

Key Shift in the WA ELA 2026 Learning Standards

Introduction

The Washington State K–12 Learning Standards for English Language Arts (WA ELA 2026) update the Common Core State Standards (2011). This revision is designed to:

- Reflect the latest research,
- Integrate media literacy and digital citizenship, and
- Prepare students for new and unfamiliar communication contexts.

A key foundational shift is woven throughout the WA ELA 2026: *Students are active decision-makers.* This shift recognizes and builds students' capacity to make thoughtful, purposeful choices as they read, write, speak, listen, and engage with media messages—positioning them as active agents in their own learning.

This shift is also grounded in and made possible by **six key understandings** about literacy. These understandings highlight why students use literacy to pursue personal, academic, community, and other goals.

Six Key Understandings

1. Students' experiences matter.
2. Language is social.
3. Language domains are interdependent and integrated.
4. Literacy is more than the sum of its skills and subskills.
5. All texts are multimodal.
6. Literacy skills connect to students' histories, are relevant to their current realities, and prepare them for unknown futures.

The key shift describes what students do (make active decisions about how to use literacy). The key understandings support the key shift by explaining why students need to make those decisions.

What It Means to Be an Active Decision-Maker

Students develop decision-making skills not by following rigid steps, but by engaging in authentic choices—supported by tools, strategies, and learning environments that nurture critical thinking and effective communication.

Students will navigate complex communication demands in their careers, education, and personal lives. While no curriculum can anticipate every scenario, we can equip students with the skills and confidence to make informed, purposeful decisions—so they're ready to respond thoughtfully and effectively in any context.



To support the key shift, the standards highlight **six literacy practices** that guide students in making decisions as they use literacy in real-world ways.

Six Literacy Practices

When students are active decision-makers, they:

1. Use literacy for their own purposes.
2. Think about the communicative situation.
3. Use and adapt genres to create multimodal texts.
4. Use flexible, recursive processes.
5. Make meaning through their own experiences and perspectives.
6. Critically examine texts through various lenses.

These six practices are a consistent thread throughout the WA ELA 2026 standards. Rather than being tied to specific grade levels, they reflect the ongoing development of students' literacy expertise—skills that deepen and expand each year.

Each of the six WA ELA Literacy Practices plays a vital role in this shift, helping students grow as confident, capable decision-makers who use literacy to navigate and shape their world.

1. Students Use Literacy for Their Own Purposes

Students are engaged and motivated when they understand the **why** behind their reading, writing, and speaking. When they connect their learning to personal goals, interests, and identities, their work becomes more meaningful and purposeful.

By anchoring literacy tasks in real purpose and motivations, students take greater ownership of their learning—making choices that reflect who they are and what they care about.

The WA ELA 2026 standards encourage students to:

- Reflect on why they're reading a text.
- Use texts to explore questions that matter to them.
- Choose mentor texts to inspire their writing.
- Develop their own reasons for writing—even when the task is assigned.
- Re-read their work to see if it meets their goals.
- Decide whether feedback helps them achieve their purpose.
- Choose how to present themselves and their ideas in discussions and digital spaces.

2. Students Consider the Communicative Situation

When students speak or write, they are always communicating in a specific situation. That means to communicate effectively, students need to think about:

- **Why** they're communicating,
- **What** they want to say,
- **Who** they're talking to,

- **Where** and **how** the message will be shared, and
- **What** the audience already knows, values, or expects.

Writing and speaking are powerful social acts. Consideration of the communicative situation helps students make important choices when creating or interpreting texts and media messages – so that their message lands the way they intend.

The standards support this by asking students to:

- Analyze the situation an author is responding to.
- Think about their own purpose, audience, and message when writing.
- Choose genres and platforms that fit their goals.
- Consider how their audience will experience their message.
- Adjust their language based on the setting or medium.

3. Students Use and Adapt Genres to Create Multimodal Texts

Genres are types of texts with familiar patterns—like poems, news articles, or social media posts. As technology and communication evolves, new genres emerge. Instead of memorizing a few formats, students learn to recognize, use, and adapt genres to fit their needs.

The standards encourage students to:

- Notice how different genres use language, visuals, and structure.
- Analyze how authors use genre features to achieve their goals.
- Compare how the same topic is handled in different genres.
- Choose genres that fit their purpose.
- Decide which genre features to use or adapt.
- Use genre conventions to organize ideas and structure their work.
- Include visuals, techniques, and citations that match the genre.

