Literacy Lifelines for America's English Language Arts Teachers

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Contents

Intro

The seven "Literacy Lifelines" that follow are gleaned from *Reading and Writing Instruction in America's Schools*, which was based on the results of a nationally representative survey of English language arts (ELA) teachers conducted by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The goal of that report was to identify the challenges that ELA teachers are encountering in their efforts to implement the three "instructional shifts" in the Common Core State Standards-ELA (CCSS-ELA) and similar state standards. Accordingly, each Literacy Lifeline offers practical advice for overcoming a particularly challenging aspect of implementation, based on the latest literacy research, and the recommendations of some of the nation's leading ELA experts.

Literacy Lifeline 1

How should teachers select appropriately complex texts?

Teacher Tip

Determine the instructional purposes for which it is suited.

When evaluating a text, teachers should supplement quantitative measures of complexity (such as Lexile and Flesch-Kincaid) with qualitative measures (such as vocabulary and subject knowledge requirements) and then use their professional judgment to determine the instructional purposes for which that text is suited.

Additional Resources

Text Complexity (Achieve the Core)

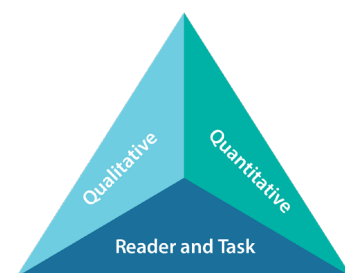Selecting Complex Texts with Intention (Association for Middle Level Education)

A Beginner's Guide to Text Complexity (We Teach NYC)

Although most ELA experts now endorse the use of "quantitative" measures of text complexity, such as Lexile and Flesch-Kincaid, it remains important for teachers to supplement these tools with qualitative measures, and to use their professional judgment to decide which texts are suitable for which students—and for which purposes.

More specifically, Student Achievement Partners—a nonprofit that was founded by the primary authors of the CCSS-ELA—suggests that teachers use a three-step process to select appropriately complex texts.

1. Use quantitative measures to assign a text to a grade band (e.g., Lexile or Flesch-Kincaid).

2. Use qualitative measures to locate a text within a specific grade including:

   - Text structure;

   - Language clarity and conventions;

   - Knowledge demands; and

   - Levels of meaning/purpose.

Text Complexity Triangle

3. Use professional judgment to decide how suited a text is for a specific instructional purpose with a particular set of students.

The "text complexity triangle" (seen above and in Appendix A of the CCSS-ELA) illustrates the importance of incorporating these additional measures and considerations.

Literacy Lifeline 2

How should teachers help students build content knowledge?

Teacher Tip

Organize your lessons around "text sets."

By systematically building students' content knowledge, dramatically accelerating the rate at which they learn new words, and effectively scaffolding instruction, a well-constructed text set addresses several challenges simultaneously.

Additional Resources

What Are "Text Sets," and Why Use Them in the Classroom? (Fordham Institute)

Which Text-Set Approach Is Right for You? (Fordham Institute)

Model text sets are available through Achieve the Core, Readworks, and Newsela.

In general, content knowledge is essential to a good education because it is:

1. Critical to reading comprehension;[1]

2. Critical to vocabulary acquisition;[2] and

3. Inherently useful.

In recognition of these benefits, the CCSS-ELA encourages teachers to adopt a content-rich curriculum that includes a healthy dose of informational texts. Yet as Fordham's Robert Pondiscio notes, "Common Core asks not just for more nonfiction, but for a *coherent*, knowledge-rich curriculum in English language arts."[3] This distinction is important because research shows that, in addition to building content knowledge more quickly,[4] students acquire new vocabulary up to four times faster when they read a series of *related* texts.[5]

Accordingly, Student Achievement Partners suggests that teachers construct "text sets" that:[6]

- Center on a single topic (e.g., insects or entrepreneurship) and contain a variety of resources (e.g., books, articles, videos, websites, and infographics);

- Purposely order resources to support students in building vocabulary and knowledge;

- Include activities to be completed after each resource to demonstrate comprehension and students' newly acquired knowledge and/or vocabulary; and

- Are designed to be completed with increasing independence by students.

