

CHAPTER 1

DO YOU NEED TO TAKE THE MARKING HOME?

This chapter will equip you with techniques for:

- Tackling marking within school
- How to involve pupils more actively in the marking process
- Making the best use of your time.





CASE STUDY

A REFLECTION FROM MY OWN LIFE

Remember that you are only human. An extended period of illness very nearly finished my teaching career in its infancy. What that frightening time in my own life created was a period of enforced reflection which led to the realisation that, in order to keep teaching, I would need to work differently. Since then I have focused on conserving the dynamic best of my energy for the classroom by learning how to deal with marking and other tasks in a more efficient way.

WORKLOAD AND WELL-BEING

Teachers are busy people. In every minute of every day, they are juggling multiple and competing priorities. There is always another resource to differentiate, a lesson to plan or a child who needs extra support. You will never find a teacher who has nothing to do!

Undoubtedly, there is a buzz that comes from busyness and many teachers thrive on this energy, however teacher workload and wellbeing remain a concern. According to the DfE's workload review:

most respondents said they still felt they spent too much time on planning, marking, data management and general administrative work. In addition, about seven out of ten primary respondents and nine out of ten secondary respondents still report that workload is a 'fairly' or 'very serious' problem. The findings suggest there is further work to do in reducing the amount of time teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders spend on these non-teaching activities. (Walker et al., 2019: 11)

Marking is one of the most labour-intensive of these non-teaching activities and, according to the Report of the Independent Teacher Workload Review Group (2016: 5), 'providing *written* feedback on pupils' work – has become

disproportionately valued by schools and has become unnecessarily burdensome for teachers.'



REFLECTION

How much of an impact does marking currently have on your work–life balance and sense of wellbeing? Make a mark on the continuum below:

1 (very little) 10 (huge impact)

Make a list of the specific ways in which marking encroaches on your life outside of school:

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

How willing do you feel you are to improve this by making changes to your practice?

1 (unwilling to change) 10 (totally motivated to change)

Ultimately, teachers need to save the best of their finite human energy for the moment when they step into the classroom and begin to bring the curriculum to life for the young people that they teach. To do this, they need restorative rest at home in the evenings and certainly during

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weekends and holidays. To put it simply – too many brilliant teachers are suffering from burnout because they are spending too much time on tasks like marking. So, what if we were to stop taking marking home?

This chapter will explore how feedback and marking can be dealt with within the school day and within lessons. Not only is this particularly useful in supporting teachers to maintain more of a work–life balance, it also helps to ensure that feedback has far greater immediacy and impact on pupils' learning.

NOT ALL WORK IS THE SAME

Dylan Wiliam (cited in Hendrick and Macpherson, 2017) recommends 'four quarters' feedback', whereby:

- 25% of work is marked in detail by the teacher
- 25% is skim-marked by the teacher
- 25% is marked by peers
- 25% is self-marked.

This formula alone can be very liberating for teachers, freeing them from then expectation that every piece of work in every pupil's book must be marked. It reminds us that some work is, by its nature, more complex or important and necessitates thorough marking whilst other tasks may require far less attention.

The other key implication here is that, with appropriate support, pupils can be empowered to play a much more active role in the assessment process, as we will explore in Chapter 2.

*'Take rest; a field that has rested
gives a bountiful crop.'
(Ovid)*



HINTS & TIPS

Do not focus on the deficit idea of what you are not doing for your pupils (e.g. sitting up until midnight writing in every book), but instead on what you are providing by changing your practice: even more engaging lessons because you are less tired, plus a genuine opportunity to become fully involved in the assessment process through the mechanisms of peer and self-assessment. Remember that more than anything else, your pupils need and deserve you at your brilliant best in the classroom. They get one go at each academic year and it is in your hands to make it as good as possible.

CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

- **‘A tick and a flick’** – as previously noted, not all work needs to be marked in detail by the teacher. Some work requires little more than a tick to acknowledge it and a quick flick through the book. The purpose of this kind of marking is a simple quality assurance check: has the work been completed? Is there sufficient quantity and at the expected standard? Does this pupil appear to be taking their learning seriously and following the school’s presentation protocols? This is a low-effort activity for teachers but helps to reassure pupils (as well as parents and other stakeholders) that you are aware of what pupils are doing and that you acknowledge their efforts.
- **Entrances and exits** to lessons are a great opportunity to provide the quick ‘tick and a flick’ type of feedback described above. Invite pupils to wait outside of the classroom with their books/work open and ready to show you. As pupils pass by you to enter the classroom, greet them whilst scanning their work. Quickly add a tick (or similar) to each child’s work and keep track of pupils who may need a follow-up of any kind. You are likely to find yourself automatically adding verbal feedback as well, and this sort of personalised acknowledgement at the start of the lesson really helps to establish high expectations for

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the whole lesson. This strategy works particularly well for checking homework.

