



Washington Office of Superintendent of  
**PUBLIC INSTRUCTION**

*Washington State Literacy  
Framework K–6*

# WASHINGTON STATE LITERACY FRAMEWORK K–6

2026

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Vision and Purpose

Every student in Washington deserves access to high-quality, evidence-based, Tier 1 literacy instruction, delivered consistently across classrooms, grades, and schools. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) is committed to every student in Washington state developing strong literacy skills, laying the foundation for lifelong learning, civic participation, and economic opportunity. Achieving this vision requires system-level alignment across instruction, assessment, professional learning, and community engagement. The Washington (WA) State Literacy Framework (K–6) serves as a statewide guide for strengthening literacy outcomes through coherent, equity-driven system design.

Developed by OSPI, The WA State Literacy Framework K–6 provides a comprehensive, research-aligned guidance for strengthening school systems through equitable, effective literacy practices. The framework empowers leaders and educators to build on existing strengths by continuously refining their district’s literacy infrastructure and maintaining a coherent, aligned system that supports all learners. Grounded in the science of reading, and aligned with Washington state policy, this framework emphasizes systems-level coherence, cultural responsiveness, and inclusive, high-quality instruction. We affirm that all students are capable, and that strong Tier 1 instruction is the foundation of equitable systems.

## Six Key Understandings

The literacy framework is built upon six high-level understandings to center equity and student agency in all literacy instruction:

1. Students’ experiences matter.
2. Language is social.
3. Language domains are interdependent and integrated.
4. Literacy is more than the sum of skills and subskills.
5. All texts are multimodal.
6. Literacy skills are relevant to students’ current realities and unknown futures.

## Audience and Use

This document is intended for a wide audience including local educational agency leaders, school administrators, instructional coaches, classroom educators, families, and community members. It can be used as a tool for strategic planning, designing a [Multi-Tiered System of Supports \(MTSS\)](#), guidance for professional learning, resource alignment, and instructional improvement. It supports shared responsibility and collaboration to build coherent, sustainable literacy systems that reflect the diverse needs of Washington’s students.

## Literacy Leadership and Advocacy

Leaders play a pivotal role in strengthening literacy systems. They must invest in professional

learning, use student data to inform practice, and foster collaborative learning communities. Leadership includes ensuring that core instruction is evidence-based and equitably delivered across classrooms. Strategies include early screening, Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, progress monitoring, and advocating for aligned instructional resources.

## Organizational Structure of the Framework

The framework is organized into thematic, interconnected sections. Each section provides context, research, and implementation guidance. This structure supports both comprehensive understanding and targeted use.

## Research Foundation

The framework is grounded in a broad and rigorous body of empirical research and scholarship, encompassing fields of cognitive science, linguistics, neuroscience, and education. This body of work informs the framework's structured literacy approach and supports evidence-based practices. The empirical research studies include findings from the [What Works Clearinghouse \(WWC\)](#), published by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), a division of the U.S. Department of Education. [WWC Practice Guides](#) are evidence-based resources developed by panels of national experts to support educators and policymakers in making informed decisions about instructional practices. These guides synthesize high-quality research into practical, actionable recommendations that are rated based on the strength of supporting evidence. In developing this framework, we drew directly from the WWC Practice Guides to identify and elevate instructional strategies that:

- Demonstrate strong or moderate evidence of effectiveness.
- Can be implemented at scale in diverse school contexts.
- Align with Washington state's goals for equity, inclusion, and systemic coherence.
- Support the implementation of the Washington (WA) English Language Arts (ELA) Learning Standards (2026).

## Key Instructional Concepts

While these are just some of the major concepts included, more are explored throughout the full framework including:

1. **Student Belonging:** Foster belonging with culturally responsive teaching, inclusive texts, and the 'warm demander' approach. Belonging boosts academic performance and student engagement.
2. **Literacy for All Learners:** Emphasizes inclusive, equitable instruction that recognizes and responds to the diverse strengths, needs, and identities of every student through an MTSS, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and culturally responsive teaching.
3. **Families, Caregivers and Community partnerships:** Strengthen literacy development through reciprocal, culturally grounded partnerships that extend learning beyond the classroom.
4. **Oral Language Development:** Integrate structured speaking and listening routines into daily instruction. Support diverse communication methods and affirm the linguistic assets of

- multilingual learners (MLs).
5. **Writing and Expression:** Scaffold writing from early mark-making to structured texts. Emphasize writing as a tool for identity, community-building, and critical thinking.
  6. **Strong Foundational Reading Instruction:** Implement explicit, systematic, structured literacy based on the science of reading. Address phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.
  7. **Research and Media Literacy:** Equip students to think critically in a multimodal world by integrating digital literacy, media analysis, and research skills into ELA instruction.
  8. **Standards, Planning, Content Integration:** Align ELA instruction with Washington state standards and meaningfully integrate literacy with other disciplines to reinforce content knowledge and language development.
  9. **Assessment:** Use balanced assessment systems—including screening, progress monitoring, and formative feedback—to guide instruction and support learner growth.

## Calling In Instructional Systems & Leadership

For effective instruction within the classroom, leaders must commit to a systemic and structured approach to early literacy, as outlined by the following key priorities in the framework:

- **Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS):** MTSS provides a framework for delivering high-quality literacy instruction at increasing levels of intensity based on student need.
- **Data-Based Decision Making:** Use universal screening and progress monitoring to inform and adapt teaching.
- **Culturally Responsive Teaching:** Affirm identity and experience through curriculum and pedagogy.
- **High-Quality Instructional Materials:** Adoption of materials aligned with state standards and inclusive of diverse learners.
- **Collaborative Professional Learning:** Use PLCs to co-plan and calibrate literacy instruction.

## Evidence Based Instructional Design & Delivery

Within an effective system for literacy instruction, leaders, and educators must focus on structuring student experiences which prioritize:

- **Explicit and Systematic Instruction:** Plan, model, guide, and sequence instruction clearly.
- **High-Rate Student Interaction:** Use student centered engagement, open and relevant questions, peer talk, and discussion routines.
- **Timely and Specific Feedback:** Reinforce and/or correct understanding immediately.
- **Scaffolding and Gradual Release:** Use visual aids, sentence frames, and guided practice.
- **Differentiation:** Adjust based on student strengths, needs, and backgrounds.
- **Universal Design for Learning (UDL):** Ensure multimodal access and expression.
- **Standards and Content Integration:** Integrate with other subjects (e.g., science, social studies, arts, mathematics, physical education) in ways that strengthen both content knowledge and literacy skills, aligning instruction with state standards to support deeper learning across disciplines.

# SECTION ONE: FRAMEWORK OVERVIEW

## Vision and Purpose

The WA State Literacy Framework K–6 is comprehensive guidance designed to improve literacy education across Washington. Grounded in evidence-based practices, this framework provides a statewide systems approach that connects literacy instruction to state learning standards, policies, and guidelines to enhance student outcomes. The framework outlines essential components for implementing equitable and high-quality programs within an MTSS. This framework leverages the most effective evidence-based literacy practices to fully realize this vision across our state.

Additionally, OSPI prioritizes ensuring access to literacy resources, and to that end this framework will describe evidence-based approaches to do so. Literacy includes a range of skills and concepts, including reading, writing, speaking, and listening. These skills are essential for effective communication and comprehension and forming the foundation for academic success and lifelong learning.

It is important to acknowledge that literacy is more than just a collection of skills; it is deeply intertwined with human experience. Literacy is inherently social, used to convey ideas, build relationships, create meaning, and think critically about our world. Understanding and application are shaped by students lived experiences, personal and social realities, and the relationships they build within their communities.

## Who Can Benefit from this Framework?

The WA State Literacy Framework K–6 serves as a guiding resource for multiple audiences:

- **Teachers and Paraeducators** provide classroom instruction and support student learning.
- **Literacy Specialists and Instructional Coaches** offer expert consultation and resources for improving literacy.
- **District Leaders and Building Administrators** ensure the implementation of effective literacy strategies, high quality instructional materials, and maintain systems for literacy learning.
- **Families, Caregivers, and Community** as literacy partners by providing connections that support relationship between schools and those that support children’s literacy inside and outside of school.

## This Framework: Structure, Evidence, and What Comes Next

To support meaningful implementation, this framework is organized into distinct, interconnected sections that reflect the complexity of literacy development and instruction. Each section begins with an overview that defines the topic and explains its role within a comprehensive literacy system. Following each overview, the framework presents key practices and implementation strategies grounded in research. These practices are informed by a wide body of evidence, often referred to as the science of reading, which includes research from cognitive science, linguistics, neuroscience, and education. This foundation ensures that instructional recommendations are both effective and

aligned with how students develop literacy skills and concepts.

Strong Tier 1 instruction is the foundation of successful literacy systems. The primary focus of the framework is intended for Tier 1 instruction, as the core literacy instruction provided to all students in the general education setting. High-quality Tier 1 instruction is critical for preventing reading difficulties and ensuring students have equitable access to effective, evidence-based teaching. It is the most effective form of prevention and the greatest opportunity to meet the needs of all learners before gaps emerge. While Tier 1 is the central focus, references to Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports are included throughout, showing how literacy practices align within a broader (MTSS).

## What’s Ahead

The framework includes the following sections, each of which highlights a critical component of effective, inclusive literacy systems:

- [Section 2](#): Student Belonging
- [Section 3](#): Literacy for All Learners
- [Section 4](#): Families, Caregivers, and Communities
- [Section 5](#): Oral Language
- [Section 6](#): Writing
- [Section 7](#): Reading
- [Section 8](#): Research, Media Literacy, and Digital Citizenship
- [Section 9](#): Standards, Planning, and Content Integration
- [Section 10](#): Assessment

## Connection to WA Learning Standards (2026)

The WA State Literacy Framework K–6 is designed to complement the K–12 English Language Arts (ELA) Learning Standards (2026), by providing additional instructional guidance for educators. The framework and standards have distinct purposes. The standards are student-centered and focus on learning outcomes while the framework provides a structured approach to implementing best practices for student learning. Despite their distinct purposes, both the framework and the learning standards are aligned in their goal of engaging and supporting students to achieve academic success.

## Key Shift, Key Understandings, and Student Literacy Practices

A key shift is woven throughout the WA ELA 2026 Standards: ***Students are active decision-makers.*** Students will navigate complex communication demands in their careers, education, and personal lives. 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.

### *Key Understandings of Literacy*

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.

1. **Students' experiences matter:** Literacy learning is shaped by students' lived experiences. Reading, writing, speaking, and listening are filtered through their personal and social realities, including experiences, values, relationships, and aspirations.
2. **Language is social:** Language is inherently social, used to build relationships, convey ideas, and create meaning within a community.
3. **Language domains are interdependent and integrated:** Reading, writing, speaking, and listening develop together and should be taught in an interconnected way.
4. **Literacy is more than the sum of its skills and subskills:** Literacy is not just about mastering individual skills; it involves using these skills for meaningful, purposeful communication.
5. **All texts are multimodal:** Literacy instruction must recognize that texts include written words, images, sounds, and other forms of communication.
6. **Literacy skills connect to students' histories, are relevant to their current realities, and prepare them for unknown futures:** Students need adaptable literacy skills that are useful in both their present and future lives.

### *Student Literacy Practices*

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. 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.

When students are active decision-makers, they do these literacy practices:

#### **1. Use Literacy for Their Own Purposes**

- Connect reading, writing, and speaking to their interests, identities, and goals
- Reflect on why they are engaging with a text or task
- Use texts to explore questions and ideas that matter to them
- Evaluate their work and feedback based on their purpose

#### **2. Consider the Communicative Situation**

- Think about their purpose, message, and audience
- Consider the context, platform, and setting for communication
- Make choices that help their message reach the audience effectively

#### **3. Use and Adapt Genres to Create Multimodal Texts**

- Recognize patterns and features of different genres
- Choose genres that fit their purpose and audience
- Adapt genre conventions when creating texts
- Use visuals, structure, and media to communicate ideas

#### **4. Use Flexible, Recursive Processes**

- Approach reading, writing, and communication as a process
- Plan, draft, revise, edit, and share their work

- Move flexibly between steps as they develop ideas and respond to feedback

### **5. Make Meaning Through Their Experiences and Perspectives**

- Connect texts to their experiences, identities, and perspectives
- Use personal knowledge to interpret and question texts
- Reflect on how perspectives shape understanding and responses

### **6. Critically Examine Texts Through Various Lenses**

- Ask questions about perspective, bias, and missing voices
- Analyze how texts influence ideas and audiences
- Evaluate credibility, logic, and fairness of information and media

## **Literacy as a Civil Right**

At the heart of this framework is the belief that literacy is a civil and human right, and every child must have access to high-quality literacy instruction. Literacy is foundational not only to academic success, but also to economic opportunity, civic engagement, and overall well-being. By integrating evidence-based instructional practices, formative assessments, and responsive teaching, the framework addresses systemic inequities that have historically limited access to high-quality literacy instruction, particularly for students from underserved communities in our state.

Schools serve as literacy hubs, providing essential resources and fostering strong partnerships with families and communities. The framework encourages family engagement and recognizes that educators, parents, and community leaders must work together to create inclusive learning environments that empower all students. In doing so, the access and opportunity which follows literacy extends beyond the school walls and into the community.

## **Literacy Leadership and Advocacy**

Effective literacy leadership is central to the success of this framework. School and district leaders play a crucial role in:

- **Strengthening Tier 1 Instruction:** Ensuring all students receive high-quality, evidence-based core literacy instruction.
- **Using Data to Drive Instruction:** Training educators to collect and interpret student data efficiently and reliably, using assessments to inform instruction.
- **Content Integration:** Support and advocacy for content integration.
- **Differentiating Literacy Instruction:** Supporting teachers in adapting time, content, and support levels based on students' assessed needs.
- **Building Collaborative Literacy Communities:** Fostering collaboration among educators, families, and community in ways that promote literacy skills.
- **Promoting Continuous Improvement:** Engaging in ongoing assessment and refinement of literacy practices to ensure responsiveness to student needs.

By emphasizing student strengths and personalized instruction, this framework fosters a growth-oriented learning environment where all students can succeed. To ensure all students develop strong literacy skills, the framework outlines a multi-tiered approach to reading instruction and

intervention, particularly in the primary grades:

- **Early Screening and Identification:** Schools should use valid, reliable screening tools to identify students who need additional literacy support.
- **Targeted Interventions (Tier 2 & Tier 3):** Educators provide explicit, systematic instruction for struggling readers, ensuring individualized support.
- **Ongoing Progress Monitoring:** Regular assessment of students receiving interventions allows teachers to track growth and adjust instruction as needed.
- **Empowering Educators:** Providing teachers with high-quality professional development in effective reading interventions and data-driven decision-making.

### *Balancing Guidance with Flexibility*

Our shared goal is to ensure every student in Washington develops strong literacy skills that lay the foundation for lifelong learning and success. However, this framework is not a one-size-fits-all mandate. OSPI outlines the systems and practices that research shows are most effective, but it is up to each district to take leadership in adapting and implementing these in ways that reflect their unique local context, needs, and student populations. Districts prioritize early literacy by investing in professional development, fostering collaboration, and using data to drive continuous improvement. The framework encourages innovation and flexibility, empowering schools to build systems that are both aligned with best practices and responsive to their communities.

## **Alignment to Evaluation and Instructional Models**

The WA State Literacy Framework K–6 aligns with established evaluation and instructional models to ensure a cohesive and comprehensive approach to literacy education. These models provide evidence-based strategies and best practices that support the framework's goal of enhancing student outcomes and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. The framework aligns with commonly used instructional models:

- Washington State Teacher Criteria ([RCW 28A.405.100 2\(b\)](#))
- Center for Educational Leadership's 5 Dimensions (CEL 5D) of Teaching and Learning
- Marzano's Framework
- Danielson Framework for Teaching

The framework provides educators with evidence-based practices to meet Criterion 4 of the [Washington State Teacher Criteria](#) by delivering focused, coherent, and equitable instruction across all five ELA domains, which meets diverse student needs. The instructional practices promote culturally and linguistically responsive teaching, UDL, and the use of formative assessment practices to adjust instruction in real time, ultimately improving student learning. The framework also supports educators in meeting Criterion 4 by growing and deepening their content-area knowledge in the domains of reading, writing, speaking, listening, digital forums, language, research, and media literacy. Equipped with the framework, educators are empowered to design instruction that is rigorous, developmentally appropriate, and aligned with grade-level expectations.

## *K–6 Instructional Framework Supports Criterion 4 by:*

- Aligning instruction with grade-level standards.
- Using appropriate, evidence-based teaching strategies.
- Designing coherent units and assessments.
- Demonstrating strong content knowledge of ELA.
- Promoting equity and consistency across classrooms.
- Collaborating professionally to improve practice.
- Addressing diverse student needs through responsive instruction.
- Using data and formative assessments to guide teaching.
- Ensuring all students have access to high-quality ELA learning.

## **Key Terms to Introduce in the Framework**

1. **Comprehensive Literacy Instruction:** An approach that integrates multiple components of literacy, including reading, writing, speaking, and listening.
2. **Core Instruction:** High-quality, evidence-based, literacy instruction and support provided to all students. Sometimes referred to as Tier 1 (Universal supports).
3. **Culturally Responsive Literacy Instruction:** Teaching practices that recognize and build on students' diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
4. **Data-Driven Decision Making:** The process of using assessment data to inform instruction, intervention, and policy decisions.
5. **Early Literacy:** Early literacy encompasses foundational reading skills such as print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics, decoding, word recognition, and fluency for the purpose of communicating and comprehension. Additionally, they are learned through reading, writing, speaking, and listening to support language and vocabulary development.
6. **Equity in Literacy Education:** Ensuring all students, regardless of language, age, ability, race, culture, socio-economic status, or geography have access to high-quality literacy instruction and resources.
7. **Evidence-Based Practices:** Instructional approaches and interventions that have been tested through high-quality research and demonstrated to improve literacy outcomes across diverse settings.
8. **Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS):** A framework for delivering high-quality instruction and interventions at varying levels of intensity based on student needs.
9. **Multilingual learner (ML):** A student who is learning in more than one language. This includes students who are developing proficiency in English while maintaining their home language.
10. **Research-Based Instruction:** Teaching methods grounded in educational research and cognitive science, designed to align with how students learn best.
11. **Science of Reading:** A body of research from multiple fields related to literacy that explains how people learn to read and write, encompassing elements such as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. A comprehensive view also includes, but is not limited to, research related to motivation, engagement, genre, reasoning, criticality of text, and how multilingual students learn to read and write.
12. **Structured Literacy:** A comprehensive approach to literacy instruction based on scientific evidence, emphasizing explicit, systematic, cumulative teaching of foundational reading skills in key areas such as phonological and phonemic awareness, sound-symbol correspondence (phonics), syllables, morphology, semantics, and syntax.

# SECTION TWO: STUDENT BELONGING IN THE LITERACY CLASSROOM

## Defining Belonging

Belonging is the feeling of being valued, respected, and included in a group. In the classroom, this sense of belonging is essential for both academic and emotional growth, influencing how students engage with learning. When students feel included and recognized, they are more likely to participate in literacy activities, contribute to discussions, and collaborate with their peers. Research demonstrates that a strong sense of belonging is associated with improved academic performance, psychological well-being, and overall health (Jose, Ryan, & Pryor, 2012). When a child feels connected to their learning environment, when they see themselves reflected in books, and when they know their voice matters, literacy becomes an act of identity and empowerment. A classroom becomes a place where they are regarded as capable learners, feel willing to take risks, and develop the confidence to engage with literacy in meaningful ways. When students participate in a classroom culture of belonging, learning is not transactional, but transformative.

*"The feeling that we're part of a larger group that values, respects, and cares for us—and to which we feel we have something to contribute."  
—Geoffrey Cohen*

At the heart of belonging is teacher support, one of the strongest predictors of whether students feel connected in school (Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie, & Waters, 2018). Teachers create an environment of belonging by fostering authentic relationships, ensuring students feel seen and valued, and providing opportunities for student voice and choice. When students have a sense of autonomy and see their own experiences, languages, and cultures reflected in their learning, they develop a deeper connection to their education. Practices which foster belonging in early literacy:

- Greeting students at the door.
- Building a classroom library with representative texts.
- Predictable daily routines, such as morning meetings.
- Displaying student work.
- Sharing appreciations and shout-outs, like "Student Spotlights."
- "Opportunities for students to share about their interests, favorites, family, and friends."

## Belonging as the Foundation for Literacy Development

A sense of belonging must be established early and nurtured continuously. Literacy instruction is most effective when it is contextualized and connected to students' lived experiences and the world around them. By integrating literacy with real-world connections and personal experiences, educators enhance student engagement and comprehension, leading to stronger literacy outcomes.

Research has shown that belonging significantly impacts students' social emotional, academic, and behavioral outcomes (Souto-Manning, Ghim and Madu, 2021).