Literacy Lifeline 3

How should teachers balance cultural literacy and cultural responsiveness?

Teacher Tip

Expose students to new material that builds on their prior knowledge.

Research shows that reading comprehension depends on students' general knowledge, and that students are more likely to remember new material if it builds on what they know.

Additional Resources

Teaching Content Is Teaching Reading (E.D., Hirsch)

How Knowledge Helps (Daniel Willingham)

Knowledge is Literacy (Robert Pondiscio)

What Every American Should Know (The Atlantic)

In addition to shifting away from fiction and toward informational texts, research suggests that teachers are also moving away from "classical texts" and the "literary canon" and toward texts that reflect students' increasingly diverse backgrounds and cultures.[7] This highlights one of the difficult (and important) challenges facing teachers in the twenty-first century: striking a satisfactory balance between "cultural responsiveness," or efforts to respectfully incorporate students' cultures, and what E. D. Hirsch referred to as "cultural literacy," which requires "participation in…a shared body of knowledge, a knowledge of the culture of the country" that is "assumed by writers of everything from training manuals to newspapers."[8]

Clearly, students should read some texts that were written by individuals who share their background so they understand that—in the words of Langston Hughes—"they, too, are America." Yet as that reference implies, insofar as the canon itself has become increasingly diverse—and most present-day literary anthologies suggest that it has—the choice between cultural literacy and cultural responsiveness may be a false one. So perhaps the challenge lies not in striking a balance between the two, but in recognizing the knowledge that we, as citizens of an increasingly diverse America, already share.

Literacy Lifeline 4

How should teachers help students engage in close reading?

Teacher Tip

Use questions as "bread crumbs" that lead students toward deeper understanding of the text.

In an effective close reading, the teacher anticipates the aspects of a text that students will find challenging and plans his or her questions accordingly so that students have a trail to follow.

Additional Resources

Close Reading Q & A
(Tim Shanahan)

Close Reading in Elementary Schools (Fisher and Frey)

Close Reading Model Lessons
(Achieve the Core)

Every close reading starts with the identification of a passage that is worth reading multiple times—first for basic understanding and then for a deeper appreciation of craft and style. Typically, the teacher asks a carefully planned set of text-specific questions designed to highlight elements that illuminate the text's complexity. According to ELA expert Tim Shanahan, these questions serve as "bread crumbs" that help students a) establish the meaning of a text so that they can summarize it and b) analyze how that meaning is achieved through word choice, symbols, allusions, and other structural elements.[9]

By choosing a specific focus for their questions—and then moving from basic to advanced questions with that focus in mind—well-prepared teachers can provide students with effective "scaffolding" that allows them to gain a deeper understanding of the text.

According to Shanahan, teachers leading close readings often go wrong by:

- Asking questions as a check for understanding, rather than as "bread crumbs" designed to promote understanding;

- Asking lots of low-level questions but never getting to high-level questions about the author's choice of words, motivation, or argument;

- Skipping straight to high-level questions that require students to analyze a text without first helping them establish its basic meaning; and

- Failing to choose a focus for their questions that leads students toward a deeper understanding of a particular aspect of the text.

Literacy Lifeline 5

How should ELA teachers decide which words to teach as vocabulary?

Teacher Tip

Make a conscious effort to spotlight new "Tier 2" words as students encounter them.

To understand complex texts, students must be familiar with both general academic vocabulary ("Tier 2" words) and domain-specific vocabulary ("Tier 3" words). Of the two, the former are easier to overlook.

Additional Resources

Vocabulary and the Common Core (Achieve the Core)

Meaningful Vocabulary Learning (Fisher and Frey)

Academic Word Finder (Achieve the Core)

There are approximately 750,000 words in the English language—more than any teacher on the planet could hope to teach. So how should ELA teachers decide which words to focus on?

