

Utah State  
Board of  
Education

# Clarifying Foundational, Content Area, and Disciplinary Literacies in English Language Arts

Contents

Introduction ..... 3

How do Foundational Literacy Skills Support ELA? ..... 4

How Does Content Area Literacy Play a Role in ELA? ..... 5

What are ELA Discipline-Specific Skills? ..... 6

Does disciplinary literacy in ELA have real-world applications? ..... 8

Do students need to master foundational literacy skills before  
they engage in content area or disciplinary literacy practices? ..... 9

Why is it important to understand the differences between  
foundational, content area, and disciplinary literacy in the context of ELA? ..... 10

How do these distinctions support school-wide literacy initiatives? ..... 11

Conclusion ..... 12

References ..... 13

Contact ..... 14

This document aims to clarify the often-confused relationship between **general literacy development** and the **English Language Arts (ELA)** disciplines. It provides a framework for understanding foundational, content area, and disciplinary literacies, offering insights for ELA educators, curriculum developers, and school leaders committed to fostering comprehensive student literacy.

## Introduction

*Literacy* and *English Language Arts (ELA)* are distinct yet related terms and concepts, often used interchangeably. This confusion stems from ELA’s reliance on and development of literacy, which is broadly defined as the ability to read, write, speak, and listen effectively (National Reading Panel, 2000). *Literacy* is also an umbrella term, encompassing various types of literacies including, but not limited to, foundational, content area, and disciplinary literacies.

*Foundational literacy* equips individuals with fundamental reading and writing skills like phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000; Petscher et al., 2020). Building upon these skills, *content area literacy* teaches general reading and writing strategies applicable across broad content areas (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Within these school-level content areas, which are often grouped for curricular convenience and to make broad connections for students, reside numerous distinct academic disciplines.

*Disciplinary literacy*, in turn, provides specialized skills for navigating the unique demands of each of these individual academic disciplines (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012; Moje, 2008), including those within ELA like linguistics, literary theory and criticism, rhetoric and composition, and communication studies (Reynolds & Rush, 2017; Reynolds et al., 2020).

Think of foundational and content area literacies as the essential building blocks. Disciplinary literacy in ELA then represents the specialized skills to cultivate and explore those blocks through the artistic and cultural lens of the English language.

Foundational & Content Area Literacies	Disciplinary Literacy in English Language Arts
Scope	Scope
Foundational life skills applicable across all content areas.	The literacy skills needed for navigating the theories, methodologies, content, texts, and analytical tasks characteristic of the various disciplines within ELA (i.e., linguistics, literary theory and criticism, rhetoric and composition, and communication studies).
Focus	Focus
Fundamental and universal skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, and comprehension of and communication with text.	In-depth study and critical analysis of the English language, literature, and culture using reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

While younger students focus primarily on building foundational and content area literacy skills, the emphasis shifts as students advance through grade levels, with disciplinary literacy becoming increasingly prominent. However, all three types of literacy should always be taught, just at varying degrees tailored to a student's ongoing literacy development and the increasing complexity of academic tasks (see Figure 1).