One key aspect of student belonging is the establishment of trusting relationships between students and teachers. In addition to strong relationships, incorporating inclusionary literacy practices is of benefit to all students, not only those experiencing disabilities or reading difficulties. Inclusionary practice and strong relationships create a sense of security allowing young learners to explore new concepts and develop their reading and writing skills without fear of judgment or failure.

## Fostering Belong Through Culturally Responsive Practices

Culturally responsive teaching is a form of inclusionary practice that validates and affirms students' cultural and linguistic identities and backgrounds. This contributes to a sense of belonging, making literacy instruction more relevant and engaging. Culturally responsive teaching practices support students' belonging by recognizing and valuing diverse cultural identities, creating an inclusive learning experience, and strengthening teacher-student relationships. These practices are essential for fostering a positive and supportive environment where young learners find joy and success through literacy. By creating an inclusive environment, teachers help students from diverse backgrounds feel that they belong and can thrive academically and socially.

When students see their identities reflected in the district-adopted instructional materials, they are more motivated to engage in learning. Culturally responsive teaching helps students engineer successful outcomes without compromising their cultural and social identities (Stembridge, 2020). Culturally responsive classrooms:

- Recognize and honor diverse backgrounds.
- Use linguistically and culturally relevant instructional practices.
- Provide culturally and linguistically relevant materials.
- Provide instructional choices that support student agency and autonomy.

*"Students are more willing to invest in spaces and communities that support and connect with who they are."*

*–Stembridge, 2020*

## The Warm Demander Approach

By combining high expectations with supportive relationships, teachers can empower young learners to persist through challenges, develop resilience, and see themselves as capable learners. In 1975, Judith Kleinfeld conducted research on teacher-student interactions in Native Alaskan communities. She identified a teaching style within Native Alaskan classrooms she termed the "warm demander." This approach involves teachers who combine high expectations with a supportive and caring attitude towards their students. Kleinfeld found that effective teachers in these communities were able to balance firmness with warmth, creating an environment where students felt both challenged and supported.

Kleinfeld's research on warm demanders significantly influenced the field of culturally responsive teaching. Culturally responsive teaching shifted away from a deficit-based perspective where learners from multilingual and racially diverse communities were seen as lacking. Instead, it adopted a strength-based perspective that recognizes and builds upon learner cultural assets. In response to this inclusive and challenging teaching style, learners taught by warm demanders demonstrate better academic performance, self-reported motivation, and self-discipline as they navigate the structured yet caring classroom environment.

This stance is especially important in the developmental phase of students in an early literacy setting. Learning to read and write is a complex process that requires multiple skills. This process can be overwhelming, especially for students who may not have had much exposure to literacy activities outside of school. Warm demanders encourage their students by believing in their brilliance while providing a nurturing and supportive environment. By providing a consistent, supportive environment, warm demanders encourage students to keep trying, even when tasks feel difficult. By showing genuine care and high expectations, warm demanders build trust with their students. This trust makes students feel valued and understood, fostering a strong sense of belonging in school and communicating to students that they are a part of a supportive community.

### *What a Warm Demander Looks Like in the Literacy Classroom*

- Encourages students to play with sounds, recognize rhymes, and experiment with language.
- Provides gentle guidance in writing, celebrating progress from scribbles to full sentences.
- Creates a classroom culture where students feel safe to express themselves, share stories, and build oral language skills.
- Protects and supports each student's literacy journey, providing just-right challenges for growth.
- Promotes a love of reading, writing, and conversation by making literacy engaging, joyful, and accessible.
- Promotes gradual independence as students build confidence.

## **Cultivating Criticality in Young Learners**

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad (2020) defines criticality as the capacity to read, write, and think in the context of understanding power, privilege, and oppression. This concept is part of her Historically Responsive Literacy (HRL) framework, which includes four key learning goals: identity development, skill development, intellectual development, and criticality.

Teaching criticality is crucial for young learners as it empowers them to understand and question societal structures, fostering a sense of agency and confidence. It enhances comprehension by helping young learners grasp the broader context in which texts are written, allowing them to appreciate diverse perspectives and narratives. Criticality also encourages analytical and critical thinking skills, which are essential for academic success and informed community engagement. Criticality in young learners promotes cultural awareness and sensitivity, enabling students to respect and appreciate different cultures and viewpoints. Engaging with texts through the lens of criticality makes reading and writing more relevant and interesting for young learners, increasing

their curiosity and motivation for learning.

By integrating criticality into early literacy, teachers can help young learners develop a whole understanding of the world around them and become thoughtful, informed members of their communities. There are many classroom-based activities which foster criticality while building foundational literacy skills in young learners, such as:

- **Diverse Read-Alouds:** Reading aloud helps young learners develop listening skills, vocabulary, and comprehension. Discussing diverse perspectives enhances their understanding of different cultures and viewpoints, fostering empathy and critical thinking.
- **Role-Playing and Drama:** Acting out scenes improves oral language skills, fluency, and comprehension. It also encourages young learners to think more deeply about characters' motivations and perspectives, enhancing their analytical skills.
- **Critical Questioning:** Teaching young learners to ask questions about texts helps them develop comprehension and analytical skills. It encourages them to think critically about the author's purpose and the messages conveyed in the text. For example, "Why do you think the character felt this way?" or "How would the story change if it were told from another character's perspective?"
- **Reading Circles:** Small group discussions improve oral language skills, comprehension, confidence, and critical thinking. Young learners learn to articulate their thoughts, listen to others, and consider different viewpoints.
- **Creative Responses:** Responding to texts through art, writing, or drama allows young learners to express their understanding and interpretations in diverse ways. This enhances their creativity, comprehension, and communication skills.
- **Reflective Response:** Writing reflections in journals helps young learners develop writing skills, comprehension, and critical thinking. It encourages them to think deeply about texts and relate them to their own experiences.
- **Comparing Texts:** Comparing different texts enhances comprehension and analytical skills. Students learn to identify themes, compare authors' approaches, and think critically about the messages conveyed.
- **Community Projects:** Connecting literacy activities to community projects makes learning relevant and meaningful. This enhances comprehension, critical thinking, and encourages students to apply their learning to real-world situations.

*"Skills may be difficult to teach if they are taught in decontextualized ways and disconnected from students' lives and the world."*

*–Gholdy Muhammad (2023)*

## Curating Diverse Texts to Foster Belonging

Using diverse texts as mirrors and windows fosters inclusivity and strengthens students' sense of belonging (Bishop, 1990). This approach helps students see themselves in the curriculum and understand the diverse world around them. When students see themselves in books, they feel validated and valued. Literature affirms identity while also expanding perspectives, fostering cultural understanding and connections across diverse communities (Bishop, 1990).

- **Mirrors:** Texts that reflect students' identities, languages, and experiences, allowing them to see themselves in literature.
- **Windows:** Texts that provide insight into other cultures, backgrounds, and perspectives, helping students understand lives different from their own.
- **Sliding Glass Doors:** Stories that transport readers into new worlds, enabling them to step into characters' experiences and broaden their perspectives.

## Reinforcing Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) into literacy instruction is crucial for fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment. SEL helps students develop essential skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. By incorporating SEL strategies, educators can create a positive classroom climate that enhances students' ability to engage with literacy content.

ELA Learning Standards provide a developmental framework for reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills that require students to engage with diverse perspectives, communicate ideas in multiple mediums, and attune to the social emotional experiences of characters in stories. In other words, to become proficient in ELA skills and become literate in a text-rich world, young learners develop, apply, and nurture multiple social emotional competencies (knowledge, skills, and mindsets). The [WA Social Emotional Learning Standards, Benchmarks and Indicators](#) coincide with and build on ELA Learning Standards to encourage robust, personal learning experiences for all students in Washington. Educators may consider the following questions when planning literacy lessons to intentionally integrate and nurture social-emotional competencies. These questions are from the module series "Academic Learning Is Social and Emotional: Equity-Centered Social Emotional Learning in Washington."

- **Explicit Skill Alignment:** Which SEL standards include the same skills, knowledge, and mindsets as those within the ELA standards?
- **Explicit Strategy Alignment:** What social-emotional competencies within the SEL standards do students use to accomplish specific ELA tasks?
- **Ways of Interacting:** How do students use their social-emotional competencies within the SEL standards to participate in activities that help them learn ELA skills and content?
- **Ways of Being:** What social-emotional mindsets and habits do ELA scholars (e.g., authors, journalists, and novelists) exhibit to be successful in various literacy disciplines?

As educators consider these examples, the goal is to create conditions that encourage young learners to develop, apply, and exhibit their social-emotional competencies while they are developing foundational literacy skills. SEL-integrated literacy practices include:

- Journaling: Encouraging self-expression through writing.
- Collaborative Storytelling: Strengthening relationships through shared narratives.
- Reflective Discussions: Building understanding by discussing different perspectives.

### *Evidence-Based Practices that Support Belonging*

- Promote high expectations while offering responsive support for all students.

- Encourage cooperative problem-solving through structured group work.
- Foster a classroom culture where mistakes are seen as part of learning and effort is valued.
- Provide instructional choices to increase student voice, agency, motivation, and engagement.
- Offer multimodal opportunities for students to engage in literacy activities and participate interactively.
- Select diverse texts that reflect various cultures, backgrounds, identities, and experiences.

DRAFT

# SECTION THREE: LITERACY FOR ALL LEARNERS

## Ensuring Equitable Literacy Instruction for Every Student

Every student brings a unique set of strengths, experiences, and learning needs to the classroom. To ensure that all students have access to high-quality literacy instruction, schools must provide targeted support that recognizes and responds to diverse learners. Effective literacy instruction is grounded in MTSS, UDL, culturally responsive reaching, and coordination with Special Education and related services. These approaches proactively tend to barriers for learning while leveraging students' strengths:

- Understand and implement the principles of instructional design that engage and support diverse learners.
- Establish and maintain an ongoing process for collecting a variety of student data.
- Provide evidence-based, differentiated instruction that meets students' individual needs.
- Use high-quality instructional materials that align with state learning standards.
- Form transdisciplinary teams that share in thinking, data analysis, and decision-making.

### Multi-Tiered Instructional Approach in Literacy

For students developing literacy skills, targeted interventions must be evidence-based, such as those outlined in [Washington's Multi-Tiered System of Supports Framework](#). This framework ensures that regular screening, progress monitoring, and differentiated instruction are used to support all students equitably. The essential components of MTSS are interrelated, and as the intensity of student need increases, each of the components also increases in intensity. Teams share the responsibility of making decisions in an MTSS framework. These decisions are driven by high-quality data, collected over time, from multiple sources. Teams engage families, students, and invite community partners to plan, implement, and improve student

services. Staff and community partners provide a continuum of support to students through a tiered delivery system, starting with strong core instruction, using evidence-based practices to accelerate student learning across all tiers.

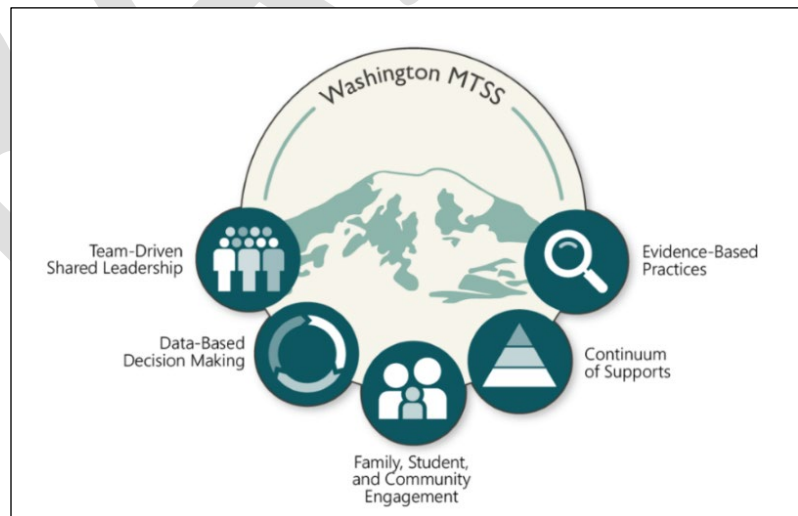


Figure 1. Essential Components for WA MTSS, OSPI

Staff and community partners provide a continuum of support to students through a tiered delivery system, starting with strong core instruction, using evidence-based practices to accelerate student learning across all tiers.

By emphasizing student strengths and providing personalized instruction, this framework fosters a growth-oriented learning environment where all students can achieve success. A multi-tiered approach to reading instruction and intervention includes these essential components:

- **Team-Driven Shared Leadership:** Teams share the responsibility of making decisions within the MTSS framework. Decisions are made based on high-quality data.
- **Data-Based Decision Making:** The use of data to make informed decisions about instruction, movement within the multi-level prevention system, intensification, allocation of resources, and disability identification.
- **Family, Student, and Community Engagement:** Engaging families, students, and when applicable, inviting community partners to plan, implement, and improve services. This engagement ensures that there is ongoing two-way communication and collaboration between school personnel and families.
- **Continuum of Supports:** Providing a continuum of support to students through a tiered delivery system, starting with strong core instruction, and increasing in intensity based on student needs.
- **Evidence-Based Practices:** Using evidence-based practices; activities, strategies, or interventions that have been proven to improve student outcomes. These practices are systematically implemented to ensure they are effective in improving student outcomes. Districts can support by providing teachers with high-quality professional development on effective reading interventions and data-driven decision-making. Building and districts leadership can advocate for teachers to use evidence-based practices when providing literacy instruction to all students.

**Table 1: Tiered Intensity of Supports**

Tier	Description	Instructional Focus
Tier 1 (Core Instruction)	High-quality, evidence-based, differentiated instruction for all students. Tier 1 is the foundation for additional layers of support and should meet the needs of approximately 80% of student population.	Systematic phonics, oral language development, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies.
Tier 2 (Core + additional support)	Targeted interventions for students who need additional support.	Small-group instruction on targeted skills and concepts, providing additional practice with feedback.
Tier 3 (Core + additional support + intensive support)	Intensive, individualized intervention for students significantly below grade level.	Explicit, diagnostic-prescriptive instruction with increased frequency and intensity.

Follow the link for more OSPI information on [MTSS Components and Resources](#)

# Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

UDL is a way of thinking about teaching and learning that helps give all students an equal opportunity to succeed. By utilizing a UDL framework, educators focus on learning experiences that provide the opportunity for all learners to have access to, participate in, and progress in the general education curriculum. There is mention of UDL throughout this framework, as it is connected to many aspects of effective literacy instruction. UDL is a framework for how to develop lesson plans and assessments that are based on three main principles:

- **Multimodal Materials:** Offering information in more than one format and seeking “flexible and varied” materials intended to increase access to instruction and engagement.
- **Actions and Expressions:** Providing more than one way to interact with the material and to show what they have learned. There are many options for students to show what they know, because students have different strengths in how they express themselves.
- **Engagement Motivations:** UDL encourages multiple ways to motivate students. Letting kids make choices and giving them assignments that feel relevant to their lives are some examples of how teachers can sustain students’ interest.

## Structured Literacy

Structured Literacy is a highly effective, evidence-based approach that benefits all students, including those with dyslexia, varied reading abilities, and language-based learning differences. The importance of Structured Literacy lies in its systematic, cumulative, and explicit methodology. It ensures that students receive instruction that builds on prior knowledge and addresses their specific areas of need. This approach provides explicit, systematic, and cumulative instruction in the key components of reading:

- **Phonemic Awareness:** Understanding and manipulating sounds in spoken language.
- **Phonics:** Recognizing letter-sound relationships and decoding words.
- **Fluency:** Reading with accuracy, appropriate speed, and expression.
- **Vocabulary:** Understanding and using words effectively.
- **Comprehension:** Making meaning from text.

Supporting students with reading difficulties requires targeted, specialized support tailored to their unique needs. Structured Literacy is required in Washington state under [Dyslexia Interventions \(RCW 28A.320.260\)](#) and [ESSB 6162](#). This requires schools to use MTSS to provide evidence-based multisensory structured literacy interventions to students in grades K–2 who are at risk for reading difficulties, including dyslexia. By adhering to these requirements, Washington state ensures that all students receive the support they need to develop strong literacy skills.

## Specific Learning Needs

Every student brings a rich tapestry of strengths, experiences, and unique gifts to the classroom. Recognizing and celebrating these assets is foundational. When educators acknowledge what students bring, add, and can do, they lay the groundwork for supporting students in areas where they may need additional assistance. With that strength-based perspective in mind, educators can address potential challenges or unique characteristics as part of a holistic view of the learner. Many

students bring unique learning styles to the classroom. Some may require additional support in specific areas like reading and writing, while also possessing remarkable strengths in areas such as problem-solving or creative expression.

## *Dyslexia*

Dyslexia is a specific learning disorder that is neurological in origin and is characterized by unexpected difficulties with accurate or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities that are not consistent with the person's intelligence, motivation, and sensory capabilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological components of language that are often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities. The difficulties are not typically the result of ineffective classroom practices. Secondary consequences may include challenges in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge ([RCW 28A.320.250](#)).

For some students, learning to read requires more than just high-quality core instruction. It also requires targeted, specialized support tailored to their unique needs. Students with dyslexia or other reading difficulties often face persistent challenges with decoding, fluency, and comprehension, despite receiving standard reading instruction. For these learners, structured literacy approaches offer the explicit, systematic instruction necessary to develop foundational reading skills. A structured literacy approach emphasizes:

- **Explicit Phonics Instruction:** Teaching letter-sound relationships in a clear, sequential manner.
- **Multisensory Learning Techniques:** Which engage multiple senses (visual, auditory, kinesthetic), to reinforce reading skills.
- **Decodable Texts:** Ensuring students have controlled reading materials that align with their phonics knowledge.
- **Ongoing Formative Assessments:** Allowing educators to monitor progress and adjust instruction accordingly.

These measures ensure that students with reading disabilities receive the support they need to become confident, capable readers. By equipping educators with the right tools and strategies, schools can create inclusive learning environments where all students can succeed.

Follow link for more OSPI information on [Dyslexia Guidance: Implementing MTSS for Literacy \(2024\)](#).

## **Learning Assistance Program (LAP): Closing Literacy Gaps**

For students who are not yet meeting grade-level literacy standards, the [Learning Assistance Program \(LAP\)](#) provides essential, state-funded support. Aligned with MTSS, LAP ensures that students receive targeted (Tier 2) and intensive (Tier 3) interventions that accelerate literacy growth. LAP plays a vital role in removing barriers to literacy success by providing supplemental time, instruction, and resources to help students reach their full potential. LAP services are most effective when they are:

- Aligned with general education classroom instruction, ensuring consistency across core and supplemental literacy practices.
- Implemented with fidelity, using evidence-based strategies tailored to student needs.
- Responsive to progress monitoring, allowing educators to adjust support as students develop their skills.

Follow the link for more OSPI information on [LAP Program Overview](#).

## Special Education Services

Special education services provided through an Individualized Education Program (IEP) offer an essential layer of support that complements, rather than replaces, solid Tier 1 instruction. These services are designed to address the unique needs of students, ensuring that they receive personalized assistance tailored to their specific learning requirements. By integrating IEP support with Tier 1 instruction, educators can create a more inclusive and effective learning environment that promotes academic success and fosters a sense of belonging among all students. This approach underscores the commitment to providing equitable education opportunities, recognizing that every student deserves access to high-quality instruction and the necessary resources to thrive.

### *Multisensory Learning*

Multisensory learning occurs within core instruction. This technique offers an engaging approach by activating multiple senses—visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic—during literacy lessons. Picture a student tracing letters in sand while saying their sounds aloud or using colored tiles to build words. These strategies make abstract concepts tangible and reinforce learning in ways that are both memorable and effective for a broad range of students.

### *Individualized Instruction*

At the heart of effective special education services is Specially Designed Instruction (SDI), which adapts the content, methodology, and delivery of instruction to meet the unique needs of each learner. Students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) related to literacy skills require specially designed instruction that is both individualized and evidence based. For students with disabilities, this approach ensures equitable access to literacy development and grade level standards, while addressing specific learning needs. Imagine a classroom where every child’s learning journey is tailored to their strengths and needs. This is the essence of individualized instruction in special education. For students with IEPs, explicit and systematic teaching methods, such as structured literacy approaches, are essential for building foundational skills like decoding, fluency, and comprehension. These methods are not one-size-fits-all; they are carefully designed to address the specific barriers each student faces while helping them achieve their academic goals. Effective individualized instruction in literacy must include the following:

- **Progress Monitoring:** Progress monitoring acts as a compass, guiding educators toward effective interventions and adjustments when needed. It involves systematically tracking a student’s advancement toward their IEP goals through tools like Curriculum-Based

Measurements (CBMs) or observational data. For example, a teacher might administer timed reading fluency tests weekly to measure growth or use graphs to visualize trends over time. When progress stalls or accelerates unexpectedly, these insights allow educators to recalibrate instruction, ensuring every student stays on track toward meaningful growth.

