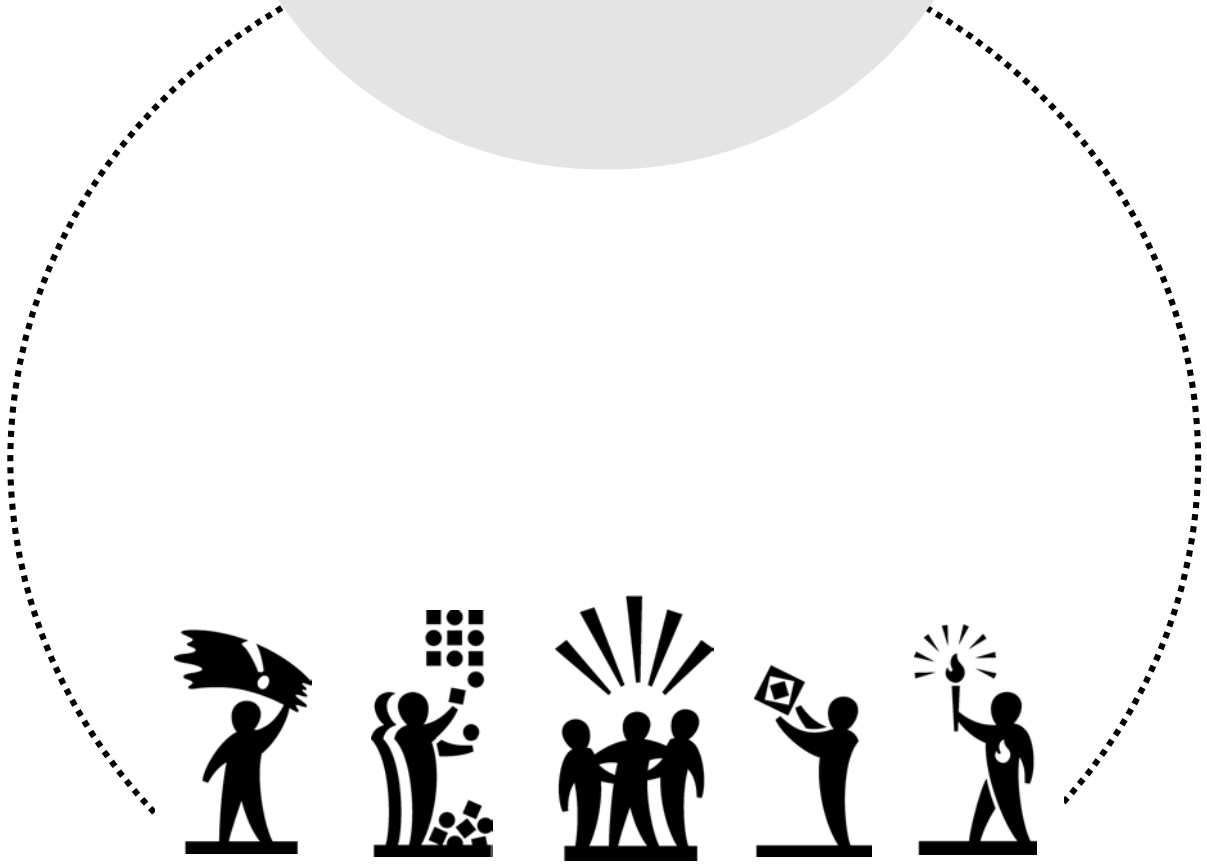


Planning and Assessment



UNIT PLANNING

Planning starts with determining what students already know and what they need to understand and be able to do. Classroom assessment is conducted to fulfill this formative function—to inform teaching and improve learning and to monitor student progress in achieving the learning outcomes. Student self-assessment and reflection on their learning strategies provides important information not only for the student but also for the teacher. This information is then used in planning what learning outcomes students need to achieve and in choosing the resources and teaching and assessment strategies that are most appropriate. Summative evaluation fulfills a grading purpose and is used to inform students, parents and other interested parties, such as post-secondary institutions, of the extent to which the students have achieved the outcomes.

Alberta’s English Language Arts Senior High School Program of Studies, 2003, states the outcomes students are to achieve by the end of each course, along with the texts to be studied. Teachers and/or schools must then design units that best help students achieve the specific outcomes for their current courses while building on and maintaining their ability to demonstrate the outcomes of the previous grades and courses.

A number of factors influence unit design, including:

- student interests, needs and goals
- provincial requirements and suggestions
- relevant jurisdictional policies
- assessment and reporting practices
- teacher interests, strengths and skills
- resources available, and budget for new resources
- parental and community values and interests
- diploma examination preparation.

Many teachers organize units of study around themes in order to focus instruction, make connections between a variety of specific outcomes and plan around groups of outcomes that require deeper understanding on the part of students. Planning around such universal experiences as “innocence lost to experience” or “the response of individuals to power and control within their society” helps students to explore complex ideas, enhances student engagement and takes students beyond English language arts to connect to other areas, such as philosophy, the social sciences or fine arts.

The following unit planning¹ process demonstrates one way of planning around these big ideas, using universal questions raised in literature, film and other texts. In this process, students explore the questions and come to essential understandings through reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing and representing; they demonstrate their understandings through performance and self-assessments. Ways of providing a unit focus and deciding which outcomes to address are discussed, and sample performance assessments to determine how well students have achieved the outcomes are included. Suggestions for the types of texts students could study and create in this kind of unit are also included. The unit activities are intended for ELA 20-1 and 20-2 students, but they can be adapted for other levels.

