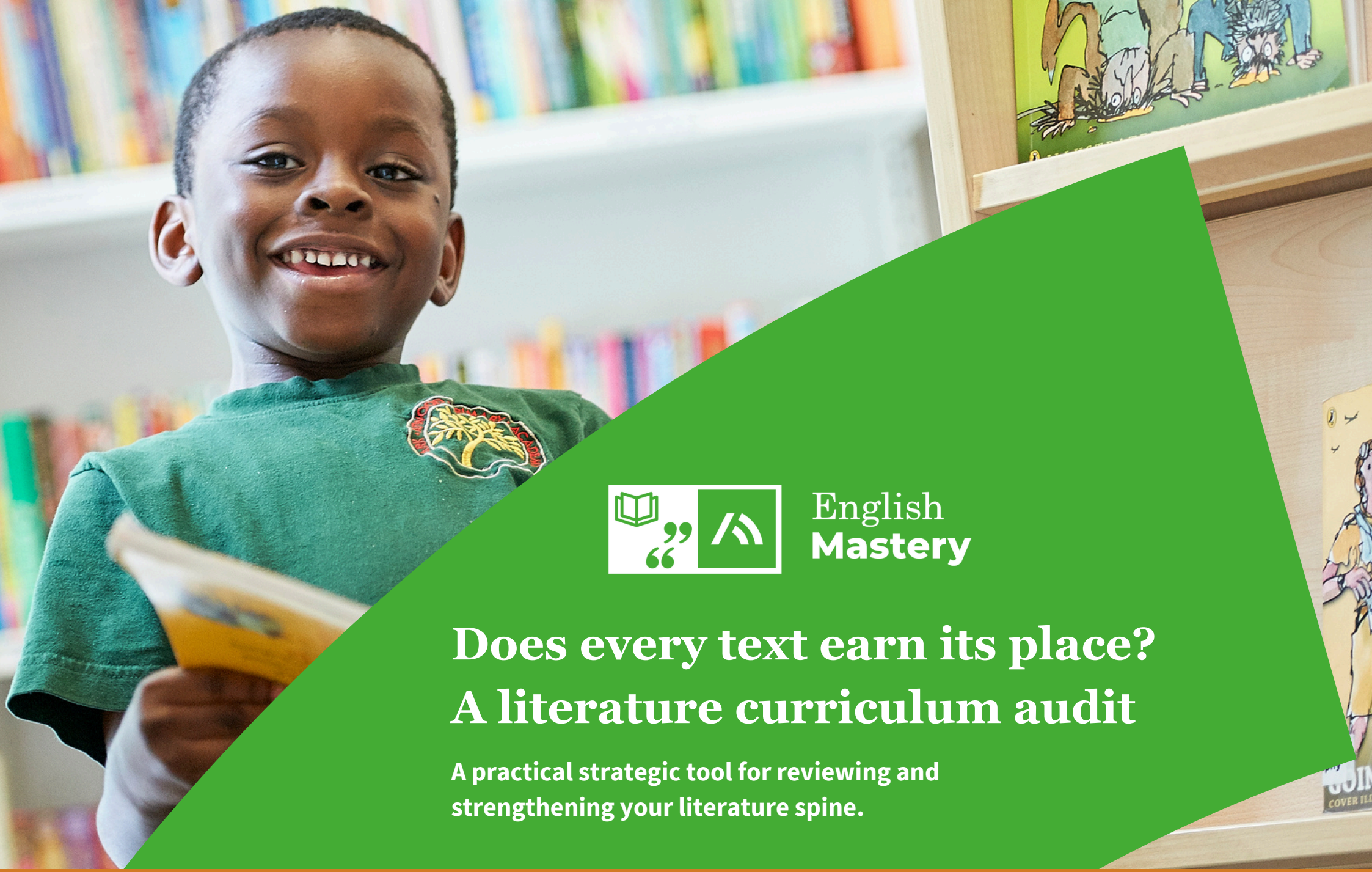


English
Mastery

Does every text earn its place? A literature curriculum audit

A practical strategic tool for reviewing and strengthening your literature spine.

Introduction

We both know the joy of finding a book that makes a class laugh, stops them in their tracks or sparks a brilliant conversation. We have seen classes hold their breath as Sophie hides from the giants, erupt in cheers when Beowulf defeats Grendel, and argue passionately about whether Prospero has treated Caliban fairly. These are the moments that make teaching English so rewarding, and they are why we care so deeply about the books children encounter.

