

# WA State Literacy Framework K-6

## Oral Language

*This document is a section from the [Washington State Literacy Framework K-6](#). Refer to the main source for more information. 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).*

### 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](#).