

Help! I'm behind with my marking!

That mountain of books won't mark itself, so why not follow Peter Greaves advice and turn it into a more manageable molehill?

I remember the opening INSET day of my NQT year as if it was yesterday. A new headteacher had been appointed and the first item on the agenda was 'Vision'. He called us to order and an expectant hush descended... "I don't do vision," he declared abruptly. "Plan well, teach well, mark well and you won't go far wrong."

I was underwhelmed by this lack of inspiration, but as time has gone on, I have come to realise the wisdom that lies in this short statement. Nothing is more basic than our duty to carefully consider what we need to teach, deliver this to the best of our ability and then assess the learning that has taken place. As a result, despite all our other responsibilities, these three components continue to be the biggest contributors to both a teacher's angst and their workload.

Getting behind with your marking is an occupational hazard. It happens to all of us every term to varying degrees and, like a snowball at the top of a slope, it will have develop a terrifying momentum all of its own if steps are not taken. So if piles of books are weighing heavy on your mind as you go to bed or make your way to work in the morning, here are some ways of taming the beast.

1. Prioritise

It's easy to look for the pile you think you can get through quickest. However, books that pupils use more regularly are probably more important in terms of getting your comments into the teaching cycle. Write a list of the order in which you would ask the Marking Fairy to tackle the backlog and then face up to the reality that you are the Marking Fairy!

2. Divide and conquer

Write down the time-slots that are available to you to mark and choose a realistic number of books you can get through in that time. Then physically divide the

books into corresponding piles and stick a Post-it on top of each pile with the day and time that you're going to mark them. You will find this brings a real sense of purpose to what otherwise can seem a never-ending problem. I find there is something very 'doable' about six books; a big enough fraction of the class to feel I am making a difference but achievable in a focused shorter session.

3. Mark from the back

When you sit down to actually mark the books, the temptation is to start from the last marking you did. The reality though is that the learning from that lesson has been and gone. Instead, go to the most recent piece of learning and mark that the most heavily. You can then work backwards, highlighting what is still relevant. This prevents you writing 'Don't forget your full stops.' on eight consecutive pieces of work.

4. Prevention is better than cure

If you are badly behind, you may need to give yourself a breathing space. Consider whether written responses are needed or ask pupils to do their learning on a whiteboard. There are many creative ways of allowing pupils to demonstrate their learning in a meaningful way that don't lead to the need for marking and it is worth considering these as you head towards busy times of the term, such as parents' evening week. Then as you lose regular marking slots, a backlog snowball won't begin to roll.

The final thing to remember is that any honest staffroom conversation will make clear that every teacher gets into this position more regularly than you may imagine. There will be a corresponding number of ideas on how manage it, so talk to your line manager or other colleagues you trust. You're guaranteed a sympathetic ear.