But those moments rarely happen by accident. Choosing literature is one of the most consequential decisions we make as English teachers. A strong literature spine is more than a collection of books that pupils enjoy. It is a deliberately sequenced curriculum through which pupils build knowledge, language, literary understanding and experience over time.

Drawing on our experience of teaching and of developing English Mastery across primary and secondary, we have created this guide to help schools look closely at the literature they choose and the experiences those choices create. We believe inclusion and ambition should go hand in hand: pupils should encounter a rich range of voices, perspectives and experiences, while the barriers that might prevent them accessing ambitious literature are deliberately removed. Inclusion is not about lowering the ceiling. It is about ensuring every pupil has the support, knowledge and opportunities they need to reach it.

We hope this guide helps schools strengthen their literature spines so that every pupil can experience the challenge, richness and joy that great literature can bring.



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Reviewing and strengthening your school's literature spine

Our accompanying article, **More than a good book: choosing ambitious literature with purpose**, sets out six questions that can help schools think differently about choosing and sequencing literature:

1. Why this text?
What makes this text worth teaching? What does it offer in language, ideas, knowledge, literary form, genre, perspective or experience?

2. Why here?
Why does it belong at this point in the sequence? What comes before and after?

3. What makes it ambitious?
What are the linguistic, conceptual, structural, intellectual and experiential demands of this text?

4. What does it contribute?
What distinctive value does this text add to pupils' cumulative experience of literature?

5. Who does it open the door to?
Whose lives, voices and perspectives will pupils encounter?

6. Can everyone access it?
What might prevent some pupils from meeting the demands of this text, and what support will enable them to do so?

This audit takes those questions a step further. It is designed to help you review your existing literature spine, test the rationale for individual texts, identify gaps and duplication, and make informed decisions about what to keep, move, strengthen or reconsider.
You do not need to start again. In many cases, a literature spine will contain strong texts that need no change. The purpose of the audit is to make the thinking behind those choices explicit and to identify where relatively small changes could strengthen the curriculum as a whole.

How to use the audit

1. Review individual texts

Choose a year group, key stage or section of your literature spine and work through the six questions for each text. You may find it most useful to begin with a year group or section of the spine where you are already considering change, rather than attempting to audit every text at once.

For each question, record:

- **What does the evidence tell us?**
- **What does this mean for the curriculum?**
- **What, if anything, should we investigate further?**

These are not judgements about whether a book is 'good'. They are judgements about its curriculum value.

2. Review the spine as a sequence

Once you have considered individual texts, step back and look across the whole spine.
Ask whether pupils' experience of literature is cumulative. What knowledge, perspectives, forms, genres, ideas and ways of reading are developing over time?

3. Identify priorities

You do not need to act on every observation at once. Use the final section to identify the changes that are most likely to strengthen the curriculum and the practical steps needed to make them.

Part 1: Review individual texts

Use the matrix below to review one text at a time. Look for specific evidence rather than general impressions, then make a curriculum decision.

Question	Core idea	Key prompts	Evidence to consider	Evidence/ implications
1 **Why this text?** *What makes this text worth teaching?*	Choose texts for what makes them worth teaching, not simply because they are good books.	• What can pupils know, understand, experience or do through studying this text? • What does this particular text offer that another text might not? • Does it provide rich language, interesting ideas, wider knowledge, diverse perspectives or an opportunity to study a particular literary form? • Is the rationale sufficiently specific to this text?	Look at: • the text itself; • the knowledge and vocabulary pupils will encounter; • the literary form, genre or authorial choices; • the concepts and ideas it introduces; • the experiences or perspectives it offers; • what pupils are expected to learn through studying it.	Keep / Reconsider / Replace Reflections:

Question	Core idea	Key prompts	Evidence to consider	Evidence/ implications
2 **Why here?** *Why does this text belong at this point in the sequence?*	*A strong literature spine is a sequence, not a collection. A text's value depends not only on what it contains, but on what it connects to.*	• Why does this text belong at this point in the sequence? • What prior knowledge does it draw on? • What new knowledge, vocabulary or ideas does it introduce? • What will pupils be better prepared to understand because they have studied earlier texts? • What does this text prepare pupils to encounter later? • Would its contribution be stronger elsewhere in the sequence?	Map connections to: • prior literature; • wider curriculum knowledge; • recurring vocabulary and concepts; • literary forms and genres; • historical and cultural knowledge; • later texts and concepts. Consider whether pupils are building knowledge cumulatively rather than repeatedly encountering similar content without progression.	Keep here / Move / Resequence Reflections:

