

Disciplinary Literacy in Social Science

Text Types in Social Science

Students of social science must evaluate, interpret and compare source materials, data and disciplinary concepts in a variety of media. Social science texts are diverse and used by professionals in a wide range of disciplines. Examples of texts in social science careers and in the classroom include primary sources like texts, art pieces, film and other media; secondary sources from multiple perspectives; historical documents; civics documents; policy briefs; opinion editorials; academic articles and research reports, often incorporating data sets; news articles and popular media; maps and charts; and artifacts and interviews.

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

“Social science ... equips students with the essential tools to analyze, create and communicate complex ideas, fostering informed, articulate and adaptable individuals who become contributing members of our democracy.”

(Oregon’s Adolescent Literacy Framework, page 139)

Explicitly Teaching Literacy Practices in Social Science Classrooms

PRACTICE: Help students expand discipline-specific vocabulary by connecting to their prior knowledge.

Educators can accelerate student learning of terminology, historical language and conventions for communicating in social science by activating students’ prior knowledge and experiences related to the topic.

EXAMPLE: *During a lesson on how social and political movements affect lawmaking, students first reflect on an issue they care about and consider ways to make an impact. They share strategies and the teacher uses the examples as a bridge to explicit instruction of vocabulary like “advocacy,” “lobbying,” “civil disobedience,” “grass-roots organizing,” “political efficacy”, “coalition building” and “litigation.”*

PRACTICE: Teach students to effectively navigate diverse texts, sources and data integral to the discipline.

Educators can support students by explicitly teaching discipline-specific reading strategies for a variety of text types. Important strategies in social science include evaluating evidence, synthesizing information, analyzing an author’s purpose and perspective, and exploring multiple interpretations and critical perspectives. The effective social science classroom also provides extensive opportunities for students to practice and apply these skills in real-world contexts.

EXAMPLE: *In a 10th grade economics class, students analyze a recent article about the Federal Reserve’s decision on interest rates. The teacher first models her own process of evaluating the evidence presented, synthesizing information on monetary policies and exploring the author’s perspective on the Federal Reserve’s role. Students then choose an economic indicator to investigate and make a recommendation about interest rates based on their research.*

PRACTICE: Teach students discipline-specific writing conventions.

Students in social science use writing for reflection and sense-making, crafting structured, evidence-based arguments tailored to specific audiences. Teachers can help students develop these skills by modeling the research and writing processes, emphasizing the steps of drafting, revising and engaging in peer feedback.

EXAMPLE: *In a high school history class, students read and annotate a collection of primary sources about individual experiences with immigration to the United States during different historical periods, annotating the text for reasons for immigrating. The teacher then uses a think-aloud to model the process of using evidence to develop a thesis statement and organizing their evidence into an outline for a comparative analysis essay about causes of immigration in U.S. history. Students then develop their own thesis statements and outlines, and engage in peer-feedback and teacher conferences that will inform their final essay.*

PRACTICE: Teach students to engage in civic discourse.

Social science teachers can strengthen students' communication skills by teaching them how to engage in discussions, dialogues and deliberation that mirror the collaborative and sometimes contentious nature of inquiry in social science. Teachers also allocate time for students to practice active listening, respectful exchanges, use of discipline-specific evidence, structured argumentation, problem-solving and critical engagement with differing viewpoints.

EXAMPLE: *In a 12th grade geography class, students prepare to debate the economic effects of zoning policies on various population groups. The teacher helps students understand the debate structure and provides examples of active listening, effective use of evidence and respectful exchange of viewpoints. Students collaborate with partners to prepare their arguments before participating in the class-wide debate.*



Questions for teachers reflecting on and discussing their practice:

- ① What does disciplinary literacy in social science look like to you? What does it look like to read and write like a social scientist?
- ① What text types could your students use more support with to read?
- ① What new opportunities for authentic, discipline-specific discourse would you like to try in your class?

Learn more about disciplinary literacy in social science in [Oregon's Adolescent Literacy Framework, pages 138–148.](#)