

# Key Stage 3 Strategy, Foundation Subjects strand: key messages about structuring learning

This leaflet provides information for teachers about the 'Structuring learning' section of the training materials for foundation subjects.

## Why is structuring learning important?

Research shows that structuring learning, for example by dividing lessons into clear episodes or sections, helps to maintain pace and challenge and thus enhance learning.

Structuring learning may involve teachers:

- getting lessons off to a flying start by involving the whole class in a lively, engaging and thought-provoking starter activity;
- drawing from a range of approaches which help to make the learning active and engaging for all pupils;
- setting tasks which cater for different learning styles;
- scaffolding the learning so that all pupils can carry out challenging tasks;
- providing activities which allow pupils to process new information and to identify and apply patterns, rules and conventions;
- using plenaries to crystallise and embed pupils' learning;
- providing opportunities for pupils to reflect on both what has been learnt and on the strategies used in the learning;
- helping pupils to transfer learning in order to encourage its wider application by recognising connections between the thinking involved in one lesson and other contexts.

The four 'Structuring learning' modules each focus on some of the above features of effective lessons. Each provides a description of the principles underpinning effective practice, practical examples and suggestions for trying things out in the classroom.

## Which modules focus on structuring learning?

Structuring learning is one of the key themes of the foundation subjects strand and should be seen as an element of all the training modules. The four modules which explicitly address it are:

- Starters;
- Plenaries;
- Challenge;
- Engagement.



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Each module can be used as 'stand alone' training and will fit into a typical session during a training day or twilight event. Alternatively, the modules can be linked to address a broader range of issues and professional development needs.

## Starters (module 7)

This module promotes the use of starter activities to establish engagement, pace and challenge at the beginning of lessons.

Its key messages are listed below.

- Starters are about purposeful, interactive teaching which involves all pupils.
- Starters should be planned as a discrete element of the lesson which contributes to the achievement of the lesson's objectives.
- Starters are most effective when they:
  - have a clear purpose;
  - inject a sense of pace;
  - challenge pupils to think.
- Teachers can select from a wide variety of different types of starter so as to reflect the objectives of the lesson and address pupils' needs.

The training materials include video excerpts showing nine different starters across a range of foundation subjects.

*Virtual consultant*

The **Principles for teaching thinking** appendix describes strategies suitable for starters. The **Questioning** module can help teachers to inject more challenge into starters.

## Plenaries (module 8)

This module promotes the use of plenary sessions as a vital and integral element of all lessons. It illustrates how plenaries, wherever they occur in a lesson, can be used to clarify, consolidate and extend learning.

The key messages are listed below.

- Successful plenaries employ strategies which actively engage pupils and require them to reflect upon and articulate their learning.
- Plenaries play an important role in helping pupils to remember what they have learnt.
- Effective plenaries extend and deepen learning, paying particular attention to the big skills and concepts which underpin it.
- Successful plenaries encourage pupils to reflect on how they have learnt so that they might apply and transfer their learning to other contexts.
- There is a wide range of different types of plenary which teachers can use to meet the needs of the lesson objectives and to create variety.

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This module links closely with the **Reflection** module which focuses on identifying a language for thinking. Another useful link is to **Big concepts and skills**.

The training materials include video extracts showing four different plenaries.

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Other video clips containing plenaries are **Assessment for learning in everyday lessons, Questioning and Engagement**.

## Challenge (module 9)

This module emphasises the importance of planning challenging learning opportunities. It examines how teachers can design tasks which are both challenging and achievable. It also explores ways of creating a classroom climate in which pupils are confident to tackle such tasks and to take risks.

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For further support you could use the modules

**Planning lessons, Questioning, Engagement and Principles for teaching thinking.**

The key messages are listed below.

- Challenge is a prerequisite to learning.
- In planning for appropriate challenges teachers need to have an understanding of the level of difficulty presented by a task.
- The provision of appropriate but diminishing support to 'scaffold' learning is a key to successful lessons and to increasing pupil independence.
- There are many ways of raising the level of challenge.
- Effective teachers employ a combination of strategies for creating a classroom climate in which pupils respond positively to challenge.

*Virtual consultant*

Useful LAC links include **Writing non fiction, Reading for information** and **Making notes.**

## Engagement (module 10)

Creating engagement in learning is a key objective for all teachers. This module explores ways of structuring learning so as to promote pupil involvement and motivation. The module could provide a useful platform from which to explore the other modules in the section.

*Virtual consultant*

**Engagement** links closely with other modules, especially **Assessment for learning in everyday lessons, Planning lessons** and **Principles for teaching thinking.**

The key messages are listed below.

- Pupils are more likely to engage in their learning if they are clear about its purposes and relevance.
- Pupil engagement is influenced by a complex set of related factors which interact. These include a pupil's:
  - physical state;
  - emotional state;
  - preferred learning styles;
  - prior knowledge.
- Pupils are more likely to remain engaged when learning is 'chunked' and varied, where they have opportunities to shape or determine their work and they can recognise the progress they have made.

## Where next?

How you go about using the foundation subjects training materials to help you to develop the structure of your lessons depends, to a considerable extent, on your starting point, your aims and your current level of expertise. Here are some suggestions for getting started.

*If your work on structuring learning is at an early stage you could consider the following.*

- Begin by planning and delivering a small number of starter activities which are engaging, pacy and challenging. Check out the level of challenge against Bloom's taxonomy (see Appendix 7.1). Reflect on their impact on your lessons.
- Plan three different plenaries which each have a different purpose, for example, drawing together learning from across the class to create a 'big picture' or encouraging pupils to consider the degree to which they have achieved the lesson's learning objectives. Consider their impact on learning then plan three more in response to what you've learned.

*If you already use structured lesson plans and want to build on or refine your practice you could consider the following.*

- One way to improve your starters or plenaries could be to consider your questioning techniques using the **Questioning** module. Try capturing your questions and the pupils' responses on a camcorder or tape recorder to see whether you demand high levels of thinking in response to starter activities or if you ask pupils to justify, synthesise or evaluate at the end of a task. Plan sequences of questions in response to your findings.
- Analyse the level of challenge in one lesson. You could use Bloom's taxonomy or the National Curriculum thinking skills (see Appendices 7.1 and 7.2 in the **Starters** module). If you decide that the level of challenge could be higher, design a sequence of activities which move learning towards a more demanding outcome.
- Select a challenging task, which extends over several lessons, from your scheme of work. Consider the degree to which the learning objectives are correctly sequenced and amend them if necessary. Identify points in the learning sequence where interventions to support thinking and/or literacy would help pupils to carry out the work more successfully. Plan to cater for pupils' different learning styles across these lessons prior to redesigning the learning activities. Finally, identify the key aspects of learning on which your plenaries should focus.

## ... and finally

There are three further foundation subjects key messages leaflets on 'Assessment for learning' (DfES 0045/2003), 'Teaching repertoire' (DfES 0047/2003) and 'Teaching thinking' (DfES 0046/2003).

[www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/keystage3](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/keystage3)

All training modules referred to in this leaflet can be found in the 'Training materials for the foundation subjects' folder (DfES 0350/2002) unless otherwise stated. LAC refers to 'Literacy across the curriculum' (DfEE 0235/2001).