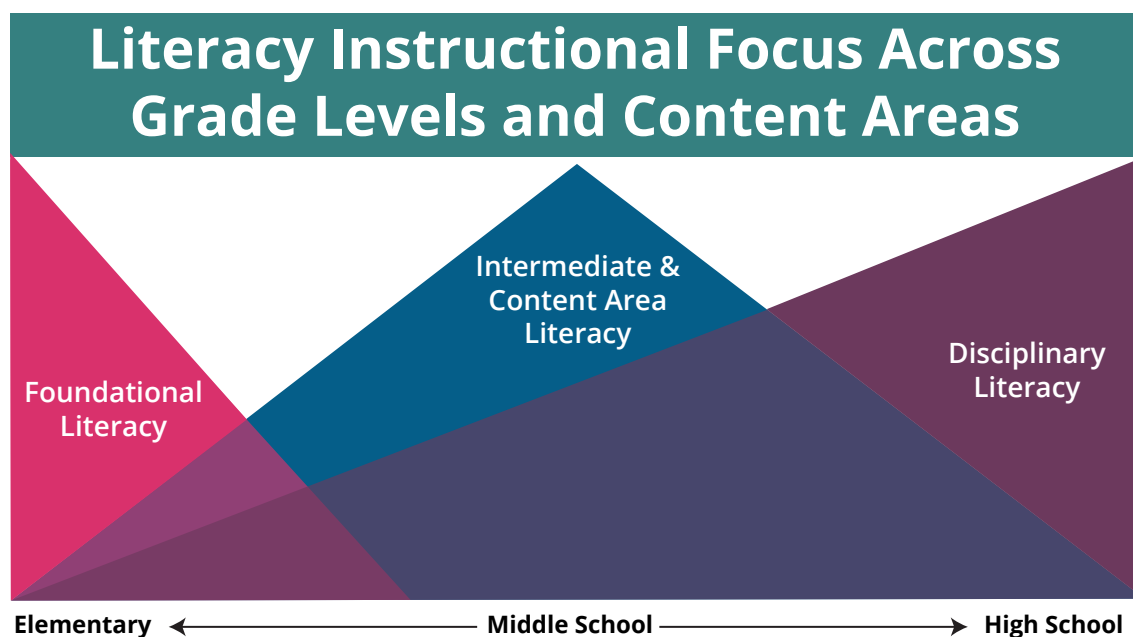


Figure 1: Literacy Instructional Focus Across Grade Levels and Content Areas.  
Adapted from Ippolito, J., Dobbs, C. L., & Charner-Laird, M. (2019). *Disciplinary Literacy Inquiry & Instruction*, 1st ed. Learning Sciences International.

## How do Foundational Literacy Skills Support ELA?

Foundational literacy skills are the bedrock upon which success in all disciplines is built (National Reading Panel, 2000; Petscher et al., 2020). They provide the essential tools that enable students to engage with more complex and nuanced aspects of language and literature. Here is a breakdown of how these skills specifically support ELA:

- **Decoding (Reading Standards 1-3):** Without the ability to decode words, students will struggle to access and make sense of literary texts, understand grammatical concepts presented in writing, or follow the nuances of spoken language in discussions.
- **Vocabulary (Reading Standards 8, 9; Speaking & Listening Standard 3; Writing Standards 1-3):** A robust vocabulary allows students to understand the precise language used by authors, analyze word choices for their connotations, and articulate their own ideas with clarity and precision in both writing and speaking.
- **Fluency (Reading Standard 4):** Reading fluently allows students to move beyond word-by-word decoding and engage with the text, paying attention to rhythm, tone, and the flow of ideas. This is essential for appreciating, for example, the artistry of language in literature and for effective oral communication.

- **Basic Writing Skills (Writing Standards 1-5):** The ability to form coherent sentences, understand basic grammar and punctuation, and organize simple ideas in writing provides the necessary framework for developing more sophisticated writing skills required in the ELA disciplines, such as essay construction and analytical writing.
- **Listening Comprehension (Speaking & Listening Standards 1-3):** Strong foundational listening skills enable students to follow classroom discussions, understand instructions, and analyze spoken language, which is crucial for engaging with oral interpretations of literature or participating in debates.
- **Oral Communication (Speaking & Listening Standards 1-3):** The ability to express basic ideas clearly and participate in simple conversations forms the basis for the more formal and analytical oral communication expected in the ELA disciplines, such as presenting interpretations of literature or engaging in critical discussions.

## How Does Content Area Literacy Play a Role in ELA?

Content area literacy in ELA focuses on intermediate literacy skills applied to the content of English studies. It is about equipping students with strategies to better understand texts and complete tasks within the ELA classroom, without necessarily engaging in the specialized practices of the ELA disciplines like literary or linguistic scholars (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2010; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).

### Examples of Content Area Literacy Strategies in ELA:

- Employing general comprehension strategies like summarizing, questioning, and making inferences to understand the plot or ideas of a text. (Reading Standard 4)
- Employing vocabulary-building techniques to learn commonly used academic vocabulary. (Reading Standards 8 & 9)
- Using graphic organizers based on basic text structures to map out relationships or main ideas. (Reading Standards 7, 10)
- Taking notes on texts or during discussions to capture main ideas. (Speaking & Listening Standard 1, Reading Standard 6)

Think of content area literacy as making the content accessible, like summarizing the plot of a story or using a Venn diagram to compare two characters. Educators in other content areas may employ these same instructional strategies (e.g., comprehension strategies, vocabulary-building techniques, graphic organizers, and note-taking) to help students understand the content of science, math, health, social studies, the arts, etc. Oftentimes school-wide literacy initiatives focus on these general skills that can be applied broadly, regardless of content area.

## What are ELA Discipline-Specific Skills?

Disciplinary literacy in ELA involves a unique set of skills that move beyond foundational and content area literacy skills, enabling students to engage deeply with language and literature in

analytical and creative ways and that are used in the disciplines of ELA (e.g., linguistics, literary theory and criticism, rhetoric and composition, and communication studies) (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012; Reynolds & Rush, 2017; Reynolds, et. al, 2020; Reynolds, et. al, 2022).

