



Australian Society of Authors

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SUBMISSION TO ACARA ON ENGLISH Y11-12 CURRICULA

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The Australian Society of Authors

The Australian Society of Authors (ASA) is the peak professional association for Australia's literary creators. The ASA was formed in 1963 to promote and protect the rights of Australia's writers and illustrators, and now has almost 3000 members across Australia. Our members are biographers, illustrators, academics, cartoonists, scientists, food and wine writers, children's writers, ghost writers, librettists, travel writers, historians, romance writers, translators, computer programmers, journalists, poets and novelists. The ASA was instrumental in setting up the Copyright Agency Limited and the Australian Copyright Council, and successfully campaigned for Public Lending Right in 1975 and Educational Lending Right in 2000. The ASA is continually acting as an advocate for the rights of professional authors.

The ASA's concerns with the English curriculum

The ASA is concerned that the teaching of English in Australia continues to offer students and teachers the opportunity to engage with and comprehend Australian past and future literary creation in its many forms – novels (of all types), poems, plays, film, television, as well as newer digital media. In this, we share some of the concerns of the English Teachers Association with regard to the naming of some of the strands in the English curriculum. The strand currently named “Literature” could perhaps be more attractively titled as “Storytelling”. Such a title would also address concerns that the course was focussed solely on text-based materials. Since many of our

members are illustrators, graphic novelists or working in multimedia environments, we comprehend that the term “literature” can be somewhat limited. We agree that the naming of one strand as “English” is confusing.

At the same time, the ASA strongly believes that the teaching of English, and storytelling, in Australia must centre on Australian material. The broad focus of all the English strands calls for students to have experience of:

- fiction, non-fiction, plays, poetry, film and other multimodal and digital texts
- Australian literature, including the inscriptional and oral narrative traditions or contemporary literature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people
- world literature
- texts drawn from a range of literary traditions
- texts drawn from a range of historical and cultural contexts, including texts from an Asian perspective

In our view, all selection of curricular material should be guided first by relevance to Australian culture. Australian literature (including fiction, non-fiction, plays, poetry, film and other multimodal and digital text) must be at the centre of curricular material. These texts should be drawn from a range of Australian historical and cultural contexts, including engagement with traditional and contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island storytelling. With over 60% of the output of the Australian publishing industry being domestic product, there is no excuse for the use on non-Australian resources for the teaching of English in Australia, except on the rare occasions where seminal works such as those of Shakespeare might be studied (and even these are available in Australian editions).

It should be stressed that Australian literary and cultural production now includes such names as Nam Le, Mabel Lee, Christos Tsiolkas, Terri Janke, Melina Marchetta, Damien Leith, Tom Cho and a host of other authors of diverse cultural background and established or growing international repute. They are “mainstream” *at the same time as* they are unique in their individual cultural, social and literary perspectives. They should be utilised for their social inclusion, representativeness and their literary quality. They should be given significantly greater exposure in the English course, along with other more recognisably “correct” (usually Anglo) names (see below).

With its diverse threads and eclectic mix of content, the teaching of English offers students the best opportunity for the enhancement of their cultural literacy. When a class of first year students of English at an Australian university, all of whom have studied four units of English as HSC level, does not know who Patrick White was, let alone what he wrote or his status as Australia's first Nobel Prize for Literature laureate, you know that the teaching of English in Australian secondary schools has failed. It has failed not just in the teaching of literature but more importantly in teaching cultural literacy.

The move to a National Curriculum might be expected to redress that sad situation. However, while the ACARA English curriculum documents refer to study of "Australian literature, including the inscriptional and oral narrative traditions or contemporary literature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people", and to study of "texts drawn from a range of historical and cultural contexts", texts appear to have been selected to fit these categories, rather than to be complementary across them. This has led to a complete absence of Australian historical and cultural texts.

It is not a major issue for "Essential English". The selected texts there are almost all Australian fiction and non-fiction, and these help expand cultural literacy, representing a diversity of views about Australia. The dramatic works for "Essential English" too are all Australian, as is much of the poetry. The selection of these texts is to be commended.

With the exception of Film, the "EAL" sample selections are in our view also unnecessarily and heavily Anglo-US oriented for Fiction and Plays. The situation deteriorates again with texts for the "English" curriculum. Only two Australian works of fiction, one an issues-based Young Adult novel, are examined. A Fitzgerald novel is listed, when Christina Stead or Patrick White would have been better cultural choices. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* may well be a classic, but why couldn't an Australian classic replace her? If irony was required, Thea Astley gives Jane a run for her money. Such a selection would also draw from a range of historical and cultural contexts more relevant to contemporary Australia than a work satirising British manners of the early nineteenth century.

With regard to the selection of non-fiction works, if Asian-themed study is necessary, why can't this be more directly related to Australian culture? *Falling Leaves* is a fine book, but there are works by Australian-Asian writers that are equally as good and more culturally relevant. And why not a work from Don Watson, say, in place of Orwell's *Essays*? Australian works should be given preference in the English curriculum, not have the status of also-rans or else be excluded.

And that is exactly what examination of the curriculum for “Literature” for 11-12 indicates. The recommended texts to be studied are proposed as examples, but as examples they are indicative of the mind-set behind their selection. The current documents suggests just one Australian novel (*The Secret River*, by Kate Grenville), one Australian poet and two playwrights are to be studied. The inclusion of the dramatists is to be applauded given the dire situation of writing for performance in Australia. But why are other literary forms dominated by works and authors from other countries? This is a form of cargo-cultism that should have been abandoned long ago.

The Australian Society of Authors has argued from its inception in 1963 that Australian literature is an integral part of our national culture and reflects the hopes, aspiration and changes – good and bad – of our society. In being deficient in the number of Australian-authored texts included, we find the current ACARA National Curricula for English to show a disrespect for and ignorance of our national literature and in this sense we would describe it as a failure. We call for a thorough overhaul of the text selection with an emphasis on Australian literature. The text selection and structure of these courses should aim to develop the cultural literacy of students drawing on texts from the tremendous historical and cultural range of our literature. Given the achievements of our authors, historians, playwrights and others, cultural literacy based on Australian texts is eminently achievable.

All senior courses, whether “English”, “EAL”, “Essential English”, or “Literature”, should aim to engender excitement in the content in these areas. There is little or no sense of this in the current documentation for any of the courses proposed. If supplied with more local content choice, taught strategically and with pedagogical confidence and vigour, all the courses – from “EAL across to “Literature” – could also better deliver a set of ‘personal tools’ to our students. Whatever else is aimed for, the intellectual, political, moral, aesthetic analytical elements of English study should be harnessed to serve young people more broadly – not only for study or academic purposes but to afford them individual pleasure and a key means for understanding life and living it well.

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