

English Language Arts Literacy Q & A

1. As an English teacher, I am often expected to be the expert of how to teach reading and writing skills, yet when my students struggle with reading and writing, I do not always know what to do. What is my role in supporting students' literacy development?

As a teacher of English language arts, your job is to support students' literacy development in all the ways that you can. This includes providing texts in multiple genres that students can read and understand and providing many writing opportunities to assist students in learning the different genre of writing. It includes teaching specific reading and writing skills that students need to read and write successfully. Such skills may include assisting students in understanding particularly difficult parts of texts, teaching specific skills and strategies they need, e.g. teaching them to summarize, to synthesize information across multiple texts, or to critically evaluate a persuasive essay.

As an English teacher, you will sometimes be assigned students whose reading and writing skills are so far behind that it would be very difficult for you to remediate their skills within the context

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of an English language arts classroom. For those students your job is to differentiate instruction. By differentiating your instruction, you can provide a classroom that can accommodate their needs either

through small group instruction, paired or buddy reading, or special supplementary texts written at appropriate grade levels. For those readers who are reading at the primary grade levels, your job is to assist them in getting remedial help for struggling readers so that they may eventually succeed in your classroom.

2. How do I fit literacy instruction and the use of literacy strategies into my daily instruction when I do not have enough time as it is to cover my content?

Even though literacy strategies are part of the curriculum and instruction of English, the teaching of literacy strategies is everyone's job. Regardless of the content standards for any content area, national and state standards include gaining new knowledge in a particular content and being able to communicate that knowledge. Thus, all content areas have the job of teaching literacy, not just English language arts.

Many "literacy strategies" take no time away from your content at all. What they do is to help you teach your content in a way that more actively engages your students so they will learn more. For example, when you are using patterns of strategies like reciprocal teaching—where students must predict, summarize, ask questions and clarify hard parts—you are teaching your content. That content may be reading an adolescent or classic novel, or an essay written by Martin Luther King Jr. In any case, reciprocal teaching just helps you teach your content better. You assist more students in getting at the important ideas in the text through literacy strategies. You still teach your content, and you cover the same material, but you teach it in a different way.

There are many other literacy strategies that support your existing content. In the Content Literacy Guide, you will learn about many literacy strategies such as Anticipation Guides, Word Sorts for important vocabulary, and Quick Writes. All of these strategies are methods of teaching your content better. They do not interfere or take time away from your content.

Some learning strategies, on the other hand, do take more time, but it is your job as an English teacher to teach students how to use particular strategies to improve their reading and writing of text. For example, an easy reading strategy is predicting, something all good readers do before and during reading. Good readers predict what they will read about in upcoming texts. They make predictions about the topic of the text; they often make predictions about the kind of text they will be reading and what they expect to learn in the text based on whether the text is an article in *Time* magazine, an adolescent novel, a bus schedule or TV Guide.

So, one of your jobs is to teach students how to predict, if they do not know how. In fact, most students predict with little assistance from anyone. However, there are some struggling readers, and perhaps English language learners (ELLs), who do not know how to predict and need to be taught how. They need to know especially that they have to use information in their heads, their background knowledge, and information from the title of a text, plus its genre and perhaps pictures, to generate some ideas about what a text will be about. Struggling readers and ELLs typically learn how to predict fairly easily without too much instruction.

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There are other literacy strategies, however, that are much more difficult to teach. For example, summarizing is a very difficult literacy skill for many students; yet, all students must learn how to summarize a text. Students also must learn how to make connections between their own life experiences and the content of a text. It is through making connections and the integration of new knowledge with existing knowledge that comprehension occurs. These strategies do take some time to teach, but they are part of a core standards curriculum in the English language arts. By helping students learn these strategies, you are helping them get access to the texts, sometimes texts they would not otherwise understand.

3. In regards to reading, writing, and word learning in English language arts, what kinds of texts should students read and write in my class?

Texts to Read

For secondary English teachers, the answer to what kinds of texts students should be reading is *all kinds*. In order to become critical and analytic readers, students need practice reading a variety of different kinds of texts. They will not gain the knowledge they need to become advanced readers with just one kind of text—narratives.