1. Several of the ideas in this unit are based on the work of Wiggins and McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, 1998.



Units based on other planning models, along with unit planning templates, can be found in Appendix A.

How Should I Begin?

One way to begin unit planning is to choose a topic based on student interests and available resources. The easiest way to come up with focus questions for a unit is to select one that could be used as is, or adapted from the newly authorized resources or from old diploma examinations, e.g., “How does conflict and struggle affect the human spirit?” (*Echoes II*) or “What is the effect of isolation on the individual?” (January 1994 English 30 diploma examination).

Turning a topic or combination of topics from authorized resources into questions is another easy way to begin. For example, the topics “identity” and “choices” could be combined to create a question such as: “To what extent is an individual’s identity shaped by the choices he or she makes?”

An alternative way to come up with focus questions is to work with a colleague or with students to choose a topic, and brainstorm questions or concepts related to the topic that would be important for students to understand. For example, in exploring a topic such as “heroes,” one might come up with the following important concepts:

- what heroes are
- how heroes are made
- how heroes are undone
- what purposes heroes can serve in a community or culture
- why audiences/readers sympathize with heroes and antiheroes
- how one’s quest or ambition assists or interferes with the making of a hero
- how conflict or ambition enhances or reduces heroic tendencies
- how one’s current context—historical, cultural, social, philosophical—can determine whether or not an individual’s actions are perceived as heroic.

Choose several of the concepts and combine them to create questions on which to focus the unit. Two such focus questions could be:

- How do ethics, ambition and context contribute to the making or undoing of heroes?
- How do text creators use selected words, images or literary techniques to construct or deconstruct heroes?

What Outcomes Should be Addressed?

In the process of exploring the focus questions, students come to important understandings that are connected to all of the general outcomes in the program of studies, but each question focuses on particular outcome subheadings and specific outcomes. For example, the following outcome subheadings are related to the first question, “*How do ethics, ambition and context contribute to the making or undoing of heroes?*”

- 1.2.1 Consider new perspectives
- 2.1.1 Discern and analyze context
- 2.3.1 Connect self, text, culture and milieu
- 3.2.3 Form generalizations and conclusions
- 4.1.1 Assess text creation context
- 5.1.2 Appreciate diversity of expression, opinion and perspective

The following outcome subheadings are related to the second focus question for the unit, “*How do text creators use selected words, images or literary techniques to construct or deconstruct heroes?*”

- 2.1.2 Understand and interpret content
- 2.2.2 Relate elements, devices and techniques to created effects
- 2.3.2 Evaluate the verisimilitude, appropriateness and significance of print and nonprint texts

How Will I Know if Students Have Achieved the Outcomes?




Once the outcomes for student learning are identified, it is important to decide what evidence will be used to determine if students have achieved the outcomes. Performance assessments are an important way for students to demonstrate their understandings arising from the unit focus questions; they help students and teachers determine the extent to which students have achieved the outcomes.

Pages 23–26 describe types and purposes of assessment, including performance assessments.

Student choice can be incorporated in performance assessments, as it is an important way to encourage students to reflect on and take ownership of their learning. One way to do this is to have students complete a proposal identifying a performance assessment, timeline and resources they could use, as well as identifying group responsibilities and roles, if the performance assessment is collaborative. Having students reflect on their strengths, limitations and interests, and how these influence their choices, helps to make the activity metacognitive.



Strategies for encouraging metacognition are identified with this icon  throughout the guide.

While developing, maintaining/monitoring and evaluating their plan of action, students can be encouraged to ask questions such as the following:

Developing

- What in my prior knowledge will help me with this particular task?
- In what direction do I want my thinking to take me?
- What should I do first?
- Why am I reading this selection?
- What resources do I already know about which will be useful in this project?
- How much time do I have to complete the task?
- What are my interests, and how can they be used to help me be successful?

Maintaining/Monitoring

- How am I doing?
- Am I on the right track?
- How should I proceed?
- What information is important to remember?
- Should I move in a different direction?
- Should I adjust the pace depending on the difficulty?

- What do I need to do if I do not understand?
- How can I improve this component of what I have drafted?

Evaluating

- How well did I do?
- Did my particular course of thinking produce more or less than I had expected?
- What could I have done differently?
- How might I apply this line of thinking to other problems?
- Do I need to go back through the task to fill in any gaps in my understanding?

Students should be given or should develop scoring guides when they are selecting their performance assessments, and they should use them periodically throughout the drafting process. By being part of the process of creating assessment tools, students identify and understand better what is expected of them and how their work will be assessed. As well, students' sense of ownership of the assessment process increases. Such involvement helps students achieve their goals for language learning, set new goals and strengthen their ability to self-assess as independent learners.



Appendix B, page 442, provides a model for creating assessment devices in collaboration with students.

Sample Performance Assessments for This Unit

Performance assessments can be developed for all categories in the Minimum Requirements: Text Creation on page 11 of the English Language Arts Senior High School Program of Studies, 2003. The following performance assessments provide ideas for oral/visual/multimedia presentations and for personal and critical/analytical responses for this unit.

