in the autumn of 1977 I found I was the only journalist on the one-year course for would-be FE teachers with professional experience so I was attached for practical work to the group specialising in English, although the college called it "Communications", the term then in vogue. And that is how I came to be researching the different methods of teaching spelling in the college library one winter's day. You'd think that would be a reasonable place to start – but it turned out to be a complete dead end. There was nothing – nothing at all – in the library on spelling although there were two shelves of books on various, often experimental, methods of teaching reading.

The most bizarre of these was the "initial teaching alphabet" (ITA), introduced in the early 1960s. As an early learner you were expected to absorb a 44-character alphabet in which each character corresponded to a single sound; then later, in a separate procedure, you had transfer this skill to normal reading of the conventional alphabet. After some years of experimental work on guinea pigs – mostly working-class children, of course – the scheme was abandoned, leaving its victims behind, some of them with a life sentence of illiteracy. To illustrate: once, missing the last train from Dover, I hitched a lift to south London with a cowman who was driving a stylish and comfortable car – a real gent who said he was happy to take me miles out of his way but he'd have to turn round and go back when my intended route left the main road: he just couldn't read the signs that would show him the way home. When I asked why, he said: "I was supposed to learn to read by using the ITA method but I failed" – or it failed.

I did eventually manage to find a book on spelling: *Spelling: Caught or Taught?* by Margaret Peters (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967). It illustrated the problem – a survey of primary school teachers showed "little evidence of actual instruction in spelling" whereas it was clear that for many children spelling is not simply "caught" by reading – and made various suggestions as to how to deal with it. One I found convincing was based on the psychological principle of association: from a word you can spell you progress to other similar ones you may have trouble with, as in learning by heart the sentence "The penguin spilt fruit juice down his suit and ruined it" where you're already familiar with one or more "ui" words. But it was clear that 10 years after its publication the book's message had not got through: spelling in most state schools was still not being systematically taught or practised.

In October 1976 the Labour prime minister James Callaghan had launched "the great debate" about public education with a speech at Ruskin College, Oxford. He had referred to "complaints from industry that new recruits from the schools sometimes do not have the basic tools to do the job" and to "unease felt by parents and others about the new informal methods". Here, a year or so after his speech, was clear evidence that, in English at least, there was indeed a problem – and that, at Garnett at least, not much was being done to solve it.

The malaise seemed to be general and official. In our practical sessions at Garnett we were told that grammar, spelling and punctuation had a limited importance for both the traditional GCE qualification and the lower-level Certificate in Secondary Education*, which had been introduced in 1965. As our group of aspirant English (sorry, "Communications") teachers discovered more about the realities of the subject they were now expected to teach in colleges of further education, there was growing disillusionment at the task ahead of them. Whereas I was very relieved to find that the journalism tutors at the London College of Printing, where I did my teaching practice, thought that

grammar, spelling, punctuation and the rest were pretty important. After all, if you're editing somebody's copy, how exactly do you go about it if you can't punctuate? If you're writing for publication, some idea of grammar can't be bad. And, obviously, what's published needs to be spelt correctly – and in a consistent style in the case of variations (such as *spelt/spelled*).

*The two qualifications were merged in 1988 into the General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE).

After I joined the permanent staff of the LCP and started running journalism courses as well as teaching on them, I stopped worrying about the use of English as such and concentrated on journalistic technique. Several years passed. Then, almost simultaneously, two things happened: first, two editors who acted as our external examiners wrote a report saying that some LCP journalism students were still making elementary mistakes in English at the end of their course; and second, a magazine publishing company asked me to run a workshop covering aspects of English language for their graduate trainees. That's right: bright young graduates recruited for their writing skills, their ability to express themselves and communicate effectively, were hampered by the fact that they were still making basic errors in English – and obviously this wasn't good news for the titles they worked on. When challenged, they often responded by saying something like: "We were never taught that" – and you had to add (though not out loud): "And the university which managed to convert your A-levels into BA (increasingly first-class or 2:1) degrees obviously didn't bother too much either."

I once ran an intensive one-day writing and subbing workshop for the periodical publishers Morgan-Grampian at their offices in Woolwich which consisted of four participants, articulate graduates at the start of their careers. As they introduced themselves, I asked them to say what their formal level in English was. One of them had veered away from studying English after GCE; another had an A level in the subject; a third had a BA degree; and the fourth a higher degree. But was there any noticeable difference in their command of English in terms of usage, grammar etc? You'll have guessed the answer.

So "English for journalists" was born, as something adaptable to the needs of students, either pre-entry or already employed. It could be the first part of a course, an element in a full-time programme, or the basis of a one-day workshop. And it also became the title of a handbook* for trainees, students and anybody interested in the subject, now in its fifth edition. But as the novelist and journalist Keith Waterhouse said when he reviewed the book in the *British Journalism Review*: "English for *journalists*? Aren't we supposed to *know* English?"

This remains the key question: not only potential journalists but everybody else is entitled to effective instruction and guided practice at school in the use of their own language. They shouldn't have to go to college for a remedial course.