Question	Core idea	Key prompts	Evidence to consider	Evidence/ implications
3 **What makes it ambitious?** *What demands does this text make of the pupils?*	*Ambition is about the quality and richness of the thinking a text makes possible, not simply how difficult it is to read.*	Consider five dimensions of ambition: **Linguistic** Vocabulary, syntax, imagery, distinctive language and authorial choices. **Conceptual** Ideas and concepts that may be unfamiliar, abstract or complex. **Structural** Perspective, chronology, narrative structure, genre and form. **Intellectual** Ambiguity, competing interpretations and complexity. **Experiential** Unfamiliar lives, worlds, cultures, experiences and perspectives.	Look at/to: • specific features of the text that create these demands, including where different dimensions combine; • avoid mistaking length, unusual vocabulary or complex sentences for ambition; • consider whether accessible language enables sophisticated thinking. Ask: • What, specifically, will pupils have to understand, notice, interpret or think about in order to engage fully with this text?	Protect / Develop / Reconsider Reflections:

Question	Core idea	Key prompts	Evidence to consider	Evidence/ implications
4 **What does it contribute?** *What distinctive value does this text add?*	*Each text should add something distinctive to pupils' cumulative experience of literature.*	A strong spine needs more than good individual texts. Look across the texts pupils encounter and ask: • What does this text add to pupils' cumulative experience that they might otherwise miss? • Does it introduce or deepen a genre, form, author, period, style, idea or way of seeing the world? • What connections does it make with other texts, and does it build on previous learning? • Where might its contribution duplicate another text, and what literary experiences are missing from the spine? • Beyond the unit itself, what does it contribute to pupils' understanding of literature, language, knowledge, other people and experiences, themselves and what literature can do?	Create a simple map of the spine showing: • genres and forms; • authors and literary traditions; • historical periods; • recurring concepts and themes; • knowledge; • perspectives and experiences; • opportunities to develop increasingly complex ways of reading.	Distinctive / Some duplication / Duplicates another text Reflections:

Question	Core idea	Key prompts	Evidence to consider	Evidence/ implications
5 **Who does it open the door to?** *What lives, voices and perspectives does this text add to pupils' wider experience of literature?*	*No single text can represent everything. What matters is the range of lives, voices and perspectives pupils encounter across the literature spine.*	The purpose of this question is not to judge whether an individual book is sufficiently representative in isolation, but to consider what this particular text adds to pupils' wider experience of literature. Ask: • Whose lives, voices and perspectives do pupils encounter through this text, and whose perspective is foregrounded? • Does it allow pupils to see themselves, encounter experiences different from their own, or both? • What experiences, cultures, communities or perspectives does this text introduce or deepen? • How does its contribution connect with the other texts pupils encounter across the spine? • What might pupils miss if this text were removed?	Consider: • the lives and experiences represented; • whose perspective is foregrounded; • cultural and geographical settings; • historical experiences; • family and community; • disability; • gender and identity; • social and economic experience; • whose voices are heard and whose are absent. Avoid reducing representation to whether a text appears to 'tick a box'. Instead, consider the quality and significance of the contribution this text makes to pupils' cumulative experience of literature.	Strong contribution / Could broaden / Gap identified Reflections:

Question	Core idea	Key prompts	Evidence to consider	Evidence/ implications
6 **Can everyone access it?** *What might prevent some pupils from meeting the demands of this text, and what support will enable them to do so?*	*Accessibility does not mean lowering the level of challenge. It means giving every pupil the support they need to meet it.*	Ask: • Which of the text's demands are likely to create barriers for some pupils? • What prior knowledge, vocabulary or reading fluency will pupils need? • What might prevent some pupils from meeting those demands? • Are we providing sufficient support without reducing the intellectual or literary ambition? • Does the curriculum give pupils enough time and practice to build the knowledge and skills they need? • Could pupils with different starting points participate in the same ambitious intellectual experience?	Consider: • pupils' prior and background knowledge; • vocabulary; • reading fluency; • opportunities for repeated encounters with challenging language, ideas or passages; • language demands; • SEND and accessibility needs; • scaffolding and modelling; • alternative formats where appropriate; • opportunities for discussion and rehearsal; • the support provided by the sequence of lessons. The key distinction is between reducing the demand and removing barriers to meeting the demand. The goal is not to lower the ceiling. It is to build the staircase.	Accessible / Support needed / Reconsider Reflections:

The final test

If we were designing our curriculum from scratch today, would we still choose this text? Why?