A. Brochures

- **Goal:** Your task is to create two brochures based on a major character that you encountered in this unit. Imagine that the character or individual is running for a political office.
- **Role:** Your role is that of an advertising executive.
- **Audience:** The audience for each brochure is voters.
- **Situation:** Your challenge is to vary your purpose for each brochure.
- **Product/Performance:** In the first brochure, assume your advertising company has been hired by the character or person. Use pertinent details from the text or context to present the character as a hero to voters. You may add details, but they should not contradict the evidence in the story about the character. In the second brochure, assume your advertising company has been hired by an opposing party to create a negative brochure against the same character. You may add details, but they should not contradict the evidence in the story about the character.
- **Standard for Success:** Your brochures will be evaluated for content (close reading of the text to find details about the character that can be highlighted in each brochure, as well as plausible extensions of the character's experience that are suggested by the text). Also, your brochures will be judged on their organization and consistent formatting, including matters of choice (such as the use of colour and angles in visuals to reveal the tone toward the character,

use of diction to convey tone toward the character); matters of convention in layout (correct formatting of headings, appropriate use of visuals, use of white space, font); and matters of correctness in writing appropriate for the form (grammar, usage, mechanics).

- **Extension Activity:** You may submit Web page versions of your brochures, which demonstrates your skill at modifying your work for another medium.

B. Visual Presentation: Photo Essays

- **Goal:** You will reveal the influence that context plays in the making of a hero. The challenge is to create a representation of a character or individual from two points of view. The obstacle to overcome is the acquisition of a substantial base of photographs from which final images can be selected for inclusion.
- **Role:** Your role is that of a news magazine journalist. You have been asked to provide fair representation of each side of this character, so that the public can come to its own conclusions.
- **Audience:** The audience is the general public.
- **Situation:** (can be made specific to the text/context) The awarding of a medal of honour has become controversial in the community. The context of various factions involved in the decision-making process has created uncertainty regarding the recipient of this award.
- **Product:** You will create two photo essays of five images each, one which will present the character as a hero and deserving of the award, and the other which will present the character as undeserving. You will need to develop and include a set of criteria to guide your selection of images.
- **Standards:** The photo essays will be evaluated for thought and detail (insightful, close reading of the text to find details about the character that can be highlighted in the photo essays, careful selection of images); organization (introduction, body, conclusion); visual appeal (use of image, colour and relationship among elements, effective communication of point of view); and matters of choice (camera techniques used purposefully, diction for the target audience).

C. Oral/Visual Presentation – Spoken Word CD/Cassette Tape

- **Goal:** Your challenge is to create a spoken word CD/cassette tape, complete with explanatory, illustrated cover, that is 10 minutes in length and will demonstrate your understanding of what a hero is in relation to our study of _____.
- **Role:** Your job is to find poems, excerpts from short stories, songs and/or appropriate background music that will support YOUR opinion about _____ (or any other character from _____) in relation to his or her status as a hero in your mind.
- **Audience:** You need to convince your peers to see your side, based on their listening to your CD/cassette tape. This task will be based on the personal context you brought to the reading of the text.
- **Product:** You will create a 10-minute spoken word CD/cassette tape through which you identify your opinion of _____ (or the character of your choice) in relation to his or her status as a hero. You will include poems, excerpts from short stories, songs and/or appropriate background music that support your opinion. You will also design a cover for the CD/cassette tape and justify your choice of each piece included on the cover.

- **Standards:** You, your peers and the instructor, each using rubrics, will judge your work. Your CD/cassette tape must meet certain standards. The recording must be smooth and reflect practice, and the cover must be edited and polished and be visually appealing.

D. Personal Response Essay (Designed for ELA 20-1 and 20-2)

Each essay topic focuses on one of the essential questions for the unit. Students can select topics and texts based on their interests and abilities.

Choose ONE of the topics below. Write a personal response essay using your own experiences and/or observations to support your opinions about the topic. Use at least one of the texts studied during the unit to reinforce your opinions. You may also refer to other literature or films that you have studied.

- In your opinion, what is a hero? Use examples from one or more of the texts to support your ideas. You may also wish to use examples from your own experience or from other experiences that you know about. (ELA 20-2)
- What is your opinion of the idea that heroes are created because they serve particular purposes in a culture or community? Use examples from one or more of the texts studied for support, along with your own experiences or world events that you know about. (ELA 20-1 or 20-2)
- Think back over the texts that you studied in this unit, and choose the character that is most like you in the way that he or she responded to the central dilemma or problem in the text. Use details from your own experience and from the text to support your explanation. (ELA 20-2)
- Why do readers/audiences identify with heroes or antiheroes? Use examples from one or more of the texts studied during the unit, along with your own reactions to the characters to support your opinion. (ELA 20-1 or 20-2)

Your essay will be evaluated on the following criteria:

- Thought: The insights into heroes or heroic action.
- Detail: How well the details you use support your main ideas—quantity and quality of supporting ideas.
- Organization: Coherence and shaped discussion, including an introduction that attracts the reader and focuses the discussion, and a developed and convincing conclusion.
- Matters of Choice: Varied vocabulary that is used with precision; syntax is varied for effect.
- Matters of Correctness: Correctness of sentence construction, usage, grammar and mechanics.