**English for Journalists*, Routledge, 1993...2023. A second book, *Writing for Journalists*, followed in 1999, and I contributed to several others in the Media Skills series. I also wrote a commentary on usage, *Quite Literally*, which came out in 2004.

A second theme of *The English Patient* is the development since the 1960s of linguistics and descriptive grammar as academic subjects. For the first time the universities started to provide a

theoretical basis for changes to the English curriculum. As successive official reports recommended that “English teaching should include explicit teaching about grammar”, the first national curriculum was introduced in 1988. The consequence is that there has been something of a revolution in the teaching and assessment of English in schools.

Not surprisingly there have been problems since “we in England are emerging from a period of grammar-free education”. Older teachers may have learnt some grammar but now need to cope with a new approach, while most young teachers “know very little grammar and are suspicious of explicit grammar teaching”. And then of course there are the parents who, unless they have been exposed to language and linguistics as an academic discipline, will now have difficulty helping with English homework.

During the Covid pandemic of 2020-22, many parents of English schoolchildren were on lockdown duty as emergency teaching assistants, some of them confronted for the first time with the new grammar jargon – expressions like modal verbs and relative pronoun cohesion. Eliane Glaser, a journalist and the mother of two primary-school children, reported* that eight and nine-year-olds are now expected to know all about “noun phrases expanded by the addition of modifying adjectives, preposition phrases, fronted adverbials and determiners”. Of these the fronted adverbial has been a particular source of bafflement. According to the current national curriculum for Key Stage 2 children in year 4, aged 8-9: “Pupils should be taught to develop their understanding of the concepts set out in English Appendix 2 by...using fronted adverbials...[and]...indicate grammatical and other features by using commas after fronted adverbials.”

**Prospect*, March 2021

So what’s it all about? First, what’s an adverbial and what’s the difference between it and an adverb? Bas Aarts, who is professor of English linguistics at University College London, has a blog called *Grammarianism* in which he comments on the issues raised by the national curriculum and answers queries, particularly from teachers. He writes: “...adverb is a *grammatical form* label (more specifically, a word class label), whereas Adverbial is a *grammatical function* label (and hence spelled with a capital letter on this blog).”

So an adverb can be an Adverbial and so can a variety of phrases and clauses that have a similar function. I follow the logic of adopting a particular word to show this function but unfortunately the word “adverbial” is also used in the terminology of traditional grammar as the adjective derived from the word “adverb”, for example in the expression “adverbial phrase”. Confusion between the two uses is inevitable.* A further confusion is that some definitions of “phrase” seem to include “clauses” whereas in traditional grammar a clause has a verb and a phrase doesn’t.

*See a lucid discussion of this and various other “fronting” issues by Brian Richards, professor of education at the Institute of Education in *Affronted Adverbials*, available at www.researchgate.net.

Aarts continues: “What is a fronted Adverbial? This is simply an Adverbial that is placed at the start of a sentence, as in the following examples:

*Over the last few weeks,* the train company has apologised several times for the delays.

*Last month, w*e went to the beach.

*Before the match finished,* the stadium emptied.

"(Something to be aware of: the national curriculum insists that children write a comma after a fronted Adverbial.)"

To be technical for a moment: classifying a word or group of words as an "Adverbial" is certainly an example of grammar whereas the decision about where it goes in a sentence is surely a matter of style rather than grammar. But what is the point of "fronting" anyway? Aarts explains: "The italicised phases normally occur later in the sentence, so a question that arises here is this: 'Why would we want to put Adverbials at the start of a sentence?' The answer is that fronted Adverbials highlight the phrases that have been placed initially, and hence they can be a useful device for writers to draw their readers' attention to this part of a sentence."

So in rather clumsy and repetitious language we have the simple idea that what comes first in a sentence has more impact than it would later on. But is this always true? Aren't some common initial words and phrases – last month, yesterday, on Sundays – the exact opposite of dramatic? Informative certainly but "perfunctory" would surely be a more accurate term. And can't you also achieve impact in a sentence by a powerful ending? (Logically then, we would have to talk about "backed adverbials" as well as fronted ones – and "centred adverbials" too for the cases where they belong in mid-sentence.)

When a fairy story begins "Once upon a time" that expression is merely a sign that what follows is in fact a fairy story, just as years ago young listeners to the radio programme *Listen with Mother* settled down to the familiar words "Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin."

And what about powerful endings to sentences? Here's the children's master story-teller Roald Dahl early in his book about a friendly giant, *The BFG*: "He was running so fast his black cloak was streaming out behind him *like the wings of a bird*." And a line or two later: "A wide river appeared in his path. He crossed it *in one flying stride*." No doubt about where the impact is in these examples. So should the 8-9 year olds be expected in an exercise to bring these phases forward to "highlight" them, thus correcting Roald Dahl? I think not.

