

Art or D&T?

A short curriculum check for primary schools
without a Design and Technology specialist.

Run it across your existing units in about twenty minutes. No
new scheme. No rewriting. Just an honest look at what's actually
being taught.

A lot of primary D&T is actually art. That's nobody's fault.

If you're leading D&T in a primary school, there's a decent chance it wasn't your idea. A subject came free, you said yes, and now you're responsible for a specialism you may not have studied since you were fourteen.

So you've done the sensible thing. You've found units that are creative and practical, the children make something they're proud of, and it's on the display board by the end of term.

It's lovely work. It's just that some of it is art wearing a D&T label, and that's the bit that gets exposed when somebody asks you to explain the progression.

This check is not an inspection. It's what I'd do if I sat down next to you with your long term plan open. It takes about twenty minutes and it tells you three things: which units are genuinely D&T, which strands you're quietly missing, and which units are one small change away from working.

What you'll need

Your D&T long term plan or curriculum map. A pen. That's it. You don't need to speak to anyone else first, and you don't need to prepare anything.

How to use it

- **Part 1** is the three-question test. This is the bit that changes how you see everything else.
- **Part 2** is the unit grid. Run every unit through the test and write the verdict down.
- **Part 3** checks coverage across the five strands of the subject.
- **Part 4** checks technical knowledge, the most commonly missing piece.
- **Part 5** is cooking and nutrition, the strand that quietly disappears.
- **Part 6** shows you how to fix a unit without rewriting it.

BEFORE YOU START

If you find a lot of gaps, that's the normal result, not a bad one. Primary teachers are asked to lead subjects they were never trained in, with no specialist to ask and no obvious way to check. Finding the gaps is the whole point. It means you know something now that you didn't know this morning.

The three-question test

Art and D&T use the same materials. You can do genuine D&T with card and masking tape, and you can do art with a saw. The difference is never the stuff on the table.

In art

- The child is the author
- The outcome is expressive and personal
- Judged on how it looks and what it says

In D&T

- The child is designing for somebody else
- There's a user, a purpose and constraints
- Judged on whether it does the job

Three questions that tell you which one you've got

01

Is there a user who isn't the child?

Can a child tell you who the product is for and what that person needs? "For me, because I like it" is art. "For a Reception child who can't reach the peg" is D&T.

02

Did a design decision happen before the making?

More than one idea, chosen for a stated reason, modelled before committing. If the design step happens after the making, or every child ends up with the same product, designing didn't happen.

03

Did they learn something technical about why it works?

A lever, a shell structure, a circuit, a seam, how ingredients behave. Something a child could explain using the right word for it. Making skill on its own is craft, not D&T.

Three yeses	Genuine Design and Technology. Keep it, and be able to say why it's good.
One or two	A making activity with D&T potential. This is where most primary units sit, and it's the easiest thing on your curriculum to fix. See Part 6.
None	It's art, and there's nothing wrong with art. Move it to the art curriculum where it can be taught properly, and stop counting it as D&T coverage.

Your unit grid

List every unit you currently teach as D&T, in year group order. Tick or cross each of the three questions. Be honest rather than generous. Nobody else needs to see this sheet.

Unit and year group	1. Real user and purpose?	2. Design decision before making?	3. Technical knowledge taught?	Verdict
	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	
	Y / N	Y / N	Y / N	

The usual pattern

Most schools tick question 1 more often than they expect, tick question 2 rarely, and tick question 3 almost never. If that's your result, you're in the same position as nearly every primary I speak to.

The five strands

D&T has five strands. A curriculum that covers four of them well is still incomplete, and the missing one is usually the same in every school. Mark each year group where the strand is genuinely taught and assessed, not just touched.

Strand	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Y6
Designing Users, purposes, generating and modelling ideas						
Making Planning, practical skills, accuracy						
Evaluating Own products, existing products, key designers						
Technical knowledge Mechanisms, structures, systems, materials, textiles						
Cooking and nutrition Where food comes from, preparation, nutrition						

Three things worth checking while you're here

Evaluating existing products. Across KS2, children should investigate how well products have been designed and made, why materials were chosen, and how well they meet user needs. Most primary curriculums only ever evaluate the child's own work.

Key designers and inventors. Across KS2, children should know about inventors, designers, engineers, chefs and manufacturers who developed ground-breaking products. This often gets assumed to be an art requirement.

Repetition dressed as progression. If the same skill appears in Year 3 and Year 5 with a different theme wrapped round it, that's coverage rather than progression. Look for what actually gets harder.

THE REFERENCE STANDARD

The strands above follow the [Design and Technology Association and Expert Subject Advisory Group progression framework for KS1 and KS2](#). If you want the full statement-by-statement version, that's the document to ask for.

The technical knowledge check

This is the strand that goes missing, because it needs subject knowledge rather than organisation. Below is what children are expected to know. Write in the unit where each is taught. Leave it blank if it isn't.

