

The Science of Clear Writing

Course Outline

Target Audience: VWO Students (Upper Forms / Bovenbouw, years 5–6)

Goal: To transition students from "writing for the teacher" to "writing for the reader" and thus prepare them for academic and professional environments.

Methodology: Based on the principles of clear writing according to readers' expectations. These ten modules cover the *written production* strand of the VWO English curriculum, specifically ET8 (writing) and ET11 (effect of language choices). Module 9 (Using AI) will cover ET14 and ET12.

These modules are meant to be used *alongside* instruction in receptive skills (ET3–ET5), speaking and conversation (ET6–ET7), language variation and multilingualism (ET9–ET10, ET13), literature and culture (ET16–ET20), and future orientation (ET15).

Sequence of modules: The modules are meant to be offered in order because they build logically on each other.

First, students develop a mindset and are introduced to reader expectations (1).

Next, they learn a sentence structure that they will keep coming back to (2).

They use this structure to develop a technique for flow (3) between sentences.

Then, they are introduced to the curse of knowledge and how it creates logical gaps (4), which can be resolved by using the techniques in Module 3.

Afterward, they are introduced to clear writing topics: zombie nouns (5), parallelism/comparisons (6), wordiness (7) and consistency in vocabulary (8).

Finally, they are asked to practice critically using AI (9), writing a clear take-home message and revising their essays using all the principles in these modules (10).

Recommended placement: Second half of year 5 or first half of year 6, after students have a working foundation in English grammar and reading comprehension. The course builds on what students already know about sentence structure and grammar.

Entry level: Students should be working at approximately B2 level in written English. They should have a decent understanding of grammar (tenses, subject-verb agreement, articles, sentence parts). Students who are still working at a B1 level will find the rewriting tasks frustrating rather than productive.

Differentiation: Most modules can be differentiated according to ability. For stronger students (C1-C2), the independent practice tasks can be done on texts that are more complex than those provided or on their own texts. For students working closer to B2, the interactive practice tasks can be done classically or in pairs, which allows students to help each other identify issues before they need to do it by themselves.

Assessment: Interactive practice tasks are formative — they generate discussion and use peer feedback and self-correction, but they are not marked for a grade. Independent practice tasks ask students to produce a short written product; these can be used to contribute to a portfolio or for a single summative grade at the end of the course. Module 10 asks students to revise an essay that they have written and write a reflection, which makes for a natural summative assessment. The module 10 teacher notes include a suggested rubric.

Modeling good examples: This curriculum focuses on learning how to write more consciously: students work primarily on broken or mediocre writing that needs to be fixed by applying the principles from the modules. But a student who has never seen a principle working well does not know what to aim for. Thus, the interactive practice section of each module starts with a short original passage (3–5 sentences) that demonstrates the module's principle at its simplest. Students read it first and answer discussion questions about how the principle is being used (what makes it easy to read). Only then do they start to fix the broken versions.

ReallyWrite (reallywrite.com): These modules were created by a university academic writing teacher, who is the same creator of the ReallyWrite editor. The ReallyWrite editor is recommended as a diagnostic tool in the later modules. It is a practical aid that can help students to become more aware of what is happening under the surface of their writing and is often used in university writing courses. From a privacy standpoint, ReallyWrite is exceptionally safe for classroom use. It has a clear privacy policy, and *the text you paste into the editor stays in your own browser*. ReallyWrite collects no personal data and thus uses no cookies. There is no need to create an account. Thus, the editor is compatible with AVG/GDPR requirements and schools will not need individual consent forms or ICT coordinator approval because the text never leaves the student's device.

The ReallyWrite Editor is free to use and ad-free. It was created as a service for academic writing students, so there are no financial conflicts of interest to report.

Flipping the classroom: These modules can easily be incorporated into a flipped classroom. Let the students read the theory and listen to the podcast for homework. Then you can use class time to work through the interactive and independent practice tasks (either classically, in partners, or individually depending on how much help the group needs).

