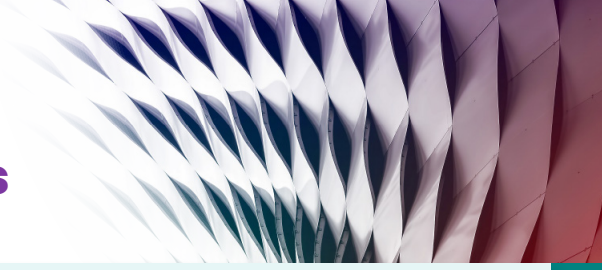
Disciplinary Literacy in Language Arts



Text Types in Language Arts

Students in language arts classrooms must be able to engage with an array of texts to successfully interpret, appreciate and contribute to literature in all its forms in our society. These texts include classic and contemporary literature (e.g., stories, drama, poetry), literary nonfiction (e.g., memoirs, essays), research papers, argumentative essays and images, films and other visual media.

To ensure students have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in language arts, it is critical to explicitly teach discipline-specific literacy practices. The next section describes several key literacy practices for language arts.

> "Language arts-specific disciplinary literacy enables students to participate actively in the community of readers, writers and critics. It encourages them to enter the conversation as apprentice analysts and creators who can interpret, evaluate and contribute to the rich tapestry of literary works."
>
> (Oregon's Adolescent Literacy Framework, page 106)

Explicitly Teaching Literacy Practices in Language Arts Classrooms

PRACTICE: Leverage background and vocabulary knowledge to further develop students' comprehension of texts.

Students access complex texts by bridging the words of the text and their knowledge of the world. Background knowledge and vocabulary are closely related; explicitly building both is an effective way to strengthen students' understanding of texts.

EXAMPLE: *In a unit on American Romanticism, the teacher leverages students' personal experiences by asking them to engage in a free-write about a time they felt most alive. Students discuss their writing, and the teacher uses the ideas shared by students as a bridge to the feelings, ideas and vocabulary used by authors in the Romantic period.*

PRACTICE: Teach students reading strategies applicable to complex literary texts.

Teachers can equip students of language arts to use various reading strategies to engage deeply with literature. Clearly teaching students why, when and how to use strategies such as questioning the text, evaluating evidence, analyzing the author's craft and purpose, and exploring multiple perspectives prepares students to analyze and enjoy literary works.

EXAMPLE: *In a high school language arts class, the teacher facilitates an activity in which students identify literary devices such as foreshadowing and irony within a short story. Using lessons from the district curriculum, the teacher helps students question the text to understand how these devices aid in character development and thematic evolution within the short story. Students build on these understandings during collaborative discussions.*

PRACTICE: Teach writing approaches and strategies specific to language arts.

Educators can build students' ability to create and critique by explicitly teaching students to write like an author. In effective language arts classrooms, students learn to craft a strong thesis or central narrative, organize ideas, vary sentence structure and practice the art of revision.

EXAMPLE: *In an 8th grade language arts class, a teacher helps students build a writer's toolbox that includes vocabulary lists, sentence structure variations and model texts with annotations describing organizational structure. Students use this toolkit to develop an outline for an essay about an influential person in their lives. After working individually, students pair up with peers to share their ideas and receive feedback on their planned essay organization.*

PRACTICE: Teach students to communicate like a literary critic.

Engaging in well-structured dialogue supports students to think critically about texts, question assumptions and engage in deep, wide-ranging discussions. Language arts educators teach students to communicate for many purposes, including argumentation and literary debate, which emphasize active listening, respectful disagreement and synthesizing diverse viewpoints.

EXAMPLE: *In an 11th grade language arts classroom, students learn how to communicate viewpoints through structured debate. Students observe persuasive argumentation techniques in debate videos, then work in teams to prepare for a debate. Teams gather evidence and prepare arguments on whether the setting of the book is dystopian or utopian. Students practice active listening and respectful disagreement before applying these techniques in coherent arguments in structured debates.*

Questions for teachers reflecting on and discussing their practice:

- How can you deepen your understanding of your students' lived experiences and use this insight to enhance their conceptual understanding and vocabulary development?
- What text types could your students use more support to read?
- What new opportunities for authentic, discipline-specific discourse would you like to try in your class?

Learn more about disciplinary literacy in language arts, read Oregon's Adolescent Literacy Framework, pages 103–114.