In general, all readers, including adults, read, understand and remember narrative texts more easily than expository texts. This is because narrative texts have a very familiar

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organization or structure—setting, characters, plot, resolution. Expository texts, on the other hand, often have an unfamiliar organization or structure. It is much harder for students to develop a mental map of where an expository text is taking them than it is to have a mental map of where a narrative text is taking them. For example, it is easier to predict the ending of a narrative text than of an expository text. A narrative text usually concludes predictably, and it is nice surprise when it does not. However, an expository text does not often end predictably; it could end in many different ways.

One of the most important findings from research is that too many of our students are unfamiliar with expository texts, those texts that do not have a narrative structure. Examples of expository texts are brochures, essays, editorials, advertisements, schedules, newspapers, and informational web pages. And yet, so often our reading tests consist of expository paragraphs with very different text structures. So, we need to expose our students to a wide variety of texts to read. This will, of course, help them when they take reading tests, but, just as importantly, it will also assist in their overall improvement of comprehension and critical thinking.

Texts to Write

For secondary English teachers, the answer to what kinds of writing students should be doing is *all kinds*. In order to become critical and analytic writers, students need practice writing a variety of different kinds of texts. These texts include fiction, to parallel some of the kinds of reading they do. But students need to have practice writing other kinds of texts, especially nonfiction—descriptive, informational and essay, and persuasive. Writing expository texts, just like reading expository texts, can be difficult for students, especially if they have not read many different kinds of expository texts. For example, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicates that persuasive writing is the most difficult for students to write. Therefore, they need specific instruction and practice writing this kind of text.

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Words to Learn

For secondary English teachers, the question of what kinds of words your students should be learning is an interesting one. After all, English is not a content area like earth science, math or civics that have a unique set of specific words that have to be mastered in order to learn the content.

In general, four big categories of words should be learned in the English classroom. The first category of words to be taught (these are not in any particular order) are **concept words** that relate to the themes of stories you are covering, words like *courage, bravery, friendship, individualism*. These words are explored in the literary texts your students will be reading. So, knowledge of what these words mean will be critical to understanding particular selections your students will read.

Second, it is critically important for you to teach the “language of instruction.” The language of English language arts instruction covers many different areas, from the language of literary terms like *similes, metaphors, plot, rising action* to the language of writing terms like the *writing*

process, revising, pre-drafting, and editing to the language of grammar and punctuation terms like *noun, verb, adjective, quotation marks*, and so forth. Leveled word lists, K-12, based on the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and other standards, have been compiled for schools and departments to review and select literary and grammatical terms and academic vocabulary that all students should learn in English. These word lists are most helpful for secondary teachers. Students who do not know these important terms are likely to fail to learn from the instruction you provide.

Third, it would be wise for English teachers to follow the advice of Beck, McKeown and Kukan (2002). They argue that you should embed the teaching of words within the context of the novels and stories your students read. Teaching should focus on developing understandings of the similarities and differences among words as well as the precise and nuanced meanings of words and how they function in selections. This is not the same as teaching synonyms and antonyms. It is helping students understand the complexities and subtleties of words and how they relate to other words. For example, in the book *Wuthering Heights* (Bronte, 1847/1961) Beck and her colleagues suggest teaching critically important words like *misanthrope, solitary, reserved* and *inhospitable*. The words can be taught related to the text and to the characters in the novel. They can be compared and contrasted with other similar and related words. They can be used in students' writing, which provides students with opportunities to generate the words within the appropriate context. In these ways, students learn the words deeply, the result of which is to impact standardized vocabulary test scores *and* reading comprehension.

Finally, it would appear to be useful to teach **affixes**, including Greek and Latin prefixes and suffixes. Students should be asked to apply their knowledge of these prefixes and suffixes to a multitude of words. They should know how to break up words into their component parts and identify affixes. They should learn how to use their knowledge to help them determine the meanings of unknown words. Practice using these skills will assist students in all their content area learning.

4. What literacy skills (or learning strategies related to literacy) are essential for students to learn in English language arts?