Module 1: How Readers Actually Read

This module introduces the mindset that underpins every ReallyWrite principle: informative writing is not self-expression but a service to the reader. It introduces five expectations that readers subconsciously have. These expectations do not need to be mastered here because they will all be explained in more detail in later modules.

Focus: Mindset & Reader Expectations

Connects to:

Eindterm 8: schrijven afgestemd op doel, publiek, context en medium

Eindterm 11: inzicht in en reflectie op het effect van keuzes in Engelse taalgebruik

Theory:

How readers actually read: Readers do not read word by word. They subconsciously predict the words they expect to see next based on what they have just read. When their predictions are correct, the text flows. When they are wrong, readers stop, feel confused, and have to go back.

The five reader expectations: The following five expectations describe how most readers process English texts efficiently. They reflect the conventions of Anglo-American academic and professional writing — the dominant register for international academic work. Students who encounter other writing traditions (German, French, Dutch academic writing) will find that some conventions differ.

1. *Parallelism:* Things that are logically alike should look grammatically alike.

When items in a list, both sides of a comparison, or repeated ideas all follow the same grammatical form, the reader spots the pattern instantly and can focus on the content rather than the structure.

2. *Familiar information first:* The beginning of the sentence is where the reader expects to find something they already know.

3. *New information last:* The end of the sentence is where the reader's attention naturally falls.

4. *The verb shows the action:* Readers expect to find the main action of the sentence in the verb, not a noun.

5. *Subject and verb should be close together:* Readers subconsciously expect the verb to follow the subject without delay.

Interactive Practice: *(teacher-led class discussion or partner work)*

Part 1. Analysing a good example.

Part 2. The five reader expectations.

Part 3. Two versions. This exercise can be done in partners or individually.

Students are shown two versions of the same paragraph. They identify which one better serves the reader and — using the five expectations — explain precisely what makes one easier to read than the other.

Note: The answer key can best be used by the teacher to give guidance as the students work in partners or as a class. If they work in partners, the teacher may select a group to present their findings to the class, prompting discussion and giving other groups the opportunity to add what they noticed.

Independent Practice: *(partner work or individual work)*

Scenario: A science journalist writing about a new medical discovery (Science / Media).

Task: You have a complex source paragraph about a new virus written by a specialist. Rewrite it by applying the five reader expectations.

Note: The answer key can best be used by the students themselves to check their work independently.

Module 2: Building the Sentence

This module establishes the foundational sentence structure that the following modules will build on.

Focus: Subject-Verb-Object structure, Active vs. Passive Voice, Precise Verbs

Connects to:

Eindterm 8: schrijven met gevarieerde taalstructuren en uitdrukkingen

Eindterm 11: inzicht in het effect van keuzes in taalgebruik op de ontvanger

Theory:

SVO is the foundation: Subject–Verb–Object is the core unit of the clear English sentence. The subject names who or what acts; the verb names the action; the object names what receives the action.

Subject and verb should be close together: Readers don't really process information placed between the subject and verb.

Use precise verbs, not empty verbs: Empty verbs (make, do, have, is, shows, regards) almost always hide the real action inside a noun. Students learn to find that noun and change it into a precise verb: compare, challenge, reduce, identify, propose, conclude.

Passive voice is a choice, not a default: Passive voice is acceptable when the actor is unknown or irrelevant. It is a problem when it hides responsibility or makes sentences unnecessarily weak. Students should always be able to state their reason for choosing passive voice.

Interactive Practice: *(teacher-led class discussion or partner work)*

Part 1. Analyzing a good example. Students read a four-sentence legal passage and identify the main verb in each sentence.

Part 2. The four sentence principles.

Part 3. Sentence Analysis. Students receive five broken sentences, each demonstrating a different structural problem. For each sentence, they identify the problem by name, name the actor and the precise action, and rebuild the sentence in SVO order.

Note: The answer key is best used by the teacher to prompt discussion as students work in partners or as a class.

Independent Practice: *(partner work or individual work)*

Scenario: A legal contract (Law / Civic Literacy).

Task: "Who Did This?" Students receive a five-sentence legal clause containing passive voice, empty verbs, and subject-verb separation. For each sentence, they identify the type of structural problem, name the actor and the precise action, and rewrite the sentence in SVO order. The final rewritten clause must be clear enough for a non-lawyer to understand without legal training.