- **Collaboration:** The success of special education services often hinges on collaboration. Transdisciplinary teams, including special educators, general educators, related service providers, and families, work together to create cohesive plans that align with IEP goals. In practice, this might look like flexible teaching arrangements where a general educator focuses on grade-level content while a specialist provides targeted support using SDI strategies.
- **Family and Community Engagement:** The role of families and communities in supporting students with disabilities cannot be overstated. When families are empowered to reinforce learning at home using multisensory games or assistive technologies, the impact extends beyond the classroom. Similarly, partnerships with community organizations can provide additional resources, such as tutoring or literacy workshops, tailored to students' needs.

Follow the link for more OSPI information on [Special Education Resource Library](#).

## Cultural and Linguistic Diversity and Strengths

Multilingual learners (MLs) bring linguistic diversity and cultural knowledge that enriches the classroom. Recognizing and honoring their home languages as assets fosters engagement and accelerates language and literacy development. MLs enrich our classroom with diverse linguistic and cultural perspectives. There is much diversity within the multilingual population with varying literacy needs. Multilingual students require varied instructional approaches. State and federal civil rights laws, including Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974, require districts to allow MLs the opportunity to participate in all programs, services, and activities offered by the district. They possess the incredible ability to navigate multiple languages, and as they develop proficiency in English, we can provide targeted vocabulary support that builds on their existing knowledge. By affirming students' identities and creating meaningful connections to their literacy experiences, educators empower MLs to succeed in speaking and listening, reading, and writing. To make literacy instruction accessible, educators may:

- Use culturally responsive teaching, valuing, and integrating students' linguistic backgrounds.
- Incorporate scaffolding strategies, such as sentence frames, graphic organizers, and guided practice.
- Provide visual supports and language modeling, ensuring comprehension through explicit instruction.

Follow the link for more OSPI information on [ML Policies and Practices Guide 2024](#).

## American Indian/Alaska Native Learners: Honoring Tribal Languages and Indigenous Knowledge Systems

For American Indian/Alaska Native learners, it is essential that literacy instruction be culturally affirming and relevant to their lived experiences. There is diversity in and amongst populations of Native students. Each tribal community is unique in terms of languages, governments, histories, and current experiences. Native learners “walk in two worlds” and are not only defined by traditional ways of knowing; they are leaders, creators, and knowledge holders of today.

One critical initiative is to incorporate the [John McCoy \(luliláš\) Since Time Immemorial Curriculum](#). A vital effort in Washington state is the integration of the *Since Time Immemorial: Tribal Sovereignty in Washington state curriculum* (John McCoy, luliláš), developed to ensure that all students, Native and non-Native, learn accurate and tribally endorsed histories and the present-day realities of Tribal Nations. This curriculum is endorsed by all twenty-nine federally recognized Tribes in Washington and is designed to help Native students see themselves in the curriculum while promoting government-to-government partnerships. Literacy instruction should incorporate teachings, languages, oral traditions, and contemporary voices across subjects. Doing so affirms identity, fosters belonging, and supports literacy growth in ways that reflect and honor the cultural values and strengths of Native communities. Educators can support native students by:

- Using culturally relevant texts that reflect Indigenous perspectives, languages, and oral traditions.
- Learning from and partnering with tribal educators and leaders, ensuring that literacy instruction aligns with Native knowledge systems.
- Creating space for Indigenous storytelling and community engagement, reinforcing the importance of identity and community in literacy development.

The following principles of successful Native literacy instruction and indicators support many of the core beliefs in both the state literacy framework and the WA ELA Standards (2026). They are intended to serve as guidance on how educators can integrate the knowledge of teaching literacy with the best practices of Native instruction. When these principles are implemented, the result is a strong school community that effectively connects and serves the teachers, students, families, and broader community. The following excerpt is from the [OSPI Native Literacy Guidance \(2026\)](#), authored by OSPI’s Office of Native Education and the Native Literacy Work Group (2026).

### *Principals for Successful Native Literacy Instruction (2026)*

1. Foster trust and belonging through relationships and community.
2. Use a strength-based approach to assessing and instructing AI/AN learners.
3. Center identity development as a pillar of literacy development.
4. Develop oral language and storytelling as foundations for literacy.
5. Ground curricular and instructional choices in the concept of Indigenous Excellence.
6. Engage with students in deliberate, multifaceted, and culturally respectful ways.
7. Integrate criticality into reading, writing, and community engagement.

Follow the link for more OSPI information on [John McCoy \(luliláš\) Since Time Immemorial: Tribal](#)

[Sovereignty in Washington State](#) or information on [Native Education](#).

## Contextual Factors for Learning

### *Students in Rural and Small Schools: Expanding Access to Literacy*

Students in rural and small schools often face unique challenges, including limited access to literacy specialists, intervention programs, and professional development opportunities. Technology and statewide partnerships can bridge gaps and ensure that students in rural communities receive the same level of literacy instruction as their urban peers. To ensure equitable literacy instruction, schools and districts can:

- Expand virtual professional development, providing teachers with high-quality training regardless of location.
- Utilize digital literacy tools, ensuring students have access to engaging, research-based learning materials.
- Strengthen inter-district collaboration, enabling small schools to share resources and best practices.

Follow the link for more OSPI information on the [Rural Education Initiative \(Title V, Part B\)](#).

### *Migrant Students*

Migratory families have unique circumstances which impact how students receive continuous, high-quality educational services. This is related to a necessary high rate of mobility, as well as cultural and language barriers, social isolation, health-related problems, and the lack of resources in the areas in which they live and work. The Washington State Migrant Education Program (MEP) is federally funded to ensure high-quality education programs and supplemental support services for migratory children. Literacy is a powerful mitigator and form of advocacy for migrant students and families. It provides an opportunity for voice, choice, and connection through language, stories, and the sharing of migrant cultural experiences.

Follow the link for more OSPI information on the [Migrant Education Program](#).

### *Highly Capable Students*

Students identified as highly capable or gifted require advanced, inquiry-based literacy opportunities that push their thinking and encourage intellectual growth. However, underrepresentation in gifted programs remains a challenge, particularly for students from diverse and historically marginalized backgrounds. Highly capable students thrive when given rigorous, engaging literacy instruction that challenges them to question, synthesize, and innovate. Schools can address this by:

- Expanding access to gifted identification, using culturally responsive assessment tools.
- Providing literacy tasks that encourage deep analysis, problem-solving, and creativity.
- Integrating complex, interdisciplinary texts that promote critical thinking and independent exploration.

Follow the link for more OSPI information on [Addressing Underrepresentation in Gifted Programs](#).

### *Trauma-Sensitive Literacy Practices*

Trauma is a strong emotional response to a scary, upsetting, or overwhelming experience that makes a child feel unsafe, helpless, or out of control. It can affect how they think, feel, and behave—even long after the event is over. The potential effects of trauma on young learners must be considered when working towards an equitable and inclusive approach to learning. Exposure to trauma can have neurological effects that impact the learning process as well as young learners' ability to cope with stressors, both social and academic (Cantor et al., 2018). Under-resourced communities are at compounded risk for trauma exposure and its effects (Blair & Raver, 2016). Trauma-sensitive literacy practices are designed to support students who have experienced trauma by creating a safe, supportive, and responsive learning environment (Savitz & Kane, 2023). These practices recognize the impact of trauma on a child's learning and aim to address their emotional and psychological needs in support of their academic development.

Literacy can be healing and empowering to children who have experienced trauma as it provides a means to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Writing and storytelling can be healing in a safe and structured environment. Including diverse and relevant texts and stories can also help children feel seen and understood, fostering a sense of belonging and connection. Educators of young learners can play an important role in the lives of students, impacted by trauma by providing supportive relationships, a consistent classroom environment, and integrating trauma-sensitive literacy practices. Engaging with texts helps young learners develop critical thinking skills, enabling them to analyze and question experiences and the world around them. Trauma-sensitive literacy practices include:

- **Interactive Read-Aloud:** Using books and stories that address themes of empathy, resilience, and overcoming challenges. Young learners can connect with characters and express their feelings.
- **Choice and Voice:** Provide young learners with choices in their reading and writing activities to foster a sense of greater control and engagement.
- **Consistent Routines:** Maintaining consistent daily routines helps create a sense of stability and predictability, allowing learners to focus on the demands of learning.

Follow the link for more OSPI information on [OSPI SEL Implementation Guide](#).

### *Evidence-Based Practices that Support Literacy for All Learners*

Ensuring literacy for all students requires a comprehensive, responsive approach that removes barriers and amplifies student strengths. By integrating targeted supports, culturally responsive practices, and equitable access to high-quality instruction, educators can create inclusive literacy environments where all students—regardless of background, ability, or location—can thrive as readers and writers. Effective literacy instruction is explicit, systematic, and responsive.

The following research-based strategies have been identified as high-impact practices by the IES What Works Clearinghouse (WWC):

## **1. Explicit and Systematic Instruction**

- Scaffold literacy skills into clear, sequential lessons that build on prior knowledge.
- Provide direct modeling and guided practice before independent work.
- Teach decoding strategies explicitly to support word recognition.

## **2. High-Rate Interaction and Opportunities to Respond**

- Increase student engagement by integrating active participation techniques, such as choral reading, partner discussions, and peer-assisted learning.
- Use frequent checks for understanding and prompt feedback to correct misconceptions.

## **3. Timely and Specific Feedback**

- Provide immediate, constructive feedback to reinforce correct responses and redirect errors.
- Use error analysis to adjust instruction and prevent recurring challenges.

## **4. Scaffolding for Success**

- Build supports into instruction to gradually increase student independence.
- Use visual supports, anchor charts, and guided practice before transitioning to independent tasks.

## **5. Data-Driven Decision Making**

- Form building-level teams to implement universal screening and progress monitoring.
- Use benchmarks and formative assessments to adjust instruction based on student needs.
- Train teachers to efficiently collect and analyze reading data to identify learning gaps.

## **6. Differentiated Instruction**

- Adjust time, content, and support levels to meet students at their current level of development.
- Provide targeted instruction that aligns with each student's unique literacy profile.

# SECTION FOUR: FAMILIES, CAREGIVERS, AND COMMUNITIES

## Sponsors of Literacy

Literacy development begins long before kindergarten within homes, communities, and daily interactions amongst children and caregivers. From infancy, children develop foundational language, listening, and communication skills that set the stage for reading and writing success. Research shows that early family involvement in literacy significantly impacts academic achievement, test scores, graduation rates, and even college enrollment (Henderson & Berla, 1994). When families, schools, libraries, and community organizations work together, children are more likely to develop strong literacy skills, a love for reading, and confidence in learning.

Deborah Brandt (1998) defines "sponsors of literacy" as *agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, or model literacy*. Sponsors of literacy are present in every community in various and valuable forms. Beyond schools and teachers, early readers can benefit greatly from engaging with various sponsors of literacy in their communities. When literacy activities are community-based, families and caregivers are more likely to engage as they are often seen as more accessible and more inclusive than formal school-based settings, which reduces barriers to participation. Family involvement in community-based literacy activities can reinforce the importance of reading and language at home and at school. This provides additional support and encouragement for the development of young learners.

Below are examples of common sponsors of literacy and some of the ways young readers may engage:

- **Libraries:** Libraries offer story time sessions, reading clubs, and access to a wide range of age-appropriate books. Early readers can also participate in summer reading programs and literacy events that make reading fun and social.
- **Community Centers:** Local cultural or tribal centers, museums, zoos, and public park systems often host literacy programs and workshops specifically designed for young children. Activities such as singing, cooking, dancing board games, movement, author visits, puppet shows, craft sessions, interactive storytelling, and other events that connect literacy to the real world can make learning to read an enjoyable experience.
- **Religious Institutions:** Churches, mosques, temples, and other places of worship may offer literacy classes or other educational programs that include reading and discussing religious texts together in a supportive environment.
- **Non-Profit Organizations:** Organizations like the Boys & Girls Club, YMCA, neighborhood centers, or local groups often run programs that provide books, tutoring, and literacy activities for young children. These programs can offer personalized support and resources to help early readers thrive.
- **Games and Media:** Children's magazines, music, dance, educational TV shows, and online platforms can provide engaging reading materials and interactive content that capture the

interest of early readers. Parents can guide their children to age-appropriate media that supports literacy development. Digital games and apps can provide interactive and adaptive learning experiences.

Community-based literacy activities often reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of a child's community. This helps children see their own experiences and backgrounds represented in what they read, fostering a sense of belonging and pride in their community. Engaging with local sponsors of literacy provides young readers and families with a strong support network. These spaces offer resources, programs, and encouragement that can significantly add to a child's literacy development.

These sponsors not only facilitate literacy but also benefit from the literate individuals they help create, whether through economic, social, or cultural gains. By engaging with these literacy sponsors, early readers can develop a love for reading, enhance their literacy skills, and gain confidence in their abilities. Encouraging a variety of literacy experiences within their own community makes reading more dynamic and shows children how literacy is a vibrant and valuable part of everyday life.

## Families and Caregivers Encouraging Literacy Development

Families and caregivers are the first and most influential teachers. Learning between and amongst children, families, caregivers, and community members is reciprocal, intergenerational, and reflects a holistic understanding of literacy development. The literacy-rich, community-based experiences provide—such as talking, reading, singing, storytelling, and playing—to build oral language, vocabulary, and comprehension skills long before formal schooling begins. Children learn language through interaction, and caregivers play a vital role in ensuring these early experiences are positive, engaging, and developmentally appropriate. Family, caregivers, and community members can read to young children, encourage them to read aloud, and create a literacy-rich environment outside of school. Simple activities like oral storytelling, bedtime stories, word games, reading signs and menus, or visits to the library are foundational in building early literacy skills. The practices listed below lay the foundation for literacy success and could be encouraged both at home and in community settings:

- **Reading Aloud Daily:** Strengthens vocabulary, listening skills, and comprehension.
- **Encouraging Storytelling:** Helping children organize thoughts and express ideas.
- **Providing Access:** Books, magazines, and print materials at home.
- **Modeling Reading and Writing Behaviors:** Showing children that literacy is valuable and enjoyable.
- **Engaging in Everyday Literacy Activities:** Such as making grocery lists, reading signs, or telling family stories.
- **Intentional Social-Emotional Skill Development:** Engage children in activities that build self-regulation, communication, and relationship skills.
- **Brain Games:** Strengthen working memory, attention, planning, and flexible thinking through structured play (e.g., puzzles, scavenger hunts, word searches, matching).
- **Vocabulary Building Through Talk:** Engage children in rich conversations and introduce new words.

- **Letter and Sound Knowledge:** Show children each letter, say the sound it makes, and help them practice recognizing and using those sounds in words.
- **Shared Book Reading:** Read together daily, discussing characters, events, and new vocabulary.
- **Exploring Print Features:** Point out words in the environment (street signs, food labels, menus), helping children recognize that print carries meaning.
- **Learn about the children, their families, and their communities:** Use this knowledge to adapt teaching methods, materials, and classroom setup to better suit the students' backgrounds.
- **Seek out books that include characters with whom children and their families share identities:** Ensure that these characters are presented in authentic and positive ways.
- **Encourage children and families to bring their traditions and culturally important experiences to their learning:** Helps create a more inclusive and engaging environment, while also emphasizing that all members of a community can contribute as learners and teachers.
- **Display real pictures of the teachers, children, their families, and their communities:** Fosters a sense of belonging and representation.
- **Read books about different cultures, traditions, countries, and regions of the world:** Broadens students' understanding and appreciation of diversity.

# SECTION FIVE: ORAL LANGUAGE

## How Oral Language Supports Key Literacy Skills

From the moment a child hears a lullaby, listens to a story from a family member, or talks with friends while playing together, children are engaging in the earliest forms of literacy. These experiences shape not only their ability to understand and use language but also develop their identity and sense of belonging. Oral language development is not the same for every student. Socioeconomic background, exposure to vocabulary, and early language experiences all contribute to a child's literacy journey. Oral language is the foundation of literacy, providing the skills necessary for communication, comprehension, and sense-making. Research consistently shows that children who develop strong oral language skills, such as vocabulary, sentence structure, and the ability to understand and express ideas are better equipped to succeed in reading and writing (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

Oral language and literacy are not separate processes; they develop together, reinforcing and building upon one another. Classrooms that integrate speaking and listening with reading and writing instruction led to better student outcomes. When students talk about texts before writing about them, engage in storytelling before summarizing, or explain their reasoning aloud before answering comprehension questions, they strengthen both their spoken and written communication skills (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2016).

In the classroom, students engage in oral discussions to explore ideas, clarify their thinking, and connect to what they read. This continuous engagement with spoken language strengthens their comprehension and ability to communicate in written form. Through meaningful conversations, structured discussions, and explicit instruction, teachers can help students build the vocabulary, grammar, and critical thinking skills that will serve them throughout their academic careers and beyond. Recognizing the power of oral language is essential for creating literacy instruction that is effective, equitable, and deeply engaging. Oral language activities help children develop awareness of sounds, syllables, and rhyming patterns, which are crucial for learning to read. Phonological awareness, the ability to recognize and manipulate sounds in spoken language, is a precursor to decoding and reading fluency (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). The skills children acquire through speaking and listening provide the foundation for reading and writing. Oral language is a complex skill that involves multiple components, all of which contribute to literacy development:

- **Phonological Awareness:** The ability to hear and manipulate sounds in spoken language, which is crucial for decoding in reading.
- **Vocabulary:** The breadth and depth of words a student knows and can use effectively.
- **Syntax and Grammar:** Understanding sentence structures and how words fit together to convey meaning.
- **Discourse and Pragmatics:** Engaging in conversations, being aware of how people feel when they talk, and responding in a way that makes sense for the communicative situation.
- **Listening Comprehension:** The ability to process and understand spoken language, an essential skill like engaging in discussions, following instructions, and understanding

academic content.

## Acknowledgment of Disability and Accessibility

In this framework, references to “speaking” and “listening” are intended to honor the diverse ways people send and receive information. Communication is not limited to oral speech or auditory processing. Individuals may communicate through signing, gesturing, writing, using assistive technologies, or alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) systems. This inclusive understanding recognizes and values the full participation of people who are deaf, hard of hearing, non-speaking, or who use other modes of expression and comprehension due to cognitive, physical, or sensory disabilities.

Defining speaking, listening, and oral language in ways that provide access and opportunity for students is essential for equitable early literacy instruction. Early literacy skills form the foundation for all future learning, and communication (giving and receiving information) is a critical component for all young learners. With equitable access to speaking and listening activities, educators can help young learners develop the phonological awareness, vocabulary, and comprehension skills necessary for reading and writing. Tailored strategies, such as using visual aids or assistive technologies, can bridge communication gaps and support the unique needs of each student. Inclusive oral language practices are fundamental to creating a supportive learning environment where every student can build strong literacy skills and thrive.

## Speaking and Listening as Essential Literacy Skills

Speaking and listening are tools for learning, collaboration, and self-expression. Strong oral communication enhances reading comprehension, writing proficiency, and critical thinking, making it a vital component of literacy instruction. Through discussion, students learn to process ideas, express themselves clearly, and engage with complex content. In school and beyond, these skills are essential for effective communication and success. Effective speaking and listening deepens comprehension, expands vocabulary, and sharpens their ability to construct logical, well-supported arguments. Speaking and listening activities allow students to interact with complex ideas, refine their thinking, and gain deeper understanding. Effective speaking and listening instructions include:

- **Active Listening:** Understanding and analyzing spoken language to make sense of the message they are receiving and to respond thoughtfully.
- **Oral Expression:** Organizing and articulating thoughts clearly and effectively.
- **Collaborative Discussion:** Engaging in structured conversations with peers to build ideas.
- **Presentation Skills:** Using verbal and nonverbal communication to convey information.
- **Critical Listening:** Evaluating arguments, identifying bias, and synthesizing spoken information.

### *Oral Expression: Building Confident Speakers*

Speaking is a skill that requires both linguistic and cognitive development. Students must choose words carefully, organize their ideas, and adjust their communication for different audiences and purposes. Oral expressions include participating in discussions, explaining ideas in small groups, and using language to collaborate and problem-solve. When students practice academic

conversations, they learn how to support their ideas with evidence, clarify their reasoning, and respectfully consider multiple perspectives. Educators may use classroom discussion routines and protocols to support the development of these skills and grow student confidence. These skills are crucial not just for literacy development but also for civic engagement, career readiness, and lifelong learning.

### *Active Listening: The Key to Receiving Information*

Effective listening skills help students follow directions, engage in meaningful discussions, and comprehend complex ideas. Listening is an active process that requires students to focus, process, and respond to spoken information. Without strong listening skills, students may struggle with academic tasks, from understanding classroom instructions to analyzing key details in spoken narratives. Teachers can support active listening by incorporating strategies such as think-pair-share discussions, peer summarization activities, and structured listening tasks that encourage students to engage deeply with spoken information.