The specific skills of disciplinary literacy in ELA move beyond the foundational “what” of literacy to the “how” and “why” of language, literature, and culture. These skills empower students not only to read, write, speak, and listen, but to engage deeply with texts and ideas.

*Unless otherwise noted, these skills begin in the early grades.*

## Knowledge-Based Skills

### **Literary History**

Understanding the evolution of English literature, major periods, and influential authors.  
*Reading Standard 14 starting in grade 11.*

### **Literary Theory**

Familiarity with different literary theories and approaches to interpreting literature.  
*Advanced Placement, Concurrent Enrollment.*

### **Linguistic Awareness**

Understanding the structure and function of the English language, including grammar, syntax, and semantics.  
*Reading Standard 8; Writing Standards 1c, 2c, 3c.*

### **ELA-Specific Vocabulary Development**

Acquiring and using sophisticated academic vocabulary to discuss literary and linguistic concepts.  
*Reading Standards 8, 9; Speaking & Listening Standard 3; Writing Standards 1b, 2c, 2d, 3d.*

## Analytical and Interpretive Skills

### **Close Reading**

Analyzing texts meticulously to identify literary devices, patterns, and nuances in language.  
*Reading Standards 6, 7, 11.*

### **Textual Analysis**

Breaking down texts to understand their structure, purpose, and intended audience.  
*Reading Standards 9, 10, 11, 12.*

### **Interpretation**

Developing reasoned understandings of a text’s meaning, considering various perspectives and contexts.  
*Reading Standards 10, 11, 14.*



### **Critical Thinking**

Evaluating arguments, identifying biases, and forming independent judgments about literary and linguistic concepts.

*Speaking & Listening Standard 2, Reading Standard 13, Writing Standards 1, 4.*

### **Understanding Literary Devices**

Recognizing and analyzing the function and impact of elements like metaphor, symbolism, irony, and narrative structure.

*Reading Standards 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 14; Writing Standard 3.*

### **Contextualization**

Analyzing how historical, cultural, and social contexts influence a literary text's themes, authorial intent, character motivations, and overall message.

*Reading Standard 11 starting in grade 9.*

## **Communicative & Creative Skills**

### **Effective Writing**

Crafting well-organized, clear, and persuasive arguments about literary topics, using appropriate evidence and academic conventions.

*Writing Standards 1, 4.*

### **Rhetorical Awareness**

Understanding how language persuades and influences audiences in various written and spoken contexts.

*Reading Standard 8, Writing Standards 1-3.*

### **Oral Communication**

Presenting ideas and analyses clearly and confidently, engaging in thoughtful discussions using discipline-specific vocabulary.

*Speaking & Listening Standards 1, 3.*

### **Active Listening**

Comprehending and responding thoughtfully to the ideas and arguments of others in academic discourse.

*Speaking & Listening Standard 1*

### **Creative Writing & Expression**

Composing original works (e.g., poetry, fiction, drama, creative non-fiction) and engaging in imaginative oral performance (e.g., storytelling, dramatic reading) to explore ideas, evoke emotions, and express personal voice.

*Speaking & Listening Standard 3, Writing Standard 3.*

## Does disciplinary literacy in ELA have real-world applications?

Disciplinary literacy in ELA equips students with highly sophisticated and versatile skills that extend far beyond academic settings, proving crucial for success in the real world. The core ELA disciplinary skills of close reading, textual analysis, rhetorical awareness, and understanding of literary devices become vital tools for critically evaluating the vast amount of information and diverse media encountered daily. This enables students to identify appeals, recognize manipulative language, and discern underlying assumptions.

Additionally, ELA's emphasis on rhetoric and effective academic writing and speaking directly translates to real-world communication needs, fostering the ability to craft compelling proposals, deliver persuasive presentations, and engage in productive debates by understanding audience, purpose, strategic language use, and evidence-based argumentation.

Literary analysis, also a core component of ELA disciplinary literacy, cultivates empathy by delving into different perspectives, motivations, and the complexities of the human condition (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar & Oatley, 2008). This practice fosters critical thinking about societal issues and the ability to understand nuanced viewpoints, invaluable in collaborative work environments, leadership roles, and civic engagement. Moreover, grappling with ambiguity, multiple interpretations, and complex problems without single, obvious answers, as practiced in ELA, develops a tolerance for ambiguity and a capacity for nuanced problem-solving.