E. Critical/Analytical Response Essay (Designed for ELA 20-1)

Each essay topic focuses on one of the essential questions for the unit. Students can choose topics and texts based on interests and abilities. Several of the essay topics encourage students to compare and contrast the techniques and themes used in print and visual texts. Students could collaborate to gather details from the texts for their essays and to select a graphic organizer for their data collection.

Write a critical/analytical response essay on ONE of the topics below.

- Choose a character from a text you have studied. Discuss how the character's quest or ambition enhances or interferes with the making of the hero.
- Choose a character from a text you have studied. Discuss the historical, cultural, social or philosophical context in which the character's actions are perceived as heroic or unheroic; and discuss whether the character would be considered heroic in our current context and why.
- Discuss how juxtaposition of contrasting characters and juxtaposition of character weakness and strength are used in one of the texts you have studied to lead readers to sympathize with heroes or antiheroes.
- Compare and contrast how symbol, metaphor, mood, selection of detail to present a point of view, or camera angle is used in two of the texts you have studied to support the making or undoing of a hero.

Your essay will be evaluated on the following criteria:

- Thought: The insights into the nature of heroism and the author's/artist's use of characterization, point of view, figurative language, symbol and visual elements to reveal his or her ideas about heroes.
- Detail: How well the details you select from the texts support your main ideas—quantity and quality of supporting ideas.
- Organization: Coherence and shaped discussion, including an introduction that attracts the reader and focuses the discussion, and a developed and convincing conclusion.
- Matters of Choice: Varied vocabulary that is used with precision; syntax is varied for effect.
- Matters of Correctness: Correctness of sentence construction, usage, grammar and mechanics.

What Texts Should be Studied?

Texts related to the unit question can be chosen by the teacher, students or both. The amount of choice given to the students will be determined by the teacher's level of comfort and by student strengths and needs. If students need more help with strategies, it is sometimes easier to have everyone studying the same text. When more student choice is desirable, it can be incorporated into the unit by giving a choice of selections within different categories. For example, students could be given lists of poems, stories, myths, legends or essays related to the unit focus. They could then choose several to study as a class or in groups. An alternative way of giving choice is to have students look through the resources in order to choose the ones that they are interested in and which would best help them explore the unit questions.





Literature, film and other texts often raise controversial or sensitive issues. The section on Choosing Resources, pages 103–110, provides guidance on selecting texts and dealing with sensitive issues raised by the texts.

A common way of organizing the study of texts is to use several shorter pieces, such as poems, short stories and essays, for initial exploration of the theme and then moving into an extended text, such as a novel, a modern or Shakespearean play, or a film.

Extended texts such as the following could be used in this unit:


- *Of Mice and Men* (novel) ELA 20-2
- *Lord of the Flies* (novel) ELA 20-1
- *Obasan* (novel) ELA 20-1
- *The Truman Show* (feature film) ELA 10-1, 10-2, 20-1 or 20-2
- *All My Sons* (modern play) ELA 30-1
- *The Crucible* (modern play) ELA 20-1
- *Macbeth* (Shakespearean drama) ELA 20-1 or 20-2
- *Ryan White: My Own Story* (book-length nonfiction) ELA 20-2


 Pages 10 and 11 of the English Language Arts Senior High School Program of Studies, 2003, available on the Alberta Learning Web site at http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/k_12/curriculum/bySubject/english/, provide the minimum requirements for text study and text creation.

 A listing of novels and nonfiction, *Senior High English Language Arts 1994 Novels and Nonfiction List*, is available for purchase from the Learning Resources Centre and is on the Alberta Learning Web site at http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/k_12/curriculum/bySubject/english/.


How Can I Help Students Achieve the Outcomes?


Specific lessons based on student needs and interests need to be developed around the texts studied, using strategies such as those in the Achieving the English Language Arts Outcomes for Senior High School section of this guide or in the teacher guides for the newly authorized basic resources. For example, you may find that your students are having difficulty in deciding what is significant in a text. Modelling a strategy of underlining or highlighting sections of a text that you found significant, explaining why you chose these details, and discussing how they contributed to your understanding, is one way of helping students with close reading of literature. Another strategy is to read a text aloud, identify specific parts for students to highlight and then have students work in groups to decide why you might have chosen these details and what they might mean. Similarly, students can be guided in their viewing by identifying motifs for them to take note of as they watch a film, then having them discuss the context in which they saw the motifs, any patterns they could identify and what these patterns might mean.

 Achieving the English Language Arts Outcomes for Senior High School, General Outcome 2, pages 183–238, provides numerous strategies for helping students comprehend and respond to written, oral, visual and multimedia texts. General Outcomes 1 and 3 also have a number of these kinds of strategies.


 Pages 55–102 provide more ideas and strategies for using film in the classroom.

The process of creating texts also helps students come to further understandings of the texts they are studying and the concepts around which the unit is focused. Creating poems, oral interpretations, collages or mind maps in response to texts studied are ways that students can extend their understanding of what they have read, seen or heard. Similarly, students may create stories or scripts to help them better understand the concept of heroism.


 These strategies and other ideas for responding to texts are described on pages 44 to 54, along with more information on responding to text and context on pages 35 to 44.

 Achieving the English Language Arts Outcomes for Senior High School, General Outcome 4, pages 289–348, provides numerous strategies for helping students with text creation. General Outcome 3 also has a number of these kinds of strategies.