## **Vocabulary: A Key Component of Oral Language Development**

Vocabulary development is one of the strongest predictors of reading comprehension (Stahl & Nagy, 2006). Children who use a broad range of words in conversation are more likely to recognize and understand those words in print. Early exposure to complex academic vocabulary through discussion is essential. Additionally, explicit instruction in vocabulary helps students make sense of what they read and express their ideas clearly. Students who regularly engage in meaningful conversations develop a richer vocabulary that supports increased access and understanding of texts across subjects.

### *Evidence-Based Strategies for Teaching Vocabulary*

- **Teach Words in Meaningful Contexts:** Introduce new words through rich discussions, read-aloud, and thematic instruction rather than isolated word lists.
- **Use Multiple Exposures to Words:** Students need multiple meaningful encounters with new vocabulary to internalize the meaning.
- **Engage in Morphological Word Study:** A morpheme is the smallest meaningful unit in a word. Exploring prefixes, suffixes, and root words helps students understand how words are constructed and how they convey meaning. (e.g., pack, pack-ing, un-pack-ing)
- **Encourage Student-Friendly Definitions:** Instead of formal definitions, provide definitions in child-friendly language with examples.
- **Incorporate Visual Support:** Use pictures, real objects, and gestures to reinforce meaning.
- **Engage Students in Active Use of Words:** Provide opportunities for students to use new vocabulary in conversation, writing, and play.

## **Speaking and Listening in a Digital Age**

In today's world, communication extends beyond face-to-face conversations. Students interact in digital forums, video conferencing, podcasts, and social media discussions, all of which require strong speaking and listening skills. Digital literacy is now a key component of oral communication, and students must learn to navigate both traditional and modern forms of dialogue. By integrating digital speaking and listening experiences into the classroom, educators prepare students for

modern communication environments, ensuring they can participate in virtual discussions with confidence and awareness. Digital Speaking and Listening skills include:

- Engaging in video discussions and online forums responsibly and thoughtfully.
- Practicing ethical and respectful online communication.
- Using digital tools for collaboration, such as podcasts, recorded presentations, and multimedia storytelling.
- Evaluating the credibility and tone of spoken content in media and digital platforms.

## Understanding Diverse Abilities in Oral Language Development

It is important to recognize that disabilities encompass a wide range of complex skill sets. Students with disabilities are individuals who have physical, cognitive, emotional, or developmental disabilities that may impact their experience of learning or participation in educational activities. Diverse abilities and challenges require tailored approaches to support their unique needs and foster an inclusive learning environment. It is the responsibility of teachers to understand and address these specific needs, ensuring that all learners can succeed and thrive. By acknowledging the varied nature of disabilities and committing themselves to meet the individual needs of each student, educators can create a more supportive and effective educational experience. Oral language development strategies for all students:

- Use visual supports (pictures, gestures, graphic organizers).
- Model clear, slow, and expressive speech.
- Encourage turn-taking and active listening.
- Create a safe, low-pressure environment for speaking (e.g., small groups, partner talk).
- Incorporate multi-sensory learning (visual, auditory, kinesthetic).
- Celebrate communication successes.

Oral language development can be significantly impacted for students with disabilities. Understanding the unique strengths and needs that students bring best positions educators to find ways that do lead to access, participation, and engagement.

- **Physical Disabilities:** Conditions that affect mobility, dexterity, or physical functioning, such as cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, or spinal cord injuries. Motor impairments may affect muscles used for speech (articulation, breath control). Limited mobility may also reduce opportunities for social interaction.
  - Ensure accessible seating and positioning in the classroom.
  - Use partner assisted communication when needed (e.g., pointing to choices).
  - Adapt materials and tools such as larger buttons or touchscreens to support physical access to communication.
  - Collaborate with specialists, such as speech-language pathologists, to tailor strategies to individual student needs.
- **Cognitive Disabilities:** Intellectual disabilities or learning disabilities that affect cognitive processes, such as Down syndrome, dyslexia, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Students with Down syndrome may have language or speech development delays.

While dyslexia primarily affects reading and phonological processing, it may also impact verbal memory for some students. Students with ADHD may have difficulty following conversations, and experience challenges with organizing their thoughts verbally.

- Use repetition and routines to reinforce language patterns.
  - Pair spoken words with signs or visuals to support understanding.
  - Encourage peer modeling—pair with strong language role models.
  - Focus on functional vocabulary relevant to daily life and classroom routines.
  - Use short, simple sentences and allow extra time for responses.
  - Use structured literacy approaches that connect spoken and written language.
- **Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities:** Conditions that impact emotional regulation and behavior, such as anxiety disorders, depression, or oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). Any kind of emotional dysregulation can lead to inconsistent communication patterns in young learners. For example, students experiencing anxiety or depression may show less participation in classroom discussions. Behavioral disabilities such as ODD may interfere with listening, turn-taking, and social language skills in conversations.
    - Use calm, consistent routines and expectations.
    - Avoid putting students on the spot.
    - Use sentence starters to support peer conversations.
    - Use neutral, non-confrontational language.
    - Validate feelings, offer choices, and offer encouragement.
- **Developmental Disabilities:** Disabilities that occur during developmental stages, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or developmental delays. These can affect all areas of language development, receptive (understanding), expressive (understanding) and pragmatic (social use). For example, students with ASD may have delayed speech, repeating others (echolalia), difficulty with social language, or understanding symbolic or figurative language when used in conversation.
    - Model and expand language (e.g., if a student says, “car,” respond with “Yes, a red car is driving fast!”).
    - Give extra time to process and respond – avoid rushing or interrupting.
    - Encourage use of AAC tools, such as speech generating devices or communication boards.
    - Use interests and strengths to engage in communication (e.g., talking about favorite topics together).

### *Deaf and Hard of Hearing*

Deaf and hard of hearing students are individuals who have varying degrees of hearing loss, which can impact their ability to hear sounds and communicate effectively. Many students who are deaf and hard of hearing may primarily use visual forms of communication such as American Sign Language (ASL). Whenever possible, instruction should incorporate sign language if the student uses it and ensures all team members are proficient. Some students with hearing loss may be able to hear certain sounds with the help of hearing aids or other assistive devices. They may face challenges in developing spoken language skills and may use ASL as their primary mode of communication. Hard-of-hearing students have some degree of hearing loss but can often hear

certain sounds with the help of hearing aids or other assistive devices. They might use a combination of spoken language, lip reading, and ASL, depending on their level of hearing and personal preferences. Both deaf and hard of hearing students benefit from tailored educational strategies that address their unique needs, such as visual aids, captioning, and specialized instruction. Creating an inclusive classroom environment that accommodates their communication needs is crucial for their academic success and social integration.

- **Visual and Auditory Strategies:** Use both visual aids and auditory teaching methods tailored to the student's needs. Using amplification or personal amplification devices may reduce background noise. Live captioning and preferential seating may support listening, lipreading and/or reduce acoustic interference.
- **Written Communication:** Emphasize reading and writing skills, as these are critical for communication.

## *Dyslexia*

Dyslexia is a language-based learning difference that primarily affects reading and writing skills, and it can also influence aspects of oral language development. Students with dyslexia may experience challenges with phonological awareness, word retrieval, and verbal expression, which can impact their ability to process and articulate spoken language. At the same time, many individuals with dyslexia demonstrate strengths in creative thinking, problem-solving, spatial reasoning, and oral storytelling. Recognizing and building on these strengths is essential. By understanding the diverse profiles of learners with dyslexia, including both their assets and the areas where support is needed. Educators can use targeted, evidence-informed strategies to support oral language development and promote literacy growth in inclusive and empowering ways.

Follow the link for more OSPI information [About Dyslexia](#).

## *Neurodiversity and Learning Difference*

Students who are neurodivergent may experience the world and learn in different ways. Neurodiversity reflects the natural variation in how individuals think, learn, and experience the world. This includes students with, but not limited to, identities or diagnoses such as:

- **Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD):** May involve differences in communication, social interaction, and patterns of behavior or interest.
- **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD):** May impact attention regulation, impulse control, and activity levels.
- **Dyslexia:** A specific learning disorder (SLD) that is neurological in origin and is characterized by unexpected difficulties with accurate or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities that are not consistent with the person's intelligence, motivation, and/or sensory capabilities.
- **Sensory Processing Differences:** May influence how students interpret and respond to sensory input like sound, light, texture, or movement.

Neurodiverse students often bring strengths to oral language development such as rich vocabulary,

creative expression, and unique perspectives. They may also face challenges like difficulty with social communication, impulsivity, or struggles with word retrieval and figurative language. Supporting these learners requires understanding their individual profiles and using strategies that build on their strengths while addressing specific needs.

Importantly, students may relate to more than one of these categories—or none—and still benefit from approaches grounded in flexibility, responsiveness, and universal design. Supporting all learners, including those with neurodivergent profiles, means creating environments that recognize variability not as a challenge to overcome, but as an opportunity to enrich learning for everyone. Below are effective, inclusive approaches:

- **Use Clear and Direct Language:** Simplify instructions and avoid idiomatic expressions that might be confusing.
- **Visual Supports:** Incorporate visual aids like charts, diagrams, and written instructions to reinforce spoken language.
- **Flexible Seating and Movement:** Allow students to move around if needed to help them stay focused and engaged in communication.
- **Multiple Means of Representation:** Provide students with ways to express understanding through different modalities of communication through gestures, movement, writing, or creating visuals and images.
- **Routine and Structure:** Establish predictable routines to reduce anxiety and help students feel more comfortable when communicating in class.

## Cultural and Linguistic Representation in Oral Language

### Honoring Indigenous Ways of Knowing

Across Washington, communities use storytelling and songs to pass down knowledge and preserve cultural heritage and values. Stories shared through spoken word, song, dance, and ceremony connect past, present, and future generations in meaningful and culturally grounded ways. Oral traditions strengthen listening skills, memory, and imagination, and they support SEL to develop the whole child. Research highlights the importance of oral storytelling in building narrative skills and comprehension, both critical for literacy development (Heath, 1983; Gee, 2004). American Indian/Alaska Native oral traditions, in particular, are foundational to the survival of complete knowledge systems. For Indigenous peoples, oral storytelling is an important practice that carries cultural identity, intergenerational wisdom, and traditional ecological knowledge.

While honoring deep-rooted traditions, Native ways of knowing also reflects the current realities and contributions of Indigenous peoples today. Stories continue to evolve, incorporating contemporary voices, current events, and cultural shifts. This affirms that Indigenous identity is dynamic, living, and relevant. Integrating present-day Native knowledge systems, teachings, and voices into instruction helps move beyond historical portrayals and supports students in engaging with Indigenous cultures as current, sovereign, and vital. This approach is essential for culturally responsive and relevant literacy instruction that reflects and respects the lived experiences of American Indian and Alaska Native learners.

## African American Vernacular English (AAVE)

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is a legitimate and rule-governed dialect of English with deep historical, cultural, and linguistic roots. It is often the first language or dialect that many Black children learn at home, making it a familiar and meaningful foundation for early learning. Recognizing AAVE as a valid form of communication affirms the identities of many Black students and supports their linguistic and cultural heritage. By validating the home language of students, teachers foster belonging and co-create pathways to deeper literacy learning.

AAVE's rich storytelling traditions, expressive vocabulary, and rhythmic patterns enhance children's oral language development by strengthening their ability to narrate, describe, and engage in meaningful conversations. These are essential skills for early literacy. When students are encouraged to use their home language, they gain confidence and are more likely to take risks in speaking and learning.

Additionally, learning to navigate between AAVE and Standard American English (SAE) builds metalinguistic awareness, by helping children understand how language works and using language choices based on purpose, audience, and goal. This ability to code-switch is a valuable communication skill. The dialect's natural rhythm and sound patterns also support phonological awareness skills such as rhyming and syllable segmentation. Rather than viewing AAVE as a barrier to literacy, educators can embrace it as a powerful linguistic and cultural resource. By doing so, they support the development of oral language, narrative skills, and cultural expression as key components of early literacy success.

## Oral Language Assets in Multilingual Learners (MLs)

Washington state is home to linguistically diverse communities, with over two hundred languages spoken in schools and homes. Multilingualism is not a barrier to literacy, it is an asset that enhances cognitive flexibility, problem-solving, and cultural understanding. For MLs, oral language instruction should build on their existing linguistic strengths. Providing opportunities for students to engage in discussions in their home language and English can enhance their language proficiency and literacy development. Teachers can also use visual support, sentence frames, and structured dialogue routines to support students in developing academic language. This means incorporating culturally responsive teaching practices that honor students' home languages, encourage bilingualism and translanguaging, and create a classroom environment where every student's voice is valued. MLs bring valuable linguistic and cultural assets to the classroom.

Effective oral language instruction for MLs:

- **Builds on students' home languages** as strengths rather than barriers.
- **Incorporates visuals, gestures, and language modeling** to support comprehension.
- **Encourage structured conversations and discussions** to enhance both social and academic language skills.
- **Integrate oral language instruction into content-area teaching** academic language explicitly, ensuring students understand subject-specific vocabulary.
- **Strategically use instructional tools** such as short videos, visuals, and graphic organizers—to anchor instruction and help students make sense of content.

- **Explicitly teach the content-specific academic vocabulary** as well as the general academic vocabulary that supports it, during content-area instruction.

Follow the link for more OSPI information on [Multilingual Education Program](#).

DRAFT

# SECTION SIX: THE INTEGRAL ROLE OF WRITING IN LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

## Why Writing Matters

Writing yields immediate benefits in the experiences of young learners, enriching their lives now while setting the stage for future success. Writing sparks children's creativity, helping them develop and reflect on their experiences and ideas. It allows them to express their feelings, aspirations, and imagination. Through writing, children find ways to participate in and strengthen their communities. Children build social bonds with messages of celebration, adventure, and invitation. Teaching all children to write acknowledges that everyone has a voice that deserves to be developed and heard. Washington state recognizes the following aims of writing and their benefits for young writers:

- **Sense-making:** Students write to understand self, others, and the world (including comprehension of ideas and texts).
- **Expression:** Students write to voice experiences, observations, ideas, and creativity.
- **Communication:** Students write to convey experiences, observations, and ideas to others.
- **Community-building:** Students write to build relationships and strengthen communities.

## Foundations for Writing Development

Before they form their first letters or set foot in classrooms, children grasp markers or crayons and make marks that have meaning. They leave their marks on any surface within reach—paper, counters, walls, sidewalks. Even before these marks are recognizable to others, children will proclaim their words, assigned to the markings they have made. While drawings have their own value apart from writing, together drawing and writing spring from the same source: children's impulse to visually represent experiences and ideas.

Teachers continue to build on this foundation when they encourage drawing and other forms of visual representation even after children learn to write, pointing out how both artists and writers use techniques to represent things like the passage of time, perspective, or mood. Young writers progress through predictable stages as they learn to express themselves through written language. Understanding these stages helps educators provide developmentally appropriate instruction, feedback, and support. While children may move through stages at different rates, the stages themselves reflect a common trajectory observed across diverse learners (Gerde et al., 2012; Sulzby, 1986; Clay, 1991).

## Pre-Literate Stage

Children in the pre-literate stage experiment with marks, scribbles, or drawing to represent meaning. They may not yet understand the alphabetic principle but often assign meaning to their marks. This stage is characterized by:

- Scribbles or random letter-like forms.
- Directionality may not be established.
- Writing may resemble drawing.
- Oral storytelling may accompany writing.

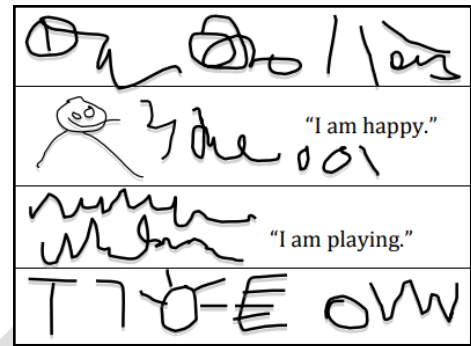


Figure 2 Pre-literate sample, West Hartford Public Schools

**Instructional focus:** Oral language development, exposure to print, modeling writing behaviors, fine motor skill support.

## Emergent Stage

Emergent writers begin to understand that print carries meaning, and that letters represent sounds. Their writing begins to show early letter-sound connections, often using initial sounds to represent whole words.

- Use of letters (often uppercase) in strings of letters.
- Partial phonetic spelling, attempts beginning sound-letter partners.
- Attempts at name writing and labeling pictures.
- Copy words found in their environment.
- Increased control of writing tools and left-to-right orientation.

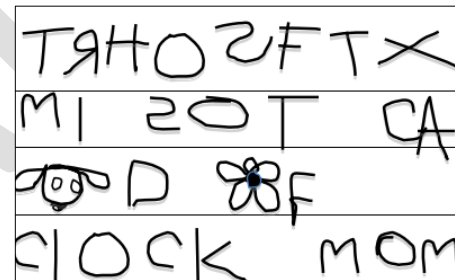


Figure 3 Emergent Stage sample, West Hartford Public Schools

**Instructional focus:** Phonological awareness, letter-sound relationships, shared and interactive writing, environmental print.

## Transitional Stage

Transitional writers begin to apply more conventional spelling and show greater control of sentence structure. They write across several lines and use more consistent spacing, punctuation, and basic grammar.

- Use of phonetics and some conventional spelling.
- Writing includes beginning, middle, and end sounds.
- Use of high-frequency words and sentence patterns.
- Increased independence in composing short texts.

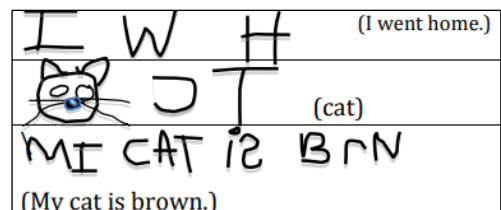


Figure 4 Transitional stage sample, West Hartford Public Schools

**Instructional focus:** Word study, sentence fluency, genre awareness, revising and editing strategies.

## Fluent Stage

Fluent writers demonstrate increasing control of the writing process. They write for a variety of purposes and audiences, organize ideas clearly, and apply spelling, grammar, and punctuation more consistently.

- Use of extended texts with multiple sentences or paragraphs.
- Voice, structure, and vocabulary begin to reflect audience and purpose.
- Growing awareness of genre and author's craft.
- Ability to plan, revise, and edit with support.

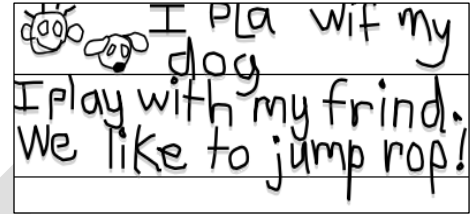


Figure 5 Fluent stage sample,  
West Hartford Public Schools

**Instructional focus:** Craft, organization, elaboration, genre conventions, and self-assessment strategies.

## Young Writers Learn by Emulating Mentor Texts

Young children naturally observe how others use reading and writing in everyday life. Without formal instruction, they begin to imitate what they see, mimicking the purposes, products, and behaviors of readers and writers.

- A child who sees an adult reading a magazine might pretend to read one too, turning pages and holding it the same way.
- A child who watches a parent write a grocery list may start making their own list, even if it is just scribbles.
- A child who sees an older sibling writing a story or letter might try to write one as well, mimicking the structure, phrases, or even the handwriting style.

These early writing behaviors show how children approximate the visual features and purposes of real-world writing. They are learning through imitation; trying out what writing looks and feels like.

## What Writers Do

Writing is a creative and generative act. To become strong writers, children need opportunities to make choices and guidance to grow. Writers of all ages engage in core writing practices, moving along a continuum of support and sophistication. As students develop, these practices become more intentional and flexible. These core ideas anchor the WA State ELA Writing Standards (2026) which are grounded in this shared understanding of writing. Aligning instruction to these standards helps students develop writing skills that matter, both in school and in life.

### *Writers Make Decisions Based on Purpose, Audience, and Context*

To grow as writers, students need chances to write for real reasons and real audiences. They also need guidance to help them think about the situation they are writing in. This includes the purpose of their writing, who will read it, what form it will take, and how it will be shared. Writers think about several things when they make decisions about what and how to write:

- **Context:** When and where is the writing happening? What is going on in the world, classroom, or community that might shape what the writer wants to say?
- **Writer:** Who is doing the writing? What is their goal? What do they care about or want to express?
- **Message:** What is the writer trying to communicate? What is the main idea or feeling they want to get across?
- **Medium:** How is the message shared? This includes:
- **Material:** The tools or modes used (words, images, visuals, etc.).
- **Genre:** The type of writing (a poem, a story, a letter, an essay).
- **Platform:** The format or place where the writing appears (on paper, in a text message, in a slideshow).
- **Audience:** Who will read or hear the message? What does the writer want the audience to think, feel, or do? What might the audience already know?

### *How Teachers Can Help*

Teachers can support students by:

- Giving students authentic purposes and audiences for writing.
- Talking about the elements above as part of the writing process.
- Encouraging students to make choices and explain or reflect on them.
- Showing mentor texts where writers make different choices based on who they are writing for and why.