Yes	Yes, but...	No
The text makes a clear and valuable contribution.	The text is valuable, but its position, support or role may need reconsidering.	The text no longer makes a strong enough contribution to justify its place in the curriculum.

Decision / next step(s):

Part 2: Audit the literature spine as a whole

Part 1 asks whether each text earns its place. Part 2 asks what those texts collectively provide.

Once you have reviewed individual texts, step back from the individual book.

A literature spine should create a **cumulative experience** that no single text can provide.

Use the questions below to identify patterns, gaps and unnecessary repetition.

Area to audit	What are we looking for?	Questions to ask	Evidence/ observations	Key findings
Purpose *What is the literature spine designed to achieve?*	A clear and coherent purpose for the literature curriculum	Ask: • What do we want pupils to know, understand, experience and be able to do as a result of studying literature? • What does our literature curriculum prioritise? • Is that purpose clear enough to guide decisions about which texts belong in the spine? • Does the spine as a whole deliver that purpose? • Are there aspects of our stated purpose that are not sufficiently represented in the texts we have chosen? • Would a teacher or leader looking across the spine be able to explain why these texts, in this sequence, serve our intended purpose?	Your curriculum aims, rationale, progression documents, text rationales and the experience pupils actually encounter.	

Coherence *How do the texts connect and build on one another?*	Meaningful connections between texts and across the sequence	Ask: • What connections do pupils make between texts across the spine? • How do texts build on pupils' previous knowledge and prepare them for what comes next? • Are important knowledge, vocabulary, ideas and concepts revisited and developed over time? • Are there clear connections between texts, or do some sit alongside one another without a clear curricular rationale? • Are pupils repeatedly encountering similar content without meaningful development? • Does the sequence feel deliberate and coherent, rather than a collection of individual text choices?	The sequence of texts, curriculum maps, progression documents, knowledge organisers, unit rationales and evidence of what pupils are expected to know before and after each text.	
Knowledge and literary understanding *What knowledge do pupils build through the spine?*	Cumulative development of knowledge about literature and the wider world	Ask: • What knowledge do pupils build through studying literature? • What do pupils learn about authors, literary traditions, historical and cultural contexts, genres and forms? • How does knowledge gained through earlier texts support pupils' understanding of later texts?	Curriculum maps, knowledge organisers, lesson content, assessment materials, text rationales and evidence of prior knowledge and learning across year groups.	

		• Are important ideas, concepts and literary knowledge revisited and developed rather than introduced once and forgotten? • Does the spine build the background knowledge pupils need to understand increasingly complex literature? • Are there important areas of knowledge that pupils encounter repeatedly, while others are missing?		
Language *How does pupils' experience of language develop?*	A rich, varied and increasingly sophisticated experience of language	Ask: • What range of vocabulary, syntax, imagery and authorial choices do pupils encounter across the spine, and how does that experience develop over time? • Does pupils' experience of language become increasingly rich and sophisticated over time? • Are pupils encountering language that stretches them linguistically, alongside appropriate support to understand it? • Are distinctive uses of language deliberately revisited and compared across texts? • Does the spine expose pupils to different voices, styles and ways of using language? • Are there areas where pupils' experience of language is narrow or repetitive?	The texts themselves, vocabulary selections, curriculum maps, lesson materials and evidence of how language is taught and revisited across the spine.	