As the performance assessment and plans for other texts to be created are developed, and texts to be studied are chosen and strategies planned, it will be evident that many outcomes in addition to the focus outcomes will be addressed. The student proposals, for example, address **1.2.3 Set personal goals for language growth**, specific outcome a: appraise own strengths and weaknesses as a language user and language learner; select appropriate strategies to increase strengths and address weaknesses; monitor the effectiveness of selected strategies; and modify selected strategies as needed to optimize growth.

 Students can use assessment guides, such as the one in Appendix B, on pages 436–437, to assess their progress in achieving this specific outcome.

Similarly, as students create the projects and essays, they will achieve a number of specific outcomes listed under **4.1.4 Use production, publication and presentation strategies and technologies consistent with context; 4.2.1 Enhance thought and understanding and support and detail; 4.2.2 Enhance organization; 4.2.3 Consider and address matters of choice; and 4.2.4 Edit text for matters of correctness.**

 Scoring guides, such as the following in Appendix B, can be used to assess student progress in these outcomes:

Personal response essays, pages 469–470


Critical response essays, pages 467–468

Oral assessment, pages 450–451

Visual presentations, page 448

A wide variety of scoring guides are available in the Classroom Assessment Materials Project (CAMP) materials, available for purchase from the Learning Resources Centre, and in the teacher guides for the newly authorized basic resources for grades 10 and 11.

As they work together to create scoring guides for performance assessments or to plan the projects, presentations and essays, students can also be helped to achieve a number of the specific outcomes listed under **5.2.1 Cooperate with others, and contribute to group processes** and **5.2.2 Understand and evaluate group processes.**

 These outcomes can be self-assessed by students by using a scoring guide such as the one in Appendix B, on page 445, or they can be assessed summatively by using a scoring guide such as the one in Appendix B, on page 443.

Students may also achieve a number of other outcomes in their work that are not assessed at this time.

What Are the Next Steps?

As one unit is completed, new units are planned to reinforce and build on the learning that has taken place and to address the outcomes that have not yet been dealt with or that require further emphasis.



Appendix A, page 396, provides an organizer that lays out all of the general outcomes, headings and subheadings on one page to help keep track of how often outcomes have been addressed and which need to be planned for. Some teachers like to put a check beside the outcome subheading each time it is addressed or list the specific outcome each time it is dealt with.

Information gathered through formative and summative assessment is used to plan for further learning. Yearly planning, therefore, becomes a process of reflecting and reformulating, based on new understandings of students and their learning and how well instruction is meeting student needs. Questions such as the following are often addressed in coming to these understandings:

- What do my students need to learn in this course?
- What do they already know, and what can they do? How well?
- What do they need to improve in?
- What are my interests, and how can I use them in my planning?
- What unit topics would be most engaging and appropriate?
- What do I know about these topics?
- What strategies do I know about that would help my students and me explore the topic and come to a deeper understanding?
- Which of these strategies were most effective? Why?
- Did the strategies work equally well with all students?
- Where can I learn about other strategies?
- What activities would be interesting and engaging and would demonstrate student understanding?
- Did these activities work? Why or why not?
- How will I find out how well students are doing?
- How will I know what acceptable and excellent work looks like?



While these questions are addressed mainly through observation, assessment, experience, collaboration with colleagues and through professional reading, the last two questions are also addressed directly in this document on pages 23–34.

As teachers reflect on their teaching and set their goals for instruction, students reflect on and set their own goals for language learning. Using self, peer and teacher evaluations, students become increasingly adept at discerning both how they are learning and how well they are learning. This information not only becomes an invaluable resource for teachers in their planning, but can also provide opportunities for students to become involved in planning and assessing their own learning. Working from new understandings, both teachers and students can identify areas for growth and formulate goals for instruction and language learning.



Pages 111–136 provide ideas on meeting the needs of different students.

An important part of the planning process is the recognition of how well students are doing with their learning. Teachers celebrate achievement publicly when they acknowledge how well students have been researching in groups, how well a discussion has been going and how well students have met particular process deadlines in the course of creating a work. As well, teachers celebrate at the end of an activity, such as when they hand back work that has been evaluated and point out areas where the class has shown improvement. Teachers also celebrate with individual students during teacher–student conferences, by indicating where growth in skill and understanding has occurred. At other times, students and teachers celebrate together publicly through positive spoken or written word and/or applause, e.g., during whole-class discussion, at the end of a readers’ theatre performance or tableau, or through the compilation of a class anthology. Further, the individual student recognizes growth and celebrates his or her achievement through such means as entries in journals or learning logs, checklists, and exit memorandums.

What Else Is Important to Consider When Planning?

Language Learning

Planning and assessment are also based on an understanding of language learning and English language arts content and processes. As students actively use the language arts, they engage in three kinds of language learning:

- Language learning is a social process that begins in infancy and continues throughout life. Language-rich environments enhance and accelerate the process.
- As students listen, read or view, they focus primarily on making meaning from the text at hand. Students use language to increase their knowledge of the world.
- Knowledge of language and how it works is a subject and discipline in itself and is fundamental to effective communication. Consequently, students also focus on the language arts themselves and how they work.²

Students develop knowledge and skill in their use of the language arts as they listen, speak, read, write, view and represent in a wide variety of contexts, i.e., for a variety of purposes, audiences and situations. Although the six language arts are sometimes considered and discussed as separate and distinct, they are, in reality, interrelated and interdependent. For example, writing tasks may also involve students in discussing ideas and information with peers and others, reading to acquire information and ideas, viewing other media, and representing ideas and information graphically. Many oral, print, visual and multimedia texts integrate the six language arts in various combinations.