### *Writers Use and Adapt Genres to Meet Their Purpose*

What is a Genre? Genre refers to *a category or type of text that follows conventions, features, and purposes*. In literacy and education, teaching about genre helps students understand how texts are structured and why authors make specific choices. Genres are types of writing that follow familiar patterns, like stories, letters, lists, speeches, comics, or opinion pieces. These patterns help both writers and readers know what to expect. Writers use, adapt, combine, and even transform genres to meet their needs. This kind of flexibility is what helps writing stay creative, relevant, and powerful. Genres grow out of shared experiences, values, and ways of communicating. For example:

- A thank-you card, a social media post, and a fairy tale each follow different patterns.
- Each one has a structure, tone, and purpose that makes it recognizable.
- These patterns help writers know how to begin and help readers understand how to read them.

### *What This Means for Young Writers*

Students do not need to know a genre's label to use it well. What matters most is recognizing how a genre works and using it with intention. Even young students can play with genre.

- Use a familiar structure (like a story) to tell their own experiences.
- Mix formats (like combining drawing with text in a comic).
- Imitate the styles and voices they see in the world around them.
- Invent new forms to match their ideas and reach an audience.

## *How Teachers Can Help*

Teachers support students by:

- Introducing a wide variety of genres, not just academic forms.
- Using mentor texts to help students notice patterns in structure, voice, and features.
- Encouraging students to experiment with genres, rather than just memorize names.
- Helping students choose, adapt, or remix genres to meet their goals and audiences.

## *Writers Use the Writing Process Flexibility*

Writers do not all write the same way. They use a variety of writing strategies and often repeat steps or move back and forth between them in a nonlinear way. This is called a flexible and recursive writing process.

Writers adjust their process based on the task, the audience, the genre, and their own habits. There is no one "right" way to write, but most writers use some combination of the following stages to move from idea to final piece. Explicit instruction in the writing process includes instructional strategies such as write-alouds, providing multiple process strategies for students to try, choose, and reflect on, and designating time and resources for each component of the process during a writing project. Writing can become complex, so the components of the writing process help structure writers' questions, considerations, and activities.

### **The Writing Process**

1. **Planning and Generating Ideas:** Considering purposes and audiences, brainstorming, and discussing ideas, gathering, and organizing material, choosing genres, reflecting on mentor texts, planning steps, and allotting time.
2. **Drafting:** Writing initial versions, focusing on getting ideas down without concern for perfection.
3. **Gathering and Evaluating Feedback:** Sharing drafts with others to see how readers understand them, evaluating whether feedback helps writers accomplish their purposes.
4. **Revision:** Strengthening the draft by expanding ideas, adding details, changing structure, trying different wording, or reworking the tone or voice. Writers may add, cut, move, or completely rethink sections to better communicate their message.
5. **Editing:** Focusing on conventions such as grammar, spelling, mechanics, and making visual features consistent (e.g., headings or lists).
6. **Publishing:** Sharing writing by distributing copies, or by reading, performing, or otherwise presenting them to an audience. Writers can share in person, through printed copies, or through digital platforms.

## *Writers Read to Learn How Writing Works*

Writers do not just read for information or enjoyment. They read to learn how texts are built, how language influences readers, and how writers make decisions. This kind of reading, called rhetorical and critical reading, helps even very young students grow as writers. Students are reading to fuel their own ideas, learn new techniques, and shape writing that reflects their voices, perspectives, and goals. When students read like writers, they ask questions such as:

- What choices did the author make, and why?

- How does the structure or genre shape the message?
- What effect does this language have on me as a reader?
- What can I borrow or adapt in my own writing?

## *How Teachers Can Help*

Teachers can support students in reading as writers by:

- Using mentor texts to highlight craft, structure, and voice.
- Asking students to analyze writing choices, not just summarize content.
- Encouraging students to read texts with curiosity and confidence.
- Giving students real writing purposes so they can draw from what they have read.
- Reinforcing that students are writers, too, and texts are tools to help them grow.

## *Example Protocol: Notice–Wonder–Choose Protocol*

This protocol builds genre knowledge organically through inquiry, giving students the tools and confidence to make intentional writing choices. No matter a student’s age or grade level, teachers can support genre awareness using a simple, flexible approach: the Notice–Wonder–Choose protocol. This process helps students explore how texts work and how they can use those features in their own writing.

### **Notice-Wonder-Choose Protocol for Mentor Texts**

#### **Notice**

- What do you notice about what is on this page—or what is not on this page?
- How does what is on this page look different from other pages?
- How does this look the same or different from what we read yesterday/previously/earlier?
- Where is everything located on this page?

#### **Wonder**

- What do the things we noticed do for the reader—make the reader do, think, or pay attention to?
- How would the reader understand differently if the things we noticed were different?

#### **Choose**

- What did we notice that I want to try in my own writing—and why?
- What did we notice that I do not want to try in my writing—and why?
- What did we notice that I want to change or adapt in my own writing—and why?

## **Scaffolding Writing Instruction for All Learners**

### **Core Writing Practices**

Structured literacy includes writing strategies that are effective for all students, while providing essential support for MLs and students with disabilities. These are strong Tier 1 practices that should be part of every classroom:

- **Explicit instruction** in grammar, sentence structure, and writing conventions helps all students understand how written language works.
- **Multisensory supports** such as visuals, oral rehearsal, manipulatives, and graphic organizers give students more than one way to access writing tasks.
- **Scaffolded writing instructions** to break the process into clear steps like planning, drafting, revising, and editing. This builds confidence and independence.
- **Opportunities for guided practice** and frequent feedback help students refine their writing and develop as communicators.
- **Consistent routines** and structures for writing make expectations clear and reduce cognitive load for all learners.

These practices are especially helpful for students who benefit from structured, direct instruction, but they also strengthen instruction for every writer in the classroom. Effective writing instruction meets students where they are. In any classroom, students bring a range of skills, experiences, and learning needs. Some students benefit from structured support to build confidence and fluency, while others thrive with opportunities for extension and enrichment. Strong writing instructions include both.

## Writing Support with Multilingual Learners (MLs)

Multilingual students bring valuable linguistic and cultural resources to the classroom. Writing instruction for MLs should build on these strengths while providing clear, supportive pathways into English writing. *Translanguaging* is when students use all their languages together to learn, think, and communicate. This approach values students' full linguistic abilities and supports deeper learning by allowing them to draw on all their language knowledge.

### Example:

A bilingual student reads a science article in English, discusses it with a classmate in Spanish to better understand it, then writes their summary in English. During writing, they might jot notes or think aloud in Spanish to organize their thoughts. Effective strategies include:

- Using sentence frames and graphic organizers to support structure and organization.
- Encouraging students to draw on home languages as a bridge to English writing development.
- Offering explicit instruction in academic vocabulary, sentence patterns, and grammar.
- Providing visuals and models to clarify genre features and writing expectations.
- Creating opportunities to write for authentic purposes and audiences, including bilingual or translanguage writing when possible.

## Developing Writers and Students with Disabilities

Some students may need targeted supports to generate ideas, organize their thoughts, or express themselves in writing. Writing instruction for developing writers and students with disabilities can include:

- Offering speech-to-text tools, dictation software, or alternative formats for drafting.
- Teaching sentence, paragraph, and essay structure explicitly and repeatedly.

- Breaking down writing tasks into manageable steps with clear expectations.
- Providing mentor texts, model writing, and guided practice for each stage of the process.
- Creating a classroom environment where effort and growth, not perfection, are the focus reducing anxiety and encouraging growth.

### *Evidence-Based Practices for Teaching Writing (K–6)*

- **Think-Alouds:** Teachers model their thinking while reading, noticing writer’s craft, genre features, language use, and the effect on readers.
- **Write-Alouds:** Teachers compose in front of students, narrating their writing decisions as they use, adapt, or combine genres to meet a purpose.
- **Read-Alouds:** Teachers highlight genre conventions, author moves, and writing techniques to help students notice how texts are built.
- **Literature Circles (text circles):** Students engage in discussions about texts they choose, exploring writer’s craft and gaining inspiration for their own writing.
- **Genre Sets:** Teachers provide text sets within the same genre to help students notice common structures and the creative range possible within a single genre.
- **Writing Models:** Teachers use examples of effective writing to show a range of writer moves, emphasizing that there is no single correct way to write.
- **Reader’s/Writer’s Notebooks:** Students use notebooks to respond to texts, practice quick-writes, explore genre features, track ideas, and experiment with writing techniques.
- **Quick-Writes:** Short bursts of writing give students low-stakes opportunities to try out new moves, respond to mentor texts, or generate ideas.
- **Reader’s/Writer’s Workshop:** A classroom structure that supports independent and guided practice in reading, writing, and applying genre and craft.
- **Shared Learning:** A collaborative approach where students explore multiple genres and media, make personal connections, learn from peers, and link reading and writing to their interests and future goals.

# SECTION SEVEN: THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF READING IN LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

## Reading is a Lifelong Skill

**Reading is a gateway to knowledge, creativity, and personal growth.** When students develop strong reading habits, they gain the ability to think critically, communicate effectively, and engage with the world in meaningful ways. When students receive clear instruction, diverse reading opportunities, and responsive support, they grow into lifelong readers who approach texts with curiosity, confidence, and critical insight.

Reading is at the heart of literacy as a complex cognitive process that requires students to decode text, make meaning from it, and engage with ideas critically. Strong reading skills enable students to access information, think deeply, and participate fully in academic and civic life.

From an early age, students develop the foundational skills necessary to read with accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. As they grow, reading becomes a means of inquiry, reflection, and engagement with the world. Research has consistently shown that reading proficiency is a key predictor of future academic success, making explicit, evidence-based reading instruction essential in the early years and beyond.

## Reading Across Genres and Modalities

Reading is a multimodal process, extending beyond print to include visual, digital, and auditory texts. In today's world, students must navigate a variety of information sources, from traditional books to interactive digital content. Integrating diverse and multimodal texts into instruction equips students to think critically across a range of contexts.

All texts are multimodal, meaning they exist in multiple forms and require different ways of interpreting information. Students must engage with a variety of text types and formats to build well-rounded literacy skills. Incorporating diverse genres and formats provides students with opportunities to read for different purposes, for enjoyment, inquiry, and critical thinking.

In the digital age, students must be able to navigate, interpret, and evaluate a range of digital and multimodal texts. Engaging with these diverse formats prepares them to meet real-world literacy demands and become critical consumers of media and information. Each text type offers unique opportunities to build thinking, language, and understanding across contexts. To support this development, students need exposure to a wide variety of texts, including but not limited to:

- **Literary Reading:** Stories, novels, poetry, and drama that build imagination, empathy, and cultural awareness.
- **Informational Reading:** Nonfiction, research-based texts, and articles that develop factual knowledge and analytical skills.
- **Argumentative and Persuasive Texts:** Opinion pieces, essays, and debates that teach

- students how to evaluate evidence and construct logical arguments.
- **Online Articles and Blogs:** Used to inform or entertain. Students can learn to assess credibility and recognize bias.
  - **Visual and Media Texts:** Understanding how images, infographics, and videos convey meaning.
  - **Audiobooks and Podcasts:** Strengthening listening comprehension and oral language.

## A Research-Based Approach to Reading

The National Reading Panel (2000) identified five essential components of reading instruction, often referred to as the Five Pillars of Reading. These pillars are grounded in decades of research from cognitive psychology, linguistics, and neuroscience, providing a foundation for developing strong readers. The science of reading is grounded in the idea that reading comprehension is built on both word recognition and language comprehension. To become proficient readers, students must develop skills in the five pillars of Reading:

- **Phonemic Awareness:** Recognizing and manipulating sounds in words.
- **Phonics:** Understanding the relationships between letters and sounds to decode words.
- **Fluency:** Reading with accuracy, speed, and expression.
- **Vocabulary:** Understanding the meaning of words and how they are used.
- **Comprehension:** Constructing meaning from text and engaging in deep thinking.

These components work together to support strong, independent readers who can make sense of a variety of texts. Instruction in each area must be explicit, systematic, and developmentally appropriate, ensuring that all students can develop the literacy skills necessary for success regardless of background or learning needs.

*"Comprehension strategies should be taught—and, according to research, should be taught using a gradual release of responsibility approach. That just means that the teacher models and explains when, how, and why to implement the strategies. Then the teacher guides students to use the strategies themselves, turning more and more of the responsibility for that over to them gradually."*

*—Timothy Shanahan*

## Literacy Models and Components of Reading

### Why Reading Models Matter

Reading models provide an evidence-based framework for understanding how literacy develops. They help educators break down the complexity of reading, guiding them in planning effective instruction and interventions. By understanding how different components of reading interact, educators can make informed decisions about curriculum design, assessment, and instructional strategies to support all learners. Research concepts are supported by theoretical models such as

The Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) and Scarborough's Reading Rope (2001).

### *The Simple View of Reading (SVR): Understanding Reading Comprehension*

The Simple View of Reading (SVR), introduced by Gough and Tunmer (1986), provides a straightforward yet powerful way to understand how reading comprehension develops. This model breaks reading into two essential components that work together to create skilled readers:



Figure 6 The Simple View of Reading, Gough, and Tunmer (1986)

This equation (above) shows that both decoding and comprehension must develop together for a student to become a skilled reader. If either is weak, reading comprehension will suffer. Strong readers can both decode words and understand their meaning, as comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading.

- **Word Recognition (Decoding):** Refers to a reader's ability to translate written words into spoken language. It includes skills like recognizing letter-sound relationships, sounding out unfamiliar words, and reading words fluently. Strong decoding skills allow readers to recognize words automatically, reducing the cognitive load required for reading.
- **Language Comprehension:** The ability to understand and make meaning from spoken language. It involves vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge, grammar, and the ability to make inferences. Even if a child can decode words, they still need strong language comprehension to understand what they read.

### *Scarborough's Reading Rope*

Developed by Hollis Scarborough (2001), the Reading Rope provides a visual metaphor for how various literacy skills intertwine over time to create skilled readers. This model expands on the Simple View of Reading (SVR) by breaking down reading into multiple, interdependent strands. It illustrates that reading is not a single skill but a complex process requiring word recognition and language comprehension to work together.

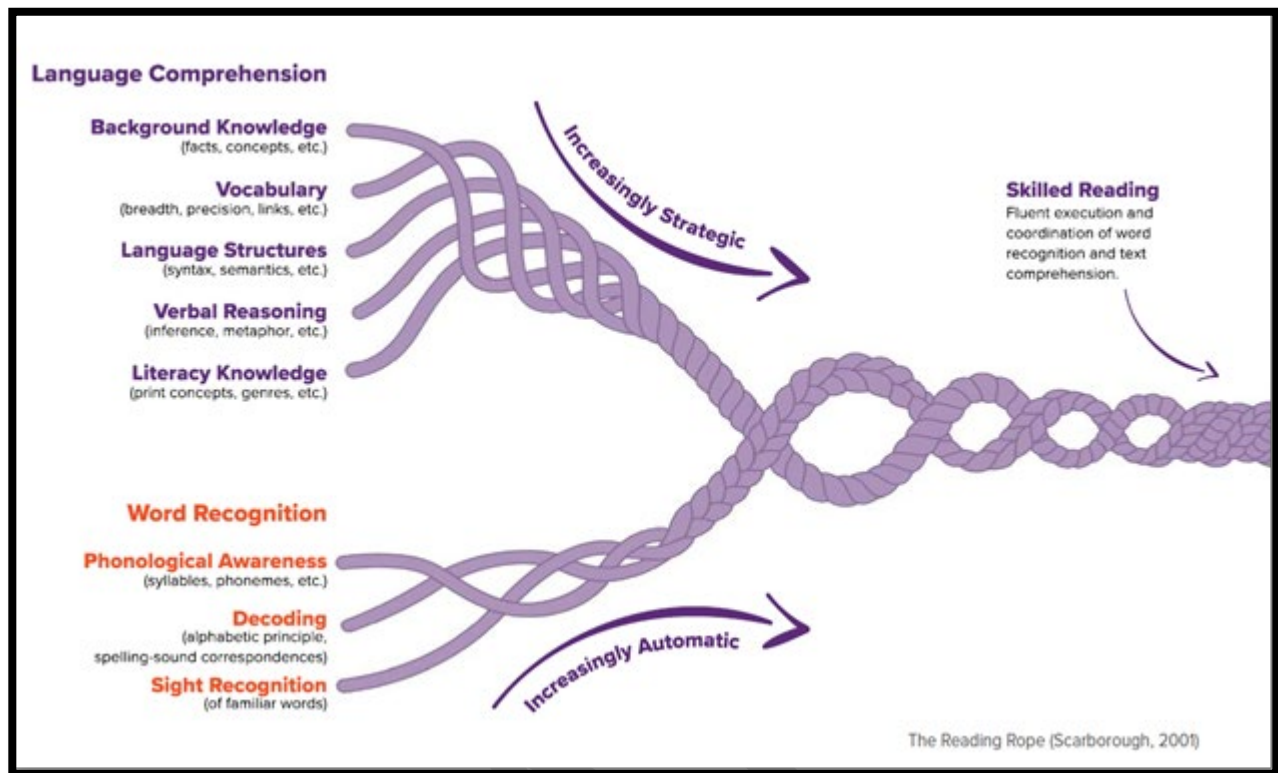


Figure 7 Scarborough's Reading Rope (2001)

**Word Recognition Strands** (The Mechanics of Reading) foundational skills help students decode and recognize words efficiently. Strong word recognition skills allow students to read words fluently, freeing up mental energy to focus on understanding the text. Word recognition skills include:

- **Phonological Awareness:** Recognizing and manipulating sounds in spoken language.
- **Decoding (Phonics):** Understanding letter-sound relationships to read words.
- **Sight Recognition of Familiar Words:** Automatically recognizing familiar and high-frequency words.

**Language Comprehension Strands** (The Meaning of Reading) foundational skills enable students to understand and interpret text. Language Comprehension skills include:

- **Background Knowledge:** Prior knowledge that helps students make sense of what they read.
- **Vocabulary:** Knowing and understanding the meanings of words.
- **Language Structures** (Syntax & Semantics): Understanding sentence structure and meaning.
- **Verbal Reasoning:** Making inferences and drawing conclusions from text.
- **Literacy Knowledge:** Recognizing print features, genres, and text structures.

Together, these skills enable students to make meaning from what they read, connecting new information to what they already know. Scarborough's model emphasizes that reading is a process

of growth. This model reminds educators that reading is a complex skill set, not a single ability. In the early stages, each strand develops separately as students build foundational literacy skills. Over time, these strands become more tightly woven, leading to automatic, fluent, and skilled reading. The Active View of Reading: Expanding the SVR Model.

### Active View of Reading

While the Simple View of Reading (SVR) effectively describes two key components of reading, Duke & Cartwright (2021) argue that it does not account for self-regulation and active engagement in reading. This model acknowledges that reading is not just a passive process but one that requires active cognitive effort and self-monitoring.

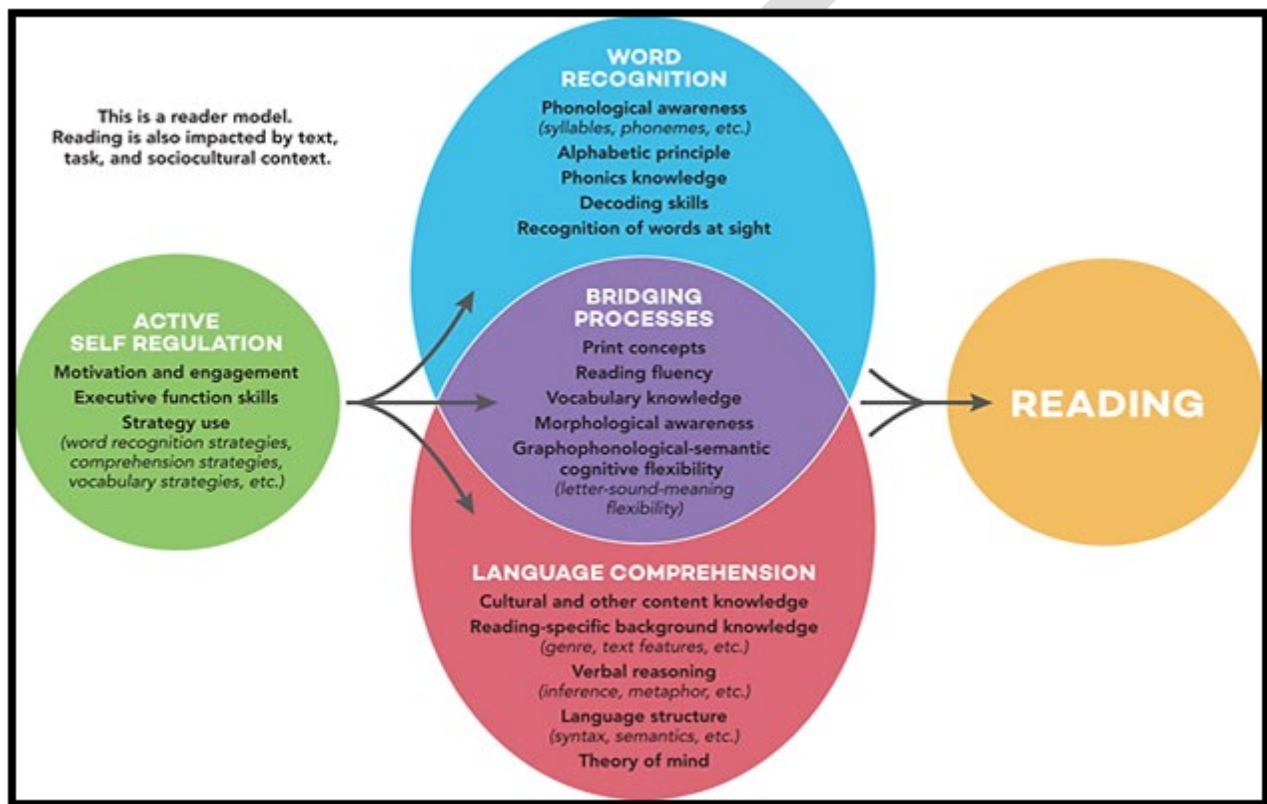


Figure 8 Active View of Reading (2021)

The Active View of Reading expands on the SVR by emphasizing:

- **Cognitive Self-Regulation:** Skills that help readers plan, monitor, and adjust their reading strategies (e.g., predicting, summarizing, and visualizing).
- **Strategic Reading Behaviors:** Techniques such as main idea identification, inference-making, and questioning that enhance comprehension.
- **Motivation and Engagement:** The importance of interest, persistence, and self-efficacy in reading success.