Phase	Children should know	Taught in which unit?
KS1	Simple working characteristics of materials and components. Movement of simple mechanisms: levers, sliders, wheels and axles. How freestanding structures can be made stronger, stiffer and more stable. That a 3D textiles product can be made from two identical fabric shapes. That food ingredients are combined according to sensory characteristics. Correct technical vocabulary.	
Early KS2 Years 3 and 4	How levers and linkages or pneumatic systems create movement. How simple electrical circuits and components make functional products. How to program a computer to control a product. How to make strong, stiff shell structures. That a single fabric shape can make a 3D textiles product. That ingredients can be fresh, pre-cooked or processed.	
Late KS2 Years 5 and 6	How cams, pulleys or gears create movement. How more complex electrical circuits make functional products. How to program a computer to monitor changes and control a product. How to reinforce and strengthen a 3D framework. That a 3D textiles product can combine several fabric shapes. That a recipe can be adapted by adding or substituting ingredients.	
Across KS2	That mechanical and electrical systems have an input, a process and an output. That materials have functional properties as well as aesthetic qualities. How learning from science and maths helps make products that work.	

If most of that column is empty

You've found the single biggest gap in primary D&T nationally, and you've found it in twenty minutes. It's also the most fixable, because technical knowledge can be added to units you already teach without changing the theme, the timing or the resources.

Cooking and nutrition

Cooking and nutrition is part of D&T, not an extra. It's usually the first thing dropped, for four understandable reasons: allergens, hygiene, staffing and not having a kitchen. All four are workable.

Check	Yes / No
Every year group does some cooking or food work, not just one or two	Y / N
KS1 children prepare simple dishes safely and hygienically without a heat source, using techniques such as cutting, peeling and grating	Y / N
KS1 children can sort foods into the five groups in the Eatwell Guide	Y / N
KS2 children cook a variety of predominantly savoury dishes, using a heat source where appropriate	Y / N
Children learn where food comes from: grown, reared and caught, in the UK and beyond	Y / N
Late KS2 children adapt a recipe by adding or substituting ingredients, and can say what that changes	Y / N
There is a written, current allergen and hygiene routine that any adult could follow	Y / N

The one people trip on

"Predominantly savoury" is in the National Curriculum. If your KS2 food work is mostly biscuits, cupcakes and smoothies, the strand isn't technically covered, however good the teaching is. This is the most common single miss in primary D&T, and it's usually news to everyone.

A NOTE ON SAFETY

This is a curriculum tool, not health and safety guidance. Risk assessment for any practical or food activity sits with your school and employer, alongside **BS 4163:2021+A1:2022** and **CLEAPSS** guidance. Nothing here replaces those.

How to fix a unit without rewriting it

Almost nothing on your curriculum needs binning. Most units are one design decision and one technical concept away from being genuine D&T. Three moves, in this order.

Move 1. Give it a user

Name somebody real and specific, and give them a need. Not "design a bag" but "design a bag for Mrs Patel, who walks to school and carries reading books in the rain". The user creates the constraints, and the constraints create the thinking.

Move 2. Put the design decision before the making

Children generate two or three ideas, mock one up quickly in cheap material, and choose with a reason. Ten minutes of modelling with card and tape does more for the subject than a beautiful final outcome.

Move 3. Teach one technical thing properly

One concept per unit, with the correct vocabulary, taught explicitly rather than discovered. A lever. A shell structure. A series circuit. Children should be able to say why their product works, not just show you that it does.

Worked example: the Tudor house

Before. Children make a Tudor house from a template during the Tudors topic. Everyone's looks broadly the same, and it's assessed on neatness. Three-question test: none out of three. It's art with a history theme.

After. Children design a display model for the Year 2 classroom that has to stand unaided, survive being carried between rooms, and show one authentic Tudor feature. They test two ways of making the frame rigid, choose one and say why. They learn how triangulation stiffens a structure, and they use that word.

What changed. Same topic, same materials, same time. A user, a real decision, and one technical concept. Three out of three.

Your three priorities

Write down the three units you'll change first. Choose the ones nearest to working, not the worst ones.

Unit		Which move it needs
1		
2		
3		

What your results probably mean

If you found	Then the useful next step is
Most units passing, one or two strands thin	You're in good shape. Fix the strand gaps and make sure your subject leader can explain the progression out loud. That's a small piece of work.
Technical knowledge largely empty	The most common result, and the most fixable. The units stay, the concepts get added. Usually a term's work, done properly once.
Cooking and nutrition missing or mostly sweet	Worth sorting before anything else, because it's a whole strand and it's visible. There are ways to do it without a food room.
Very few units passing at all	More common than you'd think, and not a reflection on anyone's teaching. It usually means the curriculum grew unit by unit without a progression spine underneath it.

IF YOU'D LIKE A SECOND PAIR OF EYES



I'm Claire. I lead Design and Technology in a secondary school, and I support primary schools with exactly this: progression that holds together, units that work for non-specialists, and safe practical work in a normal classroom with a normal budget.

I'm also the person on the other side of your transition. I find out every September what Year 6 children can actually do, which is a useful thing to have in the room when you're deciding what matters.

Bring this sheet to the call. I'll tell you honestly what I'd prioritise, and whether you need any help from me at all.

Book a free 30 minute call

No proposal unless you ask for one. Or email claire@ppabuddy.com

Scope of this document

This is a curriculum self-audit tool. It advises and supports. It does not replace your statutory health and safety responsibilities, your school or trust policies, BS 4163, CLEAPSS or employer guidance, and it does not certify staff competency. Everything here should be adapted to your own space, staffing, pupils and risk profile.