

4 KNOWLEDGE-BUILDING STRATEGIES FOR LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

By Dr. Autumn Nabors

Essential for student success in school, career, and life, literacy development is a top priority for educators. Today's great discussion, however, is whether current literacy instruction methods are failing our students.

As schools focus more on reading comprehension, the study of subjects like science, history, and art has taken a back seat. [According to Natalie Wexler and The Hechinger Report](#), this is negatively impacting students' ability to decode texts and write effectively.¹

What's missing? The general knowledge to fuel both reading comprehension and critical thinking.

EVIDENCE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWLEDGE: THE BASEBALL STUDY

An experiment that has been referenced for decades, [The Baseball Study](#) clearly demonstrates the importance of knowledge building in literacy development.²

In 1988, researchers Donna Recht and Lauren Leslie conducted a study to measure the impact knowledge has on reading comprehension. The duo tested four groups of students, divided by both their reading abilities and their knowledge of baseball. Can you guess which students performed best in the study? The top-performing groups were those who had high knowledge of baseball, regardless of whether they had high or low reading abilities. The conclusion? "Prior knowledge of baseball made a huge difference in students' ability to understand the text—more of a difference than their supposed reading level."³

Building background knowledge on a variety of topics in the classroom helps struggling readers with comprehension. Armed with knowledge, students are equipped to understand texts because they have a better grasp of the concepts at hand. Therefore, when we fail to give students knowledge in basic subjects, we unintentionally impede literacy development.

So, what strategies can you use to help build knowledge and fuel reading comprehension? Here are four tips to infuse literacy skills in the classroom each day.

1. Teach Reading in All Subjects

Literacy development shouldn't be isolated to English language arts classes. For students to achieve literacy goals, reading needs to be practiced in all content areas. This helps cement knowledge building across subjects, improving reading comprehension and students' abilities to write about topics. Disciplinary literacy helps build a solid foundation in elementary students and helps accelerate student reading levels in secondary grades.

By taking an interdisciplinary approach to literacy, educators can immerse students in decoding and comprehension skills in multiple content areas like social studies, science, and art. Typically, these subjects have been marginalized at the elementary level to make more time for comprehension skill practice, but research shows combining these subjects with reading lessons boosts student learning.⁴

You can provide students with a wide variety of texts and media, tailoring material by grade and reading level to focus on building knowledge while increasing comprehension in various subjects. [Countless resources](#) exist to help you connect your young readers to high-quality, current content and get visual with pictures, video, data, and more.

Educators can apply strategies like close reading, active reading, and chunking in subjects beyond English language arts to foster deeper connections with texts. By providing time to read in classes and at home as well as providing some choices for students to read on various topics, you can help fuel literacy development and learning across subjects.

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2. Have Students Write about Content

While knowledge building is proven to strengthen reading comprehension, research also shows that writing about content in any subject boosts student learning. According to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Policy Research Brief on Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum, “Discipline-based instruction in reading and writing enhances student achievement in all subjects ... Without strategies for reading course material and opportunities to write thoughtfully about it, students have difficulty mastering concepts. These literacy practices are firmly linked with both thinking and learning.”⁵

Writing gives students the opportunity to reinforce, expand, and support knowledge building across subject areas, leading to improved literacy development.

What are some tactics you can use to enable students to write and think critically about interdisciplinary content?

Educators can use the [Read-Think-Talk-Write strategy](#) to have students read texts actively, analyze the information presented in the text, discuss with their peers, and write their analyses and conclusions.⁶

Or you can encourage students to collaborate and share ideas with a passing notes activity. After students read a text, have them write their reaction, pass it to a peer, and then write a response to their peer’s reaction.⁷

3. Make Time for Listening Practices

Before students are fluent readers, the most efficient way for them to acquire the knowledge that fuels reading comprehension is through listening and speaking.

According to Natalie Wexler, “It’s been found that, on average, students’ listening comprehension exceeds their reading comprehension through about age 13. If teachers read aloud from a series of texts on the same topic, ideally as part of a content-rich curriculum designed to build knowledge, students will hear the same concepts and vocabulary repeatedly, enabling them to retain the information.”⁸

Developing readers greatly benefit from listening practices, and [research shows](#) that read-alouds improve comprehension across all grade levels.⁹ Reading aloud can help you bridge complex concepts and texts for students who are reading below grade level.

By modeling language, you can verbally use words and phrases that your students are familiar with to help them understand more complex topics. For example, reading aloud and explaining why experts use certain terms in specific disciplines can help your students learn more easily than focusing on isolated vocab study.

4. Drive Student Collaboration to Share Learning

Student collaboration is critical to moving newly learned knowledge to memory. Collaboration allows students to be actively involved in the learning experience, leading to improved clarification and higher-level thinking.¹⁰

Educators can utilize opportunities across every subject to empower student collaboration. Having a discussion allows students to better understand the meanings of their readings and fuels their critical-thinking skills to improve their ability to write about a subject. You can encourage students to use academic language in their discussions to help build vocabulary and knowledge to fuel literacy development.

While working together, students share knowledge with their peers. Literacy development can become a collaborative and more efficient effort when you enable students to read, think, and write together across every classroom.

OVERCOME INSTRUCTIONAL CHALLENGES WITH EQUITABLE RESOURCES

Unfortunately, the resources available to every school are not created equal. Equity of access is key for closing literacy gaps across grade levels, socioeconomic status, and more. A lack of outcomes in elementary school literacy development seeds larger issues in secondary school—knowledge helps students acquire more knowledge, so inequities grow over time, making it more difficult for students to catch up.

How can you support teachers and literacy development? Share the tactics above to promote knowledge building as a tool for literacy development in your classrooms and ensure your educators have access to the resources they need to support equitable learning.

While countless digital resources exist for educators, *Gale In Context* provides current, credible content to support learning with interdisciplinary reading material across every subject and grade level. If you need tools to support literacy development in your school, [reach out to your Gale education consultant](#).

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Dr. Autumn Nabors is a champion for literacy and its critical role in achieving equity in education. She has served as a high school ELA teacher, middle school administrator, professional developer, and most recently a curriculum director. Autumn is also an adjunct professor at the University of Richmond. In her current role at Gale, Autumn connects students to high-quality supplemental content to fuel literacy development across all disciplines.

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➔ Need tools to support literacy development in your school? Contact your Gale education consultant.