### Considering Literacy Models in Proximity to People

While literacy models provide valuable frameworks for understanding the development of reading

skills, it is important to recognize that they are simplifications of the complex nature of human literacy. These models offer insights into the components and processes involved in reading, but they do not capture the full depth and richness of human communication. Literacy is a multifaceted and dynamic skill that encompasses more than any single model can represent. Therefore, educators should use these models as guides, while also considering the unique and diverse needs of individual learners.

## The Role of Foundational Skills in Early Literacy

Learning to read is one of the most complex and essential skills a child will develop in their academic career. While comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading, students must first build the necessary foundational skills that allow them to decode and make sense of text. These foundational skills include phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, and word recognition, all of which support a student's ability to read with confidence and automaticity. Without a strong grasp of these early skills, students may struggle with reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and overall academic success.

Foundational skills serve as the bridge between spoken and written language. Early on when children learn to read, they must first develop the ability to recognize and manipulate the sounds (phonemic awareness) in words. Once they understand that words are made up of individual sounds (phonemes), they can begin to connect those sounds to letters, a process known as phonics. Through explicit systematic instruction and practice, students develop fluency, allowing them to read effortlessly and focus on comprehension rather than decoding each word.

Research confirms the importance of explicit and systematic instruction in foundational skills (National Reading Panel, 2000; IES What Works Clearinghouse, 2016). When taught in a structured way, these skills provide the necessary support for all students, particularly those at risk of reading difficulties, including but not limited to, students with dyslexia. Strong foundational skills instruction ensures that every student can access grade-level texts and participate fully in literacy-rich learning experiences.

## Key Components of Foundational Skills Instruction

### *Phonological Awareness: Hearing the Sounds of Language*

Before children can read, they must understand that spoken language is made up of smaller sound units. Phonological awareness refers to the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate sounds in words. This includes recognizing rhyming words, syllables, onset-rime patterns, and individual phonemes (sounds).

**Phonemic awareness** is the most advanced form of phonological awareness and is essential for early reading success. Students who struggle to distinguish and manipulate sounds may need additional support and opportunities to practice phonics and decoding words. Instruction should include explicit, engaging activities that help students develop these skills, such as:

- Clapping syllables in words to increase awareness of word structure.

- Identifying and generating rhyming words to recognize sound patterns.
- Segmenting words into individual sounds (e.g., "cat" → /c/ /a/ /t/).
- Blending sounds to form words (e.g., /s/ /u/ /n/ → "sun").

Research from the National Reading Panel (2000) and What Works Clearinghouse (2016) confirms that phonemic awareness instruction significantly improves early reading outcomes, particularly when paired with phonics instruction.

### *Phonics: The Relationship Between Letters and Sounds*

**Phonics** instruction teaches students how written letters (graphemes) correspond to spoken sounds (phonemes). It is not enough for students to recognize letters; they must understand how letters and letter patterns represent sounds in written language. Phonics allows students to decode unfamiliar words, an essential skill for becoming an independent reader.

Students should be given ample opportunities to apply their phonics skills in connected text rather than isolated drills. Decodable books—texts that include words following phonics patterns students have learned—are a key instructional tool for reinforcing phonics skills in meaningful ways. Research highlights the effectiveness of systematic phonics instruction in preventing and remediating reading difficulties, particularly for students with dyslexia and those at risk for reading failure (Ehri, 2004). Effective phonics instruction is:

- **Explicit:** Directly teaching letter-sound relationships and spelling patterns.
- **Systematic:** Following a carefully planned sequence, moving from simple to complex patterns.
- **Cumulative:** Building upon previously learned skills to support reading fluency.

*"Reading and writing float on a sea of talk."—James Britton (1970)*

### *Oral Language is Linked to Reading Comprehension*

Strong oral language skills are a prerequisite for reading comprehension. The Listening Comprehension Hypothesis (Hogan, Adlof, & Alonzo, 2014) suggests that listening comprehension skills directly influence reading comprehension skills. Before students can understand written text, they must develop the ability to process and understand spoken language. Research shows that classroom discussions improve both reading comprehension and writing skills by helping students process and articulate their ideas (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2016). Oral language and reading comprehension connections:

- Engage students in read-alouds and discussions about a text.
- Provide opportunities for students to explain their thinking.
- Have students retell stories, describe details and events, and make predictions.
- Use sentence stems and discussion prompts. Provide structured support to help students express complex ideas verbally.

## *Fluency: Bridging Word Recognition and Comprehension*

Fluency is the ability to read text accurately, smoothly, and with expression. When students develop fluency, they can focus on understanding what they read instead of struggling to decode each word. According to the What Works Clearinghouse (2016), fluency instruction should be integrated with comprehension strategies, ensuring that students read accurately and with meaning. Fluency is not just about speed. It is about effortless reading that supports comprehension. Developing readers working on fluency often expend so much cognitive effort on decoding that they have little mental energy left for thinking about the meaning of what they read. Fluent reading is built through:

- **Automatic Word Recognition:** Instantly recognizing common words without decoding.
- **Pacing and Accuracy:** Reading at an appropriate speed with minimal errors.
- **Expression (Prosody):** Using tone, pitch, and rhythm to convey meaning.

Evidence-based fluency-building strategies include:

- **Repeated Reading:** Rereading a passage multiple times to improve speed and accuracy.
- **Paired Reading:** Reading aloud with a partner for guided support.
- **Echo Reading:** The teacher reads a passage, and students repeat it with proper phrasing and expression.

## *Sight Word Recognition and Fluency*

While phonics enables students to decode words, some words do not follow regular spelling patterns and must be recognized instantly. High-frequency words, sometimes referred to as sight words, are words that appear frequently in texts and may not be easily sounded out (e.g., "said," "was," "does").

Teaching students to recognize these words automatically improves reading fluency and confidence. Instead of rote memorization, effective instruction integrates morphology (understanding word parts) and contextual practice, ensuring that students internalize word meanings rather than just memorize spellings.

## **Supporting Reading with Multilingual Learners (MLs)**

Multilingual students bring valuable linguistic backgrounds that should be leveraged in reading instruction. Research indicates that incorporating students' home languages into literacy instruction can significantly enhance their English reading skills. Best practices include:

- **Providing Scaffolds:** Sentence frames, visual supports, and bilingual texts are tools that help bridge the gap between students' home languages and English, making content more accessible.
- **Explicitly Teaching Academic Vocabulary:** Strengthens comprehension. Academic vocabulary is crucial for understanding complex texts and engaging in higher-level thinking.
- **Encouraging Home Language Literacy:** Supports stronger English reading skills. Studies

show that literacy skills in a student's first language can be transferred to their second language, aiding in overall reading development.

## Students with Dyslexia and Reading Difficulty

Students with dyslexia and other reading differences benefit from evidence-based, structured literacy instruction that is responsive to their individual needs. Effective support often includes:

- **Explicit Phonics Instruction and Decodable Texts:** Systematic phonics instruction helps students understand the relationships between letters and sounds, building a foundation for decoding words effectively. Decodable texts provide accessible reading materials that align with students' phonics knowledge.
- **Multisensory Learning Approaches:** Engaging visual, auditory, and kinesthetic pathways can strengthen students' ability to connect sounds to symbols and support long-term retention.
- **Systems in place at the Building Level for Progress Monitoring and Targeted Interventions:** Consistent progress monitoring, paired with timely and tailored interventions, ensure that students receive the support they need.

### *Evidence-Based Practices to Support Foundational Skill Development*

#### **Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade:**

- **Phonemic and Phonological Awareness:** Engage students in activities that help them recognize and manipulate sounds in speech. Examples include clapping syllables, identifying rhyming words, segmenting words into individual sounds, and blending sounds to form words.
- **Phonics:** Teach students the relationship between letters and sounds through explicit, systematic, and cumulative instruction. Use decodable books to reinforce phonics skills in meaningful ways.
- **Fluency:** Develop students' ability to read text accurately, smoothly, and with expression. Use strategies like repeated reading, paired reading, and echo reading to build fluency.
- **Word Recognition and Sight Vocabulary:** Help students recognize high-frequency words and understand word parts through word study and contextual practice.

#### **Continuing Foundational Skills Development in Grades 4–6:**

- **Reading Variety:** Provide regular opportunities for students to read different types of texts.
- **World Knowledge:** Help students develop knowledge that is relevant to understanding the passage.
- **Vocabulary Development:** Teach essential words, prefixes, suffixes, and Latin and Greek roots to help students understand word meanings.
- **Fluency:** Teach strategies to decode multisyllabic words and provide practice to read these words accurately and automatically.
- **Answering Questions:** Explicitly teach students how to find and justify answers to different types of questions.
- **Collaborative Discussion:** Provide opportunities for students to discuss and answer

questions together.

- **Self-Questioning:** Teach students to ask themselves questions as they read to check their understanding.
- **Reflection:** Provide opportunities for students to reflect on what they have learned.

## Developing Reading Comprehension

While foundational skills provide the mechanics of reading, comprehension is the goal. Comprehension allows students to not only understand what they read but also engage with it personally by analyzing ideas, questioning perspectives, and forming one's own conclusions.

Reading comprehension is an active process that requires students to engage with the text in multiple ways. It involves several key strategies and skills:

- **Making Connections Between the Text and Their Own Knowledge:** Students should relate the content they read to their personal experiences, prior knowledge, and other texts they have encountered. This helps them build a deeper understanding and makes the reading more meaningful.
- **Asking Questions About What They Are Reading:** Encouraging students to ask questions before, during, and after reading helps them stay engaged and think critically about the text. Questions can be about the content, the author's intentions, or the implications of the text.
- **Visualizing, Imagining, or Engaging the Senses to Understand Characters, Settings, and Events:** Visualization techniques, such as creating mental images or drawing scenes from the text, can enhance comprehension by making the reading experience more vivid and memorable.
- **Summarizing and Synthesizing Key Details from the Text:** Summarization involves distilling the main ideas and important details from a text, while synthesis requires combining information from multiple sources to form a coherent understanding. Both skills are essential for effective comprehension.
- **Inferring Meaning Beyond What is Explicitly Stated:** Inference involves reading between the lines to understand the underlying messages, themes, and implications of the text. This skill helps students grasp the deeper meanings and nuances of the reading material.
- **Critically Evaluating Arguments and Perspectives:** Students should analyze the validity and strength of the arguments presented in the text, considering different viewpoints and assessing the evidence provided. This critical thinking skill is crucial for developing informed opinions and making reasoned judgments.
- **Analyzing Syntax and Semantics:** Understanding the structure and meaning of sentences (syntax) and the meanings of words and phrases (semantics) is vital for decoding complex texts and grasping their full significance. This involves recognizing grammatical patterns, word relationships, and contextual meanings.

Effective comprehension instruction includes the direct teaching of these strategies, as well as discussion-based learning where students engage in conversations about texts, deepening their understanding through peer interaction. Research highlights the importance of exposing students

to challenging literature, nonfiction, engaging fiction, and academic texts that expand their thinking and prepare them for higher-level literacy demands.

### *Evidence-Based Practices for Improving Reading Comprehension*

- **Teach Reading Comprehension Strategies:** Introduce and model strategies like predicting, questioning, visualizing, summarizing, and making connections. Encourage students to use these strategies independently and during guided reading sessions.
- **Identify and Use Text’s Organizational Structure:** Help students recognize different text structures (e.g., cause and effect, compare-and-contrast, sequence) and use graphic organizers to map out information.
- **Guide Focused Discussions:** Develop questions that require deep thinking about the text. Encourage follow-up questions and structured, small-group discussions to promote critical thinking and deeper comprehension.
- **Select Texts Purposefully:** Choose high-quality texts that are rich in ideas and information. Include multiple genres and ensure that texts are appropriate for students’ reading abilities and instructional activities.
- **Include Syntactic Awareness:** Teach students about the arrangement of words and phrases to create well-formed sentences. Understanding syntax helps readers comprehend sentence structure and meaning.

# SECTION EIGHT: RESEARCH, MEDIA LITERACY, AND DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

## Media Literacy and Digital Citizenship Included in Literacy Development

In today's information-rich world, developing strong research, media literacy, and digital citizenship skills is essential for preparing students to think critically, ask questions, and engage responsibly with the media messages and digital forums that surround them. With the 2026 revision to the WA State ELA Learning Standards, a new domain of Research and Media Literacy has been added. This addition acknowledges the growing importance of helping students navigate, analyze, and contribute to multimodal information environments. In addition, some aspects of digital citizenship have been woven into both the Writing domain and the Speaking, Listening, and Digital Forums domain. These definitions highlight the importance of fostering these skills in students to prepare them for the complex information landscape they will encounter.

- **Research:** Research involves asking questions about things that make students curious, seeking answers from a variety of information sources, and reflecting on what they find. It includes both formal activities and spontaneous inquiry, encouraging students to nurture their curiosity and develop analytical skills.
- **Media Literacy:** Media literacy is the ability to think critically and make informed decisions when creating, consuming, or engaging with media messages conveyed via various forms of communication. It supports the development of critical thinking by teaching students to evaluate the credibility, purpose, and impact of media messages.
- **Digital Citizenship:** Digital citizenship involves engaging ethically and responsibly in digital spaces. It includes understanding the responsibilities that come with contributing to digital conversations, presenting oneself online in empowering ways, and recognizing the permanence of online posts as part of one's digital footprint.

## Critical Thinking in a Multimodal Landscape

Washington state embraces a multimodal view of literacy, recognizing that reading and writing is not confined to printed words on a page (National Council of Teachers of English, 2019). Students encounter information through images, audio, video, and other mediums, in digital and non-digital formats. As early as kindergarten, students begin to make sense of the world through diverse formats. As they progress through the grades, they develop the skills needed to ask questions, verify information, evaluate sources, and synthesize knowledge across formats. These skills are essential components of research and media literacy.

*"It's all about inquiry and so that means learning to ask relevant questions and knowing how to find credible answers."—Faith Rogow*

## *Research as Inquiry*

Students benefit from being encouraged to nurture their curiosity. Elementary students engage in formal research activities that include asking questions about things that make them curious, seeking answers from a variety of information sources, and reflecting on what they find. Students also engage in inquiry in less structured, more spontaneous ways. Questions can arise in many contexts, leading to a similar process of seeking answers.

In grades K–2, students can learn about the many different types of information sources available to them and how to access them, as well as observe when adults model how to use digital search tools such as internet search engines. In grades 3–6, students expand their capacity by collaborating on ideas for where they might find the information they need and by using digital search tools independently. As part of the research process, students also learn how to cite sources appropriately, respect intellectual property, and avoid plagiarism.

These practices connect directly to the development of reading comprehension and writing (National Council of Teachers of English, 2021). When students conduct research and reflect on what they have learned, they strengthen their analytical skills and grow as independent thinkers.

## *Connections Between Research and Media Literacy*

While conducting research or engaging in other inquiry activities, students are also engaging in media literacy. Media literacy can be defined as the ability to think critically and make informed decisions when creating (e.g., writing, recording), consuming (e.g., reading, viewing), or otherwise engaging with (e.g., liking, sharing) media messages conveyed via various forms of communication.

Media literacy skills are needed in the context of research, but they are also needed in other contexts. Research is all about intentionally seeking out information (Lagarde, 2021). Media literacy skills are also employed when students encounter the many media messages they are exposed to, whether they are seeking them out intentionally or not.

## *Building Foundations for Media Literacy in Elementary Grades*

Media literacy supports the development of critical thinking by teaching students to evaluate the credibility, purpose, and impact of media messages. According to media literacy educator Faith Rogow, media literacy is not just about protecting children from the media but empowering them to actively and responsibly participate in society. When students learn to analyze media, they gain the ability to recognize bias, misinformation, and persuasive intent—essential skills for democratic participation and lifelong learning.

Students in earlier grades may not be ready for some of these more complex skills. It can be challenging to recognize misinformation at a young age, but they can begin to build foundations for these skills early on. Beginning in the primary grades, students can engage in age-appropriate media analysis by asking questions such as:

- Was this media message created to entertain me or to make me want to buy something?
- What techniques are being used to attract my attention or influence my beliefs?
- Since media messages are created by real people, who created this one?
- What choices did they make about what to include or exclude?
- What makes someone an expert on a topic?
- Is what I am seeing in this media message pretend or real?
- What is this image trying to tell me? Could it have been altered in some way to convey a different meaning?

### *Advancing Media Literacy Skills*

These questions build the foundation for more advanced inquiry in later grades, where students are expected to apply media literacy skills to more complex texts and media formats. These foundational skills for which younger students are building include:

- Determining the intended purpose behind a media message and recognizing the techniques used to achieve this purpose.
- Detecting emotionally charged language that is intended to provoke a reaction or sway opinions.
- Determining who is responsible for a media message and then evaluating their credibility, including their reputation for conveying information fairly and accurately.
- Verify the accuracy of statements that can be verified as true or false by consulting other reliable sources and using reputable fact-checking websites.
- Analyzing visual or audio components of media messages, with an understanding that they might have been digitally altered, changing how the message is conveyed.
- Evaluating claims based on the soundness of their reasoning and how well they are supported by evidence.
- Tracing information back to its original source to determine if it has been taken out of context.
- Determining when a media message has been created by someone with a particular viewpoint on a topic.
- Distinguishing between perspectives, which everyone has, and perspectives that have been distorted by bias, which can lead to misinterpretations and misrepresentations.
- Understanding that there is a spectrum of biased perspectives that might show up in media messages, ranging from subtle to extreme.

Developing media literacy skills empowers students to approach digital and print texts with a critical eye. In addition, teaching students' media literacy skills is essential in preventing the spread of misinformation. Through structured practice, students can learn to engage with media messages more thoughtfully, questioning rather than passively accepting the information they encounter.

### *Students as Active Participants in the Media Landscape*

Another essential component of media literacy that students begin to build foundations for in elementary grades is the understanding that they are not just passive consumers of media messages. They are active participants in an information ecosystem in which their actions have

consequences. Every time they “like” or share a post or video, they are helping that message to spread. Media messages can have an impact on our beliefs, choices, and actions. That is why it is important for students to be aware of how their personal perspectives and emotional responses to media messages can affect their reactions. In the earlier grades, students ask questions such as:

- How does this media message make me feel? What do those emotions make me want to say or do?
- How might others interpret this media message differently?
- What leads people to change their minds about what they believe?
- Do I want lots of other people to see this media message?

By strengthening their media literacy skills, students can become more responsible consumers of information. In secondary grades, when students are developing, they can use these foundations to develop more complex skills such as:

- Developing healthy skepticism by asking questions.
- Reflecting on how open they are to considering new ideas or perspectives.
- Understanding there are different ways of determining what’s true and different contexts in which they are applied.

### *Ethical Participation in a Digital World*

Students must learn how to engage ethically and responsibly in digital spaces. Many of today’s conversations happen online, whether in discussion forums, social media platforms, online games, or collaborative digital workspaces. In an era where anyone can publish their thoughts online, students must understand the responsibilities that come with contributing to these digital conversations. Students in earlier grades can ask questions such as:

- How can I help other people feel included in this digital forum?
- How can I present myself in this game in ways that show who I am or want to be?
- Which audiences do I want to be able to see this post? Could it be seen by any unintended audience?

When students understand the impact of their words and creations, they begin to see themselves as contributors to a shared information ecosystem. Younger students can build foundations that will help them to later develop digital citizenship skills such as:

- Engaging in civil discourse in online communities.
- Presenting themselves online in ways that are empowering and help them achieve their goals.
- Understanding that everything they post online is permanent and part of their digital footprint.