Ideas and concepts *How does the spine develop pupils' thinking through literature?*	Increasingly rich and complex engagement with ideas and concepts	Ask: • Which ideas and concepts recur across the literature spine? • Do pupils encounter these ideas with increasing depth and complexity? • Are there opportunities to encounter ambiguity, uncertainty, disagreement and competing interpretations? • Does the sequence move beyond familiar or concrete ideas towards more complex and abstract thinking where appropriate? • Are pupils given opportunities to connect ideas across different texts, contexts and perspectives? • Are there important ideas that pupils have few opportunities to encounter through literature?	Texts, unit rationales, curriculum maps, lesson questions, discussion prompts, assessment materials and evidence of conceptual progression across year groups.	
Range and perspective *What range of lives, voices and perspectives do pupils encounter?*	A broad and meaningful range of experiences, voices and perspectives across the spine	Ask: • Whose lives, voices and perspectives do pupils encounter across the spine? • Who is at the centre of the stories pupils read, and whose perspectives are foregrounded? • Do pupils have opportunities both to see aspects of their own experience reflected and to encounter experiences different from their own? • What cultures, communities, places, historical experiences and ways of life do pupils encounter?	The texts, authors, characters and perspectives represented across the spine. Consider author background, cultural and geographical settings, historical experiences, disability, gender, identity, family and community, social and	

		• Are some perspectives repeatedly represented in similar ways? • Are there important perspectives or experiences that pupils rarely or never encounter? • Does the range of literature broaden pupils' understanding of the world rather than simply provide variety for its own sake?	economic experience, and whose voices are foregrounded or absent.	
Genre and form *What range of literary forms and traditions do pupils encounter?*	A varied and purposeful experience of literary forms, genres and structures	Ask: • Which literary forms and genres do pupils encounter across the spine? • Do pupils experience poetry, prose and drama, alongside different narrative structures and literary traditions? • Are pupils exposed to texts that use form in distinctive or challenging ways? • Does encountering different forms help pupils understand what literature can do? • Are some genres, forms or traditions over-represented while others are absent? • Does the sequence allow pupils to build knowledge of literary conventions and recognise how authors use and subvert them?	The texts themselves, curriculum maps, genre and form classifications, unit rationales and opportunities for pupils to compare and connect different literary forms.	

Progression *How does pupils' experience of literature become increasingly rich, ambitious and complex?*	A deliberate progression in the overall literary experience pupils receive across the spine	Ask: • What can pupils understand about literature by the end of the sequence that they could not understand at the beginning? • How does the complexity of the literature pupils encounter develop over time? • Does progression reflect more than increasing text length or linguistic difficulty? • Are pupils increasingly able to draw on prior knowledge, recognise connections and interpret texts in more sophisticated ways? • Does the spine gradually expand pupils' literary horizons while maintaining appropriate support? • Are there points where the level of challenge increases without sufficient preparation, or where pupils are not being stretched enough?	The sequence of texts across year groups, progression frameworks, curriculum maps, assessment expectations, examples of pupil work and evidence of the knowledge and literary understanding pupils bring from earlier years.	

Part 3: Identify priorities

The purpose of the audit is not to generate a long list of changes. Use what you have found to identify the most important strengths, gaps and opportunities in your literature spine, then decide which require action.

1. What does the audit tell us?

Finding	Where have we identified this?	What does it mean for pupils?	What might this mean for the spine?
Strengths to protect *Which texts, sequences, approaches or features of the literature spine are particularly strong and should be retained?*			
Gaps to address *Are there important gaps in knowledge, language, forms, genres, ideas, perspectives, literary experiences or opportunities for enjoyment?*			

Duplication to consider *Where are texts, themes, perspectives, genres or literary experiences making similar contributions without sufficient progression or added value?*				
Weak connections to strengthen *Where are connections between texts, knowledge, concepts or literary forms weaker than they could be?*				
Opportunities to develop the spine *Where could a relatively small change strengthen pupils' cumulative experience of literature?*				

2. What matters most?

Not every finding will require a change. Some strengths should be protected, some issues may be addressed through teaching or support rather than changing texts, and some may warrant further investigation. Use the evidence from the audit to identify the priorities that are most likely to strengthen pupils' cumulative experience of literature.

Priority	Area(s) of the audit	What have we found?	Why does it matter for pupils?	Priority level High / Medium / Low
1				
2				
3				

3. What do we need to do?

Priority	Decision	Action needed	Who needs to be involved?	When?
1				
2				
3				

The final test

If we were designing our literature spine from scratch today, would we still choose these texts, in this sequence, for this purpose?

Yes	Uncertain	No
Can we articulate why?	What evidence would help us decide?	What could make a stronger contribution to pupils' cumulative experience of literature?

Decision / next step(s):

Remember, the aim is not to create a universally agreed list of the 'best' books. It is to build a literature spine in which every text has a clear purpose, every sequence has a rationale, and pupils' experience of literature becomes richer and more ambitious over time.



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