- **Random checks** within the lesson can be very easily generated and managed by the teacher. For example, 'Pupils with birthdays in January or May, please bring your book to me now'. The randomised element is engaging for learners and serves to remind all pupils that their work could be selected at any time.
- **Sample marking** – you do not always need to look at every book to be able to provide useful feedback. You might decide to quickly look at 6–8 books (drawn from across the class's ability range) over lunch or break time in order to draw out common issues that can then be explored with the whole class, even later that same day, e.g. 'When I looked at your books over lunchtime, I noticed that a lot of you were struggling with X Now check whether you are doing the same in your work'.



CASE STUDY

LESSONS FROM INDUSTRY: POMODORO MARKING

Lee, a secondary history teacher, was very struck by how productive his wife, a project manager, was whenever she was working. When he asked her about this, she introduced him to a productivity strategy called the Pomodoro technique (see <https://francescocirillo.com/pages/pomodoro-technique>) and explained that she had been using this for several months. The strategy, which takes its name from the tasty, bite-sized tomato, simply involves setting a timer for 25 minutes and endeavouring to tackle as much as you can during that time but, crucially, without the pressure or expectation of finishing a particular task.

Lee decided to trial this approach to tackle his marking which, in his words, often felt like 'an insurmountable task' that was taking up all of his time.

What Lee said:

I really wanted my weekends back and decided to see if I could get the marking done at school instead. I experimented by trying to find 25 minutes within the school day, usually at lunchtime or during a free period. When I couldn't manage that, a maximum of 25 minutes didn't feel too daunting to tack onto the end of the day. I gave myself permission to only mark as many books as I could within that time limit: as soon as the timer beeped after 25 minutes, I stopped.

I used my observations and notes from these books to give generalised feedback to the rest of the class next lesson, making sure that the pupils whose books had not been marked were the ones I started with next time. On another occasion, I marked the remaining books with the pupils in class next lesson and that also worked well.

Trust me, you really should try the Pomodoro approach for your marking. You will be amazed by just how much you can achieve in 25 minutes when this is your sole focus.

- **Live marking** involves the teacher modelling the marking process live in front of the class. The most important element here is for the teacher to verbalise the thinking behind the marking, e.g. 'So, I am putting a tick here because ...' or 'I can see that this person has picked up their third point from the mark scheme because ... so they are now on 3 marks out of 4'. Following this, the pupils copy what the teacher has just done by applying the pointers to their work: 'Can you see any of this in your/your partner's work?'
- **Uplevelling** – focus your energy on modelling for the pupils exactly how to edit and improve their own work by doing exactly this to sample

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pieces of work that you have looked at. The key here is to talk as you work so that pupils can see exactly what you are doing and hear why, e.g. ‘So, I notice here that we are missing a connective to link the ideas so I am going to add the word “therefore” and then I can extend that sentence a bit more ...’ or ‘The first thing I notice here is that the axes have been draw without a ruler and that the scale is not accurate. I’m going to correct that first of all ...’.

- Interactive whiteboards or visualisers are ideal for this, but you can achieve the same effect by taking a photo of the work and projecting this onto any kind of screen.
- Here, pupils have the opportunity to stop you at any point and to ask for clarification – something that cannot be achieved through traditional written feedback.
- Next, urge pupils to replicate the process and to improve their own work by making similar changes to the ones you made. Keep the exemplars displayed on the board to continue to support and scaffold the pupils, thus freeing you up to work directly with any learners who would benefit from further guidance.
- **Cluster marking** – invite pupils to join you for specific feedback and input in relation to just one particular aspect, e.g. ‘I am now going to look again at how we use evidence from the text to support our argument. If you would like some feedback on that aspect, meet me around this table now’. This approach has the added benefit of encouraging pupils to take more active ownership and responsibility within the feedback process, a principle that we will explore more fully in Chapter 2.

In summary, the Workload Report (Walker et al., 2019) concluded that ‘three principles underpin effective marking: it should be meaningful, manageable and motivating’ (p.8).

The tried-and-tested strategies in this chapter will undoubtedly help to make marking more manageable. If we agree with Sir John Jones that teachers

are the 'magic-weaving profession' (Jones, 2011), we need to help them to conserve their best energy for the classroom and, in some cases, to save them from their own current habits that simply may not be sustainable in the long term.

NOTE IT DOWN

HOW COULD YOU MAKE THIS WORK FOR YOU? HAVE A THINK ABOUT YOUR WORKING WEEK IN SCHOOL. WHAT SLOTS EXIST WITHIN YOUR TIMETABLE THAT COULD BE USED TO INCORPORATE SOME OF THE STRATEGIES LISTED IN THIS CHAPTER?
LABEL THE SLOTS:

- POSSIBLE
- PROBABLE
- PREFERRED.

OVER A TYPICAL WEEK, TRY TO SEE IF YOU CAN TRIAL SOME NEW APPROACHES IN YOUR PREFERRED SLOTS. WHAT IMPACT DO YOU NOTICE ON YOUR WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND LEISURE TIME OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL?

Table 1.1 Ideas for new approaches to work-life balance

	Before school	Morning break	Lunchtime	Immediately after school	Other, e.g. free period
Monday					
Tuesday					
Wednesday					
Thursday					
Friday					