There are many learning strategies related to literacy that are essential for students to learn how to use to enhance their understanding in English language arts. Some of these include:

- *Compare and contrast*—Students in English often compare and contrast, both in reading and in writing, characters in novels, authors and their craft, arguments and decisions. They are asked to compare and contrast as a way of deepening their knowledge and understanding of characters, events, ideas and concepts.
- *Determining the main idea or gist*—One of the most important literacy strategies for students is to learn how to find the main idea or, more generally, to determine the most important information in something they read. Good students automatically seem to be able to determine the most important information, but struggling readers often have great difficulty determining the most important information as determined by the author or you, their

teacher, as opposed to themselves. Sometimes they read idiosyncratically, focusing on information they find interesting or unusual. It is critically important to teach students to think about what the author would consider most important and why.

- *Summarize*—An essential learning strategy for all students is to learn how to summarize. Summaries take the main ideas from a text and eliminate unnecessary details. Students in English need to learn how to summarize as a necessary prerequisite skill to synthesizing and analyzing information across texts and genres.
- *Identifying cause and effect*—Many novels and stories are wrapped around causes and effects, and it is important for students to learn how to determine what is the cause of something and what is the effect. In addition to novels, expository texts are sometimes organized around cause and effect. Students can more easily learn to summarize texts if they can identify causes and effects.
- *Comprehension monitoring*—Students in all subject areas, but especially in English, need to know how to monitor their comprehension. Monitoring comprehension refers to a mental act where readers are conscious of and pay attention to whether they understand or not. When they find they are struggling to comprehend, they know what to do to repair comprehension breakdowns. In order to do this, students have to feel safe identifying when they do not understand, and getting help when needed. You as a teacher can model when your own comprehension breaks down by reading aloud text that presents difficulties for you, e.g. a graduate level text in an unfamiliar area. Then, you can show students the possible repair strategies you can use: reread the text, skip a part and move on to see if it makes sense later, talk to someone, use the web to find a word or idea that you do not know.
- *Visualizing*—A helpful strategy for reading novels and stories is visualizing, where students make movies in their minds about what they are reading. Good readers often visualize. Some poor readers do not. But students can be taught to make pictures in their minds to enhance their comprehension.
- *Listening*—A critically important learning strategy for the English language arts curriculum is listening. You can teach students how to listen when you and their peers speak.
- *Asking questions*—One of the most useful learning strategies for students is to ask questions. Students can be taught to ask questions before, during and after reading, and such instruction appears to improve students' comprehension of texts. A useful instructional approach to teaching students to ask questions is to use Bloom's taxonomy of questions. This taxonomy is useful in helping students move away from asking only literal level questions and toward asking higher order thinking questions.
- *Prior knowledge*—One of the most robust findings in research is that students whose prior knowledge is activated before reading comprehend better than students whose prior knowledge is not activated. Teaching students to activate their own prior knowledge before they read will help them understand the text they read better.

- *Making connections*—We learn by making connections between our own personal experiences and background knowledge and the new knowledge or information we read or talk about. Therefore, assisting students in making connections to their own world and lives is an important strategy to learn and use.
- *Taking effective notes*—A critically important skill for learning, as opposed to just comprehending, is to take effective notes. Effective notes are one way to assist students in making important connections between their own experiences and new knowledge and information. Effective notes also helps students paraphrase information, thereby making it fit into their own knowledge and experiences.
- *Synthesizing information*—A difficult, but important, strategy to learn is how to synthesize information within a text or across multiple texts. Synthesizing information requires students to combine information they learned in different texts to come up with new text. In order for students to conduct research and write a report, they must learn to synthesize information.

5. Many of my students lack sufficient literacy skills to adequately complete the content area work in my content area; other students have very advanced skills. How do I differentiate instruction in my classroom when students have such a disparate range of literacy skills?

Differentiating instruction to meet the needs of all students is one of the most difficult aspects of high quality instruction. But, in fact, there are many different ways of meeting the needs of students with different reading levels in your English classroom. Some ways require planning and preparation, but others require a minimal amount of work. Tomlinson (2001) describes two types of differentiation: “low-prep” differentiation and “high-prep” differentiation.

Examples of Low-Prep Differentiation

- Flexible seating arrangements where you can move students around to change the composition of groups of students;
- varied journal prompts where you can provide differentiated prompts for writing based on students’ reading abilities;
- varied supplementary materials where you provide students with thematically related books of varying reading levels;
- jigsaw where you group students together and have them complete differentiated assignments depending on their reading levels, each set of students completing part of the assignment together;
- multiple levels of questions where you develop different levels of questions, e.g. according to Bloom’s taxonomy, for example, depending on the reading levels of students.