2. Halliday 1982, referenced in Strickland and Strickland, “Language and Literacy: The Poetry Connection,” 1997, p. 203.

Students study the language arts in order to function in their communities and cultures: to appreciate, enjoy, communicate, interact, identify and solve problems, think critically, and make informed choices. Just as they need skills to comprehend and communicate through print and oral texts, students need to learn techniques and conventions of visual language. Such learning will help students be more conscious and discerning in reading visual media and more effective in creating visual forms. Students learn the language and conventions of viewing and representing, in the context of classroom interactions about media texts or print illustrations, in the same way that they develop their vocabulary of literary terms through discussing print texts. Many language elements, e.g., patterns, mood, symbolism, symmetry, focus, tone and emphasis, are similar in oral, print, visual and multimedia texts.

Listening and Speaking

Oral language is the foundation of literacy. Students' fluency and confidence in spoken language are integral to their identity and place in their communities. Through listening and speaking, students express their thoughts and feelings. The ability to form and maintain relationships and to collaborate and extend learning through interaction with others is closely tied to listening and speaking skills. In language arts courses, students learn the skills and attitudes of effective speakers and listeners in communication situations ranging from telephone conversations to theatrical performances.

Students develop speaking skills through a variety of informal and formal experiences: discussing issues in small groups, performing monologues, debating, audiotaping news items, hosting ceremonies and so on. Informal speaking opportunities strengthen the precision of students' thought and vocabulary. Formal speaking opportunities allow students to examine the ways in which information and emotion are communicated through nonverbal cues, such as tone, volume and pace.

Listening is an active process of constructing meaning from sound. It involves many of the elements of reading written text: recognizing and comprehending words, observing transitions and organizational patterns, and comprehending literal and implied meanings. Listening requires students to respond to, analyze and evaluate oral texts as they would written texts. For example, students may use writing or representing to record and make meaning of oral texts. Listening has its own particular elements and vocabulary of oral and visual cues, such as oral punctuation, inflection, volume, pace, stance and gestures in expressing content, tone and emotion. Students also learn to comprehend dialect and regional patterns of language.

Learning to listen also involves learning to recognize and comprehend sounds other than speech. It means examining the role of background music and sound effects in film and the commercial uses of sound, e.g., background music in shopping malls or nostalgic songs in television commercials. Musical terms are part of the language system of sound: rhythm, motifs and patterns, crescendo and decrescendo, major and minor keys. By using sound in their own creations, students learn its role in evoking emotion, mood and images. In their performances, students link spoken language to sound by developing sound-effects tapes or music sound tracks.

Reading

Comprehending and communicating through written texts is central to language arts programming. Students' skill in reading³ and writing is fundamental to their success in school and their ability to function effectively in the larger community. The development of electronic media notwithstanding, written texts continue to be important sources of information. Furthermore, reading written texts stimulates intellectual development in different ways than viewing visual media does; constructing the world of written texts requires the imaginative collaboration of the reader.

Language arts classes offer students opportunities to read a wide variety of texts, ranging from expressive to transactional to poetic.⁴ While written texts are important sources of information and ideas, they are also vehicles for instruction in reading. Students learn to read for literal and implied meanings. They engage with texts in various ways; e.g., they respond personally, analytically and critically. Students learn many of the techniques and devices that contribute to the full meaning of language, such as connotation, tone, figurative language and sound.

Written texts, however, play a role in classrooms beyond the opportunities they afford in teaching reading skills. Books enrich students' lives, offering vicarious experiences of larger worlds. As well, written texts provide opportunities for thinking and talking about a wide range of topics and ideas, including those relating to society, ethics and the meaning and significance of experiences. Written texts still largely represent the foundation of cultural knowledge that a society holds in common, and reading is essential to cultural literacy.

Secondary English language arts teachers are acutely aware that a significant group of students still struggle with reading when they enter Grade 10. Besides allotting time for reading comprehension tests and collecting interesting literature to engage students, research shows that there are a number of excellent strategies that can be used to improve comprehension among poor readers.

Poor readers:

- seldom, if ever, read for pleasure
- complain that the literature read in class is boring
- do not vary the pace of reading to accommodate different purposes
- think that reading is just decoding words
- have few strategies for dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary
- do not visualize what they are reading.

3. The term *reading* is defined elsewhere in this guide as making meaning of any text, including visual text. Here, however, it is used in the specific sense of making meaning of print text.

4. In expressive writing, the writer reflects, examines and explores, and speculates, e.g., journal writing. The content is personal and of paramount importance. Stylistic considerations and correctness of language use are secondary. In transactional writing, the writer is concerned with developing clear communication in order to fulfill some practical purpose, e.g., reports and proposals. Transactional language may inform, advise, persuade, instruct, record and explain. Poetic writing is text that serves to share its creator's understandings in an artistic manner, e.g., short fiction and poetry (Alberta Education, *Senior High School Language Arts Curriculum Guide 1982*, pp. 36–39).

