

WA State Literacy Framework K-6 Standards, Planning, and Content Integration

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.

Introduction

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 starting 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.