Note: The answer key is best used by students themselves to check their rewritten sentences independently. Teachers may use it to guide group discussion of cases where more than one rewrite is acceptable.

Module 3: Creating Flow

This module shows how to link sentences together without any extra words.

Focus: Cohesion, Logical Flow, Information Structure

Connects to:

Eindterm 8: produceren van treffende, duidelijk gestructureerde teksten; gebruiken van gevarieerde taalstructuren

Theory:

The Old-to-New Principle: Every sentence has two positions. The topic position (beginning) holds information the reader already knows. The stress position (end) holds new information. Each sentence begins where the last one ended.

The topic position: The subject should contain familiar information: from the previous sentence, from the context, or from common knowledge. Use concrete or human nouns here. Avoid starting with abstract nouns that the reader has not yet encountered.

The stress position: The end of the sentence should contain new information: readers naturally emphasize this position.

Patterns: Topical focus and topical progression.

Linking words: Words like “However” and “Furthermore” signal a relationship between sentences without creating one. When the Old-to-New chain is working, the paragraph needs very few linking words.

Interactive Practice: *(teacher-led class discussion or partner work)*

Part 1. A good example. Students read a five-sentence passage about the human brain and draw arrows from the end of each sentence to the beginning of the next.

Part 2. Creating flow. Repeated here for easy reference.

Part 3. A puzzle. Students receive five sentences of a paragraph in scrambled order. They rearrange them using only the Old-to-New links. No linking words are permitted. The exercise is designed so that only one correct order exists.

Note: The answer key is best used by the teacher to prompt discussion. The puzzle has only one correct order, but students should be asked to explain their reasoning for each placement.

Independent Practice: *(partner work or individual work)*

Scenario: Historical Analysis (History).

Task: “The Scrambled Paragraph.” Students receive a paragraph about the D-Day landings in which the information flow is reversed: new information appears at the beginning and familiar information at the end. They restructure each sentence (not just reorder them) so that the paragraph follows the old to new principle.

Note: The answer key is best used by students to check their rewrite independently. Teachers may use it to discuss why different rewrites work, as long as the Old-to-New chain is preserved.

Module 4: The Curse of Knowledge

This module addresses why writers still produce texts that confuse readers despite knowing about reader's expectations. It introduces techniques to find and close logical gaps and helps students become better peer reviewers.

Focus: Self-Awareness, Logical Gaps

Connects to:

Eindterm 8: schrijven afgestemd op het perspectief van de communicatiepartner

Eindterm 11: reflecteren op het effect van eigen taalgebruik keuzes op de ontvanger

Theory:

The Curse of Knowledge: Once we know something, we cannot fully remember what it was like to not know it. This cognitive bias causes writers to skip connections that feel obvious to them but that the reader cannot make without help.

Logical gaps: A gap occurs when new information appears in the topic position. The writer has skipped a step. The reader stops, wonders what they missed, and often gives up.

How to find your gaps: Ask someone who genuinely does not know your topic to read a short passage and mark every place they stop. Choose a classmate from a different subject, a family member, or a friend outside your class.

How to close them: Write every missing step explicitly. Closing a gap means giving the reader the step they needed; that step then becomes the starting point of the next sentence, restoring the Old-to-New principle.

Interactive Practice: *(teacher-led class discussion or partner work)*

Part 1. A good example. Students read a five-sentence explanation of how a search engine works, written for a non-specialist.

Part 2. The Curse of Knowledge.

Part 3. Find the Gaps. Students receive a paragraph about exercise and the brain, written for a specialist audience. They identify every point where a non-specialist would lose the thread, mark the place where each gap occurs, and write out the missing connections.

Note: The answer key is best used by the teacher to prompt discussion. Students can compare their gaps in pairs before sharing with the class. There may be more than one valid place to close a gap.

Independent Practice: *(partner work or individual work)*

Scenario: A museum audio guide (Cultural Studies / History).

