

Literacy Instruction Matters

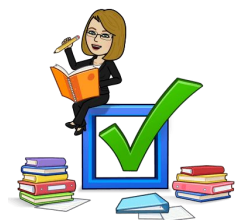
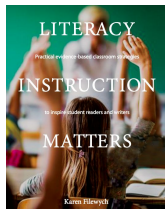
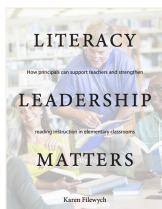
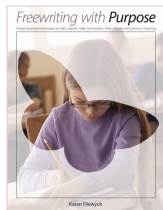
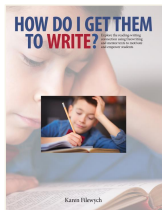


Presented by Karen Filewych
Words Change Worlds

Alberta Summer Symposium
Thursday, August 20, 2026
10:30-11:45 a.m.



...teacher, administrator, consultant, author, word-lover...



Why are we here?

Literacy Matters!

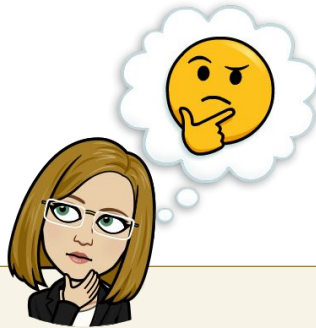


"The limits of your language are the limits of your world."

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Consider these questions:

Why do we use language?
What is the function of language?



“Language is a uniquely structured system that forms the basis for **thinking, communicating, and learning.**”

(frontmatter of Alberta ELAL curriculum, 2022)

Furthermore...

In elementary school, in particular, students are learning the foundations for **complex skills** of **reading** and **writing.**

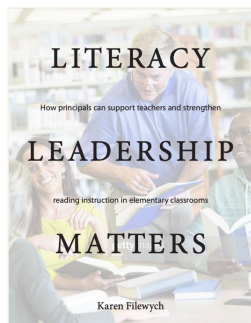
Language and Literacy Underpin All We Do!

Regardless of the age of your students, literacy matters.



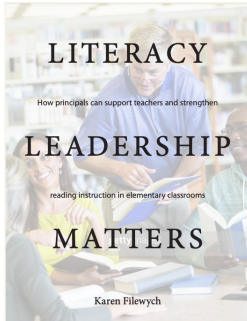
Literacy Leadership Matters, 2023

Target Audience: Principals, Assistant Principals, Consultants, Literacy Leads

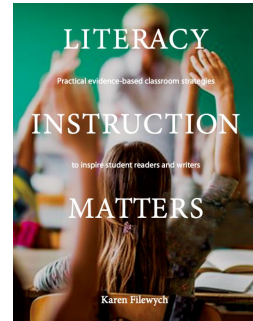


*"We need a book like this
for teachers!"*

Intentional Mirrors



Literacy Instruction Matters
mirrors the structure of
Literacy Leadership Matters.



Contents

Introduction: “Where do I begin?”

Chapter 1: Preparing Your Classroom for Literacy Instruction

Chapter 2: The Role of Language in Our Classrooms

Chapter 3: Planning: Your Year, Your Week, Your Lessons

Chapter 4: Oral Language

Chapter 5: Word Study

Contents

Chapter 6: Reading

Chapter 7: Writing

Chapter 8: Literacy in the Content Areas

Chapter 9: Supporting Literacy Success for All

Chapter 10: Encouraging Home Literacy Experiences

“Where do I begin?”



Let's be honest...

The teaching of language arts is complex!

The Complexity of ELA Instruction

- The teaching of language arts is not linear.
- Unlike other subjects, it cannot be taught in succinct units.
- Students must **use** language to **learn** language.
- This is a well-researched topic. How do we keep up?
- In addition, many stakeholders often weigh in on how to best teach students to read and write!

Consider Your Background Knowledge and Experience

- Any courses on literacy instruction?
- How familiar are you with these concepts: phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, morphology, orthographic mapping, fluency, reading comprehension?
- What about the teaching of those same concepts?



The teaching of language arts is complex, and sometimes overwhelming, but it is also very rewarding!

After all, students will use these skills **every day of their lives**, enabling them to function more fully in the world.

Preparing Your Classroom for Literacy Instruction

“Make the environment as important as the curriculum and the two support each other during instruction.”

— Lesley Mandel Morrow

The Environment Affects Our Teaching and Student Learning...