Examples of High-Prep Differentiation

- Cooperative learning groups where you group students in fours heterogeneously and where you provide assignments so that all groups may achieve mastery;
- paired reading where you group students in twos according to similar reading abilities and the pairs read the same text at the appropriate instructional level;
- small group instruction, where you ask students to work in groups of 3-4 and differentiate assignments according to groups. Groups are arranged according to similar reading abilities or to similar interest levels;
- think-pair-share activities where you provide questions for students and ask them to think about the questions and then share their responses with a partner. Partners can be self-appointed or selected by you according to reading or interest levels;
- varied graphic organizers before, during or after reading that you ask students to fill out in pairs or small groups according to ability levels.

6. I know word learning and vocabulary instruction are important in English language arts. What words should I focus on to teach and support? What strategies work the best?

There are two important issues here. First, which words should I teach? Second, what is the best way to teach them?

Regarding which words to teach, students should be taught words that they come across in their reading. This can take two different forms. First, teach concept words that relate to the themes you will be encountering in your texts, words like *courage*, *prosperity*, and *hope*. These are abstract words that students can learn more deeply through their reading. Second, teach words that students encounter in their texts related to the characters they read about, their motives, their attitudes, and so forth. For example, words like *benign*, *irritated*, *irascible*, and *petulant* are all words that describe characters, but at the same time, they are words that will be useful for students to know in their daily, adult lives. It is important to realize that when students encounter them in text, they are more likely to learn and remember them than when they encounter them on a vocabulary list.

Regarding how to teach these words, research gives us a couple of important points. First, use more than one method. For example, if you provide students with easy-to-understand definitions, use sentences as well. When you use sentences, use more than one sentence to provide a variety of contexts for the word. Second, if you want students' comprehension to be improved, then you need to teach the word deeply—not superficially, as in a simple definition. So, then you might use the Frayer model or a concept definition map where students have to not only learn the definition, but also they must do something using the word.

Finally, when individual words are challenging for students, it is useful to introduce the word before reading, talk about it when reading and do come additional activity with it after reading. This assures that students will learn and remember the word.

7. How often should I use literacy strategies? In other words, should I use a before, during, and after reading strategy in every single English lesson?

There is no one right answer to the question. It depends on the specific text you are using and the difficulty of the text for the students with whom you are working. You want to provide the minimal amount of help and support (scaffolding) necessary for students to understand and be able to learn from the text.

In general, you should not think about before, during and after reading strategies in terms of using one strategy for each part of a lesson. That’s not the way to think about it. Think about literacy strategies in these terms: What support should I give students to help them read and understand this and when should I provide that support? In general, students benefit from the most support *during* the actual reading. Next best is *before* reading. Many English language learners may benefit from *before reading strategies* that help them prepare for reading about unknown concepts and ideas. But, during reading strategies are likely to help students the most, especially if the material is difficult to read and understand.

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8. What kinds of questions should I ask students when I teach English language arts concepts?

If you think of Bloom’s taxonomy, you want to offer your students a good, healthy share of questions from the upper end of the scale. You want to assist students in relating new material to their own lives, to encourage them to think critically and analytically about what they are reading. You want them to question ideas, compare and contrast, understand cause and effect, imagine alternative possibilities and to expand their way of thinking. You want them to consider alternatives, to open up ideas and ways of thinking as possibilities that they may never have thought of. These are the types of questions that have instructional value—that is, that can teach students to think deeply about what they are reading. Asking them questions to see if they understand the story selection may help you in assessing students’ level of understanding, but these types of questions have little instructional value.

9. Do I need to use different strategies for boys and girls?

It is important to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all students. There is more variation between individuals within a gender than there is between genders. In other words, if you have a group of boys, it is likely that there is great variation among those boys themselves,

more so than between boys and girls. Differentiate strategies based on individual needs, not gender differences.

10. How does the use of literacy strategies relate to learning styles? In other words, what strategies lend themselves well to different styles of learning?

There is great controversy about learning styles, with many researchers arguing that we cannot really determine who is a visual, auditory or kinesthetic learner. Regardless of whether they exist or not, there are ways to think about strategies that will help all students. For example, we know that all students learn more when they work with more senses—visual, auditory and kinesthetic.