By learning how knowledge is constructed and communicated within the discipline of ELA, students become more agile learners capable of adapting to the unique literacy demands of other fields and new situations. This metacognitive awareness of how to approach different kinds of texts and tasks makes them lifelong learners, prepared to navigate ever-evolving professional and personal landscapes.



### **Critical Information Evaluation**

Analyze information and media to discern rhetorical strategies, identify bias, and evaluate credibility.



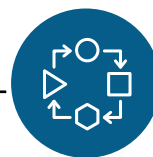
### **Effective & Persuasive Communication**

Craft compelling arguments and deliver persuasive presentations, tailoring communication for specific audiences.



### **Nuanced Problem-Solving**

Understand multiple perspectives and approach ambiguous situations with sophisticated problem-solving.



### **Adaptable Learning**

Apply foundational literacy skills to understand and engage with any field's unique demands.



## **Do students need to master foundational literacy skills before they engage in content area or disciplinary literacy practices?**

No, students generally do not need to master foundational literacy skills before they can begin to engage in content area and disciplinary literacy practices. While foundational skills are undeniably essential and form the base for all reading, writing, and communication, delaying exposure to more complex literacy practices until absolute mastery is achieved would significantly hinder student learning and engagement. Learning is a continuous, iterative process, and students can develop these different layers of literacy simultaneously, often through the strategic use of scaffolding (Fagella-Luby et al., 2012; Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Petscher et al., 2020).

Effective educators employ scaffolding to support students in areas where their skills are still developing, allowing them to access and interact with content area and disciplinary texts and tasks. For instance, first-graders still mastering letter sounds and basic decoding can read decodable texts with a simple plot and then draw or dictate a response about the characters' feelings, starting to touch on disciplinary literacy in ELA by interpreting emotional cues. Similarly, older students who struggle with decoding multisyllabic words can actively engage in complex literacy discussions about a novel's thematic elements. Strategies like explicit instruction on decoding multisyllabic words in context, text-assistive features, or collaborative small group work enable them to apply their higher-level thinking while their decoding skills are still developing.

This scaffolded approach provides meaningful context for foundational and content area literacy skill practice. Students grasp the purpose of improving their literacy when it helps them engage in authentic meaning-making: comprehending novels or primary-source documents to understand human experiences; creating scientific models to better understand the world; writing persuasive articles to shape and shift public discourse; or engaging in lively debates about complex topics to test ideas, challenge assumptions, and refine understanding through real-time intellectual exchange (Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, 2012; Fagella-Luby et al., 2012). These various literacy levels are not rigid, isolated stages, but rather a continuum of development where progress at one level often reinforces and motivates growth at another (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012; Petscher et al., 2020).

The Utah ELA Standards show this iterative progression of skill development, with early grade standards focusing more on foundational skills yet engaging students in ELA disciplinary literacy practices. As students advance to later grades, the emphasis shifts, and the standards increasingly expect students to demonstrate sophisticated content area and disciplinary literacy skills, preparing them for the complex demands of higher education, varied professional settings, active civic engagement, and navigating the complexities of everyday life.

## Why is it important to understand the differences between foundational, content area, and disciplinary literacy in the context of ELA?

Understanding the unique characteristics of foundational, content area, and disciplinary literacies holds crucial implications for effective teaching. Recognizing these distinctions enables educators to refine targeted instruction, design purposeful curricula, and implement appropriate assessments, clarifying specific responsibilities within ELA and across all content areas.

### Targeted Instruction

#### **Foundational & Content Area Literacies**

Understanding literacy as an essential skill set (reading, writing, speaking, listening, comprehension) allows educators across all content areas to identify and address specific literacy needs of their students.

#### **Disciplinary Literacy in ELA**

Recognizing the various ELA disciplines enables ELA educators to design curriculum and instruction that goes beyond foundational and content area literacy skills. They can focus on such skills as literary analysis, rhetorical devices, language history, and advanced composition skills.

### Effective Curriculum & Instructional Design

#### **Foundational & Content Area Literacies**

A clear understanding of literacy helps in designing curricula and instruction that systematically builds foundational and content area literacy skills from early grades onward. It ensures that students develop the necessary reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies that will support their learning across all content areas. This understanding also highlights the need for targeted interventions for students who require foundational skill support, delivered by educators expertly trained in teaching these critical skills.

#### **Disciplinary Literacy in ELA**

Knowing the scope of disciplinary literacy in ELA allows for well-sequenced curricula and instruction that introduces students to various genres, literary periods, and critical theories in a developmentally appropriate manner. It ensures that curricula and instruction foster critical thinking and analytical skills specific to the study of language, literature, rhetoric and composition, and communication.