Task: Students receive a curator's catalogue note about one of two paintings. They choose one, identify every point where the curator has assumed knowledge the visitor does not have, rewrite the passage to close those gaps, and test their rewrite on a classmate who worked on the other painting.

Note: The answer key is best used by students to check their rewrites independently. Teachers may wish to discuss why particular gaps were identified and how they were closed.

Module 5: Removing Zombie Nouns (Nominalizations)

This module now zooms in to the word level. Zombie nouns (nominalizations) are the most common way that otherwise clear sentences become heavy and unreadable. Students learn to identify zombie nouns, diagnose the empty verb and preposition that usually accompany them, and replace them with the precise verb hidden inside.

Focus: Precision and Clarity

Connects to:

Eindterm 11: herkennen en uitleggen van het effect van keuzes in taalgebruik

Eindterm 8: gebruiken van gevarieerde taalstructuren en uitdrukkingen in schrijven

Theory:

Identify the noun: Turning a verb into a noun hides the action and drains energy from the sentence.

Identify the structure: Zombie nouns hide next to empty verbs (have, make, show, do, is) and are usually followed by a preposition, especially of or in.

Remove the zombie noun: Find the hidden verb inside the noun and use it directly. The empty verb and the preposition disappear with it.

Notice exceptions: Not every zombie noun must go. Technical terms that cannot be replaced without losing precision are zombie nouns that serve a purpose. The rule is to remove all the zombie nouns around them so the important terms stand out.

Interactive Practice: *(teacher-led class discussion or partner work)*

Part 1. A good example. Students read a four-sentence passage and underline every verb.

Part 2. Removing zombie nouns.

Part 3. De-zombify. Students receive a paragraph of bureaucratic language packed with zombie nouns. They identify each one, extract the hidden verb, and rewrite the sentence using that verb directly.

Note: The answer key is best used by the teacher to compare student rewrites. Multiple valid rewrites exist; the most important thing is that the action must be expressed as a verb, not a noun.

Independent Practice: *(partner work or individual work)*

Scenario: A Government Policy Report (Politics / Civic Studies).

Task: Students receive a ~100-word government statement full of nominalizations. It contains two types: ordinary zombie nouns that should be converted to verbs, and some deliberate technical terms that are legitimate key words. Students rewrite all ordinary zombie nouns as active verbs and retain the key terms.

Note: The answer key is best used by students to check their rewrites independently.

Module 6: Parallelism and Comparisons

This module goes into more detail about parallelism, which was first introduced in Module 1. It explains why it works and where it needs to be applied: lists, sentences, and comparisons. The module also explicitly teaches a clear comparison structure.

Focus: Parallelism and comparison structures

Connects to:

Eindterm 8: gebruiken van gevarieerde taalstructuren en uitdrukkingen

Eindterm 11: inzicht in het effect van keuzes in taalgebruik op de ontvanger

Theory:

What parallelism is: Matching the structure makes it invisible.

Parallelism in lists

Parallelism across sentences

Parallelism in comparisons

Use “than,” not “compared to”

Use a precise verb or adjective

Interactive Practice: *(teacher-led class discussion or partner work)*

Part 1. A good example. Students read a three-sentence policy passage aloud and identify what creates the rhythm.

Part 2. Where to use parallelism.

Part 3. Creating balance. Students receive ten sentences with broken parallel structures, covering all four types: lists, sentences, and comparisons. For each sentence they identify the break, name the type, and rewrite.

Note: The answer key is best used by the teacher to compare student rewrites. Multiple valid parallel structures exist; what matters is that the chosen form is applied consistently and “than” is used for all comparisons.

Independent Practice: *(partner work or individual work)*

Scenario: A scientific paper methods/results section (Science).

Task: Students receive a methods/results section with several failures of parallelism. They must fix them and explain how the corrected version changes the reader’s experience.

Note: The results paragraph requires students to fix “in comparison to” constructions and a noun-vs.-clause comparison, applying the second half of the module’s principles alongside the first.

Module 7: Wordiness

This module covers techniques for cutting wordiness, from individual words to whole sentences.