Therefore, the more you can combine the visual, auditory and kinesthetic, the better. That is one reason why strategies that involve writing often work well for all students. Graphic

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organizers, as well as charts and graphs, work well for most students since they provide visual representations of print information. Seeing movies, like *West Side Story*, is a great way for students to develop background knowledge about a complex story like *Romeo and Juliet*. Having access to auditory and visual information assists in all students' learning.

11. On average, how much time should students spend in the act of reading and writing in a typical class in my English classroom?

There is no “correct” answer to this. It will depend on the particular objectives you have in mind. On average, in English classrooms there should be significant amounts of time devoted to

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students' reading and writing activities. However, during these activities you as the teacher should be working in small groups or one-on-one with individual students. In other

words, when students read and write during class, the teacher should be actively engaged in assisting specific students or groups of students.

12. Many strategies appear to support the needs of struggling readers and writers; what strategies work best for advanced students in English?

Research on advanced students suggests that they benefit from spending some time working with students like themselves. This provides them with opportunities to share with and learn from each other. So, for example, at times *paired reading* works well when advanced students are paired with other advanced students. This allows students to work with more challenging text and to further develop their ideas. It also allows students to challenge each other. So, for example, advanced students can read other novels by the same author as one that is being read by the whole class. They can also go online to find and report on reviews about the author's work,

whether it be the text everyone is reading or other novels by the same author. Work on long-term projects is another teaching strategy that works well with advanced students. Allowing students to conduct independent research on topics of interest works well for them. For example, students may want to examine the particular historical setting of a novel in more depth, or try to find out if certain facts in a novel are based on real events and which facts are accurate and which are not.

13. What strategies or practices work best to motivate and engage students in reading and writing in English?

Motivation and engagement come from *interest*, *challenge*, *activity*, and *choice*. Therefore, students who are interested in topics, students who are challenged by topics (but not too much) and students who are active become motivated and engaged students. Practices that include pop culture and current trends can be used to generate and maintain interest in students. Practices that

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allow students to see the importance of what they are doing are important as well. Students should be able to see how material relates to their lives and experiences.

Providing students with *choice* is another important way to motivate and engage students. However, students do not have to be provided with endless choices. Even asking them to choose one from two activities or assignments tends to motivate students. Writing for an outside audience or for a larger audience can also be motivating to students. This relates to “authentic tasks” which often engage students more than “teacher tasks.” Thus, writing a letter to an outside agency about a particular topic, or writing letters to authors are more engaging activities than writing to turn in a paper.

Many teaching strategies that actively engage students tend to be more motivating and engaging than worksheet or workbook-type tasks. Thus, graphic organizers work well for this purpose. Cooperative learning is a particularly effective strategy in that students can work together to solve problems and complete tasks. Working together forces students to become more actively engaged in what they are doing.

13. What are the best and easiest strategies for assessing literacy skills in English?

There are many “before reading” strategies that work well to assess literacy skills. Asking students to complete a *quick write* before reading will provide you with an assessment of writing skills and also background knowledge in the topic of interest. Asking students to complete a *semantic map* about a topic is another way to assess topic knowledge, e.g. about the theme of a novel, character development, knowledge of specific concept words like metaphors, similes, and so forth. *Anticipation guides* are good ways of assessing topic knowledge as well as vocabulary. *Word sorts* are an effective strategy for assessment for two reasons, 1) they provide you with knowledge about what students already know, and 2) they provide information about what students need to learn.

Asking students to complete answers to open-ended questions through short responses is also an effective way to assess comprehension of what students have read. You can observe the depth of understanding of what students read more easily and readily than you can through multiple-choice or true-false questions. When assessing students' knowledge of vocabulary, asking students to write targeted words appropriately in sentences is a more effective strategy than asking them to simply define words. The sentences will provide you with a better understanding of the depth of students' knowledge of words than definitions can provide. Students can memorize a definition, but most often, they need to have a deeper understanding of the meaning of a word to generate it appropriately in a sentence.

14. What are the best strategies for helping students comprehend visual texts (e.g. charts, maps, graphs, etc.) in English?

Comprehending visual texts is not that often used in English classrooms. I do not know of specific teaching strategies or practices that lend themselves to comprehending visual texts. Small group discussion is likely to work the best.

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