Although there is no one-size-fits-all answer to this question, most vocabulary experts agree that teachers should emphasize "high-leverage" words that will have the biggest positive impact on students. Specifically, research suggests that teachers should focus on words that are:[10]

1. Needed to fully comprehend the text;

2. Likely to appear in future texts from any discipline; and

3. Part of a word family or semantic network.

In addition to fulfilling one or more of these criteria, the words that a teacher decides to focus on should also be *new* to most of his or her students. According to vocabulary experts Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey, grade-level lists of vocabulary words and phrases can help teachers with this sort of calibration.[11]

In general, teaching vocabulary effectively means attending to new words as they occur in a text and intentionally spotlighting any high-leverage words. As part of this instruction, teachers may wish to model "word solving" so that students can learn how to infer the meaning of unknown words from their context and engage students in collaborative conversations so they can practice using academic language. Finally, in addition to these explicit vocabulary techniques, research suggests that students acquire new vocabulary significantly faster when they read a series of related texts (i.e., a "text set" like the ones described in Literacy Lifeline 2) due to the reciprocal relationship between vocabulary and content knowledge.[12]

Literacy Lifeline 6

How should teachers help struggling readers understand challenging texts?

One of the most common approaches to helping struggling readers is to "frontload" background information and vocabulary by presenting it before students read the text. This strategy can make sense in some circumstances. However, it can be problematic if it results in teachers doing work that students should be doing for themselves.

So what do ELA experts recommend?

In nearly every case, the first step is reading the text carefully to identify where a lack of background knowledge or vocabulary might cause some students to struggle. Once these challenges have been diagnosed, the next step—and perhaps the hardest part of an ELA teacher's job—is to address them in a way that still requires students to engage with the text.

One way of approaching this challenge is to double-down on the "bread crumbs" approach described in Literacy Lifeline 4 by posing more basic questions for the benefit of struggling readers. For example, if students fail to comment on organizing features of a text that might help them understand it, teachers should feel free to point these out—and then ask students what purpose they serve.

In a similar vein, the "text sets" described in Literacy Lifeline 2 can serve as scaffolding for struggling readers (as well as other students). By moving from less-rigorous to more-rigorous texts within the same unit of content, teachers can help these students accumulate necessary background knowledge and vocabulary *before* they encounter more challenging texts (thus simultaneously increasing their odds of understanding those texts and of inferring the meaning of any new words they contain).

In short, the best educators have thought carefully about what sorts of teacher-initiated *questions* might work as scaffolding. And by providing students with well-constructed text sets, they also allow them to do their *own* scaffolding.

Literacy Lifeline 7

How should teachers emphasize evidence-based writing?

The ability to inform and persuade based on a cogent analysis of the evidence is a critical skillset for K–12 students. Yet historically, many ELA teachers have devoted more energy and class time to nurturing students' creative writing skills.

So how can teachers accustomed to teaching creative or narrative writing incorporate more evidence-based writing activities into their curricula?

Literacy expert Tim Shanahan suggests writing activities that are grounded in reading such as:

- *Summarization*, in which students identify key ideas and details of text and then paraphrase or translate them into their own words;

- *Analysis and critique*, in which students look for relationships and patterns in a text such as cause and effect, problem and solution, or comparison and contrast, or in which they evaluate a text through reasoning (e.g., "Why was there an American Civil War? Compare the causes of the Civil War from the perspectives of the North and South.");

- *Synthesis*, in which students write their own text but rely on evidence from multiple sources, combining, evaluating, and resolving conflicting information (i.e., research writing); and

- *Text modeling*, in which students identify key features of a text and then write their own texts, imitating the structure and language of the original but varying the key features (e.g., by writing a five-paragraph essay or a Socratic dialogue).

In addition to developing students' capacity for evidence-based writing, text-based prompts also greatly benefit students' reading comprehension by encouraging them to review what they have read, reflect on any new information or ideas they may have encountered, and then collect their thoughts in writing. In short, teachers would do well to think of reading and writing as complementary activities, rather than as separate subjects.

Endnotes

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