

## **I've Always Been Good at Writing About Disasters and Death.**

I thought I got a 5 in my English mock. That was my overall grade for the paper. Everyone else in the class got 7s or 8s so in comparison my grade looked really bad. I was confident they would move me down a set. It wasn't until parents evening a couple of days later that they told me the breakdown of how I did in each section. I know why I did badly on the reading section - half of it was an emotion question and having stared at it for over 10 minutes I left it blank. It meant that I spent a lot more time on the creative writing section. If I was going to lose marks for not answering the question on the reading section I might as well use the time productively. On the creative writing section alone I would have got a 9. The writing prompt was for natural disasters, and we were given a picture of a train on a rainy day for a stimulus. I am really good at writing about disasters and death!

I used to get into a lot of trouble in my lessons, including a few times which my mum didn't know about. It was never made official because it wasn't really big things, but I used to get into trouble for things like complaining that the lights were too bright. I remember once, I didn't want to work with someone in the class who I didn't like, so they said I would have a week's worth of detentions. The only reason I didn't get them was that a teacher who knew me quite well was walking past the room at the time and stopped it. If he had been walking past 30 seconds later, I would have been in so much trouble. I would get into trouble for not answering questions quickly enough because I didn't have time to process the questions let alone answer them.

Mum said that it was important for me to tell my teachers in advance about my autism diagnosis and how it affected me in my lessons. Even though the school had copies of my diagnosis they didn't share it with my teachers until I was in year 10 so it ended up being my responsibility to tell my teachers. Otherwise I would get into trouble for things that were out of my control. I was worried because sometimes when people know I am autistic they start to talk to me as if I was three.

The two subjects where things were particularly difficult were English and Maths. I would get in trouble in English for not being able to recognise emotions and because I was in top set, they would assume I would be able to do it. My current English teacher is really nice. She has probably helped me more than anyone else. Whenever we have an emotion lesson in class she will come and help me. Because I am in top set, I should be able to answer emotion questions myself, but she helps me a lot. It is like trying to read a different language. You wouldn't put a college level French

test in front of someone who had never taken a French lesson in their life. It would be impossible to answer.

In year 8 my English teacher was also autistic, and she had an autistic daughter. She spoke to me about it after the lesson. She knew where I was coming from a bit more and didn't think I was using it as an excuse which some of the other teachers did. She let me change the seating plan to let me sit where I felt most comfortable. I didn't have her again after that year.

I still get into trouble in maths. Even though she knows I am autistic, my teacher still doesn't get it. She seems to think that because everyone else can answer questions at top speed, and I am also in top set that I should be able to answer at top speed. She just shouts out random questions with no warning. There's no time to prepare for that.

The English department trickled into the staff workroom in dribs and drabs. Most clutching cups of tea. It was Sally Hughes' turn to provide the biscuits and she could usually be relied on to bring something homemade and delicious. Rachel Webb, the head of department, was sitting at the head of the table with a pile of colour coded spreadsheets in front of her.

She banged on the table with her pencil case in lieu of a gavel. "Ok. Let's get going. We need to have a look at these mock exams and then make a plan to deal with 8Y2." There is a collective groan and Miss Knight, unfortunate teacher of 8Y2 covered her face with her hands and shook her head.

"Mocks first. Let's have a look at all those who scored 3 sublevels below their target. Shall we start with top set and work down? Fire away Mrs Hughes!" Mrs Webb reaches for the first spreadsheet on the pile as Mrs Hughes opens her mark book.

"Right. Firstly there is Nathan. His handwriting is so bad I could hardly read a thing. Can we refer him for special cons to use a laptop? His verbal contribution is fantastic but if I can't read his work, I can't mark it."

"Is Nathan the one who transferred from somewhere in Yorkshire?"

"Yes, and the information his old school sent about him is patchy. He is definitely top set material though if we can sort out the legibility issue."

Mrs Webb makes a note on her spreadsheet. "Ok. I will flag him with Jenny George in the Exams office. Next?"

“Um. Maggie had a tricky one. She did really well on section B but only managed to do half of Section A so she came out as a 5.”

“Hmmm. Your group did the 2019 paper looking at how the writer conveys the characters feelings about winter, didn't they? I can see what the problem might have been. I taught Maggie in year 8 and she really struggled with questions like that then.”

“I do give her extra support when we are working through those kinds of questions, but I don't know what more I can do. If the exam plays to her strengths, she could come out with an 8 or a 9, if not, well....”

Mrs Webb takes off her glasses and rubs her eyes. “Unfortunately the exam system is inflexible and unfriendly to anyone who doesn't fit the mould. She is an excellent writer but unfortunately the exam board is more interested in those who can conform to their criteria than those who push the boundaries.”

Jeff Langdon, the longest serving member of the English department looks up from his doodling. “You're sounding rather cynical this afternoon Rachel. Is everything ok?”

“Thanks Jeff. Just the regular battle with Kingsdale College to get a support worker for Gracie so she can have a bit more control over how she accesses the curriculum. She isn't having a good time of it there at the moment. Anyway, let's focus on mocks! Anyone else on your list Sally?”

### Questions/Talking points

1. Mrs Webb says the exam system is 'inflexible and unfriendly'. How could exams be changed to be more inclusive?
2. Maggie says she would get into trouble for 'complaining' that the lights were too bright. What might the impact be on Maggie that teachers think she is complaining when she is asking for her needs to be met?
3. What strategies could be used to give children like Maggie time to process questions and instructions in the classroom?