Another component of media creation is the ethical use of other people’s creative work, such as digital images, videos, or audio recordings. Younger students can begin to understand when it is acceptable to use other people’s work and when it is not fair to use their work without asking

permission or giving them credit. As students progress through grades, they can also begin to understand concepts such as copyright (a legal term for the rights that creators have over their original creative works). When students are aware of these considerations, they develop a deeper appreciation for the impact of their own media contributions.

### *Students as Media Creators*

Students today are consumers of information, and they are also creators and contributors. Educators can facilitate experiences that encourages students to engage in multimodal composition—combining text, images, video, and interactive elements (National Council of Teachers of English, 2022). This approach prepares them for the modern communication landscape. Projects that involve producing digital content not only strengthen technical skills but also reinforce the importance of creating thoughtful, accurate, and meaningful media. Whether students are making a slideshow, writing a social media post, or recording a podcast, they benefit from applying the same media literacy skills they apply to the content they consume. This is just as true in earlier grades, where students can ask questions such as:

- Who am I making this video for? How might they feel when they see it?
- Am I writing this story to express my creativity and imagination? Or am I trying to tell what really happened?
- Is the information I am putting into my presentation accurate?
- How could I change this picture, so it conveys a different meaning?

# SECTION NINE: STANDARDS, PLANNING, AND CONTENT INTEGRATION

The WA ELA standards (2026) are organized into the following five domains: Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening and Digital Forums, Language, Research and Media Literacy. These domains reflect the broad range of skills students need to be literate in the modern world. They encompass not only foundational and academic literacy but also the ability to engage critically with digital content, conduct research, and communicate across platforms.

These standards support literacy development across all stages of learning, ensuring a coherent progression from foundational skills to advanced competencies. However, standards alone do not drive students to success. It is through intentional instructional planning and the integration of rich, interdisciplinary content that these standards come to life in the classroom. By designing purposeful literacy experiences that connect to real-world content and student interests, educators create meaningful opportunities for students to read, write, think, and communicate across subjects.

The WA ELA standards (2026) are not isolated benchmarks. They are deeply connected to academic thinking, language development, and cultural understanding. When used as part of a responsive and integrated instructional system, they provide a strong framework for equitable, rigorous, and engaging literacy instruction.

## Learning Standards as the Foundation

Learning standards provide the foundation for strong instructional systems. They define what students should know and be able to do at each grade level, supporting consistent expectations while allowing flexibility to meet diverse learning needs (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

High-quality literacy standards are built on the most current research on reading, writing, oral language, and media literacy. They reflect the understanding that literacy is a developmental journey, requiring purposeful instruction in foundational skills, language comprehension, critical thinking, and digital literacy. When implemented thoughtfully, the standards support equitable access to rigorous, grade-level instruction for all students. High-quality standards help educators:

- Define clear learning targets across grade levels.
- Align instructional goals to measurable student outcomes.
- Identify appropriate scaffolds to meet the needs of all learners, including MLs, students with disabilities, and students receiving tiered support.

## Standards-Based Assessment in the Early Literacy Classroom

Understanding standards-based grading helps elementary literacy teachers focus instruction on clear, measurable learning goals aligned with literacy standards. It allows teachers to track student

progress more accurately and adjust instruction to meet individual needs. This approach also improves communication with families by clearly showing what students are learning and how they are progressing.

Standards-based assessment evaluates student learning in relation to specific standards, rather than comparing students to one another. This approach ensures that assessments are aligned with clearly defined learning goals, allowing educators to determine whether students are proficient at their grade level in key skills and content. Studies show standards-based teaching practices correlate to higher academic achievement (Craig, 2011; Schoen et al., 2003). Standards-based assessment can support more effective planning for interventions and enrichment in the classroom. By aligning instruction with learning standards, teachers can identify specific areas where students need support and adjust their teaching accordingly. This targeted approach is especially beneficial in early literacy, where foundational skills are built upon one another and early intervention can have a lasting impact.

For early learners in particular, standards-based assessment is developmentally appropriate. Young children often struggle to interpret abstract numerical grades, but they can understand concrete feedback like “You can identify the first sound in this word” or “You read that with so much expression in your voice.” This kind of feedback is more intuitive and helps children connect their efforts to specific learning outcomes.

## Standards-Based Grading and Reporting for Early Literacy

Standards-based grading and reporting provides greater clarity and transparency on student learning to students, families, and educators through systems like report cards or progress reports. Standards-based grading and reporting allows educators to gather evidence of student learning over time. Standards-based assessment and reporting seek to separate academic achievement from non-academic factors like behavior, participation, and/or attendance so that grades reflect what students have learned. Educators, through formats such as report cards, conferences, or progress reports, may summarize and communicate how well students have learned specific literacy skills. For example, a percentage like 85% in ELA does not show which specific skills a student is proficient in or where support is needed. In standards-based assessment, each standard is listed and assessed individually, then paired with a descriptor of student achievement, such as “approaching standard” or “meeting standard,” to indicate the student’s level of proficiency for that skill. Standards-Based Grading Overview:

- **Focus:** Measures student progress toward specific learning standards.
- **What it Measures:** Separates academic achievement from behavior and effort.
- **Feedback:** Detailed and skill-specific, helping students and families understand specific strengths and areas for growth.
- **Timing:** Ongoing and formative, with multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery.
- **Student Understanding:** Encourages student ownership of learning by making goals and progress transparent.

Below are best practices for implementing standards-based assessment in early literacy designed to support young learners and guide effective planning and instruction:

1. **Align Assessments with Developmentally Appropriate Standards:** Use learning standards for assessment alignment.
2. **Use Multiple Measures:** Combine varied types of records and student work samples. Include authentic assessments like storytelling, drawing, or retelling to capture a fuller picture of literacy development in addition to scoring progress monitoring and benchmark measures.
3. **Embed Assessment in Daily Instruction:** Integrate assessment into play-based and literacy-rich activities (e.g., shared reading, guided writing). Use anecdotal notes and learning stories during centers or read-alouds to document progress.
4. **Focus on Formative Feedback:** Provide immediate, specific, and encouraging feedback to guide learning. Use assessment data to adjust instruction in real time, such as reteaching letter sounds or modeling vocabulary use.
5. **Involve Students in the Process:** Use visual rubrics or learning targets in learner-friendly language (e.g., "I can find the first sound in a word"). Encourage self-assessment through simple tools like thumbs up/down or smiley face charts.
6. **Ensure Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness:** Adapt assessments to reflect students' home languages and cultural backgrounds.
7. **Use Technology Thoughtfully:** Digital tools can streamline data collection and provide visual progress tracking. Ensure screen time is purposeful and developmentally appropriate.
8. **Collaborate With Families:** Share assessment results in clear, jargon-free language. Provide home literacy activities aligned with assessment findings to support learning outside the classroom.
9. **Maintain Consistent Documentation:** Use portfolios or digital folders to track student growth over time. Regularly review data to identify trends, gaps, and next steps.
10. **Prioritize Equity and Access:** Ensure assessments are accessible to all learners, including those with disabilities or language differences. Avoid high-stakes pressure; focus on growth and development rather than comparison.

## Intentional Instructional Planning for All Learners

In planning, learning standards are not checklists of topics to cover. They are guideposts that help educators design intentional, engaging, and developmentally appropriate experiences that support students' academic and personal growth. Strong planning begins by unpacking standards (breaking them into clear, teachable concepts) and using them to curate lessons that integrate reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills across content areas.

Strong instructional planning is essential to ensure that all students can access and engage with the ELA standards. Strong instructional planning ensures that standards are addressed systematically and developmentally across the year. Educators can intentionally design instructions that:

- Aligns with learning standards.
- Builds on students' strengths and prior knowledge.
- Incorporates UDL to address learner variability.
- Clarifies desired learning outcomes before planning instruction and assessment.
- Includes formative assessments to inform daily instruction with ongoing observation and

- data collection to adjust supports and accelerate learning.
- Differentiates support for students based on need and context.
- Incorporates intentional strategies for MLs, students with disabilities, and students developing foundational skills.

## *Universal Design for Learning (UDL)*

UDL principles emphasize the need for multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement, ensuring that all students can participate meaningfully in literacy learning. Teachers who apply UDL principles in their planning create environments that are proactive and responsive, allowing each student to demonstrate their learning in ways that align with their strengths.

Effective instructional planning is where standards become meaningful classroom practice. When educators plan using UDL principles, they create more equitable environments that anticipate student differences and remove barriers to learning before they arise. Rather than retrofitting accommodations, UDL encourages teachers to design with learner diversity in mind from the beginning. Instructional planning that reflects UDL principles supports:

- Differentiation of content, process, product, and environment based on student readiness, interest, and learning profile.
- Integration of multimodal texts and culturally responsive pedagogy that reflect students' languages and lived experiences.
- Intentional use of formative assessment to adjust instruction in real time.
- Embedded support for students with IEPs, MLs, and those receiving tiered interventions.

## **Core Principles of UDL**

To ensure accessibility and inclusivity, using the UDL framework is essential. UDL encourages the creation of assessments that offer multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression, allowing all students to demonstrate their knowledge in ways that work best for them (CAST, 2020).

The core principles of UDL are based on the idea that all students learn in different ways, and instruction should be designed to accommodate this variability from the start. The UDL framework involves intentionally planning for learner variability from the outset, rather than retrofitting accommodations after the fact. These principles work together to reduce barriers to learning and ensure that all students have equitable access to instruction and assessment. These core principles, each with specific guidelines that help educators create inclusive and flexible learning environments (CAST, 2020).

## **Multiple Means of Engagement (The “Why” of Learning)**

Focuses on motivation and participation by offering options that tap into students' interests and support emotional investment in learning.

- Provide options-based interest (e.g., offering choices in topics or activities).
- Sustain effort and persistence (e.g., setting goals, providing feedback).
- Support self-regulation (e.g., helping students manage emotions and motivation).

## Multiple Means of Action and Expression (The “How” of Learning)

Encourages flexibility in how students demonstrate what they know using methods that suit their interests, strengths, and preferences.

- Provide options for physical action (e.g., using assistive technology or manipulatives).
- Provide options for expression and communication (e.g., oral, written, visual responses).
- Provide options for executive functions (e.g., goal setting, planning, and reflection).

Below are examples intended to illustrate how UDL principles—multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression—can be embedded into early literacy assessments to create inclusive, developmentally appropriate experiences that honor the diverse ways young children learn and communicate.

### *Example 1: Letter-Sound Identification with Flexible Engagement*

**Purpose:** Assess students’ ability to recognize letters and produce corresponding sounds.

**UDL in Action:** Students use a digital or physical alphabet chart and choose how to engage:

- Say the sound of a selected letter.
- Match letters to pictures or objects.
- Sing or chant letter–sound songs with visual cues.
- Use magnetic letters or tactile materials to build and say simple words.

### *Example 2: Story Retelling with Multiple Means of Expression*

**Purpose:** Practice comprehension strategies of sequencing using oral language.

**UDL in Action:** After a shared reading, students choose how to retell the story:

- Draw scenes and explain them.
- Act it out with puppets or props.
- Record an oral or video retelling.
- Use a visual storyboard to sequence and describe events.

These flexible formats allow students to demonstrate understanding in ways that align with their strengths, whether verbal, visual, or kinesthetic.

## Cross-Disciplinary Content Integration

Content integration is not simply a matter of covering multiple subjects at once, rather it is a deliberate, research-supported practice that deepens student understanding, engagement, and literacy development across disciplines. Integrating literacy with content learning creates authentic opportunities for students to use reading, writing, speaking, and listening as tools for inquiry, problem-solving, and meaning making (Cervetti & Hiebert, 2015).

Literacy is a shared responsibility across all subjects. Integrated content-area instruction strengthens students' ability to transfer literacy skills into new contexts. Embedding reading, writing, speaking, and listening opportunities in science, social studies, physical education, the arts, and mathematics promotes deeper understanding, stronger vocabulary development, and more purposeful application of literacy strategies. Content integration helps students:

- Build background knowledge that supports reading comprehension.
- Apply reading and writing strategies in authentic contexts.
- Engage in inquiry and problem-solving across disciplines.
- Strengthen academic vocabulary in context.

Literacy is not confined to the language arts block; it is the vehicle through which students access and express learning across all content areas. Content integration ensures that students encounter meaningful reading, writing, and discussion opportunities in science, social studies, the arts, and other disciplines. When students engage in research in social studies, write about scientific discoveries, or discuss visual elements in media and art, they practice critical literacy skills in meaningful contexts. Content integration also reinforces equity by ensuring students see their cultures, languages, and lived experiences represented across disciplines.

### *Braiding Standards Across Content Areas: Intentional Planning for Integrated Literacy*

Intentional planning begins with a deep understanding of the ELA standards and how they can be woven into learning experiences across the school day—not just during reading and writing blocks. The revised WA State ELA Standards (2026) provide a flexible structure that supports integration across subjects such as science, social studies, the arts, and health. When braided thoughtfully, these standards help students develop literacy skills in meaningful, authentic ways. Integration with other content areas capitalizes on student interest, background knowledge and shared experiences in areas such as science, social studies, mathematics, and the arts. By incorporating this outlook on integration, educators enrich the learning beyond isolated literacy skills and concepts to a collaborative approach. This approach also provides opportunities for peer learning, writing and investigation, where students can share insights and perspectives, enriching the overall learning experience. Educators use the standards to braid instruction by:

- **Identifying Common Literacy Practices:** Across disciplines, such as analyzing informational texts, constructing arguments, conducting research, and engaging in collaborative discussions.
- **Selecting High-interest, Content-rich Texts:** (e.g., science articles, historical documents, biographies) that align to both ELA standards and content area learning goals.
- **Designing Interdisciplinary Units:** Where students read, write, speak, and listen in ways that deepen both content and discipline specific understanding and literacy development.
- **Aligning Formative Assessment Practices:** To ELA and content standards simultaneously, gathering evidence of students' ability to comprehend complex texts, explain their thinking, and use academic language appropriately.

## *Why Content Integration/Multidisciplinary Learning Matters*

Content integration ensures that students' learning experiences are relevant, rigorous, and equitable. By braiding standards, planning interdisciplinary tasks, and embedding literacy across subjects, educators empower students to grow as readers, writers, thinkers, and communicators prepared for real-world complexity.

Without content integration, literacy instruction risks becoming decontextualized or focused on disconnected skill practice rather than meaning making. By weaving literacy and content together, educators offer students opportunities to engage deeply, think critically, and communicate authentically about the world. When educators use the standards as an anchor and planning intentionally with content integration in mind, they create rich, inclusive, and engaging learning environments where students develop literacy as a tool for understanding and communicating with the world.

### *Example: Third-Grade Integrated Unit—Literacy and Science*

In a third-grade classroom, students engage in an integrated unit titled *Surviving in Different Habitats*, which deepens their understanding of animal adaptations while strengthening literacy skills.

#### **Discipline Specific Practices:**

1. **ELA: Comprehending and Interpreting Texts:** Students comprehend and interpret texts using a variety of strategies.
2. **ELA: Plan and Generate Ideas:** Students plan and complete writing projects.
3. **Science: Life Science:** Explain how environmental factors influence organisms and drive adaptations of physical traits.

#### **Student Activities:**

- **Build Knowledge:** Read content-rich texts to learn about different habitats and adaptations.
- **Research An Animal:** Investigate an animal of choice using books, websites, and videos to make observations about the physical traits of the animal, then hypothesize how the physical traits help the animal survive in their habitat.
- **Write to Explain:** Compose an explanatory essay using evidence collected from supporting texts.
- **Present Learning:** Share findings through oral presentations or multimodal projects (e.g., posters, slideshows, videos).

In this example unit, literacy is woven into the inquiry process, not taught in isolation. Students use reading, writing, and communication as tools to practice and explore scientific concepts. This integration supports deeper comprehension, strengthens academic vocabulary, and promotes engagement through authentic, cross-disciplinary learning.

## *Evidence-Based Practices That Support Content Integration*

Evidence-based practices from the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) that directly support content integration as students learn academic content while simultaneously building literacy skills:

- **Teach Academic Vocabulary Intensively over Several Days:** Focus on structured teaching of key words and terms, using multiple contexts and modalities.
- **Integrate Oral and Written English into Content-area Teaching:** Embed language instruction (speaking, reading, writing) naturally within math, science, social studies lessons. Use visuals and scaffolded discourse to support understanding.
- **Provide Regular, Structured Opportunities for Written Language Development:** Use content-based writing tasks (e.g., explanations, summaries), supported with models, graphic organizers, and peer or teacher feedback.
- **Daily Connected Text Reading:** Ensure students read authentic, content-linked texts to support fluency and comprehension development.

## **Structures for Effective Planning in Professional Learning Communities (PLC/PLC+)**

Professional Learning Communities (PLC) and PLC+ directly support educational equity by ensuring all students—regardless of identity, language, or learning needs—receive high-quality, standards-based, and responsive instruction. In this work, equity is not an afterthought; it is a central focus. Within PLCs, educators engage in inquiry around access, opportunity, and outcomes by asking:

- *Are all students being challenged appropriately?*
- *Are instructional materials culturally relevant?*
- *Are we unintentionally lowering expectations for some?*

These questions, coupled with the structured questions of the PLC and PLC+ models, serve as stating points in a continuous cycle of effective planning and instruction.

### **Establishing Clarity and Focus:**

- ***“What do we want all students to know and be able to do?”*** (PLC)
- ***“Where are we going?”*** (PLC+)

The starting questions for PLCs guide teams to unpack foundational ELA learning standards such as phonemic awareness and early comprehension skills—and set clear, developmentally appropriate goals to plan units. During the planning phase, teachers collaboratively unpack ELA standards to design coherent units and lessons. For example, a third-grade team might co-develop a unit on writing, aligning objectives with learning standards and integrating mentor texts. Teachers align these goals with student-friendly learning targets and ensure that instruction is inclusive and culturally responsive.

### **Identifying and Describe Student Success:**

- ***“How will we know if each student has learned it?”*** (PLC)
- ***“Where are we now?”*** (PLC+)

As teaching and learning progress in the unit, PLC teams meet to address the second set of questions to support student learning and assess progress towards goals. Teachers bring data to PLC meetings to analyze trends and identify which students are meeting learning targets and which are not. This data can include common formative assessments or writing samples. Teachers might co-create rubrics for writing tasks or use common reading comprehension checks to inform instructional next steps.

### **Supporting Each Learner:**

- ***“What will we do if they haven’t learned it?”*** (PLC)
- ***“What will we do if they already know it?”*** (PLC)
- ***“How do we move learning forward?”*** (PLC+)

The questions of this phase position literacy teams anticipate barriers in learning, and collaborate to design targeted interventions, such as small-group instruction, multisensory activities, or other additional supports. Teachers also reflect on their own instructional practices and biases, ensuring that interventions are equitable and effective. For students who demonstrate proficiency, teachers also collaborate to design enrichment opportunities like more self-selected reading, writing extensions, or peer support.

### **Assessing the Impact and Efforts:**

- ***“Who benefited and who did not—and why?”*** (PLC+)

The analysis of student learning data presented earlier in the PLC cycle is deepened through the PLC+ lens by asking this next question. For example, if MLs are not progressing in *word-sound recognition*, the team might examine whether instruction is linguistically accessible and whether materials reflect students’ cultural backgrounds.

### **Pause and Reflect:**

- ***“What did we learn today?”*** (PLC+)

PLC+ adds a layer of professional inquiry, prompting teachers to reflect on their impact and how they can grow as learners themselves by asking the final question. This learning may include reflecting on student progress, refined instructional strategies, and growth in team collaboration. At the conclusion of a unit or instructional cycle with students, both PLC models encourage teachers to view themselves as learners, continuously refining their practice to better serve all students. To do so, teachers may engage in reflective dialogue, using protocols like “Looking at Student Work” or “Tuning Protocols,” to grow their practice and try out different instructional approaches in upcoming units.

## *Best Practices for Early Literacy in PLC and PLC+*

- **Anchor Instruction in Early Literacy Standards.**
  - Focus on foundational skills: phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.
  - Align learning targets and assessments to grade-level expectations.
- **Use Data to Drive Instruction and Equity.**
  - Collect and analyze formative data.
  - Identify patterns across classrooms and student groups.
  - Ask equity-focused questions to uncover disparities.
- **Design Responsive Interventions and Enrichment.**
  - Provide small-group or one-on-one support for students below the benchmark.
  - Offer advanced tasks for students who demonstrate early mastery.
  - Use culturally and linguistically responsive strategies.
- **Engage in Reflective, Collaborative Practice.**
  - Use protocols to examine student work and teaching practices.
  - Reflect on what worked, what did not, and why.
  - Set team and individual goals for continuous improvement.
- **Foster a Culture of Shared Responsibility**
  - Celebrate student growth and teacher learning.
  - Ensure all voices are heard in planning and reflection.
  - Commit to high expectations for every learner.