Now consider two questions you might put to a boy or girl: "What do you do on Saturdays?" and "When do you play football?" The formal answer to the first might be "On Saturdays I play football" and to the second "I play football on Saturdays". Here the order of the words is determined not by a straining for effect but by deciding what the reader/listener wants/needs to know next. I think this logical principle is relevant both for those learning to write and for those writing (or rewriting) for publication. As the late great wordsmith Clive James said of his first editorial job on the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "Apart from the invaluable parsing lessons at school, these months doing rewrites were probably the best practical training I ever received...writing is essentially a matter of saying things in the right order."*

**Unreliable Memoirs*, Jonathan Cape, 1980

In his blog Bas Aarts does add to his main point about impact, saying that fronted adverbials "also offer writers the opportunity to vary their sentence structures", and he cautions against over use of them, specifying "box-ticking". Alas, to judge from the various websites advising parents in these troubled times, it looks as though "box-ticking" is very much the name of the game.

Here are some examples of sentences including adverbials given by one prominent site* for primary-school parents:

We met *by the train station.*

He stood and waited *under the clock.*

The rabbit hopped *as fast as it could.*

She danced *all night long.*

He ate his breakfast *before the sun came up.*

And the same sentences with the adverbials fronted:

*By the train station,* we met.

*Under the clock,* he stood and waited.

*As fast as it could,* the rabbit hopped.

*All night long,* she danced.

*Before the sun came up,* he ate his breakfast.

* www.theschoolrun.com , owned and run by "mums working from home", whose "resources are written by experienced primary school teachers".

Apart from "box-ticking" what is the point of reversing the order of these sentences? As they stand they seem to make sense and sound natural. In fact, how can we decide whether it's a good idea or not to reverse the order of them unless we have a context, above all unless we know what comes immediately before the quoted sentence? Several of the rewritten examples (*As fast as it could,* the rabbit hopped.) sound distinctly odd, though one of them (*By the train station*, we met.) echoes the title of a literary masterpiece: *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, Elizabeth Smart's celebrated prose-poem novel. But in that example, you'll notice, the adverbial introduces a dramatic statement, whereas the rewritten one above is the epitome of bathos. Indeed you could argue that it illustrates as well as anything could that it's often a very bad idea to start a sentence with an adverbial.

If all this begins to sound like academic jargon leading to pointless exercises, there is another serious criticism to be made – that is, of the instruction to introduce commas after "fronting". First, there is confusion about whether this is to be done in all cases or whether the pupil is expected to decide whether a comma is needed. The quote from the national curriculum seems to suggest that commas are obligatory – and Bas Aarts agrees. However, this is such a ludicrous idea that most people take refuge in some kind of contradictory-sounding compromise. Here's what www.theschoolrun.com says:

"A comma is normally used after an adverbial (but there are plenty of exceptions to this rule)."

But the real objection is that in English grammar, punctuation and style, as developed through the centuries, there is no such "rule": it's an artificial academic invention. In fact let's go further: I don't think I'd employ as an editor somebody who wanted to put a comma after "station" in the Smart title quoted above. We could digress for pages discussing the various ways in which commas should or shouldn't be used, particularly after "adverbials", but that would be pointless and silly. It's enough to point out that in numerous straightforward examples accessible to children a comma is *not* in fact used after an adverbial. Thus the sharp, observant, literate child is liable to see the classroom exercise not merely as box-ticking but as nonsense.

Some children are brighter and more observant than adults give them credit for, as in the tale of the five-year-old pointing to an animal in the paddock and explaining to their younger sibling: "That's a horse but bigs call it a gee-gee."

Earlier I quoted the familiar phrase "Once upon a time", an adverbial that routinely introduces fairy stories. It's used in about a third of the examples included in *The Fairy Tale Treasury**. In not a single one is there a comma after the word *time*. OK, that's only 50 years ago; perhaps there used to be a comma; perhaps once upon a time there was. Alas, no. A number of the stories in the *Treasury* were collected by Joseph Jacobs and originally published in 1890 as *English Folk Tales* – even back then in the 19th century there was no comma after *time.*

* Hamish Hamilton, 1972

Also, did you spot all the fronted adverbials in the previous paragraph? A negative expression like *In not a single one* would never be followed by a comma (unless it was necessary to mark a parenthesis) but it does require inversion of subject and verb. Whereas sentence adverbs – *hopefully* used to show what the speaker/writer thinks (it won't rain, hopefully), as opposed to the ordinary use of the adverb in the expression "to travel hopefully" (that is full of hope) – *do* need a comma to emphasise their function: to show that they are sentence adverbs. And so on: interesting stuff – but for 8-9 year-olds starting to write?

I don't think it's fair to blame teachers for the fronted adverbial muddle: they're just trying to do what they're told. It's the policy-makers – the politicians, civil servants and senior academics – that have blundered into this in a well-intentioned but inept attempt to make English teaching more logical and coherent. It's not the use of experts that's to blame but the choice of those experts. Asking the academic linguists to reform the English curriculum unaided is like asking a bunch of physiotherapists or dieticians to take responsibility for the rescue of a failing football club, develop new and improved tactics and go on and win the league.

And, as numerous people have pointed out, learning English "grammar" has been confused with the naming of parts, completing sterile exercises and ticking boxes. We have lurched from trying to do without grammar teaching altogether to imposing a pointless and worse, inaccurate, version of it.