Preparing Your Classroom for Literacy Instruction

The Big Picture

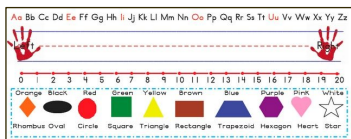
- Desk or Table Arrangement
- A Classroom Library
- A Reading Corner
- Space for Small-Group Work
- Literacy Stations

Preparing Your Classroom for Literacy Instruction

Bulletin Boards and Wall Space

- Alphabet Frieze
- Word Walls
- Calendar Space
- A Morning Message
- Sounds Walls
- Morpheme Walls
- Posters vs. Anchor Charts
- Content Curriculum
- Classroom Labels

Foundational Tools in Our Classrooms



Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm
Nn Oo Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt Uu Vv Ww Xx Yy Zz

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The Role of Language in Our Classrooms

"Teaching is listening, learning is talking."

— Deborah Meier

The Role of Language in Our Classrooms

The Six Strands of Language

A diagram showing two overlapping circles. The left circle is labeled 'receptive language' and the right circle is labeled 'expressive language'. The overlapping area contains the text 'listening and speaking', 'reading and writing', and 'viewing and representing'.

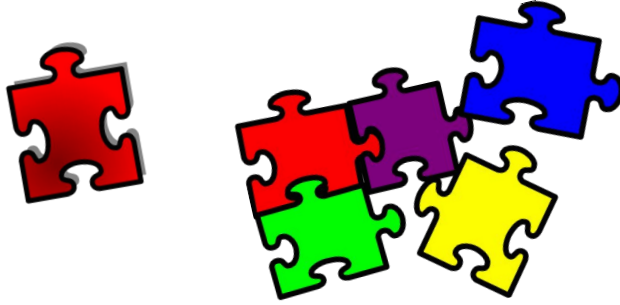
listening and speaking
reading and writing
viewing and representing

receptive language

expressive language

Keep in Mind...

The strands of language are inexplicably intertwined.
We can't (and shouldn't) teach one without the other.



Planning: Your Year, Your Week, Your Lessons

*"The key is not to prioritize what is on your schedule,
but to schedule your priorities."*

— Stephen Covey

Planning: Your Year, Your Week, Your Lessons

Consider the power of a weekly schedule!

The benefits? A weekly schedule:

- ensures all strands of language learning are scheduled each week
- enables you to embed word study throughout the week in a meaningful way
- creates opportunities for regular writing practice
- simplifies your overall planning
- capitalizes on routine
- facilitates the gradual release of responsibility



Gradual Release of Responsibility



Pearson & Gallagher

The sample timetables that follow can be found in both Literacy Instruction Matters and Literacy Leadership Matters.

Grades 1–2

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Journal Writing	Independent Reading	Independent Reading	Independent Reading	Independent Reading
Independent Reading				
Morning Message	Morning Message	Morning Message	Morning Message	Morning Message
Phonemic Awareness/Phonics	Phonemic Awareness/Phonics	Phonemic Awareness/Phonics	Phonemic Awareness/Phonics	Phonemic Awareness/Phonics
Word Study (including introducing new word-wall words)	Small-Group Instruction/ Literacy Stations	Small-Group Instruction/ Literacy Stations	Writing - targeted mini-lesson - exploration of mentor texts - modelled/shared writing - independent writing (revision)	Small-Group Instruction/ Literacy Stations
Mini-lesson Monday - read-aloud - shared reading/ writing		Reader Response (writing in response to a read-aloud or other text in some form)		Freewriting
Talk Time will be embedded throughout the week in the form of turn-and-talk opportunities, thinking routines, and collaborative learning strategies.				

Grades 3–6

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
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The Weekly Schedule = A Game Changer

specific instructional
practices

mini-lessons

literacy stations

word study

independent reading

forms of writing



Oral Language

"Reading and writing float on a sea of talk."

— James Britton

Oral Language to Support Learning

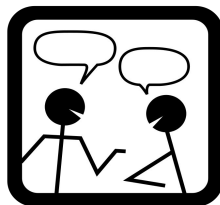
- The Art of Questioning
- The Art of Listening
- Oral Language as Scaffolding
- Oral Language as Differentiation



Talking to Learn

- When it comes to discussion... How many students are answering?
- How do we ensure **all** students have the opportunity to talk?

Turn and Talk: ensure students are talking in partners before the whole class discussion.



Turn and Talk



Grades 3–6

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Journal Writing	Independent Reading	Independent Reading	Independent Reading	Independent Reading
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Let Students in on the Secret...

Empower them to understand the role of language in learning, even from a young age.



