

## How Important is Teaching Literacy in All Content Areas?

REBECCA ALBER'S BLOG

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You are busy this summer planning and reworking lessons -- adding, adjusting, and tweaking. Here's something to think about, fast forward to fall: We know students do plenty of listening in our classes, but what about the other three communication skills they should be engaging in and practicing daily?

I'm talking about reading, writing, and speaking.

Let's define literacy. It was once known simply as the ability to read and write. Today it's about being able to make sense of and engage in advanced reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Someone who has reached advanced literacy in a new language, for example, is able to engage in these four skills with their new language in any setting -- academically or casually.

### Literacy is an *Every-Century Skill*

If you are a math, history, science, or art teacher, where does literacy fit into your classroom instruction? It's common to believe that literacy instruction is solely the charge of language arts teachers, but, frankly, this just is not so. Naysayers, please take a moment to think about this quote:

"Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st century will read and write more than at any other time in human history. They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens, and conduct their personal lives." -- Richard Vaca, author of *Content Area Reading: Literacy and Learning Across the Curriculum*

With content standards looming, it's easy to only focus on the content we teach, and covering material. We have so much to tell students and share with them. However, are we affording students enough time daily to practice crucial communication skills?

Here's one way to look at it: Content is *what* we teach, but there is also the *how*, and this is where literacy instruction comes in. There are an endless

number of engaging, effective strategies to get students to think about, write about, read about, and talk about the content you teach. The ultimate goal of literacy instruction is to build a student's comprehension, writing skills, and overall skills in communication.

Ask yourself, *how* do I mostly convey the information and knowledge to my students? Do I turn primarily to straight lecture, or teacher talk? Or, do I allow multiple opportunities for students to discover information on their own?

## Speaking

Students having academic or high-level conversations in small and large group settings does not happen overnight. It takes time -- and scaffolding - - to create a Socratic Seminar setting in your classroom.

In order for our students to engage in academic conversation, or [accountable talk](#), they need plenty of practice with informal conversation in pairs and triads. Use the following strategies frequently for building students' oral skills: [think-pair-share](#), elbow partner, shoulder share, and [chunk and chew](#). Kids need to be talking and not sitting passively in their seats. Remember, [Vygotsky](#) believed learning to be a very social act!

For every 5-8 minutes you talk, give them 1-2 minutes to talk to each other. You can walk around and listen, informally assessing and checking for understanding.

Conversation helps immensely when processing new content and concepts. Students also will surely have more fruitful answers to share (be sure to always provide [think time](#) when asking questions of students).

## Writing

When was the last time your students had sore hands from writing in your class? Just like conversation, writing helps us make sense of what we are learning and helps us make connections to our own lives or others' ideas.

You can't avoid thinking when you write.

Students need to be writing every day, in every classroom. How about adding to your instruction more informal and fun writing activities like quick writes, stop and jots, one-minute essays, [graffiti conversations](#)? Not all

writing assignments need be formal ones.

If you haven't heard of the [National Writing Project](#) (NWP), it's the largest-scale and longest-standing teacher development program in U.S. history. Workshops are offered nationwide (usually through a local university) where teachers of all content areas learn new and exciting strategies to encourage, support, and grow the young writers in their classrooms.

Two tenets of the NWP that I think produce wide gains in student writing: teachers writing side-by-side with students, and creating time on a regular basis in your classroom for writer's workshop that follows a type of [writing process](#) that puts the writer in charge (of content, voice, and structure).

## Reading

The days of believing that we could hand informational text or a novel to a student and assume he or she makes full meaning of it on their own is a teaching mode of the past. Whether we like it or not, regardless of the content we teach, we are all reading instructors.

Scaffolding the reading by using effective strategies for pre-, during, and after reading, such as: [previewing text](#), reading for a purpose, making predictions and connections, [think alouds](#), and using graphic organizers will support all our students, and not just struggling readers and English learners.

Another onus not only on English teachers, but all teachers as reading instructors? We need to inspire both a love for reading, and build reading stamina in our students (this means eyes and mind on the page for more than a minute!)

But, how do we do this? A high-interest classroom library is a great place to start. If you are a Title I school, there should be funds set aside for classroom libraries. If not, advocate for all classrooms at your school site to have a library, even if it's just a handful of books to get you going.

You can make the investment yourself, or have a book-raiser party. Email all your friends a wish list for books that students have requested and those easy sells (*Twilight*, *Guinness Book of World Records*...). Ask them to bring one or two of the books to your cocktail/appetizer party. (Read this [Edutopia post](#) for ideas on how to set up and manage your classroom

library).

If you are a physics teacher, do all your books need to be about science? Absolutely not! But you might want to focus primarily on informational, non-fiction books. In fact, with the new national standards for English emphasizing more non-fiction text and quite a bit less literature, I say all K-12 teachers need to enhance their libraries with more non-fiction (this can include newspaper and magazine subscriptions as well).

(I'm not going to go into listening as a communication skill, since I think our students do plenty of that already, but here's a great Web site with [characteristics](#) of an effective listener you can share with your students and they can practice with each other.)

What role does literacy play in your classroom? What are some ways you weave instruction in reading, writing, and speaking into the content you teach? Please share!

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