## Appropriate Assessment

### Foundational & Content Area Literacies

Effective literacy assessment employs universal screeners to identify students at risk and diagnostic assessments to pinpoint specific foundational skill needs (e.g., phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension). The goal is to gather actionable data for targeted and timely intervention, ensuring all students build the necessary literacy foundations for academic success in all content areas.

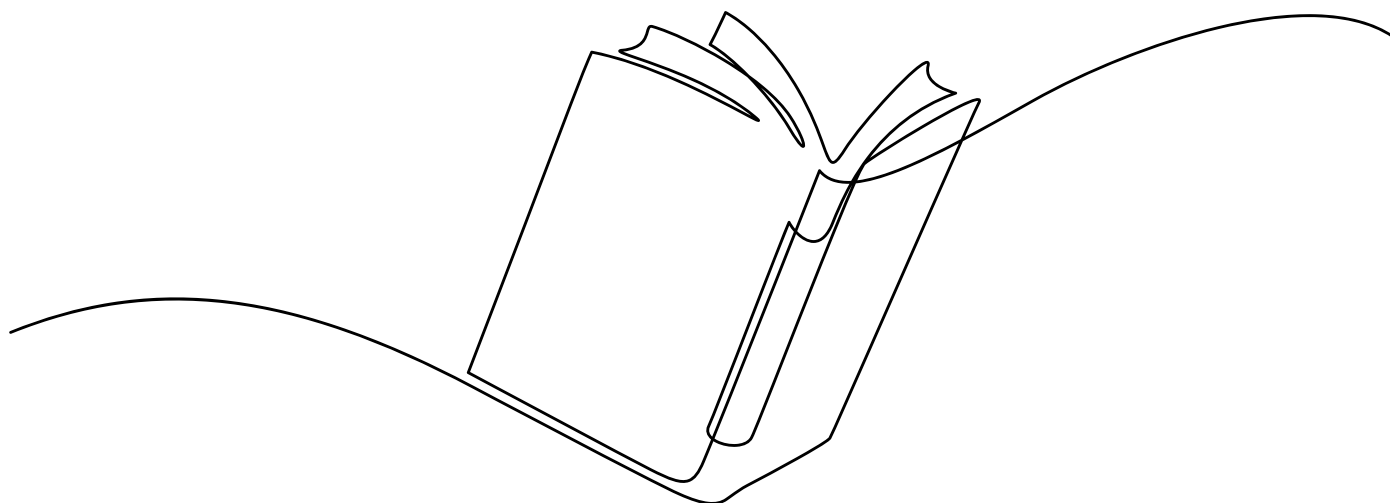
### Disciplinary Literacy in ELA

Assessment in the ELA disciplines goes further, evaluating students' ability to analyze literary texts, understand and apply literary concepts, construct arguments about literature, and demonstrate knowledge of language conventions and rhetoric.

## How do these distinctions support school-wide literacy initiatives?

Understanding the differences between foundational, content area, and disciplinary literacy is vital for a unified approach to student literacy development. When all educators grasp these distinctions, ELA teachers can more effectively collaborate with colleagues across disciplines. Trained literacy specialists can share strategies for developing academic vocabulary or improving close reading skills, while content area teachers can highlight how these strategies apply within their specific content areas and emphasize their unique literacy demands. This shared understanding of responsibilities fosters a cohesive, school-wide approach to literacy development.

Recognizing the varying levels and types of literacy skills allows all educators to pinpoint students who need extra support, regardless of the content areas they teach. This ensures interventions are more precisely tailored to a student's specific literacy needs.



## Conclusion

Engaging students in specific ways of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking inherent to the ELA disciplines is crucial. It provides authentic purpose for these skills and offers insights into their real-world value. This approach emphasizes that literacy skills are not all generic. Instead, their application is uniquely shaped by each academic discipline's distinct texts, tasks, and analytical purposes. ELA educators explicitly teach students how those in the ELA disciplines approach texts, analyze language, and construct arguments within their field. Educators in other content areas then can make the inherent literacy of their own disciplines transparent and provide targeted support.

Ensuring students receive instruction that supports foundational, content area, and disciplinary literacies underscores a school-wide commitment to student literacy development. This clarity defines the specialized expertise of ELA educators in areas like literary analysis and rhetoric, while also informing the shared responsibility of all educators in fostering comprehensive literacy across the curriculum, ultimately preparing students with versatile communication, critical thinking, and analytical abilities essential for navigating complex information and succeeding in real-world contexts.

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