Opportunities to Practice Oral Language



- Presentations
- Book Talks
- Choral Reading
- Debate



Word Study

*"Respect the building blocks, master the fundamentals,
and the potential is unlimited."*

— PJ Ladd

Word Study

- Understanding the Alphabetic Principle
- The Reading Wars
- Phonological Awareness, Phonemic Awareness, and Phonics: Oh My!
- Moving to Morphology
- Sight Words and High-Frequency Words: One and the Same?
- A Shift in Instructional Methods: Orthographic Mapping
- Word Walls
- Vocabulary Development
- Spelling Tests: Yes or No?



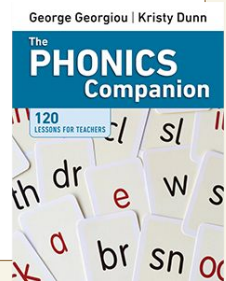
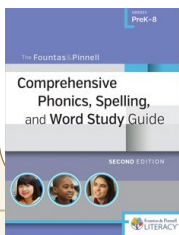
Consider those ABCs: Not So Simple

- In English, there are 26 letters of the alphabet.
- Those 26 letters combine to create 44 sounds.
- To complicate things further, as Denise Eide (2012) explains, “Those 44 sounds can be spelled in 75 different ways, 27 of which make more than one sound.”

Phonics Instruction

Phonics instruction is **most effective** when it is:

- explicit
- systematic, following a scope and sequence
- daily, occurring throughout the day
- cumulative



What about Phonics in Grades 4 and Up?

Take opportunities to reinforce more complex combinations such as:

- **consonant blends** (two letters blend their sounds together: bl, gr, sk)
- **consonant digraphs** (two letters make a new sound: ch, sh, th, wh, ph)
- **complex consonants** (hard and soft c and g; ce /s/, ge, dge /g/)
- **vowel combinations**, for example:
 - r-controlled vowels (ar, er, ir, or, ur)
 - long o: oa (float), o_e (hole), oe (toe), ow (bowl)
 - unpredictable vowel teams: ea /ě/ (health); ea /ē/ (dream)
- **silent letters**, for example:
 - kn /n/ (knowledge), gn /n/ (gnarl), wr /r/ (write), rh /r/ (rhythm), mb /m/ (climb), mn /m/ (column), t (listen)

How can we reinforce this foundational knowledge?

For example:

Whiteboard Work

- Write the word 'pet' on your whiteboard.
I have a new pet.
- Let's stretch out that word together:
/p/ /e/ /t/, pet.
- Did you write the letters p-e-t? Good.
- Now change 'pet' into 'set'. You only have to erase one letter. What do you have to erase? That's right the letter p. And what letter did you put at the beginning? Yes, the letter s says /s/. /s/ /e/ /t/, set.
- Okay, now change 'set' into 'met.'
- Now think carefully. I want you to change 'met' into 'men.'

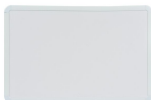


Whiteboards are less intimidating to many students because of the **non-permanence** of the form.

Another Example:

Whiteboard Work

- Write the word 'pain' on your whiteboard.
- What vowel combination makes the long a sound in this word?
- That's right: ai. Now without erasing the whole word, change 'pain' into 'brain.'
- Good. Now change 'brain' into 'rain.'
- Change 'rain' into 'train.'
- Great. Now change 'train' into 'trait.'
- What is the meaning of the word 'trait'?
Turn to your partner and say a sentence with the word 'trait.'
- Now...



Then:

- We know the letters ai make the long a sound in the middle of a word. What letters make this sound at the end of a word?
- That's right, ay.
- Brainstorm as many words as you can with ay at the end of the word. (Consider a timed, fun, competitive element.)
- *Once students understand morphology, you can add an additional step or challenge: *What morphemes can you add to these base words to create additional words?*

Why Teach Morphology?

"Knowing morphemes enhances reading comprehension, word recognition, vocabulary, and spelling."

"Good readers and spellers and people with larger vocabularies search for and notice familiar morphemes in new words that can give them a clue to a word's meaning."

Louisa Cook Moats

Three Categories of Morphemes

1. **prefixes** - appear at the beginning of a word
Examples include: *re-*, *pre-*, and *un-*
2. **base element** - the part of a word that gives it most of its meaning:
reuse, eruption

Base element is an umbrella term that includes both *bases* and *roots*.
 - A *base*, such as *use*, is a word in and of itself.
 - A *root*, such as *rupt*, requires a prefix or suffix to become a word.
3. **suffixes** - appear at the end of a word
Examples include: *-est*, *-ing*, and *-ly*

What is this student trying to write?

adid

An understanding of morphology helps students write the word with **conventional spelling**:

added

Other examples:

jumpt
pickd
becuz
infr**ma**shn

Grades 3–6

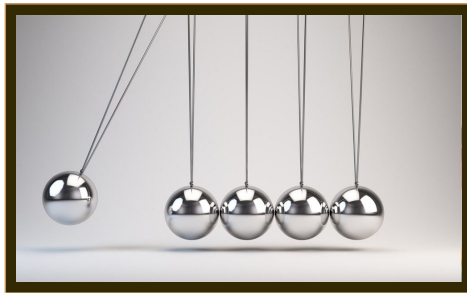
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Reading

"Reading is a gift. And as educators, we bear the responsibility and honor of delivering that gift."