While the Research and Media Literacy standards do not focus on specific genres, they build on the reading, writing, and communication skills students develop across the ELA standards. These foundational skills empower students to understand, analyze, and evaluate media messages with insight and intention.

By applying what they know about texts, audiences, and purposes, students become more critical and confident consumers and creators of media.

4. Students Use Flexible, Recursive Processes

Real-world literacy—whether reading, writing, or presenting—is rarely a straight line. Students thrive when they have flexible, responsive ways to approach complex tasks. A recursive process allows them to move fluidly between steps, adapt their approach, and make intentional choices based on their goals and the demands of the task.

These processes help students break down big challenges into manageable parts—without relying on formulaic, or rigid writing structures – which can prioritize form over thinking. By focusing on the process and not the result, students learn to navigate each stage with purpose,

using their judgment and creativity to communicate effectively.

The WA ELA 2026 standards support this approach by organizing many expectations around the process. For example:

- **Reading standards** guide students through a process of understanding a text:
 - Think about why they're reading,
 - Preview the text,
 - Use strategies like visualizing to make sense of it,
 - Reflect on what they learned or understood.
- **Writing standards** walk students through the writing process:
 - Plan and gather ideas,
 - Draft and develop their thinking,
 - Revise and edit by rereading, getting feedback, and making decisions about changes,
 - Share or publish their work.
- **Speaking, Listening, and Digital Forums standards** outline steps for preparing and participating in discussions, collaborations, and presentations.
- **Media Literacy standards** are also structured to help students break down and critically engage with media messages.

5. Students Make Sense of and with Texts through Their Experiences and Perspectives

The WA ELA 2026 standards invite students to bring rich, diverse experiences into the classroom. These experiences are essential to how they make meaning. Research affirms that students engage more deeply with texts when they can connect them to their own lives, identities, and perspectives.

Even when a text presents new or challenging ideas, students draw on their lived experiences to interpret, question, and expand their understanding. Recognizing their own perspectives is a key part of engaging thoughtfully with an author's perspective—and a powerful step toward critical, reflective literacy.

The WA ELA 2026 standards value this personal engagement while still expecting evidence-based thinking. For example:

- **Reading standards** ask students to:
 - Imagine how they would feel in a character's situation,
 - Use their experiences to make inferences,
 - Develop their own perspectives while reading or discussing.
- **Writing standards** encourage students to:
 - Write to reflect on and analyze their perspectives,
 - Use personal experiences to generate ideas and content.
- **Media Literacy standards** ask students to:
 - Recognize how their perspectives shape how they respond to media messages,
 - Recognize when others' perspectives lead them to interpret media messages differently.

6. Students Critically Examine Texts Through Various Lenses

In the past, students were often taught to appreciate texts and authors without question. Today, in a world shaped by diverse media and perspectives, students need tools to think critically and engage thoughtfully.

The WA ELA 2026 standards invite students to explore texts from multiple angles—asking questions, examining perspectives, and making personal connections. Rather than simply asking “What does this text say?”, students are encouraged to wonder:

- “Whose perspective is this?”
- “What voices or experiences might be missing?”
- “How does this align—or conflict—with what I know and believe?”

This approach empowers students to be thoughtful, reflective readers who actively shape their understanding of the world.

For example:

- **Reading standards** ask students to:
 - Reflect on their own reactions to a text—what they liked and what felt relevant,
 - Consider how the intended audience might respond,
 - Analyze texts like a writer and look for techniques and ideas to use,
 - Apply critical lenses to examine power, bias, or assumptions in a text.
- **Media Literacy standards** ask students to:
 - Explore different ways of deciding what’s true or trustworthy,
 - Evaluate the accuracy, logic, and fairness of media messages,
 - Assess the credibility of the people or organizations behind media content.

Conclusion

To implement the **WA ELA Literacy Practices**, educators can:

- Design learning experiences that invite student choice and voice,
- Model and scaffold decision-making processes,
- Encourage reflection on purpose, audience, and context,
- Create space for students to connect texts to their lives and communities,
- Support critical thinking across all forms of media.

These practices — using literacy for personal purposes, considering the communicative situation, adapting genres, using flexible processes, drawing on lived experiences, and examining texts critically—are not just instructional goals. They are habits of the mind that prepare students for the complexity of real-world communication.