# SECTION TEN: ASSESSMENT IN ELEMENTARY LITERACY

## Why Assessment Matters

### The Importance of Elementary Literacy Assessments

Literacy is foundational to all learning. In the elementary years, assessments help identify strengths, monitor development, and guide instruction. The Latin root of assessment, *assidere*, means “to sit beside” (Wilson, 2008). This image evokes trust, relationship, and reciprocity. This speaks to the relationship, trust, and support that effective assessment fosters. Educators are uniquely positioned to sit beside students understand:

- Student strengths and areas for growth.
- Students’ interests and identities.
- Experiences with language and literacy development.

### What is a Balanced Assessment System?

A balanced assessment system is a comprehensive approach to understanding student learning. It includes a range of tools and methods used at different levels of the educational system to gather, interpret, and use information about student literacy development. It includes assessment at the classroom, school/district, and state levels. When assessments work together in a balanced way, they can be used to inform instruction, evaluate programs, and provide feedback to students, families, educators, and policy makers. Effective assessment practices help educators ask important questions:

- What do these students know and what can they do?
- How are they using literacy to make sense of the world?
- What strengths and experiences do they bring to learning?
- How can instruction build on these assets and meet their needs?

A balanced assessment system can contribute to all students having access to high-quality instruction and early literacy success. In classrooms, schools, and districts, collecting a constellation of assessment data can guide decisions so that every student has equitable access to high-quality instruction and early literacy success.

- **Assessment** is the ongoing process of gathering information about student learning. It includes many forms including observations, conversations, writing samples, projects, tests, and reflections.
- **Benchmark Assessments** are periodic checks aligned to grade-level standards. They identify trends and support instructional planning.
- **Progress Monitoring** tracks student growth in specific skills over time, especially for students receiving interventions.

- **Grading** is the act of assigning a value to student performance. This may take the form of scores, letters, or proficiency levels. Grading summarizes performance but does not always provide detailed feedback about specific strengths or areas for growth.
- **Reporting** is the communication of data and grading results to students, families, educators, and education systems. It includes tools such as report cards, family conferences, data dashboards, or statewide reporting. Communication helps ensure understanding and action at the classroom, school, and system levels.

## The Assessment Process

### Overview of Assessment Levels

Understanding the different types of assessment used at different levels of a balanced assessment system—classroom, school, district, and state—is essential for creating a coherent and effective educational system. Assessment at each level serves unique purposes, operates on different scales, and relies on different methods. Collectively, they are interconnected in supporting student learning and school improvement.

### What Tool Should I Use? Matching the Tool to the Task

Assessment can take many forms, but not all assessments are meant to do the same job. Just as a carpenter would not use a paintbrush to hammer a nail, it is important for educators to select the right assessment tool for the task at hand. When assessment tools are used outside their intended purpose, they can produce confusion or cause ineffective instructional choices. Effective assessment begins with clarity about purpose, which informs educators to select the right assessment tools and apply them in ways that support learning.

To choose the most appropriate assessment tool, educators must begin by identifying the question they want to answer about student learning and the type of evidence that will best inform that answer. With that clarity, they can then select a tool that is purposefully designed to collect the needed data. By thoughtfully selecting tools that align with their intended purpose, educators can gather meaningful insights, tailor instruction, and support stronger literacy outcomes. It is essential to understand that assessment is not a single event but an ongoing process of inquiry. This cycle includes:

- **Asking Questions:** *What do we want to know about student learning?*
- **Gathering Evidence:** *What observations, conversations, student work, or data will help us explore this question?*
- **Applying Evaluative Lenses:** *How will we make sense of what we are seeing?*
- **Using Results:** *What actions will we take based on what we have learned?*

When educators know the answers to these questions, and where they are in the assessment cycle, the purpose of assessment is clear. In an early literacy context, effectively matching assessment purposes with the appropriate tools is essential for supporting young learners' development. Ensuring that the purpose of assessment is clearly defined and matched with the right tool is necessary to creating a responsive, supportive, and equitable early literacy environment (Haugen &

Smartt, 2012). Each level and type of assessment serves a distinct role and requires tools that align with its specific goals. When assessment purposes and tools are not properly aligned in early literacy, the consequences can significantly hinder both teaching effectiveness and student learning.

**Table 2: Overview of Assessment Levels and Types**

Assessment Level & Type	Description	Purpose/Examples
Classroom-Based (General)	Part of daily instruction; provides immediate insights.	<p><b>Purpose:</b> Support responsive teaching, provide real-time feedback, understand day-to-day learning.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b> samples, observations, student reflections, anecdotal, class conversations.</p>
Classroom-Based (Formative)	Uses instruction to guide teaching and provide feedback; clarify learning goals and success criteria.	<p><b>Purpose:</b> Monitor understanding, adjust instruction, engage students.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b> conversations, exit tickets, peer/self-assessments, rough draft conferences, think-pair-share activities.</p>
Classroom-Based (Summative)	Measures achievement at the end of a learning cycle; measures mastery of grade level content standards.	<p><b>Purpose:</b> Measure proficiency, evaluate instruction, communicate progress.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b> End-of-unit tests, evaluation of final writing pieces, performance assessment, district benchmarks, report card assessments.</p>
School & District (General)	Provides a broader view across classrooms and grade levels; identifies students' eligibility for school- and district-wide services, programs, and interventions.	<p><b>Purpose:</b> Identify support needs, assess instruction system-wide, understand how instruction is working across classrooms.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b> Common district benchmarks, universal literacy</p>

Assessment Level & Type	Description	Purpose/Examples
		screeners, interim assessments, school-level data reviews; MTSS assessments.
School & District (Diagnostic)	Identifies specific learning strengths and needs in a focal skill area.	<p><b>Purpose:</b> Pinpoint specific skill gaps, support targeted instruction or intervention planning.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b> Phonemic awareness screeners, decoding inventories, language assessments.</p>
School & District (Interim & Benchmark)	Administered several times throughout the school year to identify progress within a content domain or targeted set of state standards. Often aligned with pacing guides, curriculum maps, or district goals.	<p><b>Purpose:</b> Monitor progress, identify trends, inform instructional adjustments.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b> Quarterly reading/writing assessments, district-developed performance tasks, Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBA) interims.</p>
School & District (Progress Monitoring)	Tracks student growth in specific skills over time.	<p><b>Purpose:</b> Track the effectiveness of interventions and programs.</p>
Statewide	Administered across Washington to assess alignment with state standards.	<p><b>Purpose:</b> Evaluate state-level learning trends, ensure accountability, inform funding and policy.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b> Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBA), Washington Access to Instruction and Measurement (WA-AIM), WIDA ACCESS, WA KIDS.</p>

## Assessment Within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

**MTSS is a proactive, preventative, data-driven approach to ensuring that every student receives the appropriate level of instruction and intervention.** Literacy assessments are

foundational to making that system work effectively. Within the MTSS framework, school-based literacy assessment plays a critical role in identifying student needs, guiding instruction, and monitoring progress across all levels of support. In MTSS, assessment ensures that instruction meets the needs of all students.

- At **Tier 1 (Core Instruction)**, universal screening assesses all students and evaluates core instruction.
- At **Tier 2 (Core + additional support)**, more targeted assessments are used to identify specific skill gaps and help educators design small-group interventions. Progress monitoring assessments are used frequently to track student response to intervention and determine whether adjustments are needed.
- At **Tier 3 (Core + additional support + intensive support)**, individualized assessments to inform intensive, often one-on-one, interventions. Students do not need IEP or a formal medical diagnosis of any kind to receive intensive literacy support from their school.

In accordance with [RCW 28A.320.260](#), LEAs must use MTSS consistent with OSPI’s recommendations to provide screening and interventions to students in kindergarten through second grade who are at risk for reading difficulties, such as dyslexia. LEAs and schools must use MTSS to provide timely and accessible interventions and supports to every PK–12 student.

Follow the link for more OSPI information on [Washington State MTSS Framework](#).

## Washington State Assessments

Washington's statewide literacy assessments serve a range of purposes and student populations, so that all learners are represented in the state's accountability system. These assessments provide valuable data on student progress, readiness, language development, and instructional effectiveness. They are designed to align with state learning standards while meeting federal requirements and supporting equitable access to education. The table below outlines the key state-level literacy assessments, including who takes them, when they are administered, and how the results are used to inform instruction, programming, and policy.

**Table 3: Overview of State Literacy-Related Assessments**

Assessment Tool	Who Takes It	Grades	Purpose	How Results Are Used
LEA selected assessment tools	All K–2 students	K–2	Identify students who display risk indicators that are associated with dyslexia and highly predictive of future reading difficulty.	Provide evidence-based multisensory structured literacy interventions to students in grades K–2 who are at risk for reading difficulties.

Assessment Tool	Who Takes It	Grades	Purpose	How Results Are Used
ELA SBA	All students (except WA-AIM eligible students).	3–8 & 10	Measure students' proficiency on ELA standards.	Interpret group-level trends and patterns; start instructional inquiries.
WA KIDS (Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills)	All students in Kindergarten and Transition to Kindergarten (TK).	TK & K	Understand school readiness and whole-child development.	Inform classroom instruction; support early learning collaboration; inform policy and investment decisions.
WIDA Screener	Newly enrolled students who qualify for screening.	K & 1–12	Determine initial placement in English Language Development (ELD) services.	Identify which students qualify for ELD support.
WIDA Alternate Screener	Newly enrolled students who qualify for screening with significant cognitive disabilities receiving special education services and ELD services.	1–12	Determine initial placement in ELD services.	Identify which students qualify for ELD support.
WIDA ACCESS	All MLs receiving ELD services.	K & 1–12	Measure annual English Language Proficiency (ELP) level.	Determine continued eligibility for ELD services; support language instruction.
WIDA Alternate ACCESS	MLs with significant cognitive disabilities receiving special education	1–12	Measure annual ELP level.	Determine continued eligibility for ELD services; support language instruction.

Assessment Tool	Who Takes It	Grades	Purpose	How Results Are Used
	services and ELD services.			
WA-AIM	Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.	3–8 & 10	Alternate assessment aligned to grade-level content standards with modified achievement expectations.	Provide access to grade-level content; inform instruction; meet federal and state accountability requirements.

### *Early Literacy Screening*

Washington state law ([RCW 28A.320.260](#)), enacted through Senate Bill 6162 in 2018, requires all K–2 students to be screened for indicators of dyslexia using evidence-based tools. This requirement took effect in the 2021–22 school year and aims to identify students at risk for reading difficulties early, ensuring that timely interventions can be provided. Districts are responsible for selecting screening tools that meet state guidelines. These screenings are a required part of the district's balanced assessment system and play a critical role in detecting potential literacy challenges early, allowing educators to respond with appropriate, timely support. Screening focuses on foundational early literacy skills, including:

- Phonemic awareness
- Phonological awareness
- Letter-sound knowledge
- Rapid automatized naming (RAN)

Follow the links for more OSPI information on [Dyslexia Guidance: Implementing MTSS for Literacy \(2024\)](#) and the [Early Literacy Screening Crosswalk \(Updated 2026\)](#).

### *Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBA)*

The SBA is a standardized test used in many states, including Washington, to assess the systems that provide literacy programming outcomes of student proficiency in ELA. It is aligned with the Common Core State Standards and includes both computer-adaptive questions and performance tasks. The SBA provides data on student achievement and growth, informing programmatic decisions and accountability.

Follow the link for more OSPI information on [Washington State SBA Consortium](#).

### *Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS)*

WaKIDS is an observational assessment used in Washington state to understand the developmental

readiness of kindergarten students. It focuses on six domains, including social-emotional, physical, and cognitive development. WaKIDS helps teachers tailor instruction to meet the needs of young learners and supports a smooth transition into the K–12 system.

Follow the link for more OSPI information on [WaKIDS Roles & Responsibilities](#).

### *WIDA ACCESS Multilingual Students*

WIDA ACCESS is an annual ELP assessment for MLs. It measures students' skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English. ELP placement (Screener) assessments determine initial English proficiency and inform programmatic decisions, such as initial identification of MLs and placement into an ELD program. ELP annual assessments (ACCESS) are used to determine identified MLs' current level of English proficiency.

Follow the link for more OSPI information on [WIDA Assessment Guidance](#).

### *Washington ACCESS to Instruction and Measurement (WA-AIM)*

WA-AIM is an alternate assessment for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. It is aligned with grade-level content standards, with modified achievement expectations to ensure accessibility. WA-AIM is designed to provide meaningful access to instruction and assess student progress in a way that supports inclusive educational practices and meets federal accountability requirements.

Follow the link for more OSPI information on [Guidelines for State Accountability Assessments](#).

## **Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in Assessment**

UDL is a research-based framework that helps educators design learning and assessment experiences that are accessible, flexible, and inclusive. It recognizes that students vary in how they engage, process information, and demonstrate understanding (CAST, 2020). UDL has powerful implications for assessment design.

Assessments designed with UDL principles offer students a range of ways to demonstrate their understanding. This flexibility is especially important in supporting the diverse needs of all learners, including multilingual students and those with disabilities or varied learning profiles, who may benefit from alternative formats, additional scaffolds, or varied response options to fully access and engage with the task. To support all learners, educators can:

- **Offer Choices** in how students demonstrate understanding.
- **Scaffold** assessments with tools, prompts, or models.
- **Use Supportive Conditions**, flexible parameters and remove unnecessary barriers so all students can meaningfully participate.
- **Interpret Scores in Context**, with curiosity and positive assumptions, not certainty.
- **Multiple Means of Representation** and options for accessing and processing information and content.

# Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Assessment

Much like an iceberg, the most powerful influences on student learning often lie beneath the surface. Culturally and linguistically responsive assessment recognizes that learning is shaped by many interwoven factors, including:

- Home languages and community practices.
- Values, interests, and lived experiences.
- Social and cultural ways of knowing.
- Emotion, motivation, and identity.

Culturally responsive assessment helps teachers look below the surface. It invites educators to view assessment not as a judgment of performance, but as a process of inquiry that honors students' identities, experiences, and ways of making meaning. Rather than only measuring skill performance, culturally responsive assessment invites curiosity and connection. Within responsive assessment, educators consider:

- What does this student's approach reveal about their perspective or logic?
- How might their cultural knowledge or language shape their response?
- What opportunities can I create for students to draw on their own experiences?

Assessment should reflect the diverse ways students learn, communicate, and demonstrate understanding and consider dimensions of learning that are often overlooked in conventional assessments. Students bring rich backgrounds, languages, and lived experiences into the classroom, and these should be seen as strengths, not barriers.

Dr. Adeyemi Stemberge, in his work *Culturally Responsive Education in the Classroom* (2020), states that traditional assessments often prioritize standardization over authentic understanding, particularly for students from historically underserved communities. This can obscure students' true capabilities and disengage them from meaningful learning.

Culturally responsive assessment shifts this paradigm. It draws on students' funds of knowledge—language, identity, background, relationships, and motivation—and considers how they think, make decisions, and connect new ideas to lived experience. Assessment becomes a tool for affirmation and access, not gatekeeping. To support equitable learning, Stemberge encourages strategies such as:

- **Designing With Identity in Mind:** Invite students to draw from cultural experiences and interests. Create tasks that allow students to draw on their cultural backgrounds, interests, and experiences, making learning more relevant and engaging.
- **Use Formative Assessment with Dialogue:** Make learning visible in the student and teacher relationship through reflection and informal check-ins. View assessment as an ongoing conversation rather than a final judgment.
- **Prioritizing Voice and Choice:** Offer multiple ways to demonstrate understanding like storytelling, movement, drawing, or oral expression.

- **Focusing on Thinking Over Correctness:** Value reasoning and perspective, by giving students opportunities to explain their thinking or process, even when answers are not conventional.

## Effective Feedback in Early Literacy—A Bridge to Learning

Feedback is a critical component of the assessment cycle in early literacy because it bridges the gap between assessment and learning. Feedback serves as a resource that helps young learners understand what they are doing well and where they need to improve, all within the framework of their developmental stage (Hattie & Clarke, 2019). To be effective, feedback must be timely, clear, and supportive of students' developmental needs. Strategies for impactful feedback include:

- **Use of Clear, Specific Language:** Feedback should be simple and focused: "You remembered to use a capital letter at the beginning of your sentence!"
- **Positive Framing:** Emphasize what the student did well before suggesting improvements: "I like how you sounded out that word. Let's try it again together and see if we can make it even smoother".
- **Visual and Verbal Cues:** Use visuals (e.g., smiley faces, thumbs up) and gestures to reinforce feedback, especially for younger learners or MLLs.
- **In the Moment and Frequent Feedback:** Provide feedback during reading or writing activities, not just after. This helps reinforce learning as it is happening.
- **Goal Setting with Students:** Involve students in setting literacy goals (e.g., "I will use finger spaces between words") and track progress.
- **Peer Feedback:** Teach students how to give kind and helpful feedback to each other using sentence starters like "I noticed..." or "Next time you could..."

## Assessment-Capable Learners of Literacy

The term "assessment-capable learner" is most associated with the work of John Hattie, a leading educational researcher known for his meta-analyses on what works in education. Hattie popularized the concept through his research on visible learning, emphasizing that students who are assessment-capable understand their learning goals, can evaluate their own progress, and know what steps to take next to improve. Young children can become assessment-capable learners when they are supported to:

- **Understand** what they are learning (e.g., "I can hear beginning sounds in words").
- **Know** how to recognize success (e.g., "I can match the sound /b/ to the letter "B").
- **Use** feedback to improve (e.g., "My teacher said I need to stretch out the sounds more slowly").
- **Monitor** their own progress (e.g., using coloring charts or reading logs).
- **Set goals** (e.g., "I will read out loud to someone at home every day this week").

### *Self-Assessment Happens in Everyday Literacy*

Self-assessment, as described in Hattie's assessment capable learners, is the practice of students reflecting on their learning and performance in ways that build metacognition and the ability to

develop literacy skills beyond the classroom. Literate individuals reflect constantly, often without realizing it. It is deeply embedded in literacy practice and rooted in the human desire to understand and be understood. Self-assessment is woven into literacy practice. Students reflect and adjust naturally when they reread confusing text, revise a draft for clarity, or ask for clarification in conversation. These actions are driven by internal questions like:

- Does this make sense to me?
- Will a reader understand my writing?
- What does this remind me of?
- How does this confirm or change what I already knew?

For students, this approach affirms strengths and encourages deeper engagement by connecting learning to their lived experiences. Rather than being passive recipients of instruction, these students are encouraged to reflect on their learning using their full linguistic and cultural funds of knowledge.

### *Evidence-Based Practices in Literacy Assessment*

Based on guidance from the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), the following practices are recommended to support effective assessment in elementary literacy settings:

- **Universal Screening:** Screen all students early and mid-year to identify those at risk and guide resource planning.
- **Diagnostic Assessment:** For students flagged as at risk, use diagnostics to pinpoint specific skill needs like decoding or fluency.
- **Progress Monitoring:** Use short, validated tools regularly to track literacy skill growth and inform instructional adjustments.
- **Data-Driven Instruction:** Use ongoing assessment data to plan instruction, group students, and adjust supports responsively.
- **Embedded Formative Assessment:** Use daily instruction to gather real-time insights and provide immediate feedback.
- **MTSS-Aligned Assessment:** Incorporate assessment tools within an MTSS to monitor the effectiveness of Tier 2 and 3 interventions.
- **Collaborative Data Use:** Hold regular team meetings to analyze literacy data, co-plan instruction, and engage families in the next steps.

# CONCLUSION

The WA State Literacy Framework K–6 reflects a shared vision for advancing literacy for all of Washington’s learners. Grounded in research, shaped by professional expertise, and driven by a deep commitment to student success, this framework offers guidance while allowing space for local adaptation. Educators, schools, and the communities they serve are encouraged to make this framework their own, by applying it with creativity, care, and responsiveness to meet the unique needs of their students. We invite meaningful dialogue, strong instructional practice, and ongoing reflection to ensure that even our youngest learners grow as capable, confident, and joyful consumers and creators of language—as readers, writers, speakers, listeners, and thinkers.

DRAFT

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

OSPI thanks the external thought partners who participated as members of the Hunt Institute’s Path Forward team. They shared their time, effort, and expertise in shaping the *Washington State Literacy Framework K–6*. Their insights strengthened this guidance and supported our collective effort to improve literacy outcomes for our students.

**Kristen Missall**, Professor, University of Washington

**Maddy Thompson**, Governor’s Policy Advisory, Governor’s Office

**Krestin Bahr**, Superintendent, Peninsula School District

**Jared Lind**, Director of Elementary Education, Kennewick School District

**Maribel Vilchez**, 3rd Grade Teacher, North Thurston Public Schools

**Mary-Dean Beringer**, Path Forward Coach

Additional gratitude to:

**Regional Literacy Coordinators**, Association of Educational Service Districts

**Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Northwest**, WestEd

# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Technical Assistance

If you have policy questions related to the WA State Literacy Framework K–6, please contact [ELA@k12.wa.us](mailto:ELA@k12.wa.us).

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