Focus: Cutting Wordiness & Untangling Complicated Sentences

Connects to:

Eindterm 8: adequaat toepassen van taalregister en conventies van de tekstsoort

Eindterm 11: effect van taalgebruikskeuzes op de ontvanger

Theory:

1. Remove empty phrases: Placeholder subjects (*it, there*) combined with empty verbs (*is, are*) add length without meaning. The word *it* refers to nothing; the verb *is* does nothing. Remove the entire construction and replace it with a real subject and a precise verb.

2. Remove long words/phrases and meaningless words: Many multi-word phrases have shorter equivalents, and many individual words add no meaning.

3. Remove redundant adjectives/adverbs: If you choose a precise noun or verb, you do not need adjectives or adverbs to support it. The concept is already in the noun.

4. Uncomplicate complicated sentences: A sentence becomes complicated when it has too many "moving parts" — introductory phrases, relative clauses, and prepositional phrases stacked on top of each other. You may not be able to fix a complicated sentence by simply breaking it in two; you need to look critically at the structure.

Interactive Practice: (*teacher-led class discussion or partner work*)

Part 1. A good example. Students read a concise text and identify the techniques used

Part 2. The four techniques.

Part 3. The 50-word challenge. Students cut the wordiness in a 100-word text down to 50 words and label each technique they used.

Note: The answer key is best used by the student to check which aspects of wordiness they noticed and which they did not. They may not get down to 50 words, but it's a goal to strive for.

Independent Practice: (*partner work or individual work*)

Scenario: A climate change speech (Activism/Politics).

Task: Students receive a 500-word policy speech containing all four types of wordiness and cut it down to 300 words. Students receive a methods/results section with several failures of parallelism. They must fix them and explain how the corrected version changes the reader's experience.

Note: The answer key here is also best used by students to analyze their own choices and see what they may have missed. Many different choices are acceptable and students will benefit from seeing the model and comparing it to their own work.

Module 8: Consistency in Informative Writing

This module introduces an important counterintuitive rule that often surprises students — and their teachers. A note for educators is included below.

Focus: Vocabulary Precision in Informative Writing

Connects to:

Eindterm 8: adequaat toepassen van conventies van de tekstsoort; schrijven afgestemd op publiek en context

Theory:

Two type of writing requires two different rules

The synonym trap

In informative writing: If you use a different word, you signal to the reader that you have changed the meaning. If you haven't changed the meaning, don't change the word.

1. **Repeat key terms exactly:** A key term is the word you have chosen to name your central concept — the term your reader uses to track your argument. Once chosen, use it in exactly the same form every time that concept appears.
2. **Precision over variety:** Choose the most exact word for your concept and use it every single time that concept appears.
3. **When to vary vocabulary:** when the meaning genuinely changes

Why consistency matters

For educators:

This module introduces an important distinction in types of writing.

In *creative writing*, varying vocabulary is a genuine virtue. A novelist who uses "walked" in every sentence when "strode," "shuffled," "crept," and "wandered" are available is failing to use the language fully. Variety signals craft, prevents monotony, and reveals character.

In *informative writing* — reports, research papers, technical documents, journalism, essays — the goal is entirely different. The reader is not reading for pleasure or to admire the prose. They are reading to extract information accurately and efficiently. When a key term shifts ("patient" → "subject" → "participant"), the reader assumes that the meaning has changed, and figuring it out adds to their cognitive load.

These modules do not advocate for one convention over another. It teaches that conventions differ for creative and informative writing and gives students a chance to practice informative writing. Part of developing sophisticated writers is teaching them to *switch modes consciously*.

Interactive Practice: (*teacher-led class discussion or partner work*)

Part 1. A good example. Students note the key terms in a text

Part 2. The four principles.

Part 3. Spot the shift. Students identify the different words used for the same group in a text and analyze whether that shift is justified or unjustified.

Note: The answer key is best used by the student to check their analysis of justified vs unjustified and compare their rewrite with the model.

Independent Practice: *(partner work or individual work)*

Scenario: A User Manual (Technical Writing)

Task: Students receive a draft for a user manual with an inconsistency problem that is also a safety issue. They must standardize it.