— Wiley Blevins



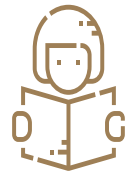
Be cautious about the swing of the pendulum!

Reading is Complex

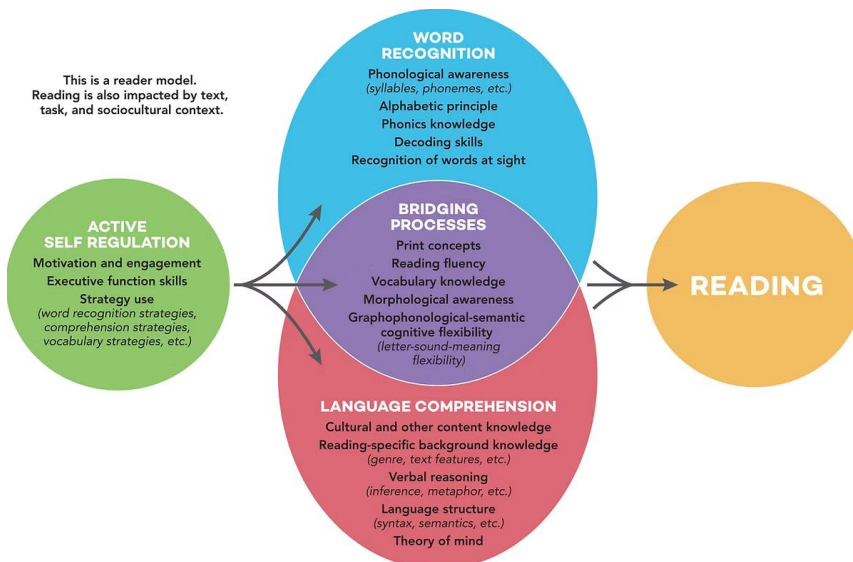
"Reading is one of the single most remarkable inventions in history."

Maryanne Wolf

The **teaching** of reading is equally remarkable,
requiring both background knowledge and skill!



This is a reader model.
Reading is also impacted by text,
task, and sociocultural context.



The Active View of Reading, Duke and Cartwright, 2021

Reading is Complex

Think of everything going on inside the brain of a skilled reader:

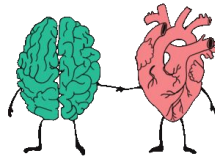
- phonemic awareness
- decoding
- word recognition
- fluency
- using knowledge of the nature of print
- accessing background knowledge
- understanding vocabulary
- understanding the text as a whole
- synthesizing information
- making connections to the text
- inferring the author's intention and tone...



What do you notice about this young 'reader'?

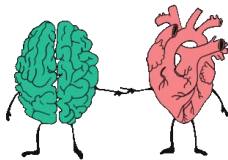
"Reading is both a cognitive and an emotional journey."

Donalyn Miller



We must teach students the complex **skills** involved in reading!

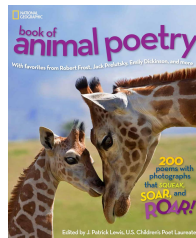
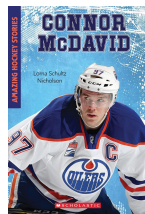
But is that enough?



We must also ensure students find **joy** in reading.

Expose Students to a Wide Variety of Topics, Genres, and Authors

Find something EVERYONE will enjoy.



An Effective Practice:

"Fifteen minutes is magic!... Carving out 15 minutes a day can make all the difference. That length of time is considered consequential in helping students improve their decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension reading skills."

Robin Bright

Did you know...?

Research indicates that time spent reading correlates positively with students' performance on standardized reading tests:

- A student in the **twentieth percentile** reads books for **.7 minutes** per day. This adds up to 21,000 words read per year.
- A student in the **eightieth percentile** reads books for **14.2 minutes** per day. This adds up to 1,146,000 words read per year.
- A student in the **ninetieth percentile** reads for **21.1 minutes** per day. This adds up to 1,823,000 words per year.
- A student in the **ninety-eighth percentile** reads for **65.0 minutes** per day. This adds up to 4,358,000 words per year.

