

WA State Literacy Framework K-6 Research, Media Literacy, and Digital Citizenship

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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?