Successful readers:

- use existing knowledge to make sense of new information
- ask questions before, during and after reading
- draw inferences from the text
- monitor their own comprehension
- use fix-up strategies when meaning breaks down
- determine what is important
- synthesize information to create new thinking
- create sensory images.⁵

Although slowing down to teach reading strategies may initially be time-consuming, the benefits of getting students to engage actively in their reading will save time in the end. Class discussions become richer and students are more at ease asking clarifying questions when they understand that reading is a process. Texts become more complex as students enter senior high school, and students may not have “practised” their reading skills to keep up with the demand of a more challenging curriculum.

Related Materials



For further information, refer to the following resources:

Billmeyer, Rachel and Mary Lee Barton. *Teaching Reading in the Content Areas: If Not Me, Then Who?* 2nd ed. Alexandria VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998.

Moore, David W., Donna E. Alvermann and Kathleen A. Hinchman (eds.). *Struggling Adolescent Readers: A Collection of Teaching Strategies*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2000.

Tovani, Cris. *I Read It, But I Don't Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2000.

Wilhelm, Jeffrey D. *Improving Comprehension With Think-Aloud Strategies: Modeling What Good Readers Do*. New York, NY: Scholastic Press, 2001.

Teaching Strategies

A good start is to find out the reading level of students. There are a number of good diagnostic tests to use which will identify those students who are three or more years behind in their reading ability. Teachers may be surprised to find out that some of their students who have reading scores below grade level still do well in their classes or at least participate in class discussions and demonstrate a good understanding of the literature being studied. These students have learned to pick up cues as the class discussion unfolds and are able to contribute personal experiences or connect to the text using other examples. However, without the support of group or class discussions, students who read below grade level do poorly on individual activities, such as the comprehension questions on the diploma examination. This is why it is useful to know the reading level of students, so that adjustments in teaching practices can be made to accommodate individual abilities.

5. Adapted from *I Read It, But I Don't Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers* (p. 17) by Cris Tovani, copyright © 2000, with permission of Stenhouse Publishers. Distributed in Canada by Pembroke Publishers.

1. Think-aloud protocol

Most students will only list rereading or reading slower as a strategy when struggling with difficult reading material. This is where the think-aloud protocol becomes so powerful. Not only does it reveal how an accomplished adult reads, it also gives students numerous reading strategies to tackle challenging texts. (See Appendix B, page 455, for a Think-aloud Checklist, and see pages 196–197 for further explanation.)

Make a transparency that shows a short piece of text—poetry works very well.

- Read through the text out loud and, with an overhead pen, model how to approach a new and perhaps challenging piece of literature. (This is especially effective with an unfamiliar selection to demonstrate how to make meaning and to deal with the frustrations encountered when meaning is not immediately clear.)
 - Underline or highlight sentences or phrases that make sense or seem important.
 - Either circle or place a question mark beside passages where meaning is interrupted.
 - Write questions in the margins.
- Read and reread so that students see that even accomplished readers do not have perfect comprehension the first time they read a new text.
- Share with students other strategies useful in clarifying meaning, e.g.:
 - using a dictionary to define new vocabulary or, when one is not available, using surrounding textual clues or identifying the root word in order to create meaning
 - discussing the piece of literature with another person
 - drawing on background knowledge.

There are a number of reading strategies that a teacher can implement in conjunction with the think-aloud protocol.

2. Accessing prior knowledge

Students may not have the background information needed to access new information, or they may not automatically connect what they already know in order to make sense of new information. A **KWL** chart (**Know**, **Want to know**, **Learned**—see Appendix B, page 441) is a useful tool to get students to brainstorm any images or previous knowledge that could help them make sense of new materials or concepts. For example, if the class is studying *Night* by Elie Wiesel, students need to collect all the images and information they have been exposed to that deals with World War II. This background information could emanate from previous classes, movies, television programs and other books dealing with the concentration camps.

3. Addressing new vocabulary

Unfamiliar vocabulary is one of the major reasons students experience an interruption in comprehension. There are a number of methods to help students learn new words, such as:

- reading for meaning by contextual clues
- creating their own personal dictionary by dividing their page into three sections: one column for the words, the second for the definition and the third for a visual

picture that the student draws to help remember the definition (the goofier the picture, the more likely the student will remember the definition).

4. Skimming for information

Students need skimming strategies that will enable them to go over text quickly to locate information. Using the think-aloud protocol, teachers can model how to find the necessary detail without having to reread the entire chapter or short story. First, show students how to locate the correct chapter or scene when dealing with a longer piece of work, recalling events from the plot to narrow the search to the beginning, middle or end of the text. Then locate key words, phrases or important dialogue that will point to the details being sought.

5. Identifying when reading difficulties are occurring

Students need cues to recognize that reading is being hindered:

- The “inner voice” inside the reader’s head stops its conversation with the text, and the reader only hears the voice pronouncing the words.
- The camera inside the reader’s head shuts off, and the reader can no longer visualize what is happening as she or he reads.
- The reader’s mind begins to wander.
- The reader cannot remember or retell what she or he has read.
- The reader cannot get clarifying questions answered.
- Characters are reappearing in the text and the reader cannot recall who they are.⁶



See Appendix B, page 454, for a self-assessment reading strategy tool.