Note: The answer key here is also best used by students to analyze their own choices and see what they may have missed. Many different choices are acceptable and students will benefit from seeing the model and comparing it to their own work.

Module 9: Using AI

This module asks students to reflect on how they can use AI tools critically, while staying true to the techniques they have learned in earlier modules. We suggest ways they can use AI as a thinking partner that helps them identify weaknesses in their own writing and argument.

Focus: AI as a Writing Coach

Connects to:

Eindterm 14: inzicht in mogelijkheden en beperkingen van digitale hulpmiddelen; evalueren van gegenereerde output

Eindterm 12: gebruik van AI om verbeteringsuggesties te krijgen voor eigen schrijfproducten

Theory:

Using AI to help you think, not to think for you: AI can point out potential issues; you decide whether and how you want to fix them.

1. **Use AI to help you revise, not to write the first draft:** do the intellectual work yourself
2. **Use specific prompts** and look at one aspect at a time
3. **Don't fall into the trap of "academic style":** use the specific vocabulary from these modules to ask AI to help you create a clearer text, not a more "academic" one
4. **Use other writing tools instead of AI:** ReallyWrite

Evaluating AI feedback

Interactive Practice: *(teacher-led class discussion or partner work)*

Part 1. A good example. Students identify the principles from this course.

Part 2. What to keep in mind when using AI.

Part 3. Critically engage with AI feedback. Students practice asking AI for specific feedback using a given prompt and decide whether it is valid or invalid, actionable or imprecise.

Part 4. Explore Academese. Students practice analyzing AI feedback based on the prompt "make this more academic".

Note: The answer key gives model answers but students' answers will differ because they will all use a different text.

Independent Practice: *(partner work or individual work)*

Scenario: Future Headline News (Journalism)

Task: Students write a short news article from 10 years in the future announcing their greatest professional achievement. They use all the principles they have learned in these modules to ensure the reader understands why that achievement actually matters to the world. Then they go through a step-by-step revision using the given prompts and analyze each output.

Note: The answer key here is best used by the teacher as a guide because students will all write vastly different texts.

Module 10: The Take-Home Message and Revision

In this final module, students learn to identify and articulate the take-home message and they practice revising their texts step-by-step.

Focus: Writing a take-home message and revising systematically

Connects to:

Eindterm 8: produceren van treffende, duidelijk gestructureerde informerende teksten

Eindterm 12: evalueren wat werkt in het eigen taalleerproces; reflecteren op passende aanpakken

Eindterm 11: reflecteren op keuzes in eigen taalgebruik en het effect daarvan op de ontvanger

Theory:

Topic vs. Message: Moving from “I am writing about AI” (a topic) to “AI requires new ethical boundaries in education” (a message with a position). The take-home message is the single idea the reader should remember.

Define it before you write: Write the take-home message during pre-writing, when you are deciding what you have to say.

Writing is a process: Pre-writing, writing, and revision are three different stages. Take each stage separately and give each stage enough time.

The Revision Checklist: The brain cannot notice everything simultaneously. Each pass through a text should have a single focus. Use the module checklist to help you stay focused.

Interactive Practice: (teacher-led then supervised in-class session)

Part 1. A good example. Students identify the take-home message in a four-sentence paragraph about teenage sleep and school start times.

Part 2. Find the take-home messages. Students receive three complex academic abstracts. For each one, they must write a single-sentence take-home message.

Part 3. The opening sentence. Identify the hidden take-home message using an announcement sentence and background information.

Part 4. Read Aloud and Peer Review. Every student reads their own draft aloud and marks every sentence where they stumble before swapping. Each reviewer uses the module checklist and identifies at least three specific problems using precise course terminology.

Independent Practice:

Part A: Literary Criticism. Students read three short critical excerpts about *The Handmaid's Tale*, identify the take-home message and write it in their own words. Then, they write their own take-home message and plan three supporting paragraphs each with a topic sentence that connects explicitly to their claim.

Part B: Revise and Reflect. Students use the revision checklist to revise a piece of their own writing, then they complete a reflection log.