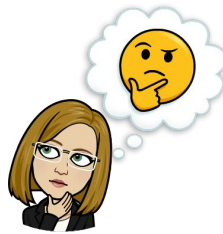
What Reading Does for the Mind, Cunningham and Stanovich

Grades 3–6

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What do you notice about YOUR students (or those in the class next door) during independent reading time?

off-task behaviour



fake reading

limited engagement

Independent Reading

It is our responsibility as teachers to ensure that instructional time is used productively.

If students are not yet engaged in independent reading,
we need to change what we are doing (and NOT doing).

Independent Reading

Do:

- ✓ schedule independent reading intentionally
- ✓ read as students are reading (eventually slide-in beside readers)
- ✓ ensure all students have something they enjoy and are able to read
- ✓ help develop your students' reader identities

Don't:

- ✗ use the time as filler
- ✗ collect forms or visit with the EA/teacher next door
- ✗ always dictate what students are reading at this time
- ✗ assume students feel confident and competent as readers

Writing

"Writing, to me, is simply thinking through my fingers."

— Isaac Asimov

Writing is a Mindset

"I don't know how."

"I can't."



Writing

Embed various forms of low-stakes writing into your week.

- Journal writing
- Reader Response Writing
- Freewriting

These low-stakes forms provide the opportunity to practice.
Then, separately, we can teach specific writing skills.



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Literacy in the Content Areas

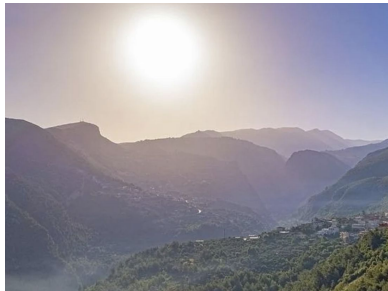
- The Power of Integration: Authenticity
- The Importance of Background Knowledge
- Enhancing Reading Comprehension Across the Curriculum
- Enhancing Vocabulary Development Across the Curriculum
- Writing to Learn Across the Curriculum
- Digital Literacy



Building Background Knowledge and Vocabulary through Images

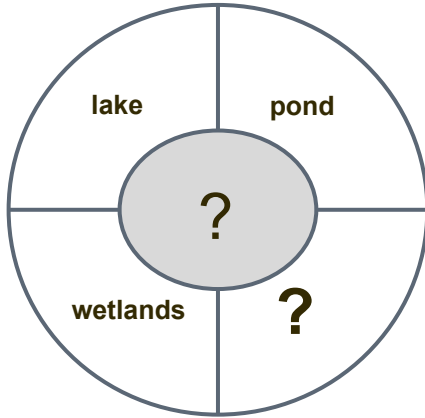


- Be intentional about the images you choose!
- Schedule this experience into your classroom at least once a week.
- Even 5-10 minutes each week will be an effective use of time.



Sometimes show a **single image**; sometimes a **group of images**.

Enhancing Vocabulary Development Across the Curriculum



Concept Circles

- Students begin by finding the connection between the words to write in the centre: **freshwater bodies of water**.
- Then they add a fourth related word to the circle: **river, stream**.
- Be sure to ask them to articulate their thinking to a peer to justify their choices.

Encouraging Home Literacy Experiences

"When I say to a parent, 'read to a child,' I don't want it to sound like medicine. I want it to sound like chocolate."

— Mem Fox

Meet the Teacher Night?
Emphasize two things: talk and read alouds!

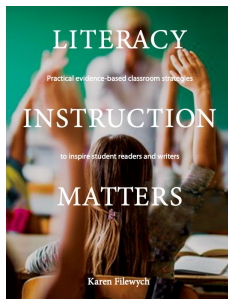
Your Instruction Matters

“Know thy impact.”

John Hattie



Literacy Instruction Matters - 5 part Book Study



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Publishers site until Sept. 30!

Online; 4:00 - 5:00 p.m.

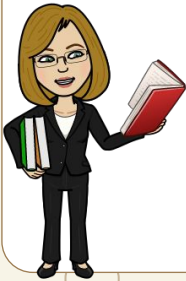
- September 22
- October 13
- November 3
- November 24
- December 8



Register here!

Thank you!

Feel free to contact me through my
website or subscribe to my blog:
www.wordschangeworlds.ca



@KarenFilewych

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survey. **Your feedback is important
and appreciated!** Note: *Your survey
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<https://aplc.ca/survey/?id=15805>