Additional suggestions for helping students improve reading comprehension skills

- Use metacognition as a key component of reading comprehension.
- Provide opportunities for pre-reading.
- Go slowly when necessary.
- Teach the reader, not the reading.
- Expose students to a wide variety of texts and to different types of reading (or reading for a variety of purposes).
- Offer texts that match students’ reading abilities.
- Teach students how to question.
- Use higher-level questions like enduring or essential questions.
- Post the characteristics of good readers to remind students that they can work to improve in this area.
- Encourage students to understand that they can learn to make insightful inferences.
- Remember that improving reading comprehension takes time and patience on the part of the student and the teacher.

6. Adapted from *I Read It, But I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers* (pp. 37–38) by Cris Tovani, copyright © 2000, with permission of Stenhouse Publishers. Distributed in Canada by Pembroke Publishers.

Writing

Facility in reading and facility in writing are closely linked. Reading builds vocabulary, teaches sensitivity to written language and fosters an intuitive sense of style. Written texts serve as models for student writing.

Students use writing not only as a means of exploring ideas, experiences and emotions but also as a means of communicating with others. They learn processes for formal writing—generating, developing and organizing ideas—as well as methods for research and inquiry, and strategies for editing and revising. Students learn to write, using a wide range of forms: expressive forms, such as song lyrics, reflective journals and poetry, and forms used in business, university and college, and journalism. They also learn new writing conventions required to write for electronic media, just as they learn strategies to read from electronic media.

Viewing and Representing

Many students are avid and sophisticated consumers of visual media, and their familiarity with visual forms facilitates literacy with other texts. Many students have an implicit understanding of visual media conventions—the unspoken agreements between producers and audiences about the way meaning is represented, e.g., how the passage of time is conveyed in a television drama. Film or television may be useful in helping students grasp the meaning of the term conventions. By using films to introduce students to devices and techniques that visual and written texts share, e.g., subplot and flashback, teachers may help students understand narrative techniques in other media. Similarly, documentary films may assist students in understanding elements, such as point of view and transitional devices, in expository print text.

Viewing and representing are also language arts in their own right. Students need to learn the techniques and conventions of visual language to become more conscious, discerning, critical and appreciative readers of visual media and more effective creators of visual products. Students need to recognize that what a camera captures is a construction of reality, not reality itself. They need to learn that images convey ideas, values and beliefs just as words do; and they need to learn to read the language of images.

Films enlarge students' experiences, much as written narratives do, and offer similar occasions for discussion. Films also provide rich opportunities to explore the parallels and differences between visual and written language. Through close reading of short clips, students may examine the effects of visual language cues: composition, colour and light, shadow and contrast, camera angles and distance, pace and rhythm, and the association of images and sounds. They learn to identify the narrative point of view by following the eye of the camera. Visual texts embody many of the elements of written texts. Whether interpreting a painting or a poem, the "reader" looks at elements such as pattern, repetition, mood, symbolism and historical context.

Students may use representation both for informal and formal expression. Just as students use speaking and writing as means of exploring what they think and of generating new ideas and insights, so they may use representing to accomplish the same goals. They may, for example, use tools such as webs, maps and graphic organizers. Sketching may be the first and most natural way for some students to clarify thinking and generate ideas. Visual tools are especially useful because they represent the nonlinear nature of thought. Students also may use visuals to express their mental constructs of the ideas or scenes in written texts. Events from novels may be depicted in murals, storyboards, comic books or collages. Information and ideas from expository texts may be depicted in graphic organizers to assist students in comprehending the parts and their relationships. Visual images may be bridges for students to learn to grasp abstract concepts, such as verbal symbolism.

Study of design elements assists students to become conscious of the effect of visual elements in written texts. Students may enhance their own formal products and presentations by using visuals with written text and/or sound. Students make informed use of design elements in developing charts, slides, posters and handouts that communicate effectively.

Note: While this section discusses visual representation, students also explore and express ideas through oral/aural representation, such as tone of voice, music and sound effects, and through print representation, such as tables.

English Language Arts Content

In language arts learning, the primary focus of students is to develop literacy skills that are vital in all learning. Because the language arts discipline is not defined by its content to the extent that other disciplines may be, distinctions between the dimensions of learning suggested by Robert J. Marzano are particularly helpful for language arts teachers in planning, instruction and assessment. Marzano suggests that students engage in three kinds of learning:

- *Declarative knowledge:* Students need to know facts, concepts, principles and generalizations. The declarative knowledge of a language arts curriculum includes the conventions of various forms and genres, as well as literary devices, such as irony, foreshadowing and figures of speech.
- *Procedural knowledge:* Students need to know and apply skills, processes and strategies. The procedural knowledge of language arts includes knowledge and skilled use of the six language arts, as well as related processes, including processes of inquiry, interaction, revision and editing, reflection and metacognition.
- *Attitudes and habits of mind:* This aspect of language learning relates personal dispositions that foster learning with awareness of these dispositions. Attitudes and habits of mind fostered by language arts learning include appreciating the artistry of language, considering others' ideas, thinking strategically in approaching a task, reflecting on one's own performance and setting goals.⁷

7. Marzano, *A Different Kind of Classroom: Teaching